

Chapter 30

High-Performance Work Systems in a Cross-Cultural Context: A Comparison Between Sweden and Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The strategic human resource management field has increased the contributions, comparing cross-cultural aspects, mainly involving the East and West cultures, but there is a gap regarding on knowing how the implementation practices impacts and how they are impacted by cultural differences. Through a qualitative contribution, this research was developed in a multinational company in Sweden with a subsidiary in Brazil. The focus is to answer the questions: How high-performance work systems are applied in different cultural contexts? How do cultural dimensions affect high-performance work systems' adaptation? The findings have shown that strong organizational cultures could overlap country differences, but adaptations could allow innovative exchanges and raise employee commitment and participation. High-performance work systems are practices that could be used in cross-cultural territories, but not without considering cultural and local adaptations. After institutionalized, the local adaptation could be able to enlarge organizational performance.

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INTRODUCTION

The international economic environment and competition requirements have made inter-country mobility an imperative (Freitas, 2009). This requires organizations know how to cope with the adaptation of both individual and corporate practices. In this sense, intercultural practices of multinational companies (MNC) are a relevant topic within strategic management. These practices may represent difficult to imitate resources and contribute to develop sustainable advantage (Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, Ketchen & Wright, 2011).

The current social landscape brings with it new perspectives like social networking, human mobility, and cross-cultural influences (Hobsbaum, 2000; Baumann, 2001). Interculturality has gained prominence in academic studies. Besides globalization and its economic influence, open information access has made the world closer (Freitas, 2009). On one hand, these different possibilities could foster creativity, innovation, diversity and improve performance; on the other hand, such differences could serve as a constraint factor (Dawidziuk, Boboryko-Hocazade & Mazur, 2012).

There are many studies comparing distinct cultural values of MNCs (Chang, 2003), however, how organizational practices are applied to different cultural contexts is not sufficiently explored. Not only the adaptation to the local culture matters but also the impact of implementation and institutionalization of managerial practices and both consequently have their impact on organizational performance (Rabl, Jayasinghe, Gerhart & Kühlmann, 2014). There are criticisms regarding the differences between countries in terms of the environment for management, and management practices need to take these differences into account (Gerhart & Fang, 2005; Gerhart, 2008). For example, differences in regulation and values (like predominance of collectivism or individualism), characteristics of the labor force play its role.

The human resource management (HRM) field has increased the contributions on a quantitative approach, comparing cross-cultural aspects, mainly involving the East and West cultures (Tung, 2008, Chen & Miler, 2010; Chang, 2003). But qualitative studies regarding on the impact of implementation practices and how they are impacted by cultural differences remains underexplored. In particular, South American differences, as well as from undeveloped countries, are not sufficiently explored if compared with more developed cultures (Tanure, 2007; Freitas, 2009).

This study presents a qualitative contribution to serve as a counterpart to quantitative approaches, describing how HRM practices planned in the headquarter of a Swedish MNC was applied and with what kind of adaptations in a Brazilian subsidiary, in Curitiba, Paraná. To understand how company practices were implemented we adopted Posthuma's high-performance work systems (HPWS) taxonomy and for capturing the cultural differences we used Hofstede's dimensions. To develop theory addressing these themes we formulated the following research questions:

1. How are HPWS applied in different cultural contexts?
2. How do cultural dimensions affect HPWS's adaptation?

Understanding how organizational culture can be adaptable to a new national culture could improve strategic management. According to our findings, HPWS practices could be used in cross-cultural territories, but not without considering cultural and local adaptations. Using as a reference to Hofstede's dimensions, the main adaptations involved cultural aspects like individualism/collectivism and short-term vision/long-term vision dimensions. With this comprehension it is possible that practitioners could

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