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Connecting HRM and change management: the importance of proactivity and vitality

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# Connecting HRM and change management: the importance of proactivity and vitality

Connecting  
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management

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Organizations are continuously under pressure to adapt to changing circumstances. Job proactivity and vitality are important in changing environments. For instance, vital employees can better deal with change because they possess more energy. However, it is still unclear how organizations can stimulate proactivity and vitality. The purpose of this paper is to connect HRM and change management by analyzing how HRM practices can stimulate job proactivity and vitality.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors used survey data collected in three large public healthcare organizations in the Netherlands ( $n = 1,507$ ) to investigate the effects of five important HRM practices on proactivity and vitality. Analyses were performed using structural equation modeling.

**Findings** – Results suggest that three HRM practices are particularly effective for improving proactivity and vitality: high autonomy, high participation in decision making and high quality teamwork. Based on these results, the authors discuss the possibilities of using HRM to improve employees' abilities to deal with organizational change.

**Originality/value** – This study is one of the first to empirically connect HRM to change management. Furthermore, it uses new concepts derived from positive psychology (job proactivity and vitality) to show how HRM can be beneficial for organizational change.

**Keywords** Quantitative, Change management, Structural equation modeling, Human resources management, Job proactivity, Vitality

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Organizations are continuously under pressure to adapt to changing circumstances, such as changing client wishes, new policy developments and the introduction of social media (Josserand *et al.*, 2006). Swift adaptation to changing conditions has always been considered crucial for the survival of private-sector organizations (Tushman and O'Reilly, 2013). However, nowadays a critical public opinion and shrinking budgets pose threats to the survival of public organizations as well, which requires them to change rapidly and profoundly (Kuipers *et al.*, 2014; Van der Voet *et al.*, 2014).



Even if employees are generally willing to change, the change process can be a stressful burden (Vakola and Nikolaou, 2005). Employees have to change their daily routines, acquire new knowledge and face peaks in workload. Such a situation can lead to resistance to further changes, burnout and staff turnover (Rush *et al.*, 1995). To cope successfully with organizational change, positive psychology scholars argue that job proactivity and vitality are of particular importance (e.g. Ghitulescu, 2013; Shirom, 2011). Proactive employees anticipate possible future events and take initiative (Grant and Ashford, 2008). High levels of proactivity are beneficial when working in new, uncertain, circumstances such as when confronted with organizational change (Hornung and Rousseau, 2007). Vitality is defined as one's conscious experience of possessing energy and liveliness (Kark and Carmeli, 2009). Vital employees can potentially better deal with change because they possess more energy (Carmeli and Spreitzer, 2009).

Since employee proactivity and vitality may be such important assets for organizational change, the question arises whether it is possible to enhance their levels. Several authors (Combs *et al.*, 2006; Wright *et al.*, 2005) showed that particular human resource management practices, including training, feedback and teamwork are strongly related to both individual and organizational outcomes. Such HRM practices are often labeled "High Performance Work Practices" (HPWPs) (Boselie *et al.*, 2005). We expect that organizations can enhance proactivity and vitality – and thus facilitating organizational changes – using such HPWPs. The goal of this paper is therefore to analyze the influence of five of the most important HPWPs on employee proactivity and vitality.

This study is innovative in two ways. First, we focus on the effects of HPWPs on active job outcomes, thereby empirically connecting HRM with change management (see Doorewaard and Benschop, 2003 for a conceptual contribution). To date, most HRM research has studied the effects of HPWPs on passive job outcomes, such as satisfaction and organizational commitment (for instance Bauer, 2004). There is a dearth on studies connecting HPWPs with active employee outcomes such as vitality and proactivity (Kark and Carmeli, 2009).

The second innovation is that we analyze HPWPs as perceived by the employee. Scholars have acknowledged that more research is needed concerning perceived HRM practices as in contrast to intended or actual HRM policies (Macky and Boxall, 2007). As argued by these scholars, not what is written in HRM policy documents, but how HRM practices are perceived by employees affects their attitudes, perceptions and behavior (Den Hartog *et al.*, 2013).

This paper is structured as follows. First, we present a number of hypotheses based on a literature review of HPWPs, proactivity and vitality. Next, we describe the method and results of the study. Finally, we discuss which HPWPs are important for stimulating employees to cope with (or to be ready for) organizational change.

### **Theoretical framework**

#### *The importance of active employee outcomes for organizational change*

In line with the resource-based view of organizations (Barney, 1991), HRM scholars have investigated how HRM practices influence employee attitudes and behavior (Macky and Boxall, 2007). Moreover, HRM scholars have examined how these individual outcomes, in turn, have an impact on organizational outcomes (Huselid, 1995).

As noted, HRM researchers often focussed on "passive" employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover. Being able to manage

passive outcomes successfully is important as these outcomes can have important consequences for employees and their organization, including employee well-being, burnout risks and staffing costs (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000).

However, being successful in managing passive employee outcomes is not enough when confronted with organizational change. For example, employees can be very satisfied with their job, but simultaneously be extremely passive in their behavior (e.g. arriving at 10 a.m., taking an extensively long lunch break, unwilling to help colleagues). Such satisfied, but passive employees will, in all likelihood, not show much initiative to turn organizational changes into a success. Therefore, positive psychology argues that active employee outcomes should be considered if one wants to change successfully (Frese *et al.*, 1997; Sonnentag and Frese, 2002).

Proactivity has two distinctive features (Grant and Ashford, 2008). First, to say that an employee shows proactive behavior implies that the person is planning and acting to anticipate possible future events. Second, proactive behavior is change oriented. A proactive employee intends to alter the self, co-workers, or the work context to adapt to the anticipated changing conditions. For example, proactive employees may anticipate design flaws in the implementation process and develop creative fixes. Hence, higher levels of proactivity reduce unnecessary workload and facilitate organizational change.

A vital person approaches work with positive energy and excitement. Vital employees believe that their behavior contributes to a meaningful purpose (Ryan and Bernstein, 2004). A vital person does not do “things halfway or halfheartedly” (Kark and Carmeli, 2009, p. 789). As such, the degree of vitality affects the time and effort employees are willing to invest in particular activities. Jansen (2004) concluded that employees require a high amount of vitality to deal with organizational change, especially because changes often have to be implemented next to regular duties.

#### *Connecting HPWPs to proactivity and vitality*

Boselie *et al.* (2005) examined over a hundred articles that linked HRM practices to performance. Based on this review, they developed a list of 26 often-used HRM practices. From Boselie *et al.*'s top ten list, we selected five HRM practices: training and development, feedback, job autonomy, participation in decision making and teamwork. These five HRM practices (or HPWPs) were chosen given that they: were important HRM practices; were expected to influence proactivity and vitality; could be measured on the employee level; and had available well-validated measures (Judge *et al.*, 1999; Tummers *et al.*, 2012).

Before discussing the five HRM practices, we should acknowledge the discussion between studying individual HR practices (such as training) or HRM systems (in short, summing up HRM practices to create one overall score of an organization's HRM system). The systems approach is often used when analyzing the effects of intended or actual HRM practices on organizational performance (e.g. Delaney and Huselid, 1996). However, some HRM scholars argue that we should focus on HRM practices instead of HRM systems when analyzing perceived HR practices (e.g. Veld *et al.*, 2010).

The advantage of studying individual HRM practices is first methodological. Items are more specifically related to a specific HRM practice than to a broad HRM system. For instance, the item “I receive ongoing training which enables me to do my job better” is directly related to the practice of training, instead of to a more distant and general HRM system. This is valuable when analyzing what HR practices have the strongest relationship with outcome variables. Next to this, when specifically focussing on HRM practices, one can hypothesize potential interaction effects instead of assuming them to

exist. In this study, we examine the individual impact of various HRM practices, but we fully acknowledge the merits of the systems approach. Next, the five HRM practices and their potential impact on proactivity and vitality will be discussed.

*Training and development.* It is expected that employees who experience training and development opportunities report higher levels of proactive behavior (Frese and Fray, 2001; Van Veldhoven and Dorenbosch, 2008). First, training opportunities may enhance employees' feeling of self-efficacy (Parker, 1998) defined as a someone's judgment of "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" (Bandura, 1982, p. 122). By the same token, training possibilities may contribute to higher levels of control appraisal, defined as someone's feeling that one can actually influence work-related decisions (Frese and Fray, 2001). Lastly, training opportunities may stimulate feelings of responsibility for organizational success. Self-efficacy, control appraisal and feelings of responsibility, in turn, result in proactive behavior (Frese and Fray, 2001).

In a similar vein, we expect that training and development opportunities stimulate employee vitality, since self-efficacy, control appraisal and feelings of responsibility contribute to positive thoughts about one's own capabilities to bring change about (Carmeli and Spreitzer, 2009, p. 169). Furthermore, training and development stimulate employees intellectually – giving "food for thought." Such intellectual stimuli have a positive impact on excitement and vitality (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2006):

*H1a.* Perceived training is positively related to proactivity.

*H1b.* Perceived training is positively related to vitality.

*Feedback from supervisors and co-workers.* Similar to perceived training opportunities, constructive feedback from supervisors and colleagues provides cues about how to increase self-efficacy, control appraisal and stimulates feelings of responsibility (Crant, 2000). Moreover, Shraga and Shirom (2009) found that employees often mention factors related to feedback from supervisors when describing situations in which they experienced high levels of vitality. As expected by leadership-member exchange theory, respondents stated that they felt appreciated or acknowledged when receiving feedback from their supervisor regardless of the content of the message. By the same token, constructive feedback from colleagues may increase employees' feelings of appreciation and, thus, vitality (Kark and Carmeli, 2009; Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2006). Hence, we expect that perceived work-related feedback from supervisors and co-workers enhances proactivity and vitality:

*H2a.* Perceived feedback is positively related to proactivity.

*H2b.* Perceived feedback is positively related to vitality.

*Job autonomy.* We expect that higher levels of perceived job autonomy are positively related to proactivity. If employees have influence over a broad range of work-related decisions, they develop enhanced level of control appraisal and a feeling of responsibility (Fuller *et al.*, 2007).

Furthermore, we expect perceived job autonomy to be positively related to vitality (Shirom, 2011). Building upon self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), scholars showed that autonomy is a basic human need that stimulates feelings of vitality. Ryan and Frederick (1997) found, for example, that respondents reported

higher levels of vitality when they completed autonomously motivated actions. In contrast, respondents reported lower levels of vitality when they perceived themselves as controlled by external forces:

*H3a.* Perceived autonomy is positively related to proactivity.

*H3b.* Perceived autonomy is positively related to vitality.

*Participation in decision making.* Similar to the aforementioned HRM practices, higher levels of perceived participation in decision making results in higher levels of control appraisal and feelings of responsibility (Jackson, 1983; Shirom, 2011). Moreover, being involved in work-related decisions enhances feelings of self-efficacy. Participation in decision making implies, for example, that employees have a voice in setting performance goals and are involved in evaluating their own achievements. Such possibilities stimulate feelings of shared responsibility and personal initiative (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). Moreover, feeling able to have a voice in decision-making processes stimulates employees to invest more energy in their work (Hülshager *et al.*, 2009).

Related to this, scholars in the field of workplace creativity stress the importance of establishing an open and safe work climate (Edmondson, 2004). Stimulating employees to participate in decision-making processes plays an important role in establishing a psychological safe climate. In such a climate people believe that they can safely express their own opinion and, thus, are likely to proactively come up with ideas to deal with work-related problems (Baer and Frese, 2003):

*H4a.* Perceived participation in decision making is positively related to proactivity.

*H4b.* Perceived participation in decision making is positively related to vitality.

*Teamwork.* Lastly, teamwork may also increase both employee involvement and perceived level of self-control (Frese and Fay, 2001) and thus we predict that higher levels of perceived team working enhances job proactivity. Furthermore, being part of a team may increase feelings of a sense of belonging (Van Mierlo *et al.*, 2001). These feelings, in turn, stimulate feeling of shared responsibility and higher levels of vitality to engage in group-related activities (Bollen and Hoyle, 1990):

*H5a.* Perceived teamwork is positively related to proactivity.

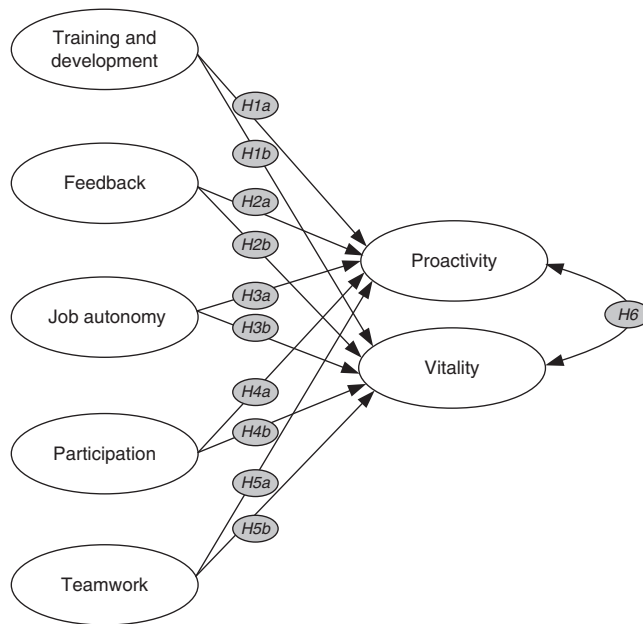
*H5b.* Perceived teamwork is positively related to vitality.

*Relationship between proactivity and vitality.* Lastly, we expect proactivity and vitality to be positively related. Specifically, we hypothesize that proactive employees feel energized by observing the positive outcomes of their proactive behavior (Shirom, 2011). Simultaneously, we expect that employees who experience higher levels of vitality are more likely to take action themselves to improve their work conditions or adjust to changing circumstances (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008):

*H6.* Proactivity and vitality are positively related.

#### *Research model*

Figure 1 shows the research model representing the research hypotheses. In the next sections, we present the methodology used to test this model and our empirical results.



**Figure 1.**  
Hypothesized effects  
of HPWPs on active  
employee outcomes

## Method

### *Procedure and participants*

Data were collected between 2010 and 2011 in three large public healthcare organizations in the Netherlands using an anonymous electronic survey (developed by Stichting IZZ, supported by PwC). The Dutch public healthcare sector is an important subsector to study, as it has been confronted with major policy shifts and related organizational changes due to expanding costs, the felt need to increase transparency and a wish to stimulate client choice (Tummers and Van de Walle, 2012; Helderma *et al.*, 2005).

The electronic survey was e-mailed to all 2,876 employees of the participating organizations. After an introductory e-mail and various reminders, 1,507 employees responded (52 percent response rate). In all, 91 percent were female, which is comparable to the Dutch healthcare sector (91 percent, see Vernet, 2010). Respondents' mean age was 42, which is also similar to the mean age of Dutch healthcare workers.

Of all respondents, 9 percent had a managerial position. Many employees followed intermediate vocational education (59 percent, in Dutch: MBO) or higher vocational education (22 percent, in Dutch: HBO). Most respondents worked as caretakers or nurses (67 percent), in facility management (10 percent), or were administrative staff (4 percent).

### *Structural equation modeling*

We tested the research model as specified in Figure 1 using SEM. SEM has several advantages over exploratory factor analysis and regression analyses – including more stringent psychometric criteria for testing model fit – thereby improving validity and reliability. However, given that CFA is often more stringent than standard Cronbach  $\alpha$  reliability measures, we removed several items to maintain adequate model fit (Kline, 2010).

To deal with the potential validity problem caused by the removal of scale items, we pursued two strategies. First, we checked inter-item correlations and reliability coefficients, but did not find important differences between scales with and without deleted items. Second, we reviewed the content of all items and found that all constructs are still fully represented by the preserved items.

### *Measures*

All items were scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Scale reliabilities – as estimated by coefficient  $\alpha$  – were highly adequate, ranging from 0.79 (teamwork) to 0.90 (training and development).

*Training and development.* We used Vandenberg *et al.*'s (1999) five-item training scale to tap perceived training and development opportunities. A sample item was “I receive ongoing training which enables me to do my job better.”

*Feedback from supervisors and co-workers.* We analyzed perceived feedback by Wright's (2004) four-item scale. A sample item was “My last performance evaluation assisted me in improving my work.” We removed the item “I receive useful evaluations of my strengths and weaknesses at work” to improve model fit.

*Job autonomy.* To measure job autonomy, we used the five-item scale developed by Reyshav and Sharkie (2010). A sample item is “I have freedom to adopt my own approach to the job.” The item “I have control over how quickly or slowly I work” was removed to improve model fit.

*Participation in decision making.* We used Reyshav and Sharkie's (2010) five-item scale to tap participation in decision making. A sample item was “I am able to influence the decisions made in my organization.” We removed the item “I am given an opportunity to express my views before my supervisor makes a decision” to improve model fit.

*Teamwork.* Teamwork was tapped using the three-item scale developed by Campion and Medsker (1993). A sample item was “Members of my team are very willing to share information with other team members about our work.” The item “Members of my team cooperate to get the work done” was removed to improve model fit.

*Proactive behavior.* Proactive behavior was measured using the seven-item self-initiative scale developed by Frese *et al.* (1997). A sample item was “Whenever there is a chance to be actively involved, I take it.”

*Vitality.* In order to measure vitality, we used the five-item scale developed by Kark and Carmeli (2009). A sample item was “I am full of positive energy when I am at work.”

*Control variables.* We included the following control variables in our model: gender (male, female), age (ten categories, ranging from 25 years or younger, 26-30 years ... to 61-65 years and 66 years or older), highest obtained educational degree (seven categories, ranging from primary school to post academic), organizational unit and two organizational dummies.

### *Statistical analyses*

SEM analyses were carried out in Mplus. Correlated-error terms were not used given the recommendations of Hooper (2008). Hypotheses were tested using standardized coefficients obtained by means of maximum likelihood estimation. To assess model fit, we used standard factor loadings ( $> 0.30$ ), CFI ( $> 0.90$ ), TLI ( $> 0.90$ ) and RMSEA ( $< 0.08$ ) (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Because of the large sample size, we decided to test the hypotheses at the 1 percent significance level.



We computed the interclass correlation coefficient (ICC) to investigate if employees' degree of proactivity and vitality varied substantially across organizational units. ICC values as small as 0.05 indicate that a multilevel effect should be included in the SEM model (Hayes, 2006). As we found ICC values  $< 0.04$  – which implies that at most 4 percent of the variance in both dependent variables could be explained by differences in organizational unit membership – we decided not to proceed with a multilevel model.

### Results

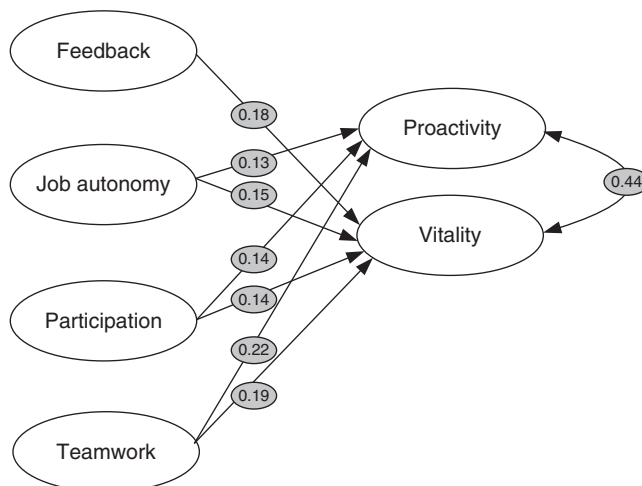
The measurement model provided a good fit to the data (CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.04).

Based on the measurement model, a structural model was constructed relating the five HPWPs to proactivity and vitality. This model also proved to fit the data quite well (CFI = 0.92; TLI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.05) with adequate explained variances of 0.13 ( $p < 0.01$ ) for proactivity and 0.25 ( $p < 0.01$ ) for vitality. Moreover, the analyses confirmed the existence of a factor structure with standardized factor loadings ranging from 0.43 to 0.87. Figure 2 shows the final model with significant standardized path coefficients  $\beta$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) only.

Interestingly, “only” three of the five studied HPWPs showed a positive relationship with both proactivity and vitality. Specifically, increased levels of perceived autonomy, participation in decision making and teamwork were related to higher levels of proactivity and vitality (i.e. *H3a*, *H3b*, *H4a*, *H4b*, *H5a* and *H5b*). Standardized path coefficients of these HPWPs varied from 0.14 to 0.22, with an average of 0.16. Moreover, the results showed that our last *H6* was accepted as well. That is, proactivity and vitality were positively related (correlation = 0.44).

In contrast, the first two *H1a* and *H1b* had to be rejected. We found no significant relationship between perceived level of training and development on the one hand and degree of proactivity and vitality on the other hand. Also our third *H2a* had to be rejected. The data showed no relationship between perceived feedback and level of proactivity.

The control variables (results not shown due to space limitations) showed no significant relationship with proactive behavior. With respect to effects of the control



**Figure 2.**  
Effects of HPWPs on active employee outcomes with significant standardized path coefficients  $\beta$  ( $p < 0.01$ )

variables on employee vitality, the results showed that vitality did not differ between male and female employees. However, older employees were generally more vital ( $\beta = 0.07$ ), the level of vitality decreased with education ( $\beta = -0.11$ ) and the average degree of vitality was around 0.10 standard deviations lower for employees of two participating organizations compared to the third organization.

## Discussion

Organizations, in the private sector but also increasingly in the public sector, are faced with rapidly changing conditions including budget cuts, altered client demands and changing demographics (By and Macleod, 2009; Kuipers *et al.*, 2014). In order to cope with those changing conditions, organizations require their employees to be ready for organizational change. This study was innovative in two ways. First, we focussed on the effects of HPWPs on active employee outcomes in order to enhance readiness for organizational change, thereby connecting HRM with change management. Second, we analyzed perceived HPWPs instead of intended or actual HRM practices given that perceived HPWPs are often directly linked to performance.

Our research showed that: job autonomy; participation in decision making and teamwork were positively related to proactivity and vitality and hence likely facilitate employees to cope better with organizational change. In contrast, training and development as well as perceived feedback seemed unrelated to proactivity. Even if employees perceive sufficient training and constructive feedback, signals sent during training and feedback may (un)intentionally result in passive behavior. Hence, if one wants to enhance proactivity by means of training and feedback, one should think carefully about employees' interpretations of the messages conveyed. We found, moreover, no effects of perceived training and development on vitality. Likely, some employees may experience training as too demanding or too time-consuming (Fransman, 2014). Consequently, positive and negative effects of training on vitality may cancel each other out.

Interestingly, the studied HPWPs are aimed at increasing employees' self-control, which proves a challenge to managers who try to implement organizational changes top down, given that top-down implementation implies a reduced level of employees' self-control. Related studies also show that increasing autonomy can be beneficial for organizational change. For example, Tummers (2011) showed that when healthcare professionals experienced more autonomy during the implementation of a policy, they were significantly less resistant toward the policy. Moreover, Armenakis *et al.* (1993) showed that readiness for change is enhanced by showing management support for the proposed change and when management clearly communicates the content of the proposed change. Our research suggest that readiness for change can also be achieved by approaching employees more actively by means of HR instruments.

We acknowledge that positive employee-characteristics as well as organizational change itself does not guarantee positive outcomes. Proactive employees may get demotivated by stubborn colleagues or think an organization is not moving fast enough. Vital employees may put all their energy in sabotaging unwelcome change. Hence, although we – and other scholars (Frese and Fay, 2001; Ghitulescu, 2013) – expect a positive relationship between proactivity and vitality on the one hand and successful organizational change on the other, this is not necessarily the case. Scholars could research the “dark side” of employee proactivity and vitality.

This study ends with some limitations. The quantitative survey-approach of this study was strengthened by using a large sample, validated scales and sophisticated analysis techniques. Nevertheless, cross-sectional studies cannot explicitly examine

process-related factors. A fruitful direction for future research would therefore be to carry out a longitudinal multi-method study. Longitudinal studies are expensive and complex to manage, but they do have the potential to provide fresh insights into important phenomena, such as how HRM practices can enhance organizational change.

Concluding, our empirical results emphasize the importance of HPWPs. In line with Boxall and Purcell (2000), we note that "HRM matters" (see also Rodwell and Teo, 2008). Our research findings more specifically note that three HR practices are particularly effective for improving proactivity and vitality, which are often related to effective organizational change: autonomy, participation in decision making and teamwork.

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**Further reading**

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