



# **Time to Change the Conversation on Employment Relations Practices and Outcomes for Employees: Eleven Theses**

**Paul Edwards**

Emeritus Professor of Employment Relations, University of Birmingham

[p.k.edwards@bham.ac.uk](mailto:p.k.edwards@bham.ac.uk)

WARWICK PAPERS IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS  
NUMBER 112  
May 2026

Industrial Relations Research Unit  
University of Warwick  
Coventry CV4 7AL

**UNIVERSITY  
OF WARWICK**

## **Time to Change the Conversation on Employment Relations Practices and Outcomes for Employees: Eleven Theses**

### **Abstract**

Efforts to demonstrate determinate links between human resource management practices and a range of outcomes for employees such as well-being continue apace; yet the results remain unconvincing, as a long series of critiques has shown. The efforts continue, in part because the critiques offer little methodological alternative. The Abilities-Motivation-Opportunity framework is used to list a set of managerial practices, and to highlight the fact that outcomes for workers can be negative, or non-existent, as well as positive. Many empirical studies find mixed effects, or that effects are context-dependent. Building on such results, realism and critical realism are outlined as methodological frameworks that permit a closer interrogation of managerial practices and their negotiation in context. With the aim of provoking controversy, arguments are stated as eleven brief theses.

The lengthy search for a definitive link between the management of employees and aspects of outcomes including, for employees, job satisfaction and, for firms, productivity shows little sign of abating (for recent exemplars see Guerci et al., 2022 or Miraglia et al., 2025). The search has also had as many critics as advocates (going back at least as far as Legge's, 1989, still valuable critique of early iterations of Human Resource Management). The present purpose is not to review the tangled debate, for many reviews exist from what may be termed a conventional or within-paradigm viewpoint (Becker and Huselid, 2006), a sceptical position from within the HRM field (notably Guest, 2017), or a more radical labour-process critique (Thompson and Harley, 2007). The aim is to provoke debate by stating some theses in stark form. Any originality lies in three aspects: the boiling down of complex ideas into simple points to provoke argument; the linking of specific debates about HRM and outcomes to wider and often neglected aspects of employment relations; and the sketch of a methodological solution.

In relation to the last, a problem with the debate has been that conventional solutions have often been technical, to the neglect of deeper questions, while some radical approaches have been critical without offering a clear alternative (a point stressed by Guest in particular). The proposed solution is not of course the whole of the answer, but it points to moving the debate in new directions. To steal a line from the economist Paul Samuelson, who argued that the only way to kill a theory was with a better one, the only way to advance the agenda is through a change of methodological paradigm.<sup>1</sup>

As to why now is a good time, my particular inspiration comes from a paper by Ogbonnaya et al. (2023) which is discussed below, for it stresses the need to place HRM in institutional context and explore the complex linkages between HRM practices and outcomes. More generally, there is now a well-grounded alternative to the established paradigm, so that suggesting a different approach is not merely a matter of hope and exhortation.

As to the specific focus here, one commonly noted feature in the debate is the large number of terms in use for the independent variable, including high involvement or high commitment practices as well as high performance work systems. A related issue concerns what outcomes are assessed and what causal paths to them are assumed, theorised or measured. The solution adopted here is to follow one popular framework, the Abilities, Motivation and Opportunities (AMO) model (Appelbaum et al., 2000) because it provides clear categories of practices without assuming their effects. Abilities embrace the provision of training and the development of skills. Motivation refers to means to encourage effort such as incentive-based pay. And Opportunity includes means to engage constructively such as systems of employee involvement and participation. Developing A,

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuelson is quoted as saying, 'in economics it takes a theory to kill a theory'. (Card and Krueger, 1995: 155).

M and O is then expected to release employees' discretionary effort. One important rider here is that, as some research recognises, 'effort' can be given voluntarily and in a way that is associated with active engagement, or through work intensification which may in turn generate stress (e.g. Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019). The AMO model at least points to such contrasting effects. In much of the HRM debate effects are expected on aspects of employee well-being such as job satisfaction. It is such things that are the focus here, and not wider possible effects such as organisational performance. This thesis is labelled as AMO-E (for employees). AMO is also taken here simply as a way of identifying relevant managerial practices; issues with it are identified below.

The choice of 11 theses is simply a cheeky nod to Marx's Theses on Feuerbach; to copy Luther with 95 theses would have taxed both writer and reader. But there is one specific reason for citing Marx. Gramsci famously used the euphemism 'the philosophy of praxis' to refer to his development of Marxism in his prison notebooks; and 'praxis', that is the set of activities, norms and social interactions that constitute social life, is central to any understanding of how managerial structures and choices can affect what people do.<sup>2</sup> Such praxis rarely appears in the AMO-E literature.

*1. Researchers have sought links between some aspect of human resource management [HRM] and a range of outcomes including measures of employee satisfaction and organisational performance. The point, however, is to change the conversation by underlining the deeply embedded, complex, and shifting dynamics of organisational life.<sup>3</sup>*

The specific debate on HRM practices and their links to outcomes can be dated to the 1990s, in particular the work of scholars such as Huselid (1995, a paper that set out the terrain and has been cited more than 17,000 times) and Becker (Becker and Huselid, 2006). The debate continues unabated; a search for 'high performance work systems' in 2024 alone produced literally hundreds of hits.

The central method in this literature is to develop a model of the determinants of a dependent variable, or variables, and to include in it measures of AMO practices. Early research tended to use individual items for the latter, but there was then an effort to identify 'bundles' of practices which together constituted some set, often labelled 'high performance' or 'high involvement'. The

---

<sup>2</sup> This basic definition of praxis as socially grounded activities and norms is of course much narrower than Gramsci's conception of a unity of theory and practice, and no linkage with wider philosophy is claimed. See for example the entry by James Martin in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, where he says that Gramsci adopted the term philosophy of praxis from Antonio Labriola 'probably' to escape the prison censor (Martin, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> A nod, and a feeble one at that of course, to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: 'philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point however is to change it'.

dependent variables have included many different possible outcomes, with recognition that some are relatively proximate to human resource management practices (HRMPs), such as employee 'engagement', while others, notably an organisation's financial performance, are more distant.

In relation to well-being and performance, Peccei and van de Voorde (2019) note a dominance of cross-sectional and single-case designs, which have problems of showing causality, and also that only a limited set of possible models has been exposed to empirical tests. An earlier wide-ranging critique by Boxall (2012) brought together several key points. They include: efforts to identify HRM best practices without regard to 'specific context' are 'fundamentally flawed'; the costs of the practices are often ignored, so that in some contexts apparently desirable practices may not be cost-effective; employee expectations and responses need to be taken into account rather than treating HRMPs as working automatically; and effects need to be considered within management systems as a whole and not in isolation.<sup>4</sup> Some of these are developed further in Thesis 7.

## *2. Thesis 1 notwithstanding, some reasonable conclusions have emerged.*

The Abilities-Motivation-Opportunities model is a useful way of summarising a list of managerial practices. That said, any concrete mechanism may be of use in some contexts and not others, direct links between output and pay being an obvious example. Some studies, moreover, include such things as performance appraisal, which are really more about policing and evaluation than high performance as such. The idea behind AMO makes sense, but it does not follow that there is a 'thing' called high performance practice which has the same meaning anywhere. It is not, therefore, surprising that a meta-analysis of papers on the AMO model finds a lack of clarity in definition and measurement, together with weak evidence as to how AMO variables interact with each other and performance (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023). Just how any mechanism is put into effect in a given context remains obscure.

There has also been remarkably little attention to the question of the range within which an effect may occur. That is, it may be true that on average a set of practices is associated with an outcome, but in any context the effect may operate only when the practices exist beyond some threshold level; and there may well be diminishing returns as more practices are put in place. Feedback loops may also need to be considered.

---

<sup>4</sup> Boxall identifies some strengths in the literature, as detailed below, and thus says that it is a curate's egg, that is good in parts. The metaphor is, however, the reverse of what Boxall intends, for the curate (in a Punch cartoon of 1895), when given by his bishop an egg that was bad and asked how it was, was constrained to reply that it was good in parts, which is not possible. Some of the critics discussed below may well prefer the actual meaning of the curate's egg story.

There has none the less been some, and perhaps increasing, attention to the complexity of possible effects. Boxall and Macky (2014) for example studied not just (employee reports of) 'high involvement' practices but also work intensification, consistent with a labour process view that effort is elicited through discipline and control rather than commitment. Ogbonnaya and Messersmith (2019) find evidence for both 'positive gains' and 'conflicting outcomes' expectations and, importantly, note that the effects of different AMO practices are 'heterogeneous'. In other words, effects may tend to operate, but they do so variously under different conditions. And looking at one element of the motivation strand of AMO, namely, contingent pay, Ogbonnaya et al. (2017) report that performance-related pay was associated with high levels of job satisfaction and other employee outcomes, but that profit-related pay and share ownership had no or negative effects, while performance-related pay was also linked to work intensification, which in turn led to an off-setting of some of its positive effects.

It is reasonable to say that systems of labour control have positive and negative aspects and that some of them can work together to generate gains for managers and/or workers. But reducing such relationships to determinate effects does violence to the nature of the employment relationship.

### *3. The AMO-E debate needs re-connecting with much wider discussion of the linkages between managerial strategy, labour relations and productivity.*

An earlier paradigm isolated industrial relations, in particular the presence of trade unions, as an influence on wages, employment levels, and profitability, with Freeman and Medoff (1984) being leading contributors. Rather than HRM enhancing performance, of course, the central default hypothesis is that unions retard productivity. The fundamental problematics are similar: some aspect of managerial relations with workers is added to efforts to explain some outcome variable, usually using quantitative methods.

A review of a large number of studies concludes that results have low statistical power with a high heterogeneity of estimates (Doucouliagos et al., 2018); in other words, individual studies can explain little, while across studies there is no agreement as to whether effects exist or not. Careful empirical studies point to the absence of any determinate links between trade unions and productivity, for example in the coal industry, where a wide range of factors including competitive conditions and technology were more important (Bowden and Barry, 2015; Scott, 2004).

Whether or not some aspect of social organisation can inhibit performance has had a longer history, going back at least to concerns in the UK around 1900 that perhaps trade union power or weaknesses in managerial organisation such as a failure to adopt multi-divisional structures were

reducing the country's ability to compete with Germany or the USA. Fundamental critiques of such ideas were made by Eric Batstone (1986) and Theo Nichols (1986). A key argument of the former was that 'bad performance' causes bad workplace relations, and not the reverse: poor managerial organisation tends to lead to production breakdowns, which in turn reduce workers' trust in management. Nichols stressed the need to dig beneath the surface of work organisations to understand the social and economic context in which they are embedded. Later in his career he focused on industrial accidents, pointing out how little was spent compared to other R&D expenditure and stressing the continuing tension between safety and profit without, importantly, saying that there is any simple or direct trade-off (Nichols, 1997; see also Armstrong, 2025). A contemporary illustration of such themes is the debate on de-industrialisation. In the case of the Australian car industry, for example, industrial relations arrangements were widely blamed for the closure of the plants of three MNCs, but these arrangements made no discernible difference when set alongside many other factors (Clibborn et al., 2016).

*4. Much of the HRMP-outcomes debate has neglected the economic context, notably the costs v returns of a given practice and the sustainability of a workplace regime in the face of competitive pressures.*

Two very different lines of critique underline the surprising neglect of the economic and political context in the AMO-E debate.

From a relatively conventional economic standpoint, Kaufman (2015) points to important facts that run counter to the theory. These include the slow take-up of the relevant practices, for if they are as good as is claimed firms should be introducing them fast, and in the same sector firms use very different business, and HRM, models. Kaufman shows that HR practices have costs as well as benefits and that take-up will vary according to such factors as the cost of hiring labour.

From a more radical viewpoint, Thompson (2003) argues that, even when managers wish to operate high-commitment work systems, they find it hard to keep their promises. This is because of a growing emphasis on the pursuit of shareholder value, which leads to practices such as delayering and pressures on local managers to meet performance targets, which in turn undermine the use of high commitment practices. This argument, Thompson (2013) later stressed, gave relatively little attention to relevant mechanisms (see below under 8) but other research identified contenders such as the private equity business model and corporate re-structuring that give more power to the board of directors and less to professional managers.

*5. The concept of the psychological contract is a distraction.*

The concept of the psychological contract underpins much of the debate on employee responses to AMO practices. It recognises that work relations involve people with their own motivations and expectations. It may have some value in understanding individual preferences. But workplaces are constituted by social relationships, and to reduce these to psychology misses key processes of collective dynamics and narrow inquiry to isolated sets of beliefs. In the words of one critical review, the construct as used tends to be 'managerialist' (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006) in that it treats individual psychic states in isolation from the relations of domination and control in which they are embedded.

Writing from a broadly psychological viewpoint, Peccei and Van de Voorde (2019) note that the extant literature has given little attention to the possibility of conflicting outcomes rather than mutual gains and that it is largely cross-sectional and quantitative in design. They remark, interestingly in the body of the text and not as a major conclusion, that we need to consider:

when, how and why particular types of HRM systems *may be perceived by employees* more as bundles of resources or as bundles of *demands*, or as a mixture of both (pp. 548-9, emphasis added).

Indeed, but it is not just individual employee perceptions that need to be addressed, but the social norms and rules within which such perceptions are embedded.

*6. Theses 1-5 do not mean that there is simply no answer. Treating employees fairly, giving them the opportunity to exercise autonomy, and allowing a voice in the wider running of the organisation are basic and long-established principles.*

These basic principles are indeed well-established. But they entail giving attention to socially embedded expectations. One important study of employee involvement schemes (Marchington et al., 1994: 867) found that:

many of the studies [in the field] rely heavily on management viewpoints about the impact of EI. Even when surveys of employee opinion are undertaken, however, the results are typically abstracted from the organizational context in which they are located. ... [E]mployee attitudes to EI are dependent, inter alia, upon the prior experiences which employees have of EI and work in general, management's approaches to employee relations, and the recent and projected corporate performance of the organization. This leads us to suggest that EI is as much affected by the prevailing organizational culture and environment as it is a source of change.

It is in other words the socially constructed and historically embedded set of norms which is important, and these cannot be reduced to psychological expectations. These norms embrace what

managers think and how they act: telling them about some new practices may mean little and simply irritate rather than motivate.

### 7. *Context is all-important, and yet has not been made central.*

The overall importance of context in organisational studies was highlighted by Johns (2006), who defined context as situational constraints or opportunities that affect what behaviour occurs and what it means, and also importantly the 'functional relationship' between variables. In other words, A is related to B in one way in situation X and another in situation Y. Johns also offered advice as to how to address context, including studying processes and events and collecting qualitative data.

Such argument apply with force to the AMO-E field, as Boxall (2012) indeed noted some time ago. A surprising number of studies reports mixed or null results. Using Australian data, Harley (2002) reports weak or absent associations of HRM practices with a range of outcomes, and in a UK study specifically on team work, he finds similar results (2001). Writing with others, he also tested a conventional high performance model and a more critical model that predicted negative effects of the practices on employees, as measured through work intensity and strain. No clear results for either model emerged, leading the authors to conclude that, once we recognise the active role of workers at the point of production and the indeterminacy of the labour process, 'we must expect an unevenness of outcome disruptive for hypotheses based on *simplistic managerial or labour process accounts*' (Ramsay et al., 2000: 522, emphasis added).

Numerous more recent studies report non-significant effects or associations that run counter to expectations (e.g. Ogbonnaya et al., 2017; Guerci et al., 2022). Where large-scale national data sets are used, this may not be surprising, for different relationships may exist in different settings so that any effects become washed out in aggregate data. But one important sector-level study reaches similar conclusions (Ogbonnaya et al., 2023). Through a longitudinal study in the healthcare sector, it argues that any link between AMO practices and outcomes is 'sensitive to the forces of dynamic equilibrium operating within a highly institutionalized context'. That is, practices become embedded in routines and hence lose any specific force.

The idea of a dynamic equilibrium was introduced much earlier by Norman Ross, who taught a course at Birmingham University in the 1960s that treated the 'firm as a system of dynamic equilibrium of vested interests' (quoted by Hodder, 2024). Hodder outlines Ross's development of the idea of the firm as having interests that are partly contested and partly shared, an idea of course later developed by Alan Fox (1974) around the concepts of unitary and pluralist frames of reference. Or in the words of another Birmingham scholar, William Baldamus, 'what determines the determinants?' (quoted in Nichols, 1997: 90; see Baldamus, 1961). In short, to understand any

AMO practice requires attention to how it operates in a given context. To build on Johns's (2006) advice, which concentrated on specific research methods, and on other scholars who stress context (.e.g. Cooke, 2018; Paauwe and Boselie, 2003) it is possible to point to a wider methodological frame in which to embed these methods.

*8. Realism and Critical Realism provide a more appropriate methodological frame than the positivism that dominates much of the literature.*

Realist Evaluation (RE), as set out in the work of Pawson and Tilley (1997), offers as its central idea the CMO model, that is, the linkages between context, mechanisms and outcomes. It considers, for example, how mechanisms may operate in some context and not others, and asks just what mechanisms have to be in place for certain outcomes to result. This leads to the question 'what works for whom in what circumstances?' To take a well-attested case from past research (notably Brown, 1973 and later commentary as per Edwards, 2012), an outcome could be whether or not workers engage in day-to-day bargaining with management over pay and effort. Two elements of context are the state of the product market (competitive v oligopolistic) and whether or not managers use some kind of payment by results. There are reasons in theory and evidence to argue that competitive conditions and flat rate pay systems tend to restrain bargaining, but, for such effects to work, certain other mechanisms, such as 'bargaining awareness' among workers and 'leniency' by managers, need to be activated. There are also situations where outcomes differ from what is predicted, which would or should lead to further efforts to identify relevant contexts and mechanisms.

More recent research notes that the meaning of 'context' is open to debate, but suggests that two views can be identified: context as observable things such as places; and context as relational and dynamic, and interacting with mechanisms (Greenhalgh and Manzano, 2022). Context can then be seen as a force rather than mere background, with explanatory potential. Consider for example a context of growing international competition. Its effects are likely to be called into action through the actions of managers, in for example demanding pay restraint in order to compete, and these actions may or may not be contested by workers. Such a perspective deepens any simple effort to measure a variable called competition and correlate it with outcomes.

This point shades into critical realism (CR). An important paper by Porter (2015) identifies the differences from RE. RE tends to conflate structure and agency within the concept of mechanisms, and instead we need to include actors, their interpretations, and the ways in which they enact mechanisms. We might also underline the causal power of underlying contexts as defined by Greenhalgh and Manzano (2022). RE also, says Porter, has a rigid distinction between fact and values, whereas it is possible and indeed desirable to consider alternative scenarios without

descending into utopianism. CR thus aims to delve into what it calls the real, that is underlying elements of the context, and how these elements shape observable behaviour.

Though CR tended initially to be stronger on critique than a programme of empirical research, there are now several hands-on guides. These include overviews (Bronnimann, 2022; Hastings, 2021) and application to the study of organisations (Edwards et al., 2014). Three points need underlining. Firstly, RE and CR are far from new, and much of what they argue would be consistent with workplace industrial relations research such as Brown's (1973). But the complexities of day-to-day relationships can be seen as mere detail so that, as is often remarked, the finding that pay is set in ways that question standard labour economics has not led to an alternative theory. RE and CR at least help to frame the pursuit of a better explanation. Secondly, though they insist on context and the point that relationships between variables are shifting and uncertain, they are not opposed to quantitative analysis. Such analysis can identify overall patterns, called by some realists demi-regularities, and help to point to possible associations which can then be pursued by other means. But the causal question is not whether X is associated with Y but what conditions activate X, what other conditions need to be present for Y to occur, and what further results may occur through the presence of both X and Y. Thirdly, neither RE nor CR is the answer to every question. McLachlan and Garcia (2015) report trying to employ the latter in a study of how people make sense of the world and argue that it did not help to understand the construction of reality. If such processes are indeed the interest, then social constructivism may well be suitable, though CR would also insist on placing such constructions in a material context.<sup>5</sup>

*9. The best methodology for the future entails a set of close, comparative, and longitudinal case studies exploring: how actors in fact define and interpret AMO practices; the connections and feedback loops between A, M and O, employee behaviour, and a range of outcomes; and the conditions that encourage or retard any particular causal relationship.*

Close engagement with concrete cases, through observation, both participant and other, and interviews and related methods, can grasp the dynamics of specific situations. Even within one case, it is possible to ask causal questions as to why things are as they are, an approach which embraces asking actors about what they take for granted and what might be different rather than treating them as mere respondents. Comparison across cases evidently strengthens a causal narrative, and leads to new questions.

One could start by looking at managerial aims and policies at a strategic level. This could include asking directly about matters that tend to be approached indirectly in the AMO approach. For

---

<sup>5</sup> These authors also follow Pawson in his critique of CR; as noted above, Porter offers a sustained counter-critique.

example it is often said that various practices work best as bundles. So are they in fact designed with such ideas in mind, or more haphazardly, and what kinds of synergies are expected? Linked to this, one can ask about what elements of discretionary effort managers wish to influence. Do they, for example, think that team work will give workers a sense of belonging and thus promote active engagement, or is the team designed to generate discipline and compliance, as per some of the early studies of teams (e.g. Barker, 1999), or something else?

A next step would consider management policies in action, in particular by examining how far and in what ways they are enacted by line managers. Is performance appraisal and target setting, for example, used to help workers to define their goals, or is it a disciplinary device, or, as per some work in this area, is it a mere ritual with little effect at all (e.g. Newton and Findlay, 1996)? One would then aim to trace through managerial intentions in using appraisal schemes, possible unintended effects, the conditions which tend to make appraisal a disciplinary or motivational device or a mere ritual, and the overall costs and benefits involved.

Finally, and crucially, there is the question of how practices, both intended and unintended, play out at the day-to-day level. How do employees respond to managerial initiatives, and what conditions lead them to respond in one way rather than another? Important here, and in contrast to the idea of the psychological contract, is the extent of work group solidarity and cohesion. Do workers respond as individuals or collectively, and, if the latter, how strong are group norms, and to what degree are these norms broadly pro-productive in the sense of encouraging a focus on task achievement or more focused on resisting managerial control? Such questions are occasionally raised in the AMO literature. Kehoe and Wright (2013: 385), in a study measuring average work group responses as well as individual ones, remark:

a group of employees' individual outcomes are [*sic*] likely affected by the way that the individuals in the group perceive the group to be managed as a whole.

This is certainly true, but a generation of workplace studies has already established the importance of group expectations and norms, and also addressed variations in group cohesion and the reasons for these. Mars (1982), for example, studied pilfering and other forms of 'fiddles', identified four distinct patterns, and explained these patterns in terms of the extent of work group solidarity and the strength of external social norms to which workers were subject.

All that said, and though there are ways of thinking about the linkages between practices and outcomes in new ways, there are few studies that specifically deploy the ideas of context and a contested dynamic equilibrium to the AMO-E debate. The paper by Ogbonnaya et al. (2023) is one very useful pointer.

10. *Researchers in the field should play close attention to a mass of workplace case studies which explore the dynamics of work performance. PhD students intending to research in this area should undertake as part of their training a module on workplace relations. Journal editors should have a default option of rejecting further papers within the standard quantitative paradigm.*

An excellent introduction to the study of the workplace is a book by Korczynski (2024). Such studies do not simply describe a complex reality but offer explanations, sometimes implicit and sometimes more explicit. Some researchers directly engage in causal accounts. Examples of generalisation include papers by Bélanger et al. (2006) and the earlier work of Hodson (2001), based on a narrative meta-analysis of a set of extant workplace studies, though see Edwards and Bélanger (2008) for critical commentary and an argument for ‘holistic modeling’.

Students entering this area really do need immersion in the kinds of studies mentioned above if they are not to remain locked within a very narrow set of questions. It may be true that doing a PhD has become an increasingly instrumental pursuit, but that fact should not justify treading an easy path, and I can attest to a number of PhDs examined over the past five years which eschew such an approach.

As for journal editors, papers continue to appear often testing some form of moderator or mediator model with a variable or variable intervening between practices and outcomes. It is not clear whether such studies add much new knowledge, as opposed to simply increasing complexity while repeating well-known problems, as per Theses 2 to 4 above. Journal editors may wish to encourage papers outside this paradigm, or ask whether further positivistic research is illuminating.

11. *Public policy needs to encourage organisations to think holistically about employment practices and skills and also to signal through legislation what good employment practice constitutes.*

As Boxall (2012) among others notes, the AMO-E paradigm has influenced professional associations, trade unions, and public policy bodies. In Australia, the Australian HR Institute published a report in 2024 identifying a set of high performance systems and arguing that they contribute to performance in practice, much on the lines of the literature critiqued above (<https://www.ahri.com.au/wp-content/uploads/AHRI-HPWS-Report.pdf>). In the UK, the CIPD has tried to extract from quantitative studies the essence of high performing teams (Young and Gifford, 2023). Whether or not the Employment Rights Act 2025, with its increased set of specific worker rights and the establishment of the Fair Work Agency as a single body to enforce those rights, will have an effect on practice is a question for experts in labour law to consider. But it is, of course,

not designed to address the ways in which organisations design their HR systems or the organisation of work within the firm.

Even the more critical studies discussed above do not dismiss the place of managerial initiatives. Ogbonnaya et al. for example say that

Healthcare administrators seeking to improve staff well-being should, therefore, consider implementing a cogent system of HRM practices that includes staff training, performance appraisal, workplace participation, and autonomy at work (2023: 1478).

Though it would be hard to disagree with such a list, managers would need to think not only about what something like participation in fact means in a given context, but also how far a new initiative might undermine other strategies, what workers might expect here, and, importantly, what would be the costs compared to the benefits. It is a matter of thinking through options and processes within the negotiation of consent, not seeking some new solution.

In terms of policy alternatives more broadly, there is growing recognition of the importance of policies that are customised for a given context and based on the idea of collaboration between firms and public bodies (e.g. Rodrik, 2022). In the same way, professional bodies and public bodies should resist the allure of some new meta analysis of extant studies, and instead encourage grounded thinking about, indeed, what works for whom in what circumstances, with balance of costs and benefits, and why. It is, then, possible to imagine a better-informed conversation around the management of employees, the necessary tensions in the process, and the outcomes.

## **Acknowledgements**

With thanks to Deb Dean, Manuela Galetto, Andy Hodder and Keith Sisson for help and encouragement.

## **References**

- Appelbaum E., Bailey, T., Berg, P. and Kalleberg, A. L. 2000. *Manufacturing Advantage*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Armstrong, P. 2025. Theo Nichols: a Personal Tribute, *Work, Employment and Society*, 39(5): 1294-97.
- Baldamus, W. 1961. *Efficiency and Effort*. London: Tavistock.
- Barker, J R (1999) *The Discipline of Teamwork*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Batstone, E. (1986) Labour and Productivity. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 2(3): 32-43.

- Becker, B. M., and Huselid, M 2006. 'Strategic Human Resource Management: Where do we go from Here?' *Journal of Management* 37: 421-28.
- Bélanger, J., Harvey, P-A., Jalette, P., Lévesque, C. and Murray, G. 2006. 'Employment Practices in Multinational Companies in Canada: Building Organizational Capabilities & Institutions for Innovation'. University of Montreal, HEC Montreal, University of Laval, Montreal & Laval: The Inter-University Research Centre on Globalization and Work (CRIMT).
- Bos-Nehles, A., Townsend, K., Cafferkey, K. and Trullen, J. 2023. 'Examining the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) Framework in HRM Research', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 25: 725-39.
- Bowden, B. and Barry, M. 2015. 'Recasting Industrial Relations: Productivity, Place and the Queensland Coal Industry, 2001-13', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 57: 48-71.
- Boxall P. 2012. 'High-performance Work Systems: What, when, how and for whom?' *Asia-Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 50: 169-86.
- Boxall, P. and Macky, K. 2014. High-involvement work processes, work intensification and employee well-being. *Work, Employment and Society*, 28(6) 963–984.
- Bronnimann, A. 2022. 'How to Phrase Critical Realist Interview Questions in Applied Social Science Research', *Journal of Critical Realism* 21: 1-24.
- Brown, W. 1973. *Piecework Bargaining*. London: Heinemann.
- Card, D. and Krueger, A. B. 1995. *Myth and Measurement: the New Economics of the Minimum Wage*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Clibborn, S., Lansbury, R. D. and Wright, C. F. 2016. 'Who Killed the Australian Automobile Industry: the Employers, Government or Trade Unions?' *Economic Papers*, 35: 2-15.
- Cooke, F. L. 2018. 'Concepts, contexts and mind sets', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28: 1-13.
- Cullinane, N. and Dundon, T. 2006. 'The Psychological Contract: a Critical Review', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 8: 113-29.
- Doucouliaagos, H., Freeman, R. B., Laroche, P. and Stanley, T. D. 2018. 'How Credible is Trade Union Research?', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 71: 287-305.
- Edwards, P. 2012. The Hot House and the Politics of Production, *Industrial Relations Journal* 43: 317-31.
- Edwards, P. and Bélanger, J. 2008. 'Generalizing from Workplace Ethnographies: From Induction to Theory', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37: 291-313.
- Edwards, P., Bélanger, J. and Wright, M. 2006. 'The Bases of Compromise in the Workplace: A Theoretical Framework', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44: 125-46.
- Edwards, P., O'Mahoney, J. and Vincent, S. (eds.) 2014. *Studying Organizations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*. Oxford University Press.

- Freeman, R. B. and Medoff, J. L. 1984. *What Do Unions Do?* New York: Basic.
- Greenhalgh, J. and Manzano, A. 2022. 'Understanding "Context" in Realist Evaluation and Synthesis', *International Journal of Social Science Methodology*, 25: 583-95.
- Guerci, M. Hauff, S. and Gilardi, S. 2022. High performance work practices and their associations with health, happiness and relational well-being: are there any tradeoffs? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33(2), 329-359.
- Harley, B. 2002. 'Employee Responses to High Performance Work System practices: an Analysis of the AWIRS95 Data', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44: 418-34.
- Hastings, C. 2021. 'A Critical Realist Methodology in Empirical Research', *Journal of Critical Realism*, 20: 458-73.
- Hodder, A. 2024. 'Understanding the Frames before Fox', *Employee Relations*, 46: 1233-45.
- Hodson, R. 2001. *Dignity at Work*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Huselid, M. 1995. 'The Impact of Human Resource Management Practices on Turnover, Productivity and Corporate Financial Performance', *Academy of Management Journal*, 38: 635-72.
- Johns, G. 2006. 'The Essential Impact of Context on Organizational Behaviour', *Academy of Management Review*, 31: 386-408.
- Kaufman, B. E. 2015. 'Market Competition, HRM and Firm Performance', *Human Resource Management Review*, 25: 107-25.
- Kehoe, R. R. and Wright, P. M. 2013. 'The Impact of High-performance Human Resource Management Practices on Employees' Attitudes and Behaviors', *Journal of Management*, 39: 366-91.
- Korczynski, M. 2024. *The Sociology of Contemporary Work*. Bristol: Bristol UP.
- Legge K. 1989. 'Human Resource Management: a Critical Analysis'. In: Storey J (ed.), *New Perspectives on Human Resource Management*. London: Routledge.
- McLachlan C. J. and Garcia, R. J. 2015. 'Philosophy in Practice?' *Management Learning* 46: 195-210.
- Marchington, M., Wilkinson, A., Ackers, P. and Goodman, J. 1994. 'Understanding the Meaning of Participation: Views from the Workplace', *Human Relations*, 47: 867-94.
- Mars, G. 1982. *Cheats at Work*. London: Counterpoint.
- Martin, J. 2023. 'Antoni Gramsci'. In: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 13 Jan 2023. [plato.stanford.edu/entries/gramsci](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gramsci).
- Miraglia, M., Dello Russo, S. and Bouville, G. 2025. The hazards of performance management: An investigation into its effects on employee absenteeism and presenteeism. *Human Relations*, 78(7), 847-875.
- Newton, T and Findlay, P. 1996. 'Playing God? The Performance of Appraisal', *Human Resource Management Journal*. 6: 42-58.
- Nichols, T. 1986. *The British Worker Question*. London: Routledge.

- Nichols, T. 1997. *The Sociology of Industrial Injury*. London: Mansell.
- Ogbonnaya, C., Daniels, K., Connolly, S. and van Veldhoven, M. 2017. Integrated and isolated impact of high-performance work practices on employee health and well-being: A comparative study. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(1), 98-114.
- Ogbonnaya, C. and Messersmith, J. 2019. Employee performance, well-being, and differential effects of human resource management subdimensions: Mutual gains or conflicting outcomes? *Human Resource Management Journal*, 29, 509-526.
- Ogbonnaya, C., Daniels, K., Messersmith, J. and Rofcanin, Y. 2023. 'A Theory-based Analysis of Null Causality between HRM Practices and Outcomes', *Journal of Management Studies*, 60: 1448-84.
- Paauwe, J. and Boselie, P. 2003. 'Challenging "Strategic HRM" and the Relevance of Institutional Setting', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 13: 56-70.
- Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. 1997. *Realistic Evaluation*. London: Sage.
- Peccei, R., and Van de Voorde, K. 2019. 'Human Resource Management -- Well-being -- Performance Research Revisited', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 29: 539-63.
- Porter, S. 2015. 'The Uncritical Realism of Realist Evaluation', *Evaluation*, 21: 65-82.
- Ramsay, H., Scholarios, D. and Harley, B. 2000. 'Employees and High Performance Work Systems: Testing inside the Black Box', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 38: 501-31.
- Rodrik, D. 2022. *An Industrial Policy for Good Jobs*. The Hamilton Project.  
[https://www.hamiltonproject.org/wpcontent/uploads/2023/03/20220928\\_THP\\_Proposal\\_Rodrik\\_GoodJobs.pdf](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/wpcontent/uploads/2023/03/20220928_THP_Proposal_Rodrik_GoodJobs.pdf)
- Scott, P. 2004. 'Path Dependency, Fragmented Property Rights and the Slow Diffusion of High Throughput Technologies in Inter-war British Coal Mining', *Business History*, 48: 20-42.
- Thompson, P. 2003. 'Disconnected Capitalism', *Work, Employment and Society*, 17: 359-78.
- Thompson, P. 2013. 'Financialization and the Workplace', *Work, Employment and Society*, 27: 472-88.
- Thompson, P. and Harley, B. 2012. Beneath the Radar? A Critical Realist Analysis of 'The Knowledge Economy' and 'Shareholder Value' as Competing Discourses. *Organization Studies*, 33(10), 1363-1381.
- Young, J. and Gifford, J. 2023. *High-performing Work Teams: an Evidence Review*. London: CIPD.