PROVOCATION

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When less is more: HRM implementation, legitimacy and decoupling

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Abstract

The implementation of human resource (HR) policies often proves troublesome due to the appearance, and stubborn persistence, of gaps in the process. Human resource management (HRM) scholars problematise these gaps and advocate tight implementation to reduce gaps and to ensure the desired impact of policies on organisational performance. Drawing on organisational institutionalism, we contend that gaps in implementing HR policies can actually be productive, as they secure organisational legitimacy, and thus enable organisations to operate viably within several institutional environments. We suggest that different approaches to implementation are needed, some of them premised on accepting sustained implementation gaps. We introduce minimum and moderate implementation approaches, rooted in the notion of decoupling, to complement approaches aimed at tight implementation. Our aim is to support the further development of research based on a richer interpretation of HRM implementation challenges and choices they present for HR managers.

KEYWORDS
decoupling, HR Professional, HRM implementation, institutional theory, legitimacy, line manager, strategic HRM

Practitioner Notes

What is currently known?

- Tight implementation of human resource management (HRM) policies is seen as crucial to achieving business outcomes.
- Policy aligned practices and employee outcomes are valued.
- Tight implementation efforts often fail in practice.
- Reasons for failure are identified including lack of line manager ability, motivation and opportunity, power games and micro-politics, and ineffective guidance from human resource (HR) practitioners.

What this paper adds?

- Implementation gaps are not necessarily problematic but can actually be productive.
- Failure to implement tightly might result from isomorphism and competing institutional environments and in those cases, complementary approaches to tight implementation may be appropriate.
- Minimum implementation, based on policy-practice decoupling, is suitable when organisations operate in several institutional environments that imply the need for different HR practices.
- Moderate implementation, based on means-end decoupling, is suitable when organisations operate in environments that value employee wellbeing/participation independent from business outcomes.

The implications for practitioners

- Reflexive awareness of the various implementation approaches supports HR managers in recognising challenges and formulating appropriate responses for protecting their organisations.
- Practitioners need to be skilled in different activities depending on the implementation approaches.
- Practitioners should expect, and also need to manage, ambiguous situations where they strive for organisational legitimacy and social HR goals.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The task of human resource management (HRM) implementation is known to be persistently troublesome and often frustrating for human resource (HR) managers employed by corporate HR departments in multinational organisations (Hailey et al., 2005), by local HR units and subsidiaries of global firms (Schuler et al., 1993) and by organisations providing services and goods for domestic markets whether large, medium-sized or small (Wu et al., 2015). Whatever the context, line managers are sometimes unwilling to implement the policies that HR managers design Sikora and Ferris (2014) (Trullen et al., 2016); or else appear go along with HR managers' prescriptions but then act completely differently (Brandl et al., 2019). In other situations, the impact of HR implementation on business outcomes remains unclear and therefore unconvincing for those who are needed to implement policies (Woodrow & Guest, 2014). Cases of gap-ridden and ineffective HRM implementation are widely reported, suggesting that many HR policies that exist on paper may not be implemented as intended by their designers. Even if implemented, they may not have clear outcomes. HRM scholars are concerned about these implementation 'gaps' and address them in a growing body of research (Bondarouk et al., 2018, Special Issue on successful HRM implementation; Mirfakhar et al., 2018; Trullen et al., 2020). This research is underpinned by assumptions that tight implementation is genuinely desirable and that HR managers add value to organisations by ensuring that policies have an impact on business outcomes.

In this provocation, we argue that pursuing tight implementation may not be the best option for HR managers seeking to help their organisations. Two arguments underpin this claim. First, contemporary HRM research overestimates the role that individual shortcomings play when implementation efforts fail. Second, HRM literature currently underestimates the complexities regarding how HR policies are linked with the organisational environment and as a result does not fully account for the barriers that exist to achieving tight, and clearly effective, implementation. Both these arguments support a third, which is that striving for tight implementation is often not possible and might not even be desirable, but rather may have serious costs for organisations.

In what follows, we explain our reasoning for these assertions and propose two approaches for managing implementation challenges based on the notion of *decoupling*. We draw on organisational institutionalism which is a perspective that is increasingly relevant for HRM research (Lees, 1997; Lewis et al., 2019; Paauwe & Boselie, 2003), and identify two forms of decoupling, discussed by Bromley and Powell (2012). The notion of decoupling serves as the basis for fruitful discussions on possible alternatives to tight implementation that dominates current HRM approaches. While we challenge the view that tight implementation is always useful, our aim is constructive. First, we want to encourage a greater variety of explanations for the observed gaps and associated puzzles linked with HRM implementation. Second, we want to consider the knowledge HR managers need in order to contribute to organisational viability in situations where tight implementation is not the appropriate response.

We, therefore, argue that when it comes to HRM implementation, 'less is more'. There are two sets of situations where we believe this argument holds. The first are situations where competing pressures lead to different HR practices being seen as likely to work or as appropriate in that context. The second are situations where practical achievement of the outcomes that a HR policy promises is seen as uncertain due to local circumstances and the pressure to adapt to them.

We outline ways to make implementation a less frustrating experience for practitioners based on the suggestion that more modest aspirations about business outcomes is warranted, and that greater sensitivity to the valuable contributions of different varieties of HR implementation is needed.

2 | AIMS, CHALLENGES AND REMEDIES IN HRM IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation debate in contemporary HRM research is located in scholarship on strategic and evidence-based HRM. Scholars assert that the value of HRM depends not only on the quality and contextual fit of HRM, but also on how targeted organisation members respond to and enact policies (Den Hartog et al., 2013; Woodrow & Guest, 2014). Woodrow and Guest (2014) argue that even the best HR policies cannot have an impact on organisational performance unless effectively implemented, and that usually implies *tightly* implemented.

In a synthesis of implementation literature, Trullen et al. (2020) rightly remark that the term implementation is used in different ways. It can be seen as a *process* in which multiple actors routinise HRM related behaviours over a period of time. This process starts with HR managers having explicit views on links between HRM and performance and then seeking to induce strategically desirable employee behaviours through the design of HR policies (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Implementation is also seen as the *outcome* of this process. Scholars regard implementation outcomes as effective when they are in line with the intended purpose of designers (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Khilji & Wang, 2006; Trullen et al., 2016). Scholars are particularly interested how HR policies can be implemented to achieve the organisation's business goals (Chow, 2012; Khilji & Wang, 2006).

To shed light on implementation challenges, it is useful to take HR policies as a baseline. HR policies formulate desirable employee behaviours in a rule-like manner. The purpose of these rules is explicated in order to signal why specific behaviours are important (Den Hartog et al., 2013). When organisational members display behaviours that are inconsistent with HR policies, and decision-makers ignore HR policies intentionally or unintentionally, this is seen to undermine the policy and endanger the business benefits intended. In a recent study of HRM implementation challenges in a hypermarket chain in India, Makhecha et al. (2018) observed that local area managers

made pragmatic changes to prescribed HR policies to suit their often urgent and specific requirements. The cumulative impact of these changes undermined the designer's purpose to attract potential employees and maintain the quality of human capital within the organisation.

A further implementation challenge occurs when organisational members comply with formal rules, but the relationship between HR policy and business outcomes remains opaque. Implementation appears ineffective in such cases. An example is Woodrow and Guest's (2014) study of a policy on workplace bullying. Although the policy was 'properly' implemented, questions remained regarding the impact on employee well-being and performance suggesting that policy implementation does not always have straightforward and verifiable outcomes.

There is a growing body of research addressing sources of implementation challenges and gaps as well as possible remedies. Researchers interpret gaps as resulting from individual shortcomings such as lack of competence, ability and motivation, or the mis-use of power or micro-politics of actors involved (Makhecha et al., 2018; Mirfakhar et al., 2018; Sikora & Ferris, 2014). A common focus is line managers who are viewed as prone to cause errors in implementation processes. The argument goes that even 'the "best" HR policies have little performance impact if line managers cannot, or choose not to, implement them' (Sikora & Ferris, 2014, p. 273). Questions are also raised as to whether HR managers have relevant and timely knowledge available to examine the actual extent of HR policy fit (Trullen et al., 2016, p. 467).

Following the logic that HR managers contribute to organisational viability by enabling tight policy implementation, remedies to these challenges are offered. Scholars advocating the inscribing of HR policies into the interpretive schemes of the relevant organisational actors (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) often have methods of change management in mind. Since the aim is to induce behavioural patterns congruent with business goals, there is a case for HR managers to intervene and push for tight implementation. For example, Makhecha et al. (2018, p. 260/261) view deviations as 'cases for managerial censure'. More recently, a dynamic approach is advocated whereby learning processes are necessary in order to achieve the intended purpose of implementation (van Mierlo et al., 2018). Scholars suggest modifying the specific design of the HR policy in response to implementation challenges (Trullen et al., 2020, p. 10), so that it is able to 'accomplish the objectives for which the organisation adopted it'. A similar dynamic-implementation logic is advocated by Makhecha et al. (2018: 382): 'Corporate HR has to continuously track HR practices as they get implemented and experienced... While devolution from HR to line is a necessity, HR needs to educate, guide, train and support line managers to ensure the smooth execution of devolved HR activities'.

Summarising, HRM scholarship assumes that the purpose of implementation is to achieve business outcomes as intended, and that implementation challenges are likely to be temporary. Gaps can be tackled through dynamic adjustment because human errors involved can be solved, and unmotivated employees and line managers can be replaced or retrained. It is also assumed that when activities are undertaken to tackle gaps (e.g., assessing impact, replacing ineffective HR policies) this is fundamentally helpful to the organisation's survival and viability.

3 | INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS AND LEGITIMACY

The approach to HRM implementation described above is the dominant one in the HRM literature. It is largely focussed on the links, albeit dynamic, between HRM policies and business outcomes. Less evident in this research is how HR policies and outcomes of implementation are linked with the institutional environment of organisations.[1] In this paper, we draw on organisational institutionalism (Dobbin, 1994; Meyer, 2017) to shed light on the constitutive influence of the institutional environment on implementation efforts and propose alternative explanations for gaps, as well as strategies for managing these gaps. Organisational institutionalism seeks to explain *why* and *how* organisations and their characteristics (formal structures) co-evolve with the institutions prevailing in the community

of organisations of which they belong. Organisations are seen as open systems that survive by being recognised by these other organisations.

Institutions are conceptualised as collectively held models of rational organising principles (Dobbin, 1994). They are constitutive for organisations, including their HRM policies and practices (Luo et al., 2020), in the sense that these models provide foundations for occupational and managerial identities and define goals as well as elements of policies through which these goals can be pursued (Luckmann, 2008). Elaborate versions of such models have been introduced to the HRM literature as institutional logics (Lewis et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2012). In other words, institutions establish the objective reality in which organisations operate, a reality which is nevertheless socially constructed. Organisational institutionalism assumes that there are isomorphic tendencies in organisational communities that imply the diffusion of institutional models in the form of policies (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Theories and evidence that support institutional models encourage isomorphism (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017). For example, relating HR policies to the resource-based view of the firm increases their plausibility; studies showing a relationship between these policies and desirable business goals underpin arguments for their efficacy. While theory and evidence make institutional models more robust and acceptable, they do not prevent gaps occurring (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017, p. 91). Considerable uncertainties prevail about the alignment of actual organisational practices with institutional models (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Organisational institutionalism asserts that individual organisations are encouraged to adopt elements of institutions because they want to use models of organising that are recognised by relevant others as rational (i.e., rationalised) and that are supported. Organisations may adopt institutional elements like policies because their members identify with these institutions and because think the model is right. Adoption of institutional elements might also occur because organisational members recognise that isomorphic behaviour is rewarded through the achievement of organisational legitimacy. Legitimacy in organisational institutionalism means that an organisation's activities are in accord with rational models accepted by other relevant organisations. It is granted based on signals that an organisation operates these models, which are delivered by an organisation's formal structure. Organisational legitimacy is crucial for organisational viability as it enables recognition by others, attainment of resources, continued relationships, and makes the organisation attractive to customers, other producers and employees (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017, p. 846). Organisations *must* look right even if they 'fail' to fully implement policies in ways that are officially 'true' (Suddaby et al., 2017).

Drawing on sociological variants of organisational institutionalism not only enables researchers to foreground the boundaries of current assumptions on HRM implementation, but also enriches implementation debates by stressing when the value of partial implementation to organisations may trump the importance of calling attention to, and trying to close, gaps. It also enriches our understanding of the activities in which HR managers should engage in order to benefit their organisations. To explore these ideas fully, we mobilise the concept of *decoupling* from organisational institutionalism.

4 | DECOUPLING: MANAGING HRM IMPLEMENTATION WHEN TACKLING GAPS IS NOT PRODUCTIVE

The concept of decoupling, introduced by Meyer and Rowan (1977), describes how organisations can operate simultaneously in different environments where competing models of managing are evident. By decoupling, organisations achieve legitimacy by focussing selectively on implementing institutional elements that produce least or little conflict with other priorities co-existing in the same environment. Decoupling is a useful concept for explaining the persistence of implementation gaps so often observed in HRM research. However, HRM scholars have made very limited use of this concept to date (for exceptions, see Kozica & Brandl, 2015; Tenhiälä & Vuori, 2012; Williamson et al., 2019) which is interesting as institutional scholars have long used HRM themes in studies of decoupling (e.g., Edelman et al., 1991). In a state-of-the-art paper, Bromley and Powell (2012) distinguish

two forms of decoupling. These correspond to two implementation approaches that we label 'minimum implementation' and 'moderate implementation.' Each requires HR managers to engage in well-thought-out activities. We now outline when it is reasonable to adopt the two alternative approaches, explain how each is different in its understanding of managing implementation compared to approaches favouring tight implementation, and describe the nature of HR managers' appropriate handling of critical situations where organisational legitimacy is at risk.

4.1 | Minimum implementation

Minimum implementation relies on the concept of policy-practice decoupling which is a gap between the formal HR policy and the actual work activities (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Under minimum implementation, the intended HR policy and realised HR practice can remain inconsistent and decision-making can systematically deviate from formal rules encoded in policies.

Minimum implementation is reasonable where organisations need recognition from several environments and when these environments suggest that different HR practices are valuable and legitimate. The classical case for minimum implementation is multinational corporations (MNCs) (Kostova et al., 2008). As Tyskbo (2019) convincingly shows, competing institutional logics for managing talent are a credible explanation for the persistence of gaps between the talent management policies from the headquarters and actual practices in subsidiaries. Rather than seeing implementation issues exclusively in terms of lack of fairness in subsidiary settings, we encourage scholars and practitioners to consider such arrangements as outcomes of the subsidiary's effort to combine different, conflicting conceptualisations of fairness (Brandl & Schneider, 2017).

Minimum implementation is also relevant for organisations that need recognition from different sectors including, for example, hybrid organisations (Battilana & Lee, 2014). In contrast to MNCs, where line managers in subsidiaries face different environments than in the headquarters, the hybrid organisation literature addresses how individual line managers simultaneously handle competing logics from day to day. For example, Kozica and Brandl (2015) study how line managers assess employee performance based on a forced ranking policy in a government funded organisation that sends employees on risky missions abroad and where competing bureaucratic (government) and organic (rapid team deployment) logics pervade everyday activities and HRM practices. In this context, team collegiality, trust and motivation relied on flexible approaches to HRM practices while, at the same time, the broader government context signalled the importance of consistent rule implementation. Managers documented their results on the performance appraisal sheet and submitted this sheet to the corporate HR department. Where the employees' 'performance' results were not consistent with the stated performance criteria, employees were occasionally given better appraisals than they deserved (according to the policy) if they, for example, had not been promoted for (what line managers considered) an overly long time. Other employees, perhaps those recently promoted and who therefore could not be promoted again in a short time period, were given appraisal ratings below their actual performance (according to policy agreed standards). These activities meant that the results of the appraisal activities aligned with the rules of the forced distribution policy, signalling the organisation's compliance with transparency in promotion decisions demanded by the government, while the flexible interpretation of the criteria allowed the organisation to strengthen the collegiality and motivation of team members that was also needed to fulfil its mission. This minimum implementation approach allowed the organisation to simultaneously fulfil conflicting demands and did *not* reflect individual shortcomings of line managers (e.g., incompetency, lack of willingness etc.). Approaches like this can also occur in other HR policy domains including hiring, reward management, and talent management.

Using the concept of decoupling and relating this to minimum implementation, we can see the role of HR managers as enabling purposeful flexibility in the interpretation of HR policies. While we acknowledge the importance and value of cultivating a homogeneous interpretation of HR policies when this is possible, our main point is that this is much more complex under conditions where relevant environments suggest competing logics for

HR implementation. Tight implementation in areas such as selection, promotion or rewarding employees will be much more difficult to achieve than in cases where HR managers are creating strong situations (Haggerty & Wright, 2010, p. 101) based on *one* logic accepted by all. Competing institutional demands mean HR managers must help line managers to develop answers not just for how to 'correctly' interpret HR policies, but also for how to build a shared understanding for when deviations from HR policies may be purposeful, and how deviations can be accomplished in ways that do not undermine the impression that the organisation is in accord with legitimacy demands from relevant environments. This can be better achieved when HR managers stay detached from business units, for example, and focus on conceptualising HR policies and accepting line managers' decisions which arise from competing institutional demands (Sandholtz & Burrows, 2016). Furthermore, HR managers need to develop sensitivity in business units towards local adaptations and exceptions by encouraging debates on practical handling of HR policies among and with line managers (Kozica & Brandl, 2015).

Difficulties can obviously arise in cases of flexible interpretation of HR policies, particularly in terms of fairness issues among employees. Where policies are minimally implemented, this can lead to subsequent lowering of employee commitment (Den Hartog et al., 2013).[2] In the case of performance ratings, those employees receiving lower ratings may feel unfairly treated and may publicly challenge inconsistencies or ask for closer inspection, and thereby bring arrangements that serve legitimacy in competing environments into question. HR managers can protect the organisation from inspections by addressing such conflicts at a 'low level', involving, for example, the provision of resources to line managers to compensate locally for inconsistencies (Kozica & Brandl, 2015). When de-escalation works, organisation members are more likely to play down shortcomings in implementation and to maintain their commitment to the organisation (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), even if they are disadvantaged by inconsistencies between intended HR policies and actual practices. In sum, minimum implementation implies that HR managers need to address uncertainties and conflicts regarding HR policies informally to avoid exposure of inconsistencies and gaps. They must show skill in avoiding inspections, or controlling the fallout, which could be damaging for organisational legitimacy.

4.2 | Moderate implementation

Moderate implementation is rooted in the concept of means-end decoupling. Under moderate implementation organisations achieve coherence between the HR policy and realised HR practices. However, the HR practices 'have a weak relationship to the core task of an organisation' (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 3), which means that their utility for what are defined as 'core' goals may not be clear and easily verified.

We might expect to see moderate implementation in HR policies domains where the contribution to business outcomes remains opaque even when policies are implemented properly. These issues are less puzzling than current implementation research suggests (Woodrow & Guest, 2014) if we consider that implementation goals often reflect the general theme in HRM theorising that human growth, employee participation and wellbeing serve as a foundation for business performance (Guest, 1990). Organisational institutionalism reminds us that the business case for HRM policies may trigger significant isomorphic behaviour but result in subsequent gaps as the means-ends relationships may not be realised (Paauwe & Boselie, 2005). The alignment of employee and business goals promises legitimacy gains in organisational environments that value economic outcomes. These may not be achieved for a variety of reasons, including that the circumstances differ from those where theory and evidence was originally produced, organisations are encouraged to strictly comply with institutional models (Wijen, 2014), or because causalities implied by underlying models diverge from those commonly suggested (Godard, 2004; Wright et al., 2005). Under these circumstances, the focus on moderate implementation is likely to be more adequate than a focus on tight implementation.

Implementation activities that are focussed on transforming HR policies into HR practices, rather than achieving specific business outcomes, can minimise the (potential) exposure of implementation gaps in institutional

environments where HRM activities are judged based on achievement of business outcomes. Such implementation activities also increase the chances of gaining support from other relevant environments that define employee growth and rights as valuable ends in their own right. A good example is HR policies for equal opportunities that prioritise the need for human growth for *all* employees. While HR managers who are invested in establishing these policies develop 'myths about causality' and the contribution of these policies to organisational performance (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017, p. 847), HR managers should tread cautiously in putting these policies to the (empirical) test on their performance outcomes alone. Evidence on Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies or diversity in organisations regarding financial outcomes remains mixed.[3] Given that such HR policies have clear legitimacy benefits, even if ambiguous links to financial or production outcomes, HR managers help their organisations when they gloss over rather than expose these means-ends gaps. Where HR managers adopt a moderate implementation approach, they evaluate policies with activity related measures (e.g., number of women involved in mentoring programs, women in executive board) rather than outcome measures. To avoid closer inspections, experts equip themselves with credentials that establish a common cognitive base with relevant environments (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Past research suggested that formal education from universities serves this goal (Heugens & Lander, 2009).

Difficulties may occur when managers find the business case for diversity unconvincing. Kirton et al. (2016) show that line managers seem to value diversity as an abstract concept while openly questioning whether diversity contributes to the effectiveness of their teams or not. However, questioning the value of female participation in management positions and decision-making can undermine organisational legitimacy, as demonstrated by the recent case of the Olympic organisation committee in Japan. When top management statements that women make meetings more complicated became public, a serious legitimacy crisis ensued. The existence of evidence supporting or undermining these assertions was largely irrelevant and the organisation (and involved individuals) were censured for questioning basic values from their relevant institutional environments, including, in this particular case, that opportunities for participation in management should not exclude women.[4]

An immediate reaction such as disciplining managers may repair organisational legitimacy. As parts of the organisation will persistently experience realities that differ from institutional models and the values they uphold, HR managers must anticipate ongoing challenges with HR policies under conditions of moderate implementation. Instead of engaging in debates on evidence, which may support or disconfirm the value of HR practices for various ends, HR managers should engage in 'trading' the meanings of HR practices with managers (Tyson, 1980). They can, for example, reinterpret meanings to satisfy different realities, while also making clear that HR practices are 'instrumental' in enabling the organisation to gain recognition from the environments where the value of such meanings have a 'fact like' status. Negotiating meanings undoubtedly requires considerable power and skill (Kern et al., 2018), especially where this involves challenging the view that HR practices are only valuable by reference to verifiable performance indicators and typically, business goals.

5 | VARIETIES OF IMPLEMENTATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR HRM THEORISING AND PRACTICE

To advance HR implementation research based on the distinction between *tight, minimum and moderate implementation*, it is important to consider the complex and complementary relationship between the 'classic' view and our novel view, as well as what these different approaches imply for HR managers (see Table 1).[5]

We outline some thoughts on this in the remainder of the paper, and offer suggestions that may make implementation less frustrating for HR practitioners. Our aim is also to stimulate promising ways of theorising in research on HRM implementation.

First, understanding the differences in approaches to implementation will pave the way towards a more reflexive stance towards implementation challenges. We believe our insights, though controversial, elucidate that

ways to tackle implementation challenges have so far have mainly followed a model of single-loop learning in which scholars advise practitioners to adjust HR activities to achieve one set of (business) goals. We acknowledge that this is *one* way to approach implementation, but it may not be the only one. If we build on the premise of organisational institutionalism that decoupling constitutes a solution to the problem of compliance under competing institutional logics (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer, 2017), asking questions such as how organisation members can be convinced to implement HR policies better and more faithfully may be missing the point entirely.

To emphasise that the value of HR policies can even exist when these policies are not working as planned, or implemented as intended, extends learning possibilities for practitioners and scholars. Varieties of implementation can offer enhanced explanatory power for observations in empirical studies related to implementation gaps. A focus on varieties of implementation could also encourage a fruitful engagement with conditions for appropriate measures for implementation success, which is a topic of interest in existing HRM implementation research (Trullen et al., 2019). For HR practitioners, a varieties of implementation approach could stimulate new forms of learning which involve shifting from a focus on measures to close gaps (such as training, communication of HRM practices, control and incentives) to reconsidering what their role is, and what exactly they are focussing on, in their implementation work. If they appreciate that competing institutional environments inevitably bring uncertainties and limit possibilities to realise business outcomes, they may also recognise that ambiguity, inconsistencies and opaqueness are not necessarily a sign of 'bad' management. This may also enable HR managers to tackle gaps to the advantage of their organisations (Brandl et al., 2019: 86). Finally, it can allow HR managers to redefine the critical challenges involved in implementation and move beyond the focus on individual shortcomings.

Second, HR managers need to consider alternative management principles and to be skilled in different activities linked with implementation approaches. Principles that 'work' in one implementation approach might be detrimental in another. Activities related to tight implementation, inspecting how HR policies are executed, evaluating results, and intervening in case of 'incorrect' interpretations, can be counterproductive to organisational viability if organisations operate in competing environments.

Activities that deserve more attention in future research include how HR managers approach critical challenges that implementation presents, and how they can anticipate, prevent and repair threats to organisational legitimacy arising from HRM implementation. Studying these activities may draw on and extend research in HRM that looks at how practitioners handle competing institutional demands on the ground (Brandl et al., 2019; Keegan et al., 2018; Kozica & Brandl, 2015; Tyskbo, 2019). HRM scholars might also use research on deception (Brown & Jones, 2000) to further our understanding of how HR practitioners cultivate faith in meeting competing institutional logics. Research on organisational communication (Christensen et al., 2020) can enrich our knowledge of how HR negotiates the meanings of HR policies in different environments. Literature on institutional work (Lewis et al., 2019, p. 316) can highlight the agency involved in these activities. It would be enriching for HRM scholars to study these perspectives as they elaborate on the notion of 'balancing' that is established in HRM and employment debates (Boselie, 2014; Budd, 2004).

A varieties of implementation approach could also provide an impulse to research on HR manager competencies which are necessary for survival in their occupation. In this regard, a comment made by Shaun Tyson more than 40 years ago is still relevant today, and perhaps even more so, than when the comment was originally made:

> 'Successful personnel managers are aware that there is this disjunction between what is "officially" real and what is experienced as real' (Tyson, 1980, p. 45).

Finally, our approach to varieties of implementation may be useful for scholars who call for more attention for social HRM goals based on ethical reasoning (Budd, 2004; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Francis & Keegan, 2020). First, institutional theory addresses *why* progress in goal achievement can be fairly slow despite efforts from governments and social movements. For example, Edelman and Cabrera (2020) show that many anti-harassment policies prevent organisational liability more than they prevent harassment in the workplace.

TABLE 1 Varieties of HRM implementation approaches

	Minimum	Moderate	Tight
Roots	Policy-practice decoupling in institutional theory	Means-end decoupling in institutional theory	Effective implementation in strategic HRM, evidence-based management
Implementation focus	HR policies	HR practices	Outcomes – especially business outcomes
Conditions where approach is appropriate	Several institutional environments	Several institutional environments; rigid rules, opaque means-ends relations	One dominant institutional environment
Role of HR managers	Enable purposeful flexibility in HR policy interpretation; enable shared interpretation; no involvement in line manager decisions	Prioritise activities; keep HR policy goals ambiguous; build credentials underlining the importance of several goals to organisation	Measure implementation progress and adjust activities based on effectiveness in achieving defined business outcomes
Critical challenges	Fairness issues; complaints raised by disadvantaged employees	Parts of the organisation question value of activities (in public); calls for evaluation of practices	Gaps between stated and realised outcomes
Appropriate HR responses	Solve fairness issues informally; de-escalate situations that could lead to inspections; equip line managers with resources so that they can compensate disadvantaged employees	Sanction managers who undermine legitimacy by questioning core institutional values; adjust meanings of HR practices to specific environments; strengthen managers' sensitivity for different demands from organisations' environments	Revise HR policy and practice; replace or retrain unmotivated employees and/or line managers

Abbreviation: HRM, human resource management.

In line with our arguments, the authors suggest that this is 'in part because courts often fail to distinguish between meaningful compliance and the merely symbolic policies and procedures that do little to protect employees from harassment' (2020: in print). Second and relatedly, it becomes more obvious that implementing government regulations for employee protection and rights is not a straight forward process but rather one that is rife with gaps between policy and action, and one where tensions between achieving social goals and acquiring organisational legitimacy for pursuing these goals are pervasive. Since achieving social legitimacy[6] is distinct from achieving social HRM goals, HR managers should expect ambiguous and paradoxical situations. For example, while their organisation's anti-harassment policies may be approved by the government, or where they earn awards for being a family friendly employer, employees may still struggle with offencive behaviour or suffer from blurred work-family boundaries. Since acknowledging problems with social HR goals may undermine social legitimacy and vice versa, sustaining legitimacy supporting policies may be ineffective for achieving social HR goals. A paradox lens (Keegan et al., 2019) can therefore be promising for analysing implementation tensions and productive responses. On a positive note, organisations operating in institutional environments where human rights matter often employ experts (e.g., EEO officers) that shift resources away from production related activities and towards legitimacy related ends (Bromley & Powell, 2012), and installing experts has been found to be one of the more effective means to achieve substantial outcomes in social goals (Kalev

et al., 2006). In other words, a varied approach to implementation may be more requisitely complex for the kinds of ambiguous challenges facing HR managers in trying to support social HRM goals.

Our proposal to focus on varieties of implementing HR policies can contribute to developing an agenda for future research on this topic. Rather than using categories such as 'failure' and 'success' of HRM implementation based on the ideal of tight implementation, HR scholars need to ask what kinds of institutional environments organisations hope to address by adopting specific HR policies, and how they can comply with institutional expectations when they cannot operate HR policies in ways advocated by these environments. In MNC subsidiaries, local demands versus global demands are likely to be a prominent influence on the limits of tight implementation. However, because we consider competing institutional demands and uncertainty about HRM outcomes to be widespread, minimum and moderate implementation should also be considered relevant for other organisational settings, including family firms and social enterprises. Studying these kinds of questions empirically requires an insider perspective. Ethnographic studies of HRM implementation projects (e.g., Kozica & Brandl, 2015) and intervention research (see Radaelli et al., 2014 for an overview) are useful for highlighting research designs that enable more fine-grained examination of the activities of actors involved in managing HRM implementation, the skills and resources actors use for handling critical situations during implementation, and the conditions that trigger organisations to change their approach to implementation.

6 | CONCLUSION

The scholarly conversation on HRM implementation mainly focuses on how to tightly implement HR policies in order to enhance the impact of policies on business performance. Notwithstanding its merits, the one-sidedness of this research might be harmful for practitioners and organisations by reinforcing an unquestioned assumption that tight implementation only has benefits but no costs. We build on organisational institutionalism to argue that this reasoning is based on an implicit view of legitimacy in terms of one dominant institutional environment, and more importantly, assumes that exposure of gaps will not undermine organisational legitimacy for other relevant environments. We argue that in many cases, approaches rooted in minimum and moderate implementation constitute potential solutions to the problems that organisations face when complying with several institutional logics. These varieties of implementation can broaden how we look at and interpret implementation challenges and productive managerial responses. We believe our insights, though controversial, better elucidate the tensions confronted by HR managers as they navigate the ambiguous terrain that is HRM in organisational life.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Where implementation scholarship acknowledges institutional influences, these tend to be framed as possible short-comings in the conceptualisation of HR policies. For example, Trullen et al. (2020, p. 13) argue that institutional isomorphism may disregard other elements of an organisation's specific context and suggest that applying evidence-based management may correct such tendencies. This suggestion assumes that organisational rationality can be independent from the environment in which organisations operate. Sociological institutionalism instead stresses that rationality is constituted *among* organisations and not *within* organisations (Dobbin, 1994, p. 120).

[2] Fairness issues are also a key argument in favour of tight implementation in HRM debates. The strong systems perspective on which much implementation research builds suggests that HR managers do their jobs effectively when they help to eliminate all deviations from policy. However, strong systems thinking is embedded in a unitarist HRM model (Gilbert et al., 2015), and advocates wins from achieving a consistent interpretation of HR policies such as procedural justice and subsequent citizenship behaviour rather than recognising that there are possible 'costs' to tight implementation. Where organisations seek recognition in several environments, efforts to ensure tight implementation will inevitably sacrifice compliance with some of the different demands.

[3] While a number of EEO policies show positive effects in terms of the promotion of women and minorities (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017), a recent large-scale field experiment reveals that 'an increase from one to two female board members on a board with four directors reduces that firm's operating income to assets by 12%' (Yang et al., 2019, p. 8).

[4] The case of Adidas that faced huge controversy due to the HR manager commenting that racism is not a concern for the company (Hofer, 2020, July 1) shows that questioning the need for strong engagement for EEO is a critical situation also for business organisations, not just for government funded organisations.

[5] It is worth noting that the labels minimum, moderate and tight do not imply any desirable hierarchy. Rather, the approaches represent different ways that incorporating HR policies can support organisational legitimacy.

[6] HRM scholars have coined the term 'social legitimacy' to capture how organisations benefit from incorporating policies that address human rights and good work standards (Paauwe & Boselie, 2007).

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