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Editorial:
25 Years of Research in Human Resource Management

This is the regular issue #100 for me as an editor for the *Zeitschrift für Personalforschung* (*ZfP*), the German Journal of Research in Human Resource Management. I started in 1990 with Dudo von Eckardstein, Oswald Neuberger, Hartmut Wächter, Wolfgang Weber, and Rolf Wunderer. This first editorial team stayed together for more than 15 years, until one member after another reached retirement age and left the *ZfP*. This continuity was important: It was a great and productive time.

Even though I am still a few years away from my own retirement, 25 years (1990–2014) later and after 4 years of having the pleasure of being a one-man show as the Managing Editor (2004–2008) seems a good point at which to step down. I do mean the term "pleasure" sincerely and not ironically. I learned a lot from my contact with colleagues, authors, and reviewers. I also enjoyed working with Rainer Hampp, who in 1987 had the initial idea for the journal and kept it moving forward dynamically.

The *ZfP* is one of the oldest human resource management (HRM)-focused academic journals. Therefore, looking back at these 25 years not only gives us memories from a book filled with family pictures (that nobody else really cares about) but also potential insights into the development of the field; something we should all care about.

The topics of our research

Looking at the major research topics, the list of our special issues is quite helpful in understanding the development of our field. Until now, we have had 38 special issues of the *ZfP*, 28 as part of the regular numbering of the year and 10 as additional issues. They covered an impressive research field. From the beginning:

- "*Personalwirtschaftliche Probleme in DDR-Betrieben*" (1990) was our first special issue and – looking back – was truly a significant one ("*HR-issues in companies based in the German Democratic Republic*"). Written in the year of Germany's unification, this issue presented 12 articles describing HRM in East Germany and associated problems. Each article in this edition is an impressive time document. What we did overlook: These articles highlighted key differences, and would have told us—if we had listened carefully—how complicated integration would be.

- "*Eurostrategisches Personalmanagement*" (1991) brought together 22 articles dealing with the question of how European human resources (HR) should be structured from a strategic perspective ("*Strategic European Human Resource Management*"). As

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we know, this topic is currently gaining new momentum regarding Europe and HR strategy.

- "*Personalpolitik aus der Sicht der Frauen: Frauen aus der Sicht der Personalpolitik*" (1993) was ultimately a very political special issue ("*HR-policies seen from the viewpoint of women: Women seen from the viewpoint of HR-policies*"). Essentially, female researchers showed in 400 pages how "male dominated" HRM is produced. Some arguments were valid, and others sounded a bit strange. For example, I was blamed for not criticizing Maslow for not having a gender-specific hierarchy. Unfortunately, these articles did not advance the discussion on gender-specific views within HRM (both as objects and subjects), which is currently dominated by legal and structural activities.

- In "*Personalmanagement in Abhängigkeit von der Konjunktur*" (1994) we sought answers to the question of how HRM changes with regard to the economy, specifically during a recession ("*How HR depends upon the economy of the country*"). One aspect has been the development of strategies for companies to avoid "hard" mechanisms of adaptation (e.g. layoffs) during a recession, by using a proactive HR policy.

This merely reflects the beginning of an impressive list of great special issues of the *ZfP*, which continued until the recent issue "*Green HRM*" (2011), a topic that will become increasingly relevant when we try to move along the path to sustainable organizations and to HRM as a driver of this movement.

The scope of the articles

The *ZfP* started out in the core of Management. Defined as part of the field of Business Administration, the starting editors have been very clear ("Die *ZfP* ist eine betriebswirtschaftliche Zeitschrift"). Consequently, other areas such as sociology, information science, microeconomics, and politics have not been our focus; and only one person in the group of editors represented psychology (Oswald Neuberger).

Focusing the *ZfP* as a "Journal for HRM" described both the objects and the subjects of research, whose primary life was in HRM. This reflected the structure of HRM at German universities, wherein it is a specific field underscored by a specific research tradition.

However, this changed when researchers with other primary backgrounds (e.g., marketing, psychology, microeconomics, planning, and game-theory) took charge of the HR institutes, HR curriculum, and HR research agenda. Consequently, at some universities, researchers from other fields took their methodology and applied it to HR, creating a specific type of HRM. Previously, HRM reflected the application of a unique body of knowledge from HR. Nowadays, HRM involves the application of a variety of other fields.

Regarding the *ZfP*, the number of contributors who considered HRM "just" one potential field for application of their non-core HR content increased, while the number of authors considering themselves as HR specialists decreased. In the future, this might lead to interesting developments for the *ZfP*. It would broaden to a "general management journal dealing with people". If this broadening leaves us with a clearly

defined scope and identity, this will be a good move. However, this will be problematic if HRM is no longer a clearly defined field with its own principles, methodologies, and mix of theories; but a loosely defined field of "anything with humans in an organization".

Internationalization

The *ZfP* had an international orientation from the beginning.

- One group of articles focused on topics relating to HRM activities encountered by German companies when going to other countries, and those that foreign companies encounter when coming to Germany. Here, "international" refers to cross-border activities.

- The second group used material from international research on differences in HR practices. Here, "international" refers to a comparative approach, which seeks similarities and differences between at least two countries. In addition, projects with a large data base such as GLOBE fit into this category.

- A third group deals with international activities in the sense of international HR strategies or global HR policies. We did not publish much in this category, although it should be noted that neither did most explicit "international" HR journals and most "international" HR articles from USA and UK, where the term "international" essentially refers to a larger regional area of activity, not to another mind-set or set of practices.

- A fourth group is labelled "international" based on the article's country of origin. For example, empirical data regarding the use of assessment centres in a hotel business in South Mumbai fits into this category. We have been reluctant to accept these papers in the past when there was no information on why this was important for others to know or how it differed from other countries.

We agreed to stay with two languages. Most authors and most readers of our journal come from German-speaking countries. Following the globalization of academia, we expanded the opportunity for non-German speaking authors and aimed for a more international audience. Still, we are the German Journal of Research in Human Resource Management, and this signals our mission also to represent the German HR community. If someone anywhere on the globe wants to understand HR in Germany, the *ZfP* must be primary resource. This is part of the past and current identity of the journal.

Rigor and relevance

The *ZfP* has always been devoted to academic rigor and relevance. Still, the basic meaning of both has changed slightly.

- Regarding rigor, in the beginning, unfortunately we did not have many empirical articles based on larger samples and sophisticated methodologies. Editors – including myself – who consider themselves "empirical" researchers were not very happy with this. However, we must keep in mind that the rest of the world also did not have much empirical HRM that went beyond the distribution of frequencies and the localization of statistically significant differences. Furthermore, non-empirical work must also follow the postulates of rigor, which is sometimes more

difficult to achieve. Currently, we receive more research based on sophisticated empirical approaches. In addition, rigor refers to discussing strategies such as against the common method bias in structural equation models. Here, times have really changed – for the better. Our strict search for rigor should remain part of the review process. It might be dangerous to follow procedures to be observed elsewhere, where junior faculty without sufficient academic background plays the role as editor, using reviews, written by doctoral students who play the role of reviewers.

- With regard to relevance, in the beginning, relevance to practitioners was easily ensured, since we focused on the core of Management and Business Administration. Therefore, the *ZfP* also had subscribers who were not part of the academic system, but part of companies. Here, the *ZfP* answered questions from both HR practitioners and HR academics. As the field expanded, it seems that the average relevance has decreased, at least for practitioners, which need not be the case. However, the editorial policy must be carefully re-evaluated and guidance should be provided to authors during the review process. This is important because, as I discussed in depth in a prior editorial, our research results must be relevant for practitioners and separated from silo-structured ivory towers. Therefore "relevance" could and maybe should be redefined in the near future.

At the end, we can continue in our road to success only if our journal is based both on strict rigor and relevance.

The impact of the *ZfP*

Rigor and relevance lead to impact. Here, we observe a paradigmatic change from "feeling" to "measuring" impact. In the past, we were happy with "feeling the impact" with articles that were talked about and articles that formed the base of other articles. Currently, the move is toward "measuring" and focusing attention on the Social Science Citation Index to determine the *ZfP's* changing position over time. However, our measuring system is still in flux and can be shaped. What is good impact? Is it a high number of citations, or is the importance of a citation within the article more relevant? Is it usage outside the ivory tower or the usage in teaching? This type of discussion is necessary and should be shaped in a HR-specific way within the *ZfP*.

Even though the *ZfP's* role has never been that of a journal instrumental in the process of shaping the HR function (here we had only a few articles) or the HR teaching at universities, in very old times, a few articles had almost political implications. For example, 1999 witnessed a strong move by the German Association of Personal Managers (DGFP e.V. and GmbH) and parts of the academic sector and some companies to standardize and accredit HRM in companies and at universities. Fortunately, the *ZfP* took another position. As part of the discussion at that time, it is evident to me that we did have an impact on preventing these ideas from becoming reality – as they are a reality in the USA and UK.

One other article was not successful: In 2001, Dudo von Eckardstein, Walter A. Oechsler, and myself strongly argued why some forms of performance-oriented pay make no sense in the academic sector. In particular, we argued against the compensation scheme (called "W"), that has been discussed at that time and was eventually im-

plemented. While we thought our conceptual paper was convincing, the article had little influence, even though, looking at it 13 years later, we can say that our analysis was correct. At the end, we did not prevent that compensation scheme with all its counterproductive consequences. Perhaps we all learned from that and stayed out of the political arena: There have been no real political articles for more than 10 years now, and not even the Bologna process stirred any debate.

Of course, one can argue that in current times academic journals should not lead political debates. Even if one agrees – which I do not – at least the *ZfP's* editorials are the space to do that: a space that I did use, but perhaps should have used more often.

What do I miss?

We could have been more successful in leading debates over HR issues. I do not mean political debates, but debates over the suitability of certain practices in certain situations and methodological issues. We unsuccessfully tried the format "Diskurs" between academia and practice. We did not obtain support from either side. We operated in harmony with the pure academic field, except maybe for one small incident (complaining about a footnote). We thought about methodological battles (which approach explains reality better) and other formats, but none emerged. We even gave up critical book reviews. Maybe the field of HR is a field with too much harmony.

However, HR deals with human interaction, and is therefore a complex field. Or, as the famous saying from Douglas Adams goes: "All you really need to know for the moment is that the universe is a lot more complicated than you might think, even if you start from a position of thinking it's pretty damn complicated in the first place." The search for harmony is not conducive to gaining insight into this complexity. I was taught that academia challenges boundaries and disrupts old structures. We should keep to these principles, since harmony only leads to uniformity and flatness. From a different perspective, perfection yes, but not at the sake of adventure.

What could the future hold for the *ZfP*?

I still think we need more critical articles, in the sense that we have to challenge what happens in organizations. Some companies still buy and use "personality tests" without understanding them. We also need articles dealing with HR from a management perspective. HR is part of the value chain, but what is its role besides trying to minimize costs? Currently, we see companies developing organizational flexibility and at the same time reducing their planning activities and organizational slack. Is this a great idea or a huge danger? This leads us to the intersection between HR and organizational theory.

There are also many unresolved issues when we move beyond simplistic and unrealistic models such as the "business partner." Similar moves can be done into the direction of computer science. Here, we look beyond a few trivial concepts for eHRM. There is more outside. Furthermore, there is more waiting before we discuss various important issues, from Big Data to a media-created reality for HR. In addition, the current discussions about SHRM, DIN, and ISO relating to standards for HR practices indicate the need for new articles in that direction. Ultimately, it is relevant to re-

member that the method or the tool is not the problem or the solution; rather, it is how we understand, shape, and apply them.

I know that writing articles in current promotion systems is more important than it was for the older generation, even though some older authors definitely published more. I know that currently the "relevance" of an article is defined by the ranking of the journal in which it is published, even though I consider that link to be nonsense. However, when we write articles that reflect on or retest a small sidestep of an irrelevant article at the highest level of significance in an A-journal, it may have rigor, but we would have lost all relevance – and fun.

Unfortunately, we allowed the current "publish or perish" system and the search to "may I get on your paper" to emerge:

- We see more "writing papers" than "creating ideas" or "doing research".
- We see more "little salami-sliced papers" than "readable representations of thoughts".
- We see more "co-authoring" than "co-working".

I doubt that we should accept these trends in the future, even though the young generation has learned to live and prosper with them. Some are playing the game so as to not jeopardize their careers. However, others want a space to share their "crazy" ideas and get feedback on the core of these ideas for the future, rather than getting rejected for not gathering enough data in the past or for not quoting a specific article.

Academic research must continue to be a worthwhile experience on which we spend our time. Specifically, HRM brings us the opportunity more than other areas, to go where no researcher has gone before. For all this, at least for me, the *ZfP* has been a great playground for 25 years. So long and thank you for everything, wherever you are!