

Human resource management practices, entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance: what is the link?

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Abstract

Purpose – Building on the little guidance in the existing literature regarding the relationship between human resource management (HRM) practices, entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance, this study aims to generate theoretical propositions that underpin an integrative framework following a systematic literature review, then to test such a framework within the context of a small and medium enterprise (SME) to demonstrate how employees' knowledge and competencies are translated into added value while fostering the company's entrepreneurial capabilities and culture.

Design/methodology/approach – For the purpose of this research, a systematic literature review was adopted to build the propositions underpinning an integrative theoretical framework linking HRM practices, entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. A single case study approach was then followed to test the propositions of the integrative theoretical framework within the context of an SME, while adopting a triangulation methodology for data collection, including questionnaires, interviews and archival data. Data analysis was conducted following the procedures of a pattern-matching methodology.

Findings – This research confirms the strategic role of HRM practices in fostering the firm's entrepreneurial orientation and capabilities, while nurturing, enriching and bundling employees' knowledge, skills and distinctive competencies within the context of a company's innovation-driven strategy. HRM practices through a strategic alignment with the company's business strategy, contribute to shaping up organizational attitudes, behaviors and cultural determinants that are, in turn, conducive to better innovativeness, risk propensity and initiative-taking. Theoretical and empirical evidence shows how such corporate entrepreneurialism is then translated into adding value activities, individual and group productivity and overall organizational performance.

Research limitations implications – This research generates meaningful insights on how HRM practices contribute to shaping up corporate entrepreneurship attitudes and transforming them into both individual and organizational results while building on conceptual assumptions and empirical evidence. The authors believe such insights have the potential to lay the foundations of a comprehensive theoretical model that disentangles the complexities and the dynamics of how strategically-oriented HRM interventions could help an organization redirect its employees' competencies into innovation and entrepreneurial capabilities to generate a competitive advantage in an ever-changing business environment. Future research should emphasize mainly on multiple case study approaches and ethnographic methodologies for the sake of result generalizability and holistic understandings.

Practical implications – This research draws significant conclusions for SMEs to cope with the change and the fierce competitive dynamics affecting current business environments. To consolidate and further develop their strategic positioning, this research suggests that SMEs could leverage distinctive individual and group competencies, through strategically aligned HRM actions and investments, to foster learning and generate entrepreneurially-oriented cultural values and management style conducive to innovation, performance and competitive advantage.

Originality/value – This research offers integrated and holistic views of how HRM practices affect organizational performance while leveraging on learning to create the necessary cultural and managerial conditions for corporate entrepreneurialism. This research builds on both theoretical propositions and empirical evidence to lay the foundations of a comprehensive model linking HRM practices, entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. From a practical perspective, the research findings

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suggest new human resource developmental venues while placing much emphasis on the value of creating the innovation-driven managerial culture and fostering entrepreneurially-oriented attitudes to achieve better performance results.

Keywords *HRM practices, Entrepreneurial orientation, Organizational culture, Corporate entrepreneurship, Firm performance, Entrepreneurial capabilities, Learning, Individual performance, Business strategy, Entrepreneurialism*

Paper type *Research paper*

Literature review

Human resource management practices

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) brought about significant change and contributions to economies both at the national and regional levels around the world. They create considerable employment offers, hence, making the national income equitably distributed among individuals from all areas (rural, semi-urban or urban) of countries, which leads to promoting growth and sustaining local and regional development (Kishore *et al.*, 2012). Such businesses, however, are generally characterized by limited financial resources that often hinder structuring an adequate human resources (HR) system (Czajkowski, 2017; Baggen *et al.*, 2016). Kishore *et al.* (2012) consider that human resource management (HRM) as a discipline has been systematically associated with large organizations, which reinforces the impression that SMEs do not need to use such practices in their management given also the entrepreneurship-driven nature of such businesses (Schmelter *et al.*, 2010). Nevertheless, given the competitive and survival issues most of SMEs are facing in today's ever-changing business environment, such business structures are required to rethink the way they manage their HR and also to adopt more creative practices and policies in this managerial domain. Establishing strong and solid HRM plans that are strictly aligned with value-adding strategies and goals becomes vital in such businesses (Kishore *et al.*, 2012).

It is becoming vital for firms to know their potential in terms of the general resources they possess to adapt to the change affecting their business environment, and more importantly, to build a strong competitive advantage (De Waal and Heijtel, 2017). The driving force to achieve such a goal varies from an organization to another, yet multiple researchers have demonstrated the role of human capital as a powerful enabler for a better competitive position in the marketplace (Bae *et al.*, 2003). Relying, however, on the mere existence of HR in companies is arguably insufficient. Wright *et al.* (2001) emphasize the substantial value employees could generate for their organizations when fostering their abilities and motivation, and offering them the necessary opportunities to operate flexibly. Leveraging on a different set of management practices, processes and HR values helps organizations shape their human capital while promoting such conditions and work environment. Chowhan (2016) designated three main HR dimensions including skills, motivation and opportunity enhancement to foster an organization's human capital. These foci are reflected in the AMO model as suggested by Kroon *et al.* (2013) to identify a bundle of HR practices referred to as high-performance work practices. This model stresses the importance of opting for employee ability-enhancing practices (such as training and skill development) (A), employee motivation-enhancing practices (including high pay, career development and top-down information sharing) (M) and practices that give employees the opportunity to go the extra mile (such as employee involvement and teamwork) (O). Similarly, Hayton (2005) singled out two main categories of HR practices to shift the focus of current managerial actions toward individuals as value generating assets. The first category includes a traditional set of HRM practices for the purpose of inducing efficiency by matching individuals' skills with organizational needs, whereas the second category represents discretionary practices whereby employee participation, commitment, learning and knowledge sharing are encouraged. Aligning HRM practices with an organization's

strategy contributes to differentiating a company from its competitors, as selectively implemented and tailored HRM practices enable firms to strengthen and maintain their competitive advantage (Chowhan, 2016). Such alignment stands at the heart of strategic HRM as an emerging field in management studies, promoting, hence, effective practices to leverage on HR to meet business strategic needs (Schuler, 1992), while strengthening firms' operational effectiveness within highly competitive marketplaces (Schmelter *et al.*, 2010). This brings us to the following proposition:

P1.1. HRM represents an adding value managerial activity for SMEs while promoting various practices that aim to ensure better alignment between the firm's human capital and its strategic orientations and to leverage on employees' knowledge and skills to create a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Several researchers have been stressing the importance of determining the nature of HRM as a function and set of processes within organizations, especially when these lean toward strategic thinking and action. Combining HRM practices with every single strategic dimension and operational process both at the vertical and horizontal organizational levels becomes crucial (Guest, 1989; Wright and Snell, 1991). Through strategic HRM, HRM practices and organizational strategies are vertically linked, while connecting and coordinating such practices and firms' operations following a horizontal perspective (Schuler and Jackson, 1987; Schuler, 1992). Such vertical and horizontal integrations facilitate the contributions of strategic HRM as a value-adding activity in achieving organizational goals and objectives while transcending the mere functional perspective of HRM (Zehir *et al.*, 2016). Paré and Tremblay (2007) recognize that a business strategy that leverages on HR should consider three primary conditions to encourage positive behaviors and attitudes within the organization and ensure alignment between human capital and strategic goals. First, an organization should use incentives as a means to induce desirable behaviors and attitudes, while rewarding individual and collective performance through promotions and benefits, among other motivation-enhancing practices. This enables an organization not only to retain potential employees but also to encourage them to undertake discretionary initiatives (Delery and Doty, 1996). Second, employees' efforts need to be meaningful while mastering distinctive skills and competences. Strategic training, in this perspective, represents a major practice whereby employees' knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) are leveraged to fit and meet organizational needs (Chowhan, 2016). Finally, creating opportunities for employees to ensure their participation at various levels remains paramount. Examples of practices to achieve such an opportunity creation and enhancement, include flexible job design, work autonomy and information sharing (Boxall and Macky, 2009). Through such conditions and practices, businesses promote strategies that nurture employees' competences and job experiences. This leads us to the following proposition:

P1.2. Promoting HRM practices in a strategic context, requires a three-dimensional framework integrating motivation enhancement, skill development and employee opportunity creation.

Entrepreneurial orientation

In an increasingly changing marketplace, enterprises are prone to deploy a set of various business processes, create new services and products, encourage research and development (R&D) and adopt new ideas (Zehir *et al.*, 2016). Such directions denote the entrepreneurial orientation of these firms (Stevenson and Jarillo, 1990). Undertaking this sort of activity stems from the strategic quest of organizations to be competitive (Covin and Slevin, 1989). The three dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation as suggested by Miller (1983) could be used to frame such strategic activities, namely, innovativeness, risk taking propensity and proactiveness:

Innovativeness represents an important element given its compelling influence on various organizational aspects and firm performance (Drucker, 1985; Roberts, 1999). Innovativeness is transposed in an organizational context through the business inclination toward encouraging new product, service and/or process creation. Organizations promote and establish innovativeness through undertaking and continuously experimenting with creative actions revolving around novelty, technology, leadership and R&D (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996).

Risk taking propensity translates the organization's attitude to take moderate risks and seize existing market opportunities (Hayton, 2005). This particular tendency reflects firms' strategic practices and competitive differentiation efforts (Covin and Slevin, 1989).

Proactiveness denotes the ability of organizations to systematically analyze their business environment, identify needs and forecast potential demands that will subsequently drive the production of novel products and services (Lumpkin and Dess, 2001). By creating this market advantage through exploring and reformulating current balances, proactive firms shape the environmental conditions in their favor while optimizing their performance and developing market leadership (Zehir et al., 2016).

In addition to these three dimensions, Lumpkin and Dess (1996) suggested two other organizational behaviors, reflecting the firm's entrepreneurial orientation, namely, competitive aggressiveness and autonomy:

Competitive aggressiveness reflects the firm's behavior in deploying all the necessary efforts to competitively enter a new market. Such intensity occurs in response to the competitors' actions for the sake of outperforming them (Farsi et al., 2013). Businesses demonstrating competitive aggressiveness adopt various dissimilar methods and practices from their rivals, which makes them acquire market prominence. Such firms tend to differentiate themselves from their competitors while reviewing and sorting out their own resources, and prioritizing and using them optimally to accomplish better results (Read and Sarasvathy, 2005).

Autonomy reveals the independent actions as undertaken by an individual or a group of people to induce a concept or a business vision and to execute it until its full implementation (Lumpkin and Dess, 2001). Mintzberg (1994) suggests that strategic decision-making is influenced when enabling and cultivating such a particular dimension among employees. Such organizational behavior contributes to enhancing business performance while implementing best practices generated from the employees' free decision-making context and independent action-taking conditions (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996).

Human resource management practices and entrepreneurial orientation

Developing a context conducive to the discussed dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation remains the main role of an organization's management and in particular, HR practitioners (Baggen et al., 2016). HRM practices play a key role in ensuring favorable circumstances within the context of a business that have the potential of nurturing the company's entrepreneurial learning. Organizations foster such as organizational behavior through opportunity identification competences and the extent to which employees are systematically involved in entrepreneurial activities. People learn in an entrepreneurial context through processes and experiences following the use of social interactions to launch, organize and manage new business-oriented initiatives (Baggen et al., 2016). According to Rae (2005), such social interaction patterns facilitate the creation and evolvement of entrepreneurial identity that encompasses all personal experiences (educational, professional and social), while indicating the development of self and future ambitions, as well as contextual learning (participation in community, industry and other networks). People construct experiences, relate, compare and share their underlying meanings while fostering the relationships and situations that enable them to determine

opportunities within the context of organizational culture and work environment. The aggregation of such dynamics offers a conceptualization of entrepreneurial learning while leveraging on individual, group and organizational behaviors. Building on such dynamics, the following proposition is suggested:

- P2. The five dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation enable organizations to cope with changing market conditions while making learning an underpinning element that systematically shapes their employees' behaviors and organizational culture.

Organizational performance

Scholars emphasize the centrality of organizational performance in strategic management research (Hamann *et al.*, 2013). However, performance measurement remains a problematic question in both academia and practice (Van Looy and Shafagatova, 2016). Performance includes two levels, namely, individual performance and organizational/operational performance (Messersmith *et al.*, 2011; Kehoe and Wright, 2013). Researchers and practitioners have been suggesting different ways to define performance and to operationalize this concept while determining some factors or characteristics that are commonly used in the description or measurement of organizational performance (Herciu and Șerban, 2018; De Waal, 2018; Apospori *et al.*, 2008). For instance, Daft (2000) explained how an organization's performance is determined through its ability to attain both strategic and operational objectives through the efficient and effective use of its resources. Similarly, Barney (1991), a pioneer of the resource-based theory, represented the foundation on which the majority of scholars and practitioners constructed their description of organizational performance and came up with measures such as profitability (Gavrea *et al.*, 2011). Despite the emerging modern subjective determinants balancing the multi-dimensional facets of organizational performance (Apospori *et al.*, 2008), such measurement attempts do not support consistent assessments across firms, which limits comparisons and benchmarking (Bakotić and Buble, 2011). Herciu and Șerban (2018) suggest emphasizing further facets that transcend the limited financial perspective when analyzing and evaluating business performance. Some of such intangible and non-financial facets leverage on the firm's entrepreneurial orientation whose dimensions have been considered instrumental components of firm performance (Findikli *et al.*, 2015). Innovativeness, for instance, has been stressed as the most compelling dimension of entrepreneurial orientation for its role in process efficiency and effectiveness, which consequently, leads to reducing costs, presenting superlative products or services and increasing revenues (Chowhan, 2016).

Human resource management practices, entrepreneurial orientation and organizational performance

Existing literature examines entrepreneurial orientation from an overall firm stance. The components of entrepreneurial orientation are embedded in individual and group behaviors within organizations, including innovativeness (Messersmith and Guthrie, 2010). Multiple researchers emphasized the importance of this particular dimension in relation to firm performance (Drucker, 1985; Zehir *et al.*, 2016). This is presumably explicable considering the scope of innovation emergence in organizational contexts while transcending the limited perspective of being restricted to employee outcome (Messersmith *et al.*, 2011), and adopting a holistic view that encompasses various operational consequences (Jiang *et al.*, 2012). Roberts (1999) observed the strong relationship between innovation and high performance while considering innovation as a result of both individual performances, as measured through attitudes and behaviors, and organizational operational outcomes.

Linking HRM practices and organizational performance relies on a strategic process involving human capital (KSAs), social capital and employee behaviors (Becker and Huselid, 1998;

Messersmith and Guthrie, 2010). A number of researchers considered bundles of strategic HR development interventions that support firm's innovation strategies, including staffing, training, performance appraisal, compensation and reward system and career management (Chen and Huang, 2009; Ling and Aizzat, 2011). As the size and scale of companies mold, in particular, the nature of their resources and their managerial approaches (Peters, 2005), the expertise of HR remains an important catalyst in dealing with such contextual conditions (Kroon *et al.*, 2013). Being entrepreneurially-oriented, these firms promote and continually strengthen their employees' expertise (Real *et al.*, 2011). Employees' competences and know-how are shaped within an organizational environment that encourages learning and fosters entrepreneurial orientation (Bal *et al.*, 2014), which consequently, results in positive influences for business performance (Jyoti *et al.*, 2017). In light of this virtuous cycle, firms and more specifically SMEs, should strategically deploy a balanced set of HRM practices having the potential to pivot and support organizational learning (Kishore *et al.*, 2012). Considering the forceful environmental conditions in which such businesses operate, implementing strategically-aligned HRM practices that foster intrapreneurship attitudes and behaviors represent the driver of business success. The dynamics underpinning organizations' profitability in the short term, and their success and effectiveness in the long run consist of using idiosyncratic resources efficiently and, most importantly, innovatively (Findikli *et al.*, 2015). Undoubtedly human capital, as the main knowledge asset, plays a strategic role in leveraging organizational learning (Jyoti *et al.*, 2017), which, in turn, contributes to making firms more innovative, and entrepreneurially-oriented (Spender and Grant, 1996). In light of these evolving managerial patterns, the following propositions are developed:

- P3.1.* To be competitive, businesses and SMEs, in particular, are ought to be entrepreneurially-oriented while focusing primarily on innovation as the major element encouraging organizational learning and knowledge resource development.
- P3.2.* Promoting HRM practices strictly aligned with business strategies and focused on corporate entrepreneurialism, including all its dimensions and in particular, innovation enhances performance both at the individual and organizational levels.

Existing literature considerably shows that the scope of scholarly studies has been predominantly limited to large-scale businesses as the investigation of the relationships involving HRM practices, entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance remains constricted within the context of SMEs. Furthermore, the prevailing research areas examine such relationships from a perspective where HRM practices mainly reinforce organizational learning and shape the overall business performance. Literature provides little guidance, however, on the interplay between HRM practices and entrepreneurial behaviors, while emphasizing the mediating role of entrepreneurial orientation to translate HRM efforts into performance consequences and results. This research builds on the propositions generated from a systematic literature review to develop and test an integrative framework linking HRM practices, entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. The objective is to grasp better understandings on how HRM efforts contribute to business performance while fostering learning and cultivating entrepreneurially-oriented behaviors.

Research design

For the purpose of this study, an inductive research approach has been followed to develop and test the integrative research framework depicting the relationship between HRM practices and SMEs' performance while examining the role of entrepreneurial orientation in shaping this relationship. The propositions underpinning the theoretical research framework and the interrelations between the research constructs have been drawn following a systematic literature review as a tool enabling a holistic factual search. Through a comprehensive analysis of the most relevant articles in the literature, a thorough

understanding of the investigated topic has been generated (Mulrow, 1994). To critically test the theoretical research framework and the significance of the formulated propositions, a single-case study method was selected following a multiple evidence and triangulation approach to data collection to create interconnectedness in terms of inquiry and strengthen construct validity while using and integrating various methods to examine the same phenomenon (Yin, 2003; Patton, 1987). PROMAMEC a Moroccan SME and a family-owned company operating in the medical and paramedical equipment and consumables sector was selected as case study and research setting. PROMAMEC has been running in Morocco since 1981 and is currently partnering with different prominent entities such as Rûsh, Baxter, Ethicon and so on, while being active in both the public and private sectors. PROMAMEC is currently considered a leader in this market, as it has been continuously creating novelty and changing in function of the market evolution, as well as diversifying its areas of production and services. Nowadays, the company counts more than 280 employees, 48 per cent men and 52 per cent women. PROMAMEC's competitive advantage stems from the quality of its products and services, its human capital, its notoriety and expertise and its continuous innovation endeavors. Such factors were determinant when choosing PROMAMEC as a research setting for this study.

Following the triangulation approach, the data collection process included archival records and documents, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. As the company where the study has been carried out operates in the Moroccan context, the data collection research tools (i.e. interview questions and questionnaires) were translated from English to French, following Brislin's (1980) method to ensure consistency and relevance.

An examination of different documents and archival records has been first undertaken, as a predictive approach (Yin, 2003), exploring the influence entrepreneurial orientation exerts on the relationship between HRM practices and PROMAMEC's performance. The objective of using this exploratory research strategy was to investigate and depict the manifestations of the studied phenomenon, following the various HRM practices as deployed by the company. A total of 16 company's documents in addition to a corporate video were examined in light of the theoretical research framework and its underpinning propositions. Questionnaires were then distributed to draw up explanations of how entrepreneurial orientation is reflected through individuals' behaviors and attitudes while adopting a certain set of HRM practices. The purpose of using such an explanatory approach was to frame the interconnectedness among the studied constructs while increasing internal validity. The used questionnaires for employees and managers included items focusing on HRM practices and entrepreneurial orientation, as well as general questions in relation to the company's context and its workforce, mainly based on Likert scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A total of 70 participants responded to the questionnaires, including 63 employees from different departments (9 from the commercial department; 3 from the customer service (after-sales support); 1 from the technical department; 3 from Johnson & Johnson division; 2 from the storage and logistics department; 12 from the finance and accounting department; 2 from "URAN;" 2 from the information technology division; 10 from the capital markets division; 1 from the medical consumables unit; 1 from the marketing unit; 1 from the administrative, legal and procurement department; 1 from the management control unit; 2 from the HR department; 3 from the imports unit; 4 from the radiology, imaging and cardiology unit; 4 from the sales department; and 2 from the hospital development unit), in addition to 4 unit managers and 3 heads of departments. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to confirm the emerging trends and patterns from the two first research strategies. The purpose was also to facilitate the generation of other potential data and information by asking questions that do not necessarily follow a certain order but are definitely determined based on the research topic. This allowed receiving meaningful insights on causal inferences from the interviewees' perceptions in relation to the investigated topic. A total of 14 interviews were conducted, involving seven managers and seven employees.

Gathered data has been analyzed following a pattern-matching approach (Yin, 2003). This relevant tool enabled the identification of linkages between the research framework's theoretical propositions and what has been detected throughout the data collection process. As this approach contributes to evaluating the validity of the studied constructs, such an assessment was first achieved through creating observed patterns based on the interpretations generated from organizing the collected data (archival records and relevant documentation, questionnaires and interviews), then developing theoretical patterns through conceptualizations, and finally, matching those patterns.

Research findings

Concerning the seven managers who responded to the questionnaire, 71.4 per cent were men and 28.6 per cent were women. 14.3 per cent of them had an age ranging between 25 and 35 years, 71.4 per cent between 36 and 45 years and 14.3 per cent between 46 and 55 years. As regards their education level, 42.9 per cent of the participating managers hold masters and Ph.D. degrees, while 14.3 per cent have a bachelor's degree. Six participating managers had a seniority ranging between 2 up to 17 years, and one manager has been working for PROMAMEC for 1 year and 6 months. As for the participating employees who responded to the questionnaire, 65.1 per cent were women and 34.9 per cent were men. In total, 6.3 per cent of the participating employees had an age ranging between 18 and 24 years, 68.3 per cent between 25 and 35 years, 19 per cent between 36 and 45 years and 6.3 per cent were more than 45 years old. In total, 44 per cent of the participating employees hold a master's degree, 33.3 per cent have a baccalaureate diploma, while 22.2 per cent received a bachelor's degree.

Following the pattern-matching approach, the research findings are presented in light of various HRM practices aiming to promote entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors among employees and generate, in turn, more added-value for the company.

Organizational culture and entrepreneurial orientation at PROMAMEC

All managers strongly agreed on the role of management to promote a company's culture that emphasizes the centrality of innovation values. The participating managers confirmed that the company encourages employees to come up with new ideas while providing the necessary conditions for them to freely voice their opinions in any business improvement area. Employees generally share the same conviction, as 92.1 per cent of the participants expressed their agreement regarding such a managerial culture. Managers also strongly agreed that employees are granted much flexibility and freedom to work on their new ideas. Employees are encouraged to experiment with such new ideas, and following the consequences, rewards are distributed in case of positive results while recognizing and encouraging the effort of less effective initiatives. Managers also confirmed that employees systematically receive feedback on their suggestions and support for the implementation of new ideas while preventing any negative reinforcement in case of failure. Managers underlined the importance of PROMAMEC's evaluation system whereby new suggestions and their outcomes are fairly assessed to promote the sense of equity and merit, while exemplifying innovative attitudes and initiative-taking behaviors.

As regards communication and information sharing, managers strongly agreed on the role PROMAMEC's management plays in providing employees with timely and accurate information particularly to support various idea-generating initiatives. Both managers and employees expressed their positive perception regarding the existing open communication channels that encourage collaborators to engage in exchanging and sharing new ideas with each other. Managers decisively agreed on the effectiveness of current managerial procedures to involve employees in new innovation and entrepreneurial activities, while creating the required structures for them to freely participate and ensure their contribution

to such endeavors. PROMAMEC has defined a number of HRM policies outlining a set of innovation- and change-driven organizational values. These have been extensively emphasized in the documentation developed and shared by the HR department while setting the driving principles of their major practices that encompass hiring, training, compensation, career management, HR planning and job analysis, and performance appraisal. In addition, a social component, as it upholds organizational values, has been emphasized through the HRM operationalization plans.

Human resource planning

This HR practice at PROMAMEC aims to monitor the evolution of the company's needs for individual and collective competencies, in light of its innovation-driven business strategy, while analyzing possible impacts on the current job structure. HR planning occurs while considering the company's internal and external environmental changes. The evolutionary patterns as affecting the company's operations and activities are then translated into a new job configuration whereby future competence needs are identified, mapped and described. Quantitative and qualitative competence needs and gaps drive the company's HR strategy and actions to attract, retain and cultivate talents able to support the company's entrepreneurial endeavors. HR planning enables strategically-focused recruiting. It also helps develop internal mobility and job rotation programs in line with the company's strategic orientations. Defining development action plans and strategic training programs to support job evolutions and process changes is also achieved through HR planning. In addition, this practice informs decision-making for talent management, succession planning and management development plans.

Hiring, selection and placement

A dynamic hiring process continually examines collected applications, including internal and external sources, to identify talented candidates for the company's job assignments. Besides the applications received from new graduates, career departments at higher education institutions and partner universities as a result of the company's HR marketing strategy, PROMAMEC promotes internal hiring and mobility, to facilitate the integration of contingent employees and temporary workers for long-term employment relationships. The guiding principle of the selection and placement processes remains transparency, as the assessment of applications follows different procedures that build on job-related criteria, including various types of interviews and considers giving feedback to both accepted and rejected applicants when such processes are completed. All applications are preserved in a dedicated internal database for two years. As a major selection criterion that remains strongly considered for hiring decisions, innovativeness has been strongly confirmed by all managers and 65.1 per cent of participating employees who stressed the strategic importance of the same practice. Questioning ability has also been firmly highlighted by 85.7 per cent of the participating managers and 66.7 per cent of the employees as a selection criterion when making a hiring decision. The same respective percentages have been provided by managers and employees when asked about the strategic role of entrepreneurial spirit as a selection assessment criterion. As part of the company's HRM practices to facilitate the contribution of new hires to its productivity and performance, PROMAMEC administers an orientation plan focusing on cultural adjustment, socialization and co-workers' acceptance. The orientation plan also includes an "employees' handbook" in addition to other documents to guide the newly hired employees. The orientation plans last six weeks, allowing new hires to gain familiarity with the work environment and the organizational culture and values. Following the orientation plan, supervisors are involved in a first performance evaluation procedure to assess the new hires' productivity and the effectiveness of their orientation programs. Such an assessment provides meaningful insights to review and update the company's selection and placement processes.

Training and development

The main strategic focus of training at PROMAMEC is to continually develop its human capital and allow for competence and knowledge sharing among its employees. Training programs are either designed and delivered internally by the company's own experts or managed and organized by external entities and specialized agencies. Besides specific coaching and mentorship programs that are directly focused on internal mobility and job rotation, training programs are mainly developed to respond to clear job-related knowledge needs. Training, from a strategic perspective, is considered as an investment whereby current and anticipated competencies, as identified through HR planning processes, are developed, nurtured and updated. As PROMAMEC is inclined toward entrepreneurial outlooks including a strong propensity to innovation, 85.7 per cent of managers and 68.3 per cent of employees strongly agreed that entrepreneurship topics, as well as innovation-related skills are systematically emphasized when designing and delivering training programs. Such competencies are also integrated into the tutoring and orientation programs as delivered to new hires. 85.7 per cent of managers and 69.8 per cent of employees strongly affirmed that sufficient time, funds and resources are allocated to training. In total, 71.4 per cent of participating employees also categorically agreed that training provides them with the necessary innovation skills while fostering their entrepreneurial mindset and shaping their initiative taking behaviors.

Career management and talent development

For all employees, career management and planning focuses on developing and retaining key competencies, supporting succession planning and encouraging internal hiring. Internal mobility, job rotation and lateral shifts and moves represent essential factors of motivation and knowledge sharing. HR policies and performance appraisal, in particular, determine the eligibility conditions for such mobility programs. In total, 85.7 per cent of managers and 71.4 per cent of employees confirmed that sufficient time, funds and resources are allocated as well to talent development programs. Managers and employees also agreed that entrepreneurship topics and innovation-related skills are adequately and effectively integrated in these programs. An annual talent review, allows PROMAMEC and the HR department to assess and identify potential talents inside the company, while considering employees' respective professional profiles. Subsequently, talents are involved in a succession plan, including tailored management development programs, to acquire the necessary managerial competences and skills, and get prepared for future managerial experiences. Innovative ideas may emerge through such talent development programs. The company encourages talents to experiment with such innovative ideas, when taking managerial responsibilities, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of management practices. This is aligned with the company's cultural environment where employees can share freely their thoughts and ideas, which are commonly listened to and considered. Such initiative taking spirit is illustrated through an example shared by a manager, emphasizing the case of a junior sales representative who suggested to create storage areas at the clients' sites instead of waiting for urgent equipment orders. Such an idea has been subsequently translated into an innovative ordering practice, resulting in significant efficiency and client satisfaction gains.

Performance appraisal and management

PROMAMEC promotes an appraisal system emphasizing merit and following the principle of "evaluating to evolve not to judge." Such a process involves supervising and monitoring employees' performance while relying on specific objectives and key performance indicators, as set through participatory approaches. Such goal-setting and performance management procedures allow for a better alignment between employees' activities and the company's strategic and operational plans. Such a system ensures transparency and

equity while following objective criteria and evaluation procedures. The performance management system also recognizes innovative attitudes and behaviors, as 85.7 per cent of managers and 65.1 per cent of employees confirmed that the existing appraisal procedures consider the potential of generating new ideas and experimenting with them, taking initiative and calculated risks and systematically questioning job-related activities to detect possible improvement venues. Current HR policies show the orientation of the appraisal system to foster the company's values including equity, transparency, "win-win conditions" and merit. Both managers and employees strongly agree that new suggestions as originated from employees are fairly evaluated, before deciding on their subsequent implementation.

Compensation and rewards

PROMAMEC's pay structure comprises direct and indirect compensation, including base pay (fixed salaries and wages) and variable pay (bonuses and incentives), in addition to different benefits such as retirement and pension plans. This compensation system aims particularly to attract and motivate employees, while gaining and promoting their loyalty. The company's management sets a number of values and principles as driving forces of this compensation system, including merit, equity, recognition, transparency, respect of obligations, alignment between individual and organizational objectives, and balance between productivity and personnel costs. Other financial determinants are also considered, including internal and external benchmarks, inflation rate and the company's financial standing.

Both managers and employees asserted that new ideas and suggestions, when evaluated to be good for the company's performance, are systematically and adequately rewarded. Gainsharing mechanisms are also integrated to reward employees for such ideas and suggestions when positive outcomes are generated following their implementation. Managers and employees also denied any practice inside the company penalizing employees for making bad suggestions or when implementing ideas that may produce negative outcomes.

Discussion

The research findings and results confirm the role of HRM as a value driver at PROMAMEC. Employees, with their competences and attitudes, are the determinants of the compelling change that underpins the company's growth. The company has placed much emphasis on transforming, building and restructuring its support functions, including finance, marketing and sales management. In such endeavors, the HRM function played a fundamental role to lead significant change management projects that have subsequently shaped up and reinvigorated PROMAMEC's entrepreneurially-oriented culture. Such change management interventions were mostly framed within the organization's strategy and materialized through focused HRM and developmental plans. A key to HRM-driven change processes has been the tight collaborative and partnership relationship involving the company's executives and HR department, which facilitated the incorporation of value-enhancing HRM dimensions into existing business operations. This confirms what other researchers highlighted in the literature, as PROMAMEC's business strategies have been operationally transposed through the efficient deployment of HRM and development practices. The company did not simply operationalize such HRM practices following conventional procedures but had drawn upon the guiding principles of entrepreneurship thinking to achieve prominent accomplishments. The company's management, within the context of implementing change, promoted innovation as a driving force to enhance performance. Through undertaking managerial innovation and upholding it mainly through HRM actions, PROMAMEC has not only been carrying out change but also fostered both its financial and non-financial performance. The main purpose behind the transformational directions the

company has set up was to create an entrepreneurially-oriented culture while undertaking HRM groundbreaking projects. Designing and tailoring the strategic and operational axes driving such projects, reflect the contribution of PROMAMEC's HR department in modernizing the organization's processes at all levels and leading successfully the company's change management endeavors. For instance, The company's project called "next step" illustrates the strategic role of the HR department to effectively develop an operational framework facilitating the structuring and execution of this change project, while engaging all concerned entities and employees (i.e. sales and purchasing, control management, finance and logistics) as support functions contributing to its roll-out. As this change-oriented project aimed primarily at boosting the firm's financial performance, it implied getting closer to the clients, listening to their needs, and addressing effectively and efficiently their demands, while reducing delivery errors and passive stocks. This strategic project also focused on creating operational agility while making internal transactions between business units and support functions more fluid. Within the context of such a restructuring project, PROMAMEC adopted a participatory approach involving all concerned employees and their respective units to design the actions to be undertaken directly with the clients. As a result, intensive communication has been set within the company through posting notes, arranging meetings and briefing sessions, while eliciting and maintaining employee motivation and dedication using preeminent HRM actions, including competence assessment and development. The meetings were adopted as a mechanism to facilitate discussions and new idea generation, explain the nature and extent of the expected change and collect feedback and observations from the operational areas. The HR department, through similar projects, worked on converting comfort and resistance zones into change agents supporting PROMAMEC's innovation-driven strategies.

PROMAMEC has been putting HR strategies at the heart of its change management plan to create the necessary conditions for its employees to adapt their behaviors and commit to the company's endeavors while championing various developmental and restructuring actions. The HR function created a framework conducive to optimized performance, including transformational tools, as rooted in solid managerial practices, coupled with an entrepreneurial orientation. Several innovative HRM practices have been significant determinants in the success of the company's change management project, while enhancing the overall organization's performance. Besides the HRM actions as detailed in the research findings, a horizontal and flat managerial structure has been fostered, whereby quick wins were systematically celebrated, allowing employees from any hierarchical level to participate in direct breakfast meetings with the managing director to share information and their thoughts regarding their activities and most importantly convey innovative suggestions and ideas for improvement. This explains the pattern similarities in collected data between the two main participating categories, namely, managers and employees. The study also demonstrates the commonly shared innovation-oriented and continuous performance-enhancement values among managers and employees. Through the effective involvement of all employees in the formulation, execution and evaluation of change-driven strategies, while providing the necessary HRM support, PROMAMEC ensured a better alignment between its workforce and various operational needs and promoted an organizational culture emphasizing innovation, corporate entrepreneurship and continuous improvement. The workforce composition, particularly in terms of age and youth concentration at various hierarchical levels, facilitated the company's change management project, while ensuring efficient adaptation, fluid information exchange and effective operationalization of actions. The new innovation culture helped the company generate non-financial performance outcomes, particularly in terms of positive work atmosphere, service quality, image and reputation.

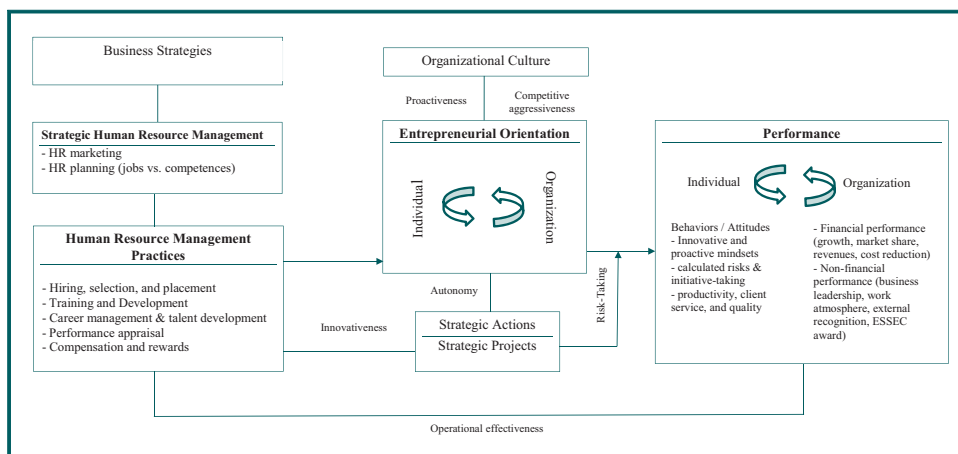
PROMAMEC's entrepreneurial orientation was crucial in creating and enforcing a culture of performance, which represents a determinant factor for its success and growth. Integrating innovativeness in managerial action, helped the company shape the employees' behaviors

and attitudes and direct them toward corporate entrepreneurialism, calculated risk-taking and proactiveness. The creation of such settings and conditions is arguably more effective when these cultural dimensions are fostered through HRM practices that are strategically aligned. Sharing cultural values that promote innovation and entrepreneurial action through strategic HRM practices lays the foundation of a successful and profitable scheme, while keeping the company's HR proactive within its entrepreneurial orientation framework. PROMAMEC has been remarkably creating value by continuously formulating ambitious visions and fueling them through innovative managerial actions that place much emphasis on HR, which resulted in a culture of performance. The innovation-driven change as operated by PROMAMEC and led by the HR department resulted in substantial tangible performance outcomes, including an overall gain of Dhs21.6m over a three-year period and a 12 per cent increase in revenues from 2017 to 2018. PROMAMEC has also been awarded in 2016 the ESSEC's prize for the best case in change management. Following its exemplary performance, the company is currently preparing its introduction to the stock market (Figure 1).

Research implications, limitations and future research agenda

This research examined the facilitating role of entrepreneurial orientation to translate HRM endeavors into performance. Building on strategically focused HRM actions, SMEs cultivate entrepreneurial capabilities that leverage knowledge resources into financial and non-financial results. The study suggests an integrative framework linking HRM practices, entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance, while building on theoretical propositions generated from a systematic literature review and evidence-based assumptions following a single case study design. Using the case of a Moroccan SME provided significant empirical insights supporting the applicability of the existing body of knowledge regarding the studied phenomenon. Developing and testing a research framework within the context of an innovative SME, contributes to furthering our understanding and advancing existing conceptualizations on the role of HRM as a performance driver, while recognizing entrepreneurial orientation as a mediating construct in this relationship. Following the case study findings, using effective HRM practices, as strictly aligned with business strategies, to integrate knowledge bundles into the business dynamics fostered the company's entrepreneurial orientation, which translated, in turn, into performance results and a strong competitive advantage in the marketplace. From a practical perspective, PROMAMEC's future plans to leverage on knowledge management programs represents an additional venue to explore how innovative HRM practices support the company's innovation-driven

Figure 1 HRM-driven value generation dynamics at PROMAMEC



change while adding value to existing HRM processes such as training and talent development. For the sake of generalizing the propositions underpinning the suggested research framework, future research should consider multiple case study approaches using ethnographic methodologies in different cultural and industrial contexts. Longitudinal studies as conducted across nations and industry sectors, appear to be also a valid alternative tool to develop a model investigating the role of HRM in spurring SMEs' entrepreneurialism and performance.

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