Employee Involvement, Strategic Management & Human Resources: Exploring the Linkages

Terry H. Wagar
In fall 1993 and winter 1994, major Canadian organizations were surveyed with respect to employee involvement practice, corporate strategy and culture, and human resource management. This report is designed to provide a summary of the research findings of the study. The results contained in this report represent initial findings from more than 1,465 organizations. Although the author is using multivariate statistics in examining the data, he has avoided using statistical jargon and procedures in this report. Rather, his focus is on presenting the major conclusions of the research. If you have any comments or questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact Dr. Wagar.

Terry Wagar is a 1984 graduate of the School of Industrial Relations at Queen's University. He has an LL.B. from University of Ottawa and a Ph.D. from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Currently, he is an Associate Professor in the Department of Management, St. Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Dr. Wagar gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. As well, he would like to thank his research coordinator, Nancy Mills, and research assistants (Catherine Read, Kathleen Vaughan, Tanya Weddleton, Joanne Quinn, Jane MacNeil, Marion Schnare, and Cheri Delaney) for their help in completing this project.

Executive Summary

- In this survey, 67% of the organizations permanently reduced their workforce over the past two years with an average reduction of 16% of the workforce.
- A number of organizations have reduced bureaucracy and restructured their operations.
- Aspects of a 'rational' culture (which focuses on productivity and goal attainment) occurred most frequently while characteristics of a 'hierarchical' culture were found least often.
- Although there were noticeable differences, overall there was some evidence of the presence of a progressive decision-making ideology.
- The strategic focus of respondents varied considerably; although cost was important, aspects of differentiation and focus strategies were present in a number of organizations.
- There are major differences in terms of opposition to unionization with nonunion organizations far more likely to oppose unionization of nonunion facilities.
- Organizations indicated only moderate readiness to compete in the global marketplace.
- Support for cooperative programs was highest for upper management and lowest for national or international union leaders (based on perceptions of respondents).
- Problem-solving groups, total quality management, and employee-management joint programs were the most common team-based and job design programs.
- Merely having human resource and employee involvement programs is not enough to produce high performance. For all of the performance measures employed in this study, the most important variable was the progressive decision-making ideology. In addition, and consistent with my past research, a positive labour-management climate was strongly associated with better organizational performance.
Introduction

Although a number of recent articles have underscored the importance of human resource management (HRM) and employee involvement (EI), there has been very little research addressing the relationship between human resource practices and organizational strategy and culture. Among the questions that frequently arise are: what practices have other organizations implemented?, what HRM practices and organizational strategies distinguish successful and unsuccessful organizations?, and what is the impact of strategy and culture on the success of HRM practices and organizational behaviour? The present study is aimed at addressing these questions.

The Study Participants

Characteristics of the Respondents

The results of this study are based on questionnaire responses from 1,466 private and public sector Canadian organizations (save for the provinces of New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island). Respondents, on average, had 1,779 employees in their organization. Further analysis revealed that 25% of the organizations had less than 200 employees, 34% had 200 to 499 employees, 17% had between 500 and 999 employees, and 24% had 1,000 employees or more. Participants represented a wide variety of industry groups —37% were in mining, construction, or manufacturing; 6% in transportation or communications; 9% in wholesale or retail trade; 5% in finance, insurance and real estate; 11% in health services; 7% in education; 18% in other services; and 7% in public administration and government. About two-thirds (66%) of the organizations were unionized and 67% reported permanently reducing their workforce over the past two years (with an average reduction of 15.8%).

The Competitive Environment

A series of questions asked respondents about the competitive environment facing the organization. Overall, respondents indicated that there had been a slight increase in demand for the organization's primary product or service (mean of 3.2 on a six point scale where 1 = substantial increase and 6 = substantial decline in demand). About 27% of respondents reported a substantial increase in demand, 13% indicated a substantial decline in demand, and 60% reported a modest change in demand over the past two years. Compared to a study conducted two years ago, these results indicate somewhat increased demand for the employer's product or service. More than 80% of respondents stated that the environment facing the organization was highly competitive (mean of 4.5 on a six point scale where 1 = low competition and 6 = high competition).

Organization Change and Environmental Turbulence

Six questions asked respondents about change within the organization (using a six point scale with the anchors 1 = none and 6 = a lot). As indicated in Chart 1, there has been some contracting out of work, stronger evidence of reduced bureaucracy, fewer layers of management and changes in management or
corporate strategy, and greatest support for restructuring of the organization (almost two-thirds of respondents had a score of 4 or greater, suggesting considerable organizational restructuring). Consistent with comments from executives and managers, a number of organizations are restructuring in an effort to compete globally and meet changing client or customer demands.

In addition, five questions focused on environmental turbulence or the extent of change within the organization's environment (1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree). As indicated in Chart 2, the majority of organizations reported only modest amounts of turbulence, with the highest level of agreement relating to the statements that there is a need to change marketing practices frequently and technology is subject to frequent change. Further analysis revealed that the highest level of turbulence was reported by organizations in transportation/communications or wholesale/retail trade.

**Organizational Culture**

There is growing evidence that strategic management policies and human resource management practices must 'fit' with the culture of the organization. In the present study, four types of culture (entrepreneurial, group, hierarchical, and rational) were identified. The mean scores for the four culture types are summarized in Chart 3. Note that scores can range from 1 to 6 and the higher the score, the greater the presence of that culture within the organization. As the table indicates, a rational culture (which focuses on productivity and achieving goals) was most common while the hierarchical culture (which is based on formal rules and procedures) was least likely to exist. It should be underscored that there is no one 'right' culture and all four types of culture may be present in an organization in varying degrees.
Corporate Ideology

Three questions on the survey addressed one key aspect of corporate ideology which is known as 'progressive decision making' (see Chart 4). Participants were asked to respond to the statements using a 6 point scale with the anchors 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree. The results indicate that substantial variation exists among organizations. The overall mean for progressive decision making was 4.60, indicating moderately positive reliance on participative decision making and open communications.

Progressive decision-making scores varied only slightly when considering union status. However, there was modest evidence that the presence of a progressive
decision-making ideology declined as organizations became larger. In addition, organizations in transportation and communications and the public service sector tended to have lower progressive decision-making scores. As well documented in the organizational literature, developing a desired ideology and changing the existing culture require substantial effort on the part of management and a long-term focus and commitment.

Organizational Strategy

A very recent, but important, issue attracting attention of both scholars and practitioners is the link between the strategy of the organization, human resource management policies, and the overall organizational performance. In this study, three strategic types were identified—a cost strategy, a differentiation strategy, and a focus strategy. The questions addressing each of the three strategies are presented in Chart 5. Note that the higher the score on the issue, the more important that item is to the organization's strategy. In addition, it should be emphasized that there is not necessarily a 'best' strategy—several factors determine the strategic direction of the organization and there is growing evidence that it is the 'fit' between the organization strategy and other employer practices that is of major importance.

Decision Making Within the Organization

For the purpose of presentation, questions relating to organizational decision making have been grouped under the two headings of employment relations and strategy and change (see Chart 6). When considering employment relations, there were major differences in responses to the question addressing whether the organization opposes union representation in nonunion facilities. Of particular significance was the difference between union and nonunion organizations; on average, nonunion organizations were more likely to oppose union representation. It may be that union organizations are more accustomed to collective bargaining (in a previous study (Wagar and Wilkins 1993), I found that senior executives in nonunion organizations were more 'anti-union' in their attitudes than executives in union firms) or less likely to take actions which may impair current collective bargaining relationships (particularly if the parties are moving toward greater labour-management cooperation).
Chart 5
Measures of Organizational Strategy

Cost Strategy
- Customer service: 5.54
- Operating efficiency: 5.23
- Product/service quality control: 5.14
- Experienced trained personnel: 4.87
- Reputation in industry: 5.13

Differentiation Strategy
- Competitive pricing: 4.20
- Brand identification: 3.42
- Innovation in marketing techniques: 3.46
- Advertising: 2.83
- Forecasting market growth: 3.73

Focus Strategy
- Developing/refining existing products/services: 4.26
- Ability to provide specialty products/services: 4.07
- Products/services in high price markets: 3.20
- Innovation in developing products/providing services: 4.13
The strategic orientation of Canadian organizations varies markedly with some respondents focusing on product or service innovation, others staying with what they do well and trying to increase efficiency, and some organizations adopting a middle position. As mentioned above, evidence from the business strategy literature indicates that there is not necessarily a 'best' strategy but rather that the strategy must 'fit' with the objectives and policies of the organization. While Canadian organizations feel somewhat comfortable in their ability to respond to environmental changes, there was noticeably weaker support concerning readiness to compete in the global marketplace.

**Unionization and Labour-Management Relations**

As noted previously, 66% of the participants were unionized (on average, organizations with labour unions reported that almost 75% of the workforce was unionized). In order to examine aspects of the labour-management relationship, unionized respondents were asked to identify the union that represents the largest number of employees in their organization and answer a series of questions about the collective bargaining environment, the labour-management climate, the incidence of concession bargaining, and the level of support for labour-management cooperation.
Characteristics of Union Respondents

Just under 22% of unionized participants indicated that there had been a strike over the past 5 years. While a number of the bargaining relationships were relatively mature (average number of years the workers had been represented by the union was 26), there was some variation among respondents. Approximately 17% of the bargaining relationships had existed for 1 to 9 years, 69% between 10 and 40 years, and a further 14% of the relationships had existed for more than 40 years.

Nature of the Relationship and the Labour Relations Climate

There is a movement, at least in some organizations, to foster more cooperative relationships with organized labour. When asked to indicate the nature of the relationship between the organization and its major union (on a six point scale with 1 indicating an adversarial relationship and 6 representing a cooperative relationship), respondents had an average score of 4.17, suggesting a moderately cooperative relationship. Just under 24% of respondents indicated that the relationship was adversarial (score of 3 or less) and 9% reported a very cooperative relationship (score of 6).

A number of questions in the survey addressed aspects of the labour-management climate. Questions were asked using a six-point scale with 1 indicating strong disagreement with the statement and 6 representing strong agreement with the statement. Two questions address 'fairness' aspects of the labour-management climate, three questions deal with 'labour-management consultation', and individual questions focus on mutual regard, membership support for the union, and the involvement of the union in strategic decisions. A summary of the responses is reported in Chart 7.

In terms of fairness issues, the results indicate some support for the statements that grievances are normally settled promptly and negotiations take place in an atmosphere of good faith (close to one quarter of respondents did not agree with these statements). Obviously, trust and commitment are key aspects in negotiating a collective agreement and resolving grievances at the workplace; without mutual respect, the bargaining environment is characterized by adversarial labour relations and more cooperative bargaining approaches are generally precluded.

Management perceptions of the degree of membership support the union has suggest only moderate commitment from employees (mean of 3.8). Further analyses revealed that 38% of respondents disagreed with the statement (score of 3 or less) while 29% strongly supported the statement (score of 5 or 6).

While employers and unions do engage in consultative relationships, a number of employers unilaterally initiate changes and the exchange of information may be limited. Some industrial relations scholars argue that unions must become involved in the making of strategic management decisions; the results indicate that this is quite rare across the country with only 1.5% of respondents strongly supporting the statement and about 25% indicating some support for the statement. A number of employers do not welcome union involvement in strategic management decisions and unions may also want to leave strategic management to the employer.
Initial analyses indicate a relatively strong relationship between the labour-management climate and corporate ideology; as expected, a more positive climate was associated with a culture based on valuing employee input and open communications among members of the organization. In addition, the climate tended to be somewhat better in smaller organizations. The existence of a strike over the past five years and a major reduction of the workforce tended to have a somewhat negative impact on the labour-management climate. However, concessions relating to greater flexibility in job classifications and job assignments were associated with more positive perceptions of labour-management climate. In today's economy, a growing number of employers are seeking the removal of restrictive work rules that impair productivity and efficiency.

Chart 7
Measures of the Labour-Management Climate

- Fairness Issues
  - Grievances normally settled promptly
  - Negotiations take place in atmosphere of good faith

- Labour-Management Consultation
  - Union and management make sincere efforts to solve problems
  - Management seeks union input before initiating changes
  - Parties exchange information freely

- Other Issues
  - Parties have respect for each other’s goals
  - Union has strong support of its members
  - Union involved in strategic management decisions

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree
Average response
In addition, preliminary results suggest that labour-management climate is strongly related to organizational performance. Union organizations with a more positive labour-management climate tended to report higher levels of overall employee satisfaction, more favourable employer-employee relations, and better organizational performance. Moreover, organizational climate was also significantly associated with more positive changes in performance measures.

**Concession Bargaining**

A number of unions made concessions over the past two years; while only 9% of respondents indicated a reduced emphasis on seniority, 36% of employers reported obtaining greater flexibility in job classifications, 49% indicated securing greater flexibility in job assignments, and more than one-third (35%) reported obtaining a wage cut or freeze. However, particular care should be taken in the interpretation of wage cuts/freezes which were most common among non-profit organizations (and at least partially attributable to wage freezes imposed by some provincial governments).

Further analysis revealed modest evidence that concessions were more likely in relationships that were somewhat cooperative in nature. This finding is deserving of greater attention and more sophisticated analysis of the data; previous research has found that union concessions have been more readily accepted if management has also made concessions. As well, unions may have made concessions in return for more employee involvement in the workplace.

**Support for Labour-Management Cooperation Programs**

While the academic and practitioner literature, as well as media reports, suggest that labour and management must make stronger efforts to cooperate in the future, very little is known about the support of the various parties. This section of the survey asked respondents to indicate their perceptions of the degree of
support for cooperative programs for the five groups referred to in Chart 8. Responses were measured using a 6 point scale where 1 = no support and 6 = a lot of support for cooperative programs. As the results indicate, upper management was the group most supportive of cooperative programs while national or international union leaders were perceived as having the lowest level of support. While joint programs often improve long-term organizational effectiveness, trust and commitment from both labour and management are essential; there is growing evidence that cooperative efforts are particularly fragile and require considerable effort from both parties.

**Team-based, Incentive and Job Design Programs**

Respondents in both union and nonunion organizations were asked to indicate whether specific team-based, incentive and job design programs for employees were present in their organization. These results are presented in Chart 9. As the chart reveals, 42% of the organizations had autonomous work teams and more than one-quarter reported having quality circles or quality of work life programs. Somewhat more popular were employee/management joint programs (58%) and problem-solving groups (70%). While 31% of respondents had profit sharing and a similar percentage provided group or team incentives, only 18% had a productivity sharing plan.

There is an ever-increasing focus on issues relating to job design. As the table indicates, over one-third of respondents had some form of job sharing or job enlargement/enrichment, and more than half (56%) had a TQM (Total Quality Management) or similar program.

Further analyses revealed that joint programs were more common in union organizations while profit sharing was clearly less common in organizations that were unionized. Larger organizations were more likely to have employee-management joint programs and total quality management while the presence of quality circles and problem solving groups were more common in manufacturing firms. For more details on the various programs, see Appendix 1 and 2.

**Organizational Performance**

Survey participants were asked to provide information concerning the performance of their organization. For the thirteen items, current performance was measured using a six point scale (where 1 = very low and 6 = very high). In addition, respondents were asked to indicate the extent of change in performance over the past 5 years (where 1 = substantial decrease and 6 = substantial increase). Although the performance data are based on self-reported measures, this approach has been used by a variety of researchers in industrial relations, human resource management and business strategy. Using managerial perceptions of performance has the advantage of comparing results across organizations providing a wide range of products or services. Moreover, constructing measures comparable across organizations with different products or services would be very difficult, if not impossible. In addition, informed managers should generally be able to provide relatively accurate assessments of performance levels.

Although it is possible to study the relationship between HRM/EI practices and each of the thirteen measures of performance, the 13 measures were grouped under
Chart 9
Incidence of Team-Based and Incentive Programs

Team-Based Programs
- Quality circles: 29
- Quality of work life (QWL): 31
- Problem solving groups: 70
- Autonomous work teams: 42
- EE/MGT joint programs: 58

Incentive Programs
- Profit sharing: 31
- Productivity sharing plan: 18
- Group/Team incentives: 31
- Employee stock ownership program: 22

Job Design
- Job sharing: 37
- Job enlargement/enrichment: 38
- Total quality management: 56

Percentage of Respondents Having Program
three categories that I have labeled 'overall employee satisfaction' (measures include employee morale, employee commitment to the organization, employee satisfaction with the organization, and employee quality of life), 'employer-employee relations' (comprised of the rate of grievances, rate of absenteeism, turnover, employee resistance to change, and conflict within the organization), and 'economic performance' (made up of the measures productivity, product/quality service, customer/client satisfaction and profitability). A number of organizations, because of the non-profit nature of their business, were unable to provide measures on profitability. As a result, I also calculated the economic performance measures with profitability excluded.

The mean scores relating to current performance and change in performance for the thirteen individual measures are reported in Chart 10. Respondents indicated that overall employee satisfaction was somewhat positive (mean of 4.26) and had increased slightly over the past five years (mean of 3.96). A similar pattern emerged when examining economic performance; respondents on average reported modestly positive results (mean of 4.41), with a marginal increase over the past five years (mean of 4.18). With reference to employer-employee relations, it should be underscored that a lower score is associated with better relationships. Current relations are relatively good (mean of 2.41) and have improved somewhat over the past five years (mean of 2.74).

Results of Statistical Analysis

While the descriptive statistics presented in the paper provide information concerning the incidence of human resource management programs, further statistical analyses were conducted to investigate relationships among the variables. Any single human resource/employee involvement program is not sufficient to have a significant impact on organizational performance; rather, what is essential is a set of interventions which in combination create a high involvement organization. In addition, systems of human resource management practices are more important than the single practices making up the system.

Employee Involvement, Strategy and Employer-Employee Relations

Among the major findings from statistical analyses are the following:

- Organizations with a more hierarchical culture were less likely to have introduced team-based and incentive programs. Moreover, the decision to implement employee involvement programs varied substantially based on the organization's strategy—organizations emphasizing a cost strategy were most likely to have adopted employee involvement.

- A management ideology characterized by progressive decision making was associated with greater membership involvement in a number of programs including quality circles, quality of work life, problem-solving groups, autonomous work teams, employee/management joint programs, and total quality management.

- A progressive decision-making ideology was strongly related to measures of the labour-management climate; respondents indicating that their organization used participative management were more likely to report that the labour-management climate was favourable.
Workforce Reduction, Employer-Union Relations and Organizational Performance

There is growing interest in research addressing the relationship between employer/union relations and the performance of the organization. The first set of performance measures focus on the current performance of the organization while the second set address performance changes over the past five years. Some of the major findings are:

- Permanent reduction of the workforce was associated with several negative consequences including increased conflict, lower employee satisfaction, and a much poorer labour-management climate. Similarly, workforce reduction was related to less favourable changes in performance over the past five years. Workforce reduction policies are not without their drawbacks and there is growing evidence that many downsizings are ill conceived, not properly planned and ineffective in meeting their objectives.

- Progressive decision making was strongly linked with better economic performance, higher levels of employee satisfaction, and lower levels of conflict. In addition, progressive decision making was associated with favourable changes in such measures over the past five years. These results have also been obtained in previous studies of more than 2,000 organizations.

- Similar to the results for progressive decision making, a more positive labour-management climate was related to more favourable scores on measures of both current performance and changes in performance. Although joint programs and labour-management cooperation efforts are not appropriate in all situations, the results of this study support my previous research from management respondents—if labour and management are able to operate in a relationship characterized by cooperation, real trust and long-term commitment, performance tends to be enhanced. However, it would be misleading to suggest that such relationships are appropriate for all employers—cooperative efforts have proven to be very fragile and require continuous and substantial participation from both labour and management.

Conclusion

There is substantial variation among Canadian employers with respect to the presence of human resource management practices and employee involvement programs. The present study varies from most past research because it examines key issues such as employee involvement, employer ideology, strategic management, labour-management climate and organizational performance using a large sample of diverse organizations. The present economic and political climate is challenging traditional views of management and greater study of issues relevant to organizational effectiveness and performance is necessary.

References

### Appendix 1: Organizational Characteristics and HRM Programs

(percentage of respondents with program)

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### Appendix 2: Industry Sector and HRM Programs

(percentage of respondents with program)

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MFG=Manufacturing/Construction
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TRDE=Wholesale/Retail Trade
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EDUC=Education
OTHR=Other Services
GOVT=Public Admin./Government