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The HR department's contribution to line managers' effective implementation of HR practices

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The implementation of human resource (HR) practices (HRPs) is increasingly regarded as a cornerstone in the achievement of overall HRM effectiveness. This article addresses the role of the HR department in contributing to line managers' (LMs) effective implementation of HRPs. It does so by comparing the actions of HR departments in both effective and ineffective implementation processes in different firms. Its findings reveal that HR departments can make a difference by taking initiatives that foster LMs' implementation abilities, motivation and opportunities, such as deploying in-the-field HR specialists, framing practices in appealing ways, involving LMs in the development of HRPs and seeking CEO support, among others. By fleshing out these HR initiatives and linking them to the AMO framework, we build an inductive model that offers a more nuanced view of what HR departments can do to have their proposals effectively implemented by LMs.

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INTRODUCTION

It is now readily apparent that the presence of high quality human resource practices (HRPs) *per se* does not suffice to ensure high performance (Woodrow and Guest, 2014). Practices that are not effectively implemented may be of little help, no matter how well they address the needs of an organisation and its employees. Empirical evidence clearly indicates the importance of effective implementation for the bottom line (Gratton and Truss, 2003; Khilji and Wang, 2006; Chow, 2012). Thus, understanding the paths to the effective implementation of HRPs seems a relevant issue for establishing a clearer link between HRM and performance.

With the increased devolution of many HRM responsibilities, line managers (LMs) are often considered to be the most critical HR implementers (Sikora and Ferris, 2014). These managers act as 'interpreters' of HRPs for employees by showing how they fit within their work units, and in so doing they are also able to influence employees' response to such practices (Townsend *et al.*, 2012). In this sense, LMs' implementation activity may strongly determine HRP pay-offs, and so an extensive literature on the implementation role of LMs has been developed accordingly (*e.g.* Nehles *et al.*, 2006).

While this emphasis on LMs is well deserved, it downplays the critical HR implementation role of a range of additional players. In particular, despite the abundant literature inspired by the work by Ulrich (1997), which analyses the strategic role played by the HR function, most research on HRM has overlooked the specific contributions that HR departments make to

the effective implementation of HRP's. The main contributions the literature makes involve relevant, albeit very general, recommendations or statements on how an HR department should develop the practices to be adopted, ensure their quality and convince LMs to take implementation seriously (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). More research is therefore needed on the HR department's role in HR implementation. Driven by this conviction, this paper seeks to explore how HR may contribute to the effective implementation of HRP's by LMs. Our aim is to develop a model that allows us to answer this question in a systematic manner that is both theoretically informed and empirically based.

We address the above research question by means of a comparative case study approach. By comparing multiple HRP implementation processes in different firms, we provide insights into how HR departments contribute to the effective implementation behaviour of LMs. Following Yin (1989), we have based our research on a preliminary conceptual framework derived from existing literature. Specifically, we build on the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) framework to explore the main ways in which an HR department may influence LMs' ability, motivation and opportunity to implement HRP's more effectively (Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2013). We then refine and expand this model inductively by analysing the data from our case studies.

This study makes relevant contributions to research and practice on HRP implementation. First, by means of its new angle of analysis, it addresses recent calls to extend implementation research to other implementation players, beyond the mainstream focus linked to LMs (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). By so doing, the study helps to explore new antecedents (*i.e.* HR department initiatives) of effective HRP implementation by LMs, thus allowing for theory building. Second, the study is among the first to examine the contribution HR departments make to HRP implementation, helping advance our understanding of the roles these departments can play in their organisations. Finally, the study provides details of practical initiatives HR departments may take in order to boost LMs' implementation performance. It is therefore of interest to those HR professionals wanting to know what they can do to liaise with LMs to ensure that the HRP's they develop are successfully implemented.

THE HR IMPLEMENTATION ROLES OF LMs AND THE HR DEPARTMENT

Judging from SHRM research, there appears to be no question that firms may improve their performance by investing in high-quality HRP's (Guest, 2011). Although the quality of HRP's may be perceived differently by different players, such as LMs and HR executives (Mitsubishi *et al.*, 2010; Wright *et al.*, 2001), SHRM research has shown that the effectiveness of HRP's depends heavily on how well they are designed, whereby they contribute more to business success when they are consistent not only with each other (*horizontal fit*) (*e.g.* Huselid *et al.*, 1997), but also with contextual variables (*vertical fit*), including a firm's business strategy, size or industry (Datta *et al.*, 2005).

SHRM research has recently begun to offer more detailed explanations of the HRP's-performance link by acknowledging that, as with other management initiatives, well-designed HRP's do not necessarily guarantee a competitive advantage. Indeed, to be useful they must also be effectively implemented (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). For example, in one of the first studies addressing HR implementation, Gratton and Truss (2003) stressed that HRP implementation was as relevant for firm performance as the horizontal and vertical alignment of HR. In another study, Khilji and Wang (2006) also showed how the consistent implementation of HRP's increased employee satisfaction with HRM, which in turn was positively related to organisational performance. More recently, Chow (2012) has reported the mediating role effective implementation plays in the relationship between the so-called

High-Performance Work Systems and firm performance. Finally, Woodrow and Guest (2014) have concluded that, if not well implemented, 'good HR policies and practices can still get bad results' (p. 54).

In HRM research, the effective implementation of HRP is usually understood to mean a process leading designated organisational constituents to use HRP as intended by their designers (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Wright and Nishii, 2013). This is also the definition used here. We understand that an HRP is effectively implemented when there is an ideal overlap between intended and actual practices. Conversely, ineffective implementation occurs when the HRP is only partially implemented, implemented in ways that are inconsistent with their initial intent, or not implemented at all (Wright and Nishii, 2013; Woodrow and Guest, 2014). HRP are typically designed by HR departments (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). Indeed, as strategic partners, one of the main responsibilities these departments have is to identify the HRP that most contribute to a firm's success (Ulrich, 1997). However, consistent with the popular strategies of devolving operational HRM duties to the line (Brewster and Larsen, 2000), the main implementers of the practices on the floor tend to be LMs. Therefore, most research on HR implementation has not surprisingly focused on these managers, with a special emphasis on the barriers and facilitators to their implementation (Sikora and Ferris, 2014). Here, we build on this research to offer new insights into effective HRP implementation by LMs, exploring the viewpoint of HR professionals and the initiatives they carry out in this implementation process.

To this end, we now carry out a review of the literature allowing for the formulation of a preliminary conceptual framework on the variables that appear to be relevant to the research objectives. This framework may guide the research, suggesting where to look for relevant evidence (Yin, 1989). As argued by Bos-Nehles *et al.* (2013), LMs' HR implementation performance may be explained by the popular AMO theory. According to this framework, LMs will perform well as HRP implementers when they have the ability (A) and motivation (M) to do so, and when their working context provides them with favourable situational opportunities (O). Therefore, we will draw on this framework to develop our preliminary research model, which we present below.

Line managers' ability to effectively implement HRPs

As any productive work behaviour, LMs' ability to carry out their HR duties is crucial for the effective implementation of HRP (Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2013). If LMs lack the necessary competences, the outcome will inevitably be poor. The abilities required may vary from practice to practice. For example, abilities may be related to knowledge about relevant legislation, trade union relationships, people management skills or procedures on how to use practices (Nehles *et al.*, 2006). In any case, it is commonly assumed that abilities to effectively implement HRP can be developed through assistance and guidance from HR specialists (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Harris *et al.*, 2002). Whittaker and Marchington (2003) indeed found that a lack of support from HR was the major concern for LMs involved in the implementation of HRP at a large food manufacturing company. We therefore focus on analysing the specific initiatives HR professionals may take to develop LMs' abilities to become effective HR implementers.

Line managers' motivation to effectively implement HRPs

Previous research has also indicated that an important antecedent of effective HRP implementation is the motivation LMs have to take on HR responsibilities (McGovern *et al.*,

1997; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006). Fully taking on these responsibilities may not be easy for LMs, as they are subject to several pressures, and are expected to create synergies between human, financial and physical resources (Brewster and Larsen, 2000). Although the devolution of HR duties may be rewarding for LMs, as it allows them to focus on strategic issues besides business targets, it is also a source of additional work and challenges. Consequently, LMs may actually pay little attention to the proper implementation of HRPs by prioritising operational tasks over HR issues (Woodrow and Guest, 2014). Guest and King (2004) stressed that LMs often consider HR practices to be irrelevant and unhelpful bureaucracy, and therefore ignore them. In light of the above, we will explore the initiatives that the HR department may take to stimulate the desire and willingness of LMs to effectively perform their HR implementation duties.

Line managers’ opportunity to effectively implement HRPs

Finally, even if LMs have the necessary HR skills and are motivated to implement HRPs effectively, they may not succeed if they find few opportunities to do so within the organisation (Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2013). In other words, the organisational context has to allow managers to fully deploy their individual skills and motivation.

There is no univocal description in HR research as to what should be understood as opportunities for performing a given task. Some authors focus on HR elements such as job design and empowerment, which give employees the opportunity to make productive contributions (*e.g.* Lepak *et al.*, 2006). Others tend to emphasise general environmental or contextual enablers of productive behaviour, including the amount of resources necessary to complete the task, physical distractions, the level of threat present in the work environment, as well as the role played by organisational policies, structure and culture as enablers of employee performance (*e.g.* Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998). Following this research, we understand opportunities to be contextual enablers and constraints with a bearing on LMs’ implementation performance. We thus explore ways in which HR departments deal with such enablers and constraints to boost a favourable implementation context for the line.

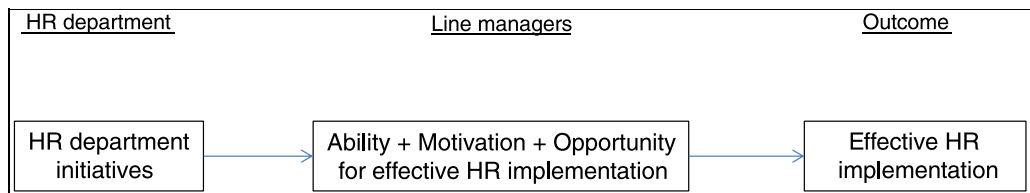
Preliminary research model

Figure 1 portrays our preliminary research model based on the AMO theory of performance, where performance means effective HRP implementation by LMs. It states that an HR department’s facilitating actions may enhance LMs’ ability, motivation and opportunity to carry out their HR duties, thus increasing the likelihood of HRPs being effectively implemented. We use this model as a starting point to help us gather and analyse the data (Yin, 1989).

METHOD

This study follows a multiple case study approach. Case studies are an appropriate methodology for addressing questions of ‘how?’ in an exploratory manner, as targeted here

FIGURE 1 *Preliminary research model*



(Yin, 1989). The use of multiple cases allows comparisons across them in order to clarify whether emergent findings are simply idiosyncratic to a single case or instead are replicated in several instances (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), thus allowing for theory building.

Our unit of analysis here is the process of HR implementation. Each HRP analysed constitutes a separate case. Cases were selected from eight large firms (*i.e.* more than 500 employees) operating in different industries in Spain. In each firm, we analysed the implementation process of successful and unsuccessful HRPs implementations. In total, we studied twenty-nine implementation cases. The twenty-nine HRPs analysed are briefly described in Table 1, and a summary of the firms' characteristics is provided in Table 2.

The data on the implementation of each HRP were collected through in-depth interviews held in 2013 and 2014, with the exception of two interviews, which were conducted in 2015. The interviews involved members of the HR department that took part in the implementation, as the most knowledgeable sources on the topic of interest. Within this group, we held nineteen interviews (see details in Table 2) lasting between one and three hours (in some cases, over more than one session). The study itself was part of a larger HR research initiative in several firms, coordinated by a business school and supported by the firms' CEOs, who granted us permission to interview different members of the HR department.

First, the CEOs in each firm were asked to identify two HRPs developed by the HR department in the last five years that had been effectively implemented, and two that had not, even to the extent of failing. While effective implementation may be seen as a continuous variable, our interest lies in studying extreme cases of effective or ineffective implementation so that we can better identify those factors that may explain such variation. We decided to ask CEOs rather than HR managers directly following the call made by Guest (2011) for multiple informants in assessing the implementation of HRPs. We specified that we were interested in HRPs designed by the HR department and implemented by LMs. To ensure the CEOs understood what we meant by effective and ineffective implementation, we always used the same definitions as outlined previously in the theoretical section. We explained that two of these practices should have been implemented and used as originally designed or intended by HR specialists, and two others should have been only partially implemented, implemented in ways that were inconsistent with their initial intent, or not implemented at all.

Once the cases had been selected, we proceeded to interview the HR manager in each firm about the different HRPs. At the end of each interview, the HR manager referred us to one or more members of the HR team who could be interviewed in connection with the practices of interest (see details in Table 2). Hence, we followed the suggestion made by Huber and Power (1985) and asked the main interviewees to identify other informants who may have additional insights into the topic under scrutiny. For the interviews, we provided all HR specialists with the same working definitions of effective and ineffective implementation to ensure that the assessment of each particular HRP coincided between the CEO, the HR manager and the corresponding HR specialist. They coincided in all instances, probably because the CEOs had provided us with quite clear or even extreme examples of effective and ineffective implementation.

All the interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed. Our interview questions were intentionally broad in order to generate a rich description of the implementation process, as well as of the challenges encountered, and any corresponding actions and solutions. The interviews started by identifying the HRPs that would be addressed and confirming whether they were perceived as a success or failure in the same terms as the CEO had considered. The interviewee was then asked to openly narrate the story about each HRP implementation and the initiatives that the company's HR specialists had taken to ensure it was effective.

TABLE 1 *List of cases: implementation of HR practices analysed in the study*

#	Name of HRP	Firm	Description	Implementation outcome
1	Nurse Training Programme	Blood Bank	Training course on blood transfusion techniques for new hires	Success
2	Nurse Work Pool	Blood Bank	Hiring of eight back-up nurses to perform support tasks in blood transfusion procedures	Failure
3	Hematologist Work Pool	Blood Bank	Compiling and updating a list of potential medical candidates to join Blood Bank	Failure
4	Knowledge Management Initiative	Blood Bank	According to the strategic plan, those areas of knowledge in which Blood Bank needs to improve are identified, and a set of actions are formulated in the form of training and development plans to acquire the necessary skills	Success
5	180° Feedback	DiaperCo	Managers and supervisors receive feedback on their leadership style from their own subordinates every six months	Success
6	Collateral Coaching	DiaperCo	Employees from different departments and business units act as mutual 'coaches' (rather than relying on external coaches or coaches from the same business unit)	Failure
7	Self-Managing Teams	DiaperCo	>Introduction of self-managing teams among manual workers in factories	Failure–Success
8	Competencies Development Center	DiaperCo	Assessment centre for middle managers to provide them with feedback on their leadership and troubleshooting skills	Success
9	Career Conversations	ChipsCo	Annual interview between middle managers and their supervisors to discuss the formers' midterm career prospects and promotion opportunities within the company	Success
10	Onboarding	ChipsCo	Socialisation programme for new hires	Failure
11	Development Review	ChipsCo	Assessment of employees on the basis of a set of corporate competencies. No promotion or compensation decisions are made on the basis of this assessment	Failure
12	Mentoring	ChipsCo	Senior managers and junior managers meet periodically. Senior managers act as mentors at these meetings. Both communicate the outcomes of these meetings to the HR department	Failure
13	Leading in Difficult Times	ChipsCo	Training programme aimed at acquiring the necessary skills for leading teams in times of crisis	Success
14	HR Shared Service Initiative	NewsCo	Creation of a Shared Service centre responsible for payroll and other low value added HR tasks for all business units in Newsco	Success
15	Organisational Transformation Programme	NewsCo	Leadership development programme inspired by the 'Learning Organisation' principles made popular by Peter Senge	Failure
16	Performance Appraisal	NewsCo	Introduction of performance appraisal in all business units	Failure
17	Climate Teams	NewsCo	Creation of employee discussion groups to work on the results of the annual climate survey	Success
18	360° Feedback	FoodCo	Introduction of 360° feedback (including direct feedback from subordinates, peers, and supervisors, as well as a self-assessment) as a development tool for managers	Success
19	People Development Review	FoodCo	Introduction of a new tool to periodically assess employees' progress in the acquisition of key competencies and skills	Failure
20	Performance Pay	FoodCo	Initiative aimed at tying pay more closely to individual performance and increasing the horizontal differentiation of salaries	Failure
21	People Management Model	InsurCo	Leadership development programme based on the concept of 'servant leadership'. It includes a self-assessment tool and a set of coaching sessions	Success
22	Performance Review	InsurCo	Introduction of performance appraisal in all business units	Failure
23	Cross-functional Training	InsurCo	Employee representatives from each business unit deliver short presentations to the rest of the company to explain the role that their unit plays within the firm and how they function	Success

TABLE 1 (Continued)

#	Name of HRP	Firm	Description	Implementation outcome
24	Employment Initiative for People with Disabilities	ParcelCo	Hiring of employees with some type of disability in different areas of the company	Success
25	Employee Suggestion System	ParcelCo	Employees make suggestions aimed at improving work processes, and they are rewarded if one of their proposals is chosen for implementation by senior management	Failure
26	E-learning Project	ParcelCo	Standardisation of the socialisation process for new hires through an online tool available in all franchises	Failure
27	Teamings Initiative	ParcelCo	Employees give up a small part of their salary for charitable purposes, and they collectively decide how to use the funds	Success
28	Workshops for Innovation	SoftwareCo	Programmers present the projects they are working on to other programmers and get feedback	Success
29	Shadowing	SoftwareCo	Type of on-the-job training where employees follow and observe other more experienced colleagues while doing their jobs	Success

TABLE 2 Description of sample organisations and interviewees

Firm	Product/Market	HR specialist interviewees
Blood Bank	Supply of blood and tissue. Benchmark centre for diagnostic immunology and the development of advanced therapies	HR manager HR-nurse liaison
DiaperCo	Personal care: sanitary towels, diapers, paper towels	HR manager Head of OD and Training HR business partner
ChipsCo	Global food and beverage company	HR manager Recruitment and Selection specialist Head of Talent Development
Newsco	Media conglomerate: newspaper, cable TV, media, etc.	HR manager Business unit HR manager
FoodCo	Global food and beverage company	HR manager Head of Compensation and Benefits Head of Talent, Recruitment and Training
InsurCo	Health and travel insurance	HR manager Head of Recruitment and Development
ParcelCo	Package delivery, and provider of specialised transportation and logistics services	HR manager Former HR manager (now independent consultant)
SoftwareCo	Develops, manufactures and sells computer software	HR manager Head of OD and Training

This open storytelling was followed by probing, asking for more detail on specific initiatives and enquiring further about any difficulties encountered throughout the implementation process.

In order to guide our data analysis toward the development of the propositions and model formulated in this study, we used an analytic induction approach, which is considered to be a highly appropriate method for theory building across multiple cases (Manning, 1982). A key element of analytic induction is the identification of conditions and contexts under which certain patterns arise (Pascale, 2011). This is precisely what we

were aiming to achieve by starting with AMO as a preliminary theoretical framework within which we could identify the conditions and contexts (in terms of HR department initiatives) that would provide LMs with the abilities, motivation and opportunities to effectively implement HRPs.

We began by individually open coding the initiatives carried out by HR specialists in a small number of cases, and initially linking them to one of the AMO elements. This is a common practice in analytic induction, where common factors and initial explanations are identified in a reduced number of cases (Smelser and Baltes, 2001). We then met to compare our coding schemes and combine them in a list of themes and paths to AMO factors, with which we subsequently analysed the remaining cases. (A summary coding table is available upon request from the corresponding author). Both the list of themes and links to AMO were refined throughout the analysis by linking them to the literature whenever possible.

FINDINGS

Following our preliminary conceptual model, we structure our findings according to the AMO model.

Enhancing line managers' ability to implement HRPs effectively

The interview material reveals that LMs' ability to implement HRPs is a serious concern for HR departments. Across the eight companies in the study, we identified a number of initiatives developed by these departments to enable LMs to implement HRPs in the desired manner.

Starting from the most basic and common initiative, HR departments usually sought to enhance the line's ability to implement HRPs by developing support materials, such as manuals or toolkits. These documents generally included detailed descriptions of the new practice and its purpose, and provided directions for effective implementation.

It was also quite common to provide formal training before launching a new HRP. For example, the Head of OD and Training at DiaperCo explained that managers were trained in giving and receiving feedback in a seminar before their 180 degree feedback system was introduced. She added that after the seminar 'managers understood how to listen in non-defensive ways to what their employees might tell them, and how to deal with it'.

Offering support was relevant also because its absence hindered effective implementation.

'The roll-out phase was too fast in my opinion. Managers did not understand how PDR [i.e., People Development Review] was different from other ongoing processes, and how exactly they had to use it. We should have met with them beforehand and explained the whole thing much more clearly. I think this lack of instruction killed PDR' (Head of Talent, FoodCo).

We heard a similar story from the HR manager at ParcelCo when talking about the failed implementation of the Employee Suggestion Programme, as she argued that LMs did not have clear guidelines about 'how to introduce employee suggestions in the daily work of their units'. In turn, the HR manager at ChipsCo told us how she realised that the support materials for the onboarding initiative were too detailed and unnecessarily 'sophisticated', which only 'served to muddle the managers' ideas'. Similarly, a business unit HR manager at NewsCo admitted that some managers were put off by having to spend one whole weekend being introduced to the new Organisational Transformation programme. Hence, while training materials and activities may be very useful to improve LMs' implementation

performance, they may also turn out to be counterproductive if perceived to be unnecessarily complex or extensive.

In addition to providing training and support materials, HR departments could also help the line improve their ability to implement new practices by providing support services. Two seemed particularly salient: the use of open door policies and the deployment of in-the-field HR specialists.

Open door policies aimed at signalling LMs that HR professionals were always approachable and willing to help. Indeed, our findings show that one thing these policies had in common in all the firms where they were used was that HR went out of its way to help the line during implementation. For example, the HR manager at SoftwareCo told us:

'We have an open doors policy and we mean it. Some issues may come up that require help from headquarters [located overseas]. When this happens, we don't mind organising conference calls with headquarters, LMs, and ourselves. They [i.e., the line] appreciate this flexibility...I think they know they can count on us.'

Similarly, the Head of Talent, Recruitment and Training at FoodCo was convinced that the 360 degree feedback initiative worked well because HR was very close to LMs, always trying to lend a hand:

'We made it crystal clear that we were happy to assist them because that was our job. In fact, we ended up calling managers ourselves periodically and asking them how they were doing.'

Therefore, 'open doors' did not only mean being reactive and picking up the phone to 'put out a fire', but rather understanding the line as an 'internal customer', and trying to continuously find ways to address their needs. When this happened, the line felt more confident that they could implement the practices effectively. One of our interviewees also suggested that 'open doors' policy is an indispensable complement to formal training:

'When managers go to training sessions they sometimes find it difficult to subsequently relay what they've learnt to their units. So you need to be available afterwards to answer their queries. This is what managers really appreciate the most, I mean, getting help right when they need it' (ParcelCo's HR manager).

An additional way in which HR could provide support and advice directly and on a regular basis was through the deployment of in-the-field HR specialists, which proved to be very effective in helping LMs' deal with the new practices. HR specialists were embedded in business units (sometimes reporting both to HR and to senior business unit managers) and helped LMs with HR implementation issues in a variety of areas, such as recruitment, appraisal or compensation. Managers valued the opportunity to receive feedback in real time from someone who was knowledgeable, and also experiencing the challenges of their local context.

'When a new policy is launched, we are right there beside them to help them in any way we can. You don't know how to do something? Well go right ahead and ask, don't be scared. And being there means we can also give them feedback on how they are doing' (DiaperCo, HR business partner).

The deployment of HR specialists could also help LMs introduce new HRP's to employees. For example, the HR manager at SoftwareCo told us how business partners accompanied LMs on the first day they introduced the new performance appraisal system to employees in their units. She said:

'When you go out there with them [i.e., LMs] and talk to their employees, well, they [i.e., LMs] really appreciate it. They feel more confident because they know that if there are questions you will be there to help address them.'

In sum, our findings indicate that effective HRP implementation may be influenced by an HR department's efforts aimed at nurturing and supporting LMs' implementation ability. The above considerations may therefore be summarised as follows:

Proposition 1: HR departments will enhance LMs' ability to implement HRP's effectively by providing support materials, training, and support services (e.g. open-door policies and the deployment of in-the-field HR specialists).

Enhancing line managers' motivation to implement HRP's effectively

LMs' willingness to serve as effective HR implementers emerges from our interviews as a *sine qua non* condition for effective HRP implementation. We could identify the different initiatives an HR department takes to motivate LMs to devote time and effort to the implementation of HRP's, namely, framing practices in attractive ways for LMs, inclusion of LMs in the design of the HRP, and recognition of LMs' HR efforts.

As to framing, these groups of initiatives consisted of attempting to mold LMs' view of what the new HRP's would mean to them, their units or the organisation, so that LMs would perceive the practices more positively. For example, framing could consist of demonstrating that HRP's were supportive of the strategic priorities of the overall organisation.

'We tried to show them how this initiative [i.e., People Management Model] was consistent with the new strategic plan, and how it would help the firm to achieve the objectives in that plan. We worked really hard to make all these links clear in a foolproof PowerPoint. This presentation helped us a great deal in convincing managers to get involved because they realised it was not only an "HR thing"' (InsurCo, Head of Recruitment and Development).

On other occasions, framing was carried out by emphasising the benefits that the line could obtain by implementing HRP's effectively. At NewsCo, for instance, the HR manager presented the line with the need to create an HR Shared Service Center with a 'strong emphasis on the project's potential savings for business units'. In other firms, HRP's could also be framed as opportunities for LMs to better achieve their unit's strategic objectives alongside the firm's overall strategic objectives. SoftwareCo's Head of OD and Training was explicit about this:

'Line managers always ask themselves the same question in their heads: "What's in it for me?" We know, and when we propose something new [i.e., a new HRP] we get in first and provide them with the information they need to find an easy answer'.

Another way in which the HR departments in the study sought to engage the line with HR implementation was by including them early on in the development of new practices. This

strategy may be understood as a form of consultation, allowing the line to feature prominently in the process. The HR manager at ParcelCo attributed the effective implementation of an initiative for employing people with disabilities in several business units to the work that was carried out behind the scenes with LMs before the actual initiative was launched. She explained:

'Instead of just telling them what we were going to do, we insisted that we could not make it on our own [...] because they were the ones who knew what vacancies they had and what the needs of their units were. In the end, they started to feel the initiative was their own initiative, and started to use it with enthusiasm.'

In turn, Blood Bank's HR-Nurse Liaison mentioned that:

'You depend on the line. If they do not want to use what you propose to them, they won't. But if you involve them in the development of the policies from the very beginning they will have fewer excuses for ignoring you'.

On other occasions, as in the implementation of the Competencies Development Center at DiaperCo, consultation occurred when the HR department decided to pilot test the new practice with a selected group of managers, and then proceeded to use their feedback to fine-tune the final design.

'[...] Managers knew that the practice was the result of common effort. I think that this increased the sense of responsibility of every manager when using the practice' (Head of OD and Training).

Finally, we also found evidence suggesting that HR sought to enhance LMs' motivation by recognising their efforts in front of employees and other managers. This positive feedback showed the line that their efforts were not in vain, and increased their intrinsic motivation to devote time to HR implementation.

'When line managers perform especially well, I try to make sure their work is acknowledged. I go there [to their business units] and praise them in front of their team. This encourages them to continue the good work [i.e., using the new HRP]' (InsurCo, HR manager).

'In the implementation of 360 degree feedback, I took personal responsibility to send an email, with a copy to the CEO, to all those managers who took part in the experience. [...] This made them feel good' (FoodCo, Head of Talent, Recruitment and Training).

Despite all the evidence presented so far, we must also stress that HR departments were sometimes unable to find ways to motivate the line to embrace HRPs. One such example was the failed implementation of the Hematologist Work Pool at Blood Bank. The idea behind it was to take advantage of the fact that medical students specialising in Hematology had to spend some time working at Blood Bank as part of their training. The HR department wanted to build a database of interns who could be potential candidates for joining Blood Bank in the future. Consequently, the department asked managers in the units where interns were employed to fill in several assessment forms for each one of these students. Much to the

surprise of the HR manager, many of these unit managers never filled in these forms, arguing that they did not have the time. Others filled in the forms, but only partially. Blood Bank's HR manager admitted that because of competing priorities in her agenda at the time, she probably did not 'lobby' enough in favour of the HRP by, for example, having one-to-one conversations with unit managers or by involving them in its development:

'That was really important for our organisation and yet...I guess I was not able to get across how relevant this was for us [Blood Bank], and how it would benefit them as well. I should have done more canvassing.'

In sum, our interviewees identified several initiatives that HR departments can take to foster LMs' motivation to effectively implement HRPs. We summarise them in the following proposition:

Proposition 2: HR departments will enhance LMs' motivation to implement HRPs effectively by framing the HRPs in appealing ways, involving the line in the development of the practices, and providing recognition to the line for good HR work.

Enhancing line managers' opportunity to implement HRPs effectively

As postulated in our preliminary model, if LMs are to effectively implement HRPs, not only do they need to be able and willing to do so, but they also need to perform their implementation duties in contexts giving them appropriate opportunities to deploy their skills and motivation (Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2013). The interviews indicate that the HR department may indeed play a role in boosting an implementation-friendly environment for LMs.

A means to this end that we identified was the hiring of consultants. The evidence suggests that the presence of consultants gave legitimacy to the line HR implementation endeavours in the eyes of employees, thus facilitating implementation.

'We were lucky enough to count on the support of a top consulting firm for the program's design [i.e., Knowledge Management Initiative], and we made sure that everyone knew about it. This made the project much more attractive and created a great deal of expectation. This made it quite easy for managers to implement the program in their units' (Blood Bank, HR manager).

'[Talking about the Competencies Development Center] That [the presence of consultants] was fundamental for managers [...]. The fact we had hired a consulting firm sent out a signal that we were spending a load of money, that something big was being done for the organisation, and this made the managers' implementation work easier. Employees understood that something was being done that the organisation believed in' (DiaperCo, Head of OD and Training, DiaperCo).

In addition to the use of consultants, another powerful means of generating a favourable implementation scenario for LMs occurred when HR managers took the initiative to seek the CEO's active support for the HRP.

'The CEO might like an idea and encourage you to pursue it. But that is not enough. To make it work, the CEO also needs to get his feet wet. My job is to bring him on board whenever possible' (FoodCo, HR manager).

The CEO's crucial role was apparent in the implementation of self-managing teams at DiaperCo. After a first failed attempt at implementation, the CEO was convinced to become actively involved, and the HRP started to be taken more seriously:

'The first time we attempted to introduce self-managing teams, the CEO thought it was a good idea, but he was not directly involved. The second time around, though, the message was stronger [...] The CEO visited the factories and talked directly to employees' representatives and supervisors. [...] He also wanted to audit the extent to which different factories moved forward with implementation and publicise the results. So it was for real. [...] If you are a manager and you have to implement what the big boss wants to implement you have an easy task' (DiaperCo, HR Business Partner).

On other occasions, HR managers would suggest that CEOs could facilitate managers' implementation efforts through public speeches and/or internal memos emphasising the strategic relevance of the HR initiatives. This is what happened, for example, in the implementation of the Career Conversations initiative at ChipsCo, where the firm's CEO agreed to record a video message and send an email sponsoring the initiative to the practice recipients. These steps meant that the recipients of the policy ' [...] raised their heads off the table [...] and from then on it was all downhill for their managers in their implementation tasks' (HR manager).

While the previous examples show how CEOs could exert direct pressure on the organisational context to make sure a practice was well-received, their central role could also enable them to use less direct ways of influence. For example, in some cases the HR department persuaded their CEOs to adopt the practice themselves, thus becoming a role model for the practice's recipients.

'[...] We were convinced that the program [i.e., leadership development program] was good for the organisation, so we asked the CEO to lend us a hand [...] The CEO was the first to attend the initial training [...] and set his own plan for self-improvement. This expedited the implementation work of managers. They encountered less resistance along the way [...] The CEO was the example to follow for their people' (InsurCo, Head of Recruitment and Development).

Finally, an additional way in which HR departments could enhance LMs opportunity to implement HRPs was by matching the introduction of a new practice to a specific window of opportunity. Windows of opportunity emerged when organisational or outside events created favourable conditions for the introduction of HRPs. The HR department's ability to identify these situations and use them to build a case for the introduction of the HRP was a key element to facilitate LMs' opportunity for effective implementation.

For example, the exploitation of windows of opportunity took place at Blood Bank in the case of the Nurse Training Programme, which was launched when the firm decided to seek certification to the ISO standard. The need to implement ISO regulations provided a good excuse to launch the training. This strategy was also used also at SoftwareCo in an initiative that allowed programmers to openly discuss their programming projects with colleagues and managers:

'We had been thinking of doing something like this [i.e., "Workshops for innovation"] for some time, but team leaders [i.e., LMs] advised against it. They didn't dare propose something like that,

because the programmers were too busy [...]. But when we found out that our closest competitor had introduced something similar, we thought it would be a golden opportunity to finally do the same ourselves. We knew that the team leaders now had good arguments for selling the scheme to the programmers' (SoftwareCo, Head of OD and Training).

However, we also found examples of practices that failed because of the HR departments' inability to introduce the practice on a timelier basis.

'We launched the program [i.e., Onboarding] at a very bad moment. The program was important, but at that time the priority in the company was the bottom-line. What we did instead was something like offering a lecture on home economics to someone while his house is burning down' (ChipsCo, Recruitment and Selection Specialist).

'In these times of crisis, people [i.e., LMs] want help to improve their P&L. We proposed something, let's say, "soft" [i.e., E-Learning Project] and they simply sent us packing' (ParcelCo, Former HR manager).

To sum up, our findings suggest that an HR department may adopt several initiatives to improve the implementation context of HRP's, thus enhancing the opportunities LMs have to be successful implementers. We summarise the considerations in this section in the following proposition:

Proposition 3: The HR department can improve LMs' opportunity to effectively implement HRP's by hiring external consultants, seeking CEO support for the practices, and exploiting windows of opportunity.

The facilitating roles of line manager selection and HRP context fit

Thus far, following our preliminary model, we have presented a variety of HR initiatives carried out by HR departments to foster HRP implementation. However, two further factors emerged from our analysis that facilitated those initiatives: the selection of LMs and the extent to which HRP's fitted their context of implementation.

Regarding the first of these factors, without being prompted to do so, some interviewees referred to 'the strategic selection of LMs' as helping the HR department in providing LMs with the necessary skills and motivation to implement HRP's. In contrast to other initiatives, this was not an action taken by HR departments in connection with the introduction of a specific HRP, but rather an approach to smooth out the HR department's work with the line, with additional benefits for HRP implementation. For example, NewsCo's HR manager suggested that their training schemes for LMs tended to be successful because they were applied to a good 'raw material'. This interviewee explained:

'If you want the line to follow you when it comes to HR stuff, first of all you need people capable of doing so. [...] And we select only managers with HRM talent [...] [Also] when we recruit internally we look at people's record in HR matters.'

SoftwareCo's HR Manager also pointed to the company's selection practices when discussing the success of the support initiatives she used with LMs.

'I must admit that we benefit highly from our selection practices [...] When it comes to the selection of new managers, I interview them personally. I want to see if they have, let's say, 'general HR aptitude'. [...] This is crucial because it makes all our work in dealing with them much easier down the road'.

LMs' selection also emerged as an important facilitator of HR efforts to motivate LMs to implement HRP.

'Things are often downhill for us [because] [...] we look for people [i.e., LMs] who, in HR matters, are already motivated. There are people with a poor attitude, and not much can be expected of them. They're better off staying at home [laughter]' (FoodCo, Head of Talent, Recruitment and Training).

'When you have to deal with people [i.e., LMs] with no HR inclination, things may be awful for you as an HR manager. They don't listen to you, no matter what you do to convince them to do HR work. So hiring good [line] managers is the first step if you want them to take you seriously' (DiaperCo, HR manager).

In sum, the selection of HR-oriented LMs appears to pave the way for the HR department's initiatives to provide them with adequate implementation skills and motivation. Therefore, this factor may be understood as a facilitator of those initiatives. That is, when LMs are selected according to their HR orientation, HR department initiatives appear to be more successful in enhancing LMs' implementation ability and motivation. Hence:

Proposition 4: HR departments' initiatives to enhance LMs' ability and motivation to implement HRPs effectively will be more successful when LMs are selected on the basis of their HR orientation.

Regarding the second factor, referring to the idea of HRP context fit, we also observed that when HRPs matched the organisation's culture, values and beliefs, HR departments' actions were more successful in influencing LMs implementation AMO. For instance, two practices at ParcelCo (*i.e.* Employment Initiative for People with Disabilities and Teaming Project) were particularly consistent with the company's high corporate responsibility standards in which managers and employees were socialised. Therefore:

'Those initiatives worked really well [...] Managers knew it was alright to devote time to make them work, because it was valued by the organisation. That's the sort of stuff that makes us different' (HR manager).

We also found evidence of practices that HR departments could not successfully introduce because they clashed with dominant organisational orientations. For example, when explaining why she thought the mentoring programme at ChipsCo did not work, the Head of Talent Development said:

'[The HR department] proposed the program with our best intentions [...]. [But] managers at ChipsCo believe in the man that works 24/7 and is the master of his own success. Mentoring proved not to go very well with this. It is a very strong culture, where you never show your weaknesses [...] The program was there, but nobody [i.e., LMs] really used it.'

And she added:

'[The reason why it failed] [...] was not due to lack of effort on our part! We offered a lot of training, but then they [i.e., LMs] would make up excuses not to show up. We ended up sending them guidelines in PowerPoint, and go figure if they ever looked at them.'

A similar example was the failed introduction of performance appraisal at InsurCo that only a very few managers used as expected to evaluate their staff.

'[LMs] appeared to use the system very poorly. I know that many of them tried to do their best. But here things are very informal and many managers and employees have very close relationships. Many of them socialise outside the workplace with their families. For managers sitting around a table with their 'friends' and talking about "performance levels", "performance improvement", "strengths and weaknesses" and stuff like this was simply out of the question. That system was not in this organisation's DNA' (InsurCo, HR manager).

This HR manager also told us that after some time he lost the 'drive to sell' the practice to the line, because 'it was not going anywhere'.

Fit was linked not only to the organisational culture, but also to the extent to which a new practice was consistent with the interests and agendas of organisational members. One example was the introduction of the Nurse Work Pool at Blood Bank, where the HR department wanted to create a pool of trained nurses to cover for absences. However:

'Ward managers faced strong opposition from senior nurses who had their own informal ways of dealing with sudden short-term vacancies. Many of them used to call in nurse friends they trusted [...]. That policy would have reduced their decision and managing power over the teams, although their reason for opposing the policy was that it would harm the quality of the service...well, that's what they said [laughter]' (Blood Bank, HR-Nurse Liaison).

To sum up, we gathered evidence suggesting that HRP's context fit could act as an important facilitator or, when absent, as a barrier to HR department initiatives when attempting to introduce new practices. Hence:

Proposition 5: HR departments' initiatives to enhance LMs' ability, motivation, and opportunity to implement HRPs effectively will be more successful when HRPs fit the organisational context.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Research on HRM has acknowledged effective implementation as a necessary condition for HRPs to have an impact on organisational performance. Through this study, we contribute to previous research on HRP implementation in different ways.

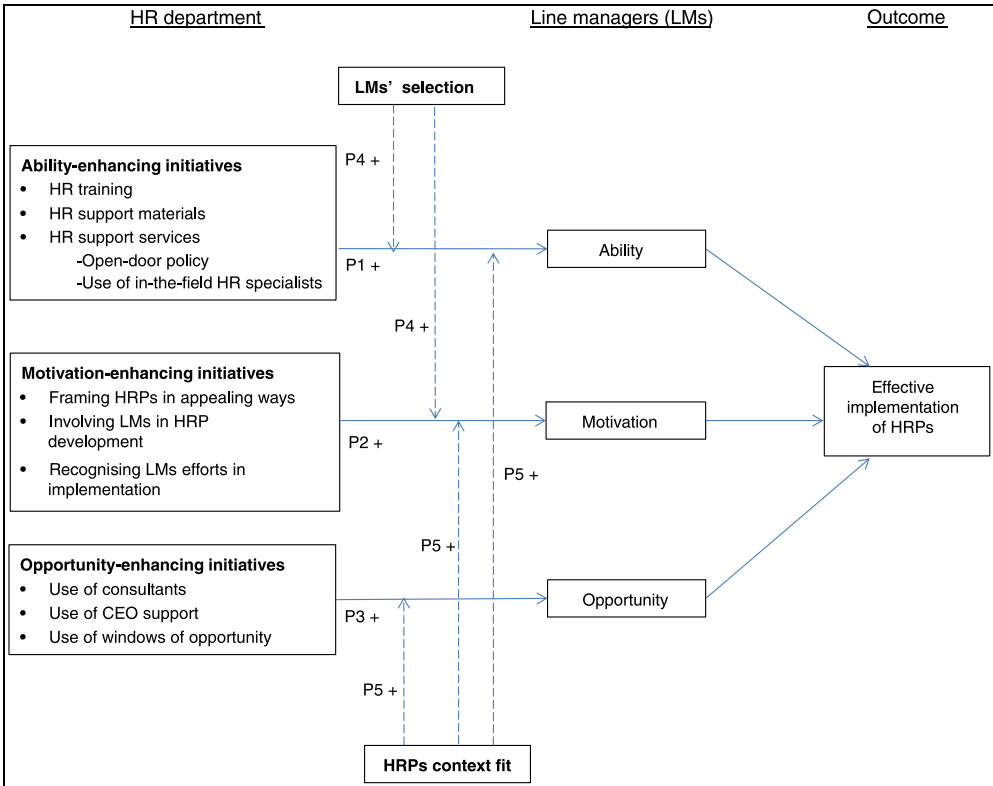
Our first contribution involves developing new theory on HRP implementation by focusing on how an organisational player other than LMs, *i.e.* the HR department, may influence HRP implementation outcomes. Specifically, we have used an in-depth comparative case study approach to explore how LMs' Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity (AMO) to implement HRPs effectively may be improved by a range of HR department initiatives. Conversely, we found that unsuccessful HRP implementation processes lacked many of these initiatives.

Figure 2 portrays the final emergent model summarising our inductively generated accounts of such initiatives.

Thus, our study addresses recent calls to shift the research focus away from the final link of the implementation chain (*i.e.* that occupied by LMs) to unravel the complexity of HR implementation, which involves a range of different players at different stages (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). Our findings extend the model of HR implementation proposed by Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013). Their model argues that the HR department’s main contributions to HRP implementation are providing high-quality HRPs and adequate technical advice to the line. We suggest that HR departments may actually have more prominence in the process, with their actions (both technical and political) having a major influence on LMs’ implementation performance. The evidence on HRPs that were not effectively implemented reinforces this idea, showing that when HR departments remain passive, implementation is likely to fail.

The second contribution our research makes, and which is related to the above one, is that it provides a more nuanced view of the roles HR departments can play in their organisations. Academics and practitioners alike commonly emphasise the major role of ‘strategic partner’ through which the HR department contributes to the bottom-line (Ulrich, 1997). Our study adds to this widely accepted framework by highlighting a different way in which an HR department may shape business success, *i.e.* by facilitating effective HRP implementation, which is a foundation of overall HRM effectiveness (Wright and Nishii, 2013). The evidence

FIGURE 2 A model of the HR department’s contribution to LMs’ effective implementation of HR practices



we report does indeed suggest that active engagement in HRP implementation may be an essential complement to strategic partnership if the practices an HR department delivers are to produce the desired effect. This resonates with Caldwell (2001), who emphasised the importance for the HR department of acting upon the 'complexities of HR implementation' (p. 47) in order to become an effective organisational player.

A further contribution our research makes is to provide HR professionals with practical suggestions on how to tackle HRP implementation by LMs. As a general recommendation, our analysis suggests that LMs' implementation behaviour should be understood in a similar way to other productive work behaviours. As such, the HR department may positively influence LMs' HR implementation performance by means of initiatives that enhance their ability, motivation and opportunity to implement HRPs. Identifying these different initiatives allows us in turn to expand Bos-Nehles *et al.*'s (2013) HR implementation model by including new antecedents of effective HRP implementation.

Managerial implications

Our case studies suggest several initiatives that HR departments may take to foster LMs' *ability*. Some of them are well-known (*e.g.* providing HR training, support material; *c.f.* Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Harris *et al.*, 2002), while others, such as open-door policies and the deployment of in-the-field HR specialists, have received less attention in previous literature. Our analysis confirms that HR departments should not be ignorant of LMs' real needs, or detached from them, as this prevents HRPs from being implemented effectively (*e.g.* McGovern *et al.*, 1997). Indeed, the picture that emerges from our empirical findings shows that when HR departments deploy initiatives to support LMs' implementation efforts, the resulting HRP will much more closely resemble their original policy.

Our cases also signal pathways for HR departments to galvanise LMs' *motivation* to effectively perform implementation, which previous literature has sometimes found lacking (McGovern *et al.*, 1997; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006). These pathways, which suggest that HR departments often need to wear the cloak of 'skilled political agents' (Sheehan *et al.*, 2014) and use a variety of influence tactics, include framing HRPs in attractive ways for LMs before launching them, involving the line in designing, refining and pre-testing the practices, and publicly praising LMs' positive implementation performance.

Our research also discloses ways for HR departments to promote a more implementation-friendly context, giving LMs the *opportunity* to carry out implementation duties. Some initiatives, such as the use of consultants and the exploitation of windows of opportunity, may be particularly valuable to this end, as they help to give more legitimacy to HRPs within the organisation. Obtaining the CEO's support for HRPs can also very be useful for ensuring that HRPs' are well-received, thus facilitating LMs' implementation task. In particular, the evidence shows that CEOs can contribute to effective implementation through legitimating discourses, role modelling and even pressure. These findings add to the limited number of studies on the role of top management in HR implementation (*e.g.* Stanton *et al.*, 2010), and advise HR departments to actively seek CEO involvement. This is consistent with Sheehan *et al.* (2014), who suggested that the reduced formal power of the HR department may inform its coalitions with the CEO. Such coalitions increase HRM legitimacy and credibility, thus making a difference to the way in which HR proposals are received.

Furthermore, the *ability*- and *motivation*-enhancing initiatives taken by HR departments are more effective when aimed at HR-oriented LMs. Hence, LM selection is a key issue for HRP implementation. Firms that look for candidates with the right people management

competencies and attitudes when filling their management positions are paving the way for future HR-line collaboration, which is likely to result in more effective implementation of HRP.

Finally, this study also confirms how important it is for HR departments to develop HRPs with context fit (Huselid *et al.*, 1997). Indeed, when this does not happen, HR departments appear to swim against the tide in their attempts at enhancing LMs abilities, motivation and opportunities to implement HRPs. In particular, questions about who wins and who loses with the implementation of a new practice, and whether the practice contradicts or supports basic assumptions in the organisational culture, need to be thought through in advance by HR professionals. These findings may be read in light of the concepts of cultural and political practice-context fit proposed by Ansari *et al.* (2010), who suggest that both types of fit are relevant in explaining the way in which new practices are implemented at organisational level. While it may seem unsurprising to argue that the effectiveness of HRPs is contingent upon their level of fit with the firm's contextual variables, it is worth noting that it was only after the HRPs were introduced that HR departments became aware of the actual extent of the practices' fit (or, more usually, lack thereof) and the consequences they unleashed when it was not present, revealing that fit is not always easy to predict for HR.

Limitations

This investigation also has its limitations. As we carried out case study research, a limitation lies in the generalisability of our findings. In addition, all the interviews were carried out in large Spanish firms with established HR departments. Hence, it would be interesting to see whether similar results are obtained in other national contexts, or in firms of a different size. While our resulting theory is limited by these boundary conditions (Whetten, 1989), the fact that it has been built from a variety of cases with different implementation outcomes increases its robustness, generalisability and testability (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Another limitation is that our research is based on retrospective accounts, which can be distorted, although we have tried to mitigate this threat via triangulation based on interviews with different people in connection with each HRP. A final limitation is that we did not interview LMs, who may have provided alternative views on the actions taken by the HR department to encourage them to effectively implement the practices.

Future research

Future research may address all the above issues, as well as extend our analysis. First, our emergent model in Figure 2 and its corresponding propositions could be operationalised and tested with a large sample. This would be a natural next step, as our aim for this study was building theory. In addition, we should consider whether HR departments' actions could have an effect on more than one AMO factor simultaneously. For example, while HR training is aimed at enhancing LMs' HR abilities, it may also increase managers' motivation to perform their HR duties. Hence, future research could test the extent to which HR actions affected different AMO factors, as well as the relative strength of those relationships. Future studies could also explore the use of other AMO-enhancing HRPs described in the SHRM literature (Lepak *et al.*, 2006) in relation to LMs' implementation performance. While we have disclosed the importance of LMs' selection and training, other practices can also play a role, *e.g.* job design and career management. In addition, one could also explore the extent to which different HR actions could interact to influence LMs' implementation AMO. For example, does HR training work better in enhancing LMs' ability when used in combination with in-the-field HR

specialists? Are framing techniques more effective at persuading LMs when used alongside CEO support? Is it simply a matter of enacting a certain number of these initiatives to achieve effective HRP implementation, or are there bundles of initiatives that work complementarily for a greater effect?

Looking at HR implementation research from a broader perspective, future research could also start exploring the role of players other than the HR department and LMs, such as employee representatives. Finally, HR reputation, which is receiving increasing attention (e.g. Stirpe *et al.*, 2013), could be an interesting topic to include in different aspects of future implementation research. For example, it would be worth exploring the possible relationships between an HR department's reputation in terms of perceived professional competence and the success of the HR actions described here. It could be argued that only departments with strong reputation may be able to secure CEO support or persuade LMs of the usefulness of a new HRP. Similarly, it would also be interesting to explore whether the HR actions described could in turn improve an HR department's reputation over the long term.

There is certainly a great deal of work to be done to arrive at a full understanding of effective HRP implementation. With this study we shed some new light on the circumstances under which effective implementation by LMs is more likely to occur, in the trust that our findings may serve as a basis for further investigations into this key HR issue.

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