

Family Firms' Awareness in Configuring Human Resources Management Practices

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Abstract

The paper aims to develop a theoretical configurational model of HRM practices for family firms facing strategic and organizational changes based on the construct of awareness. The typology of ideal HRM practices configurations we developed grounds on are: i.) two organizational factors: awareness of the internal and external environment and organizational awareness; ii.) two dimensions of organizational awareness: the need for explicit and implicit coordination mechanisms. The first dimension refers to the need for mechanisms explicitly adopted by a family firm to manage task or communication interdependencies. The second one relates to those requirements for mechanisms that are available to family firms from shared cognition, which enable them to explain and anticipate task statuses and individuals' collaborative behaviors, thus helping them in managing task interdependencies. We combined these results in four configurations of HRM practices (administrative, shared, professional, and integrated configurations) and developed seven propositions. We then discuss implications, limitations, and further steps for research.

Introduction

The paper proposes a theoretical model of the awareness that family firms need in order to make strategic and organizational changes to achieve positive performances. How do they (re)configure their human resources to sustain their performance? This conceptual paper tries to address such a question, and it concerns whether and how Human Resources Management (HRM) practices (HRMP) complement each other in family firms' performance in facing strategic and organizational changes (Huselid, 1995; Baird and Meshoulam, 1988). The adopted theoretical configurational approach focuses on how 'patterns' of HRMP (rather than single practices) positively relate to environmental dimensions in strategic and organizational changes of family firms.

We assume that unique combinations of HRMP enable family firms to achieve goals, assuring bigger effects on performance than the sum of the component ones due to individual practices (De Kok, Uhlaner, and Thurik; 2006; Carlson et al., 2006). We propose a theoretical configurational model of HRMP for family firms, as reported in Figure 1.

We assume family firms differ in their awareness of the internal and external environment (Woodall, 2000) and how these dissimilarities reflect their view and interpretation of strategic and organizational changes and the possible performance achievable. We define a strategic and organizational change as a significant modification of the bundle of resources and/or routines that a firm uses to compete and to their configuration (Boeker, 1997).

Environmental dimensions

Family firm's environmental dimensions paint the 'place' where entrepreneurial and managerial choices occur (Dyer, 2003; Woodall, 2000) and provide inputs for developing awareness for actions to take place. Capturing the awareness of the internal and external environment is challenging since the literature highlights multiple classifications of environmental dimensions. We assume that family firms' dimensions affecting their awareness are the external environment (Porter, 1985), the firm characteristics (Budhwar and Debrah, 2001), and the family characteristics (Gagné, Sharma and De Massis, 2014).

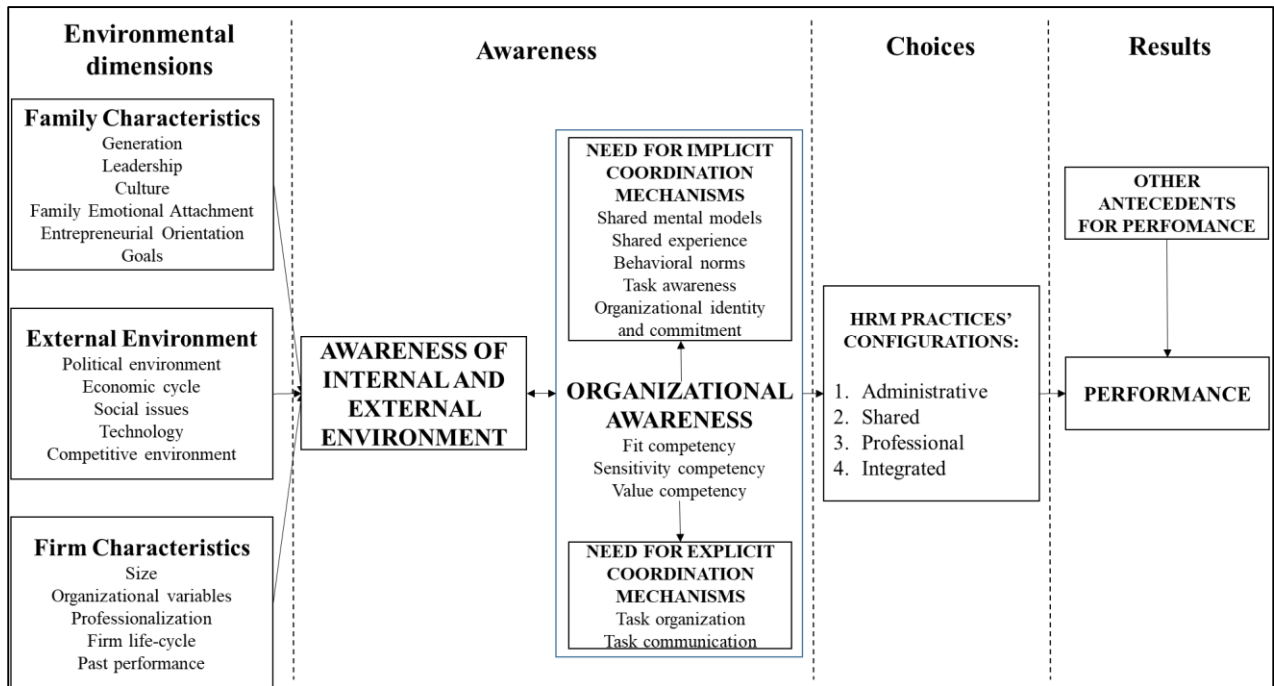


Figure 1: A configurational model of HRMP for family firms

Awareness

Firms survive by fitting their strategies and organizational variables to environmental dimensions. In framing their environment, family firms consider different choices available at various generational stages or life cycle phases. We start with one assumption: family firms realize the awareness that they need in order to make strategic and organizational changes. When environmental dimensions change, current resources and routines become old or non-fitting ones, performance deteriorates, and goals remain at stake. Family firms experience a growing sense of urgency (become aware) for change and risk-taking. They develop growth strategies to avoid the decline and loss of the family business, to foster continuity and family unity, and to save jobs and wealth creation. Performance can increase the most when the magnitude, timing, and direction of strategic and organizational changes are consistent with environmental changes and family firms are aware of them (Zellweger, 2013). At the strategic and organizational level, awareness as a construct grounds in the concept of firms as social systems (Parsons, 1951), where cognitive meanings emerge from social interactions of individuals (Mezirow, 1985). Awareness equals the process of making a new sense out of the actual situation since old mental models no longer apply (Zellweger, 2013; Murphy, 2005; Smith and DeGregorio, 2002).

Awareness bases on individuals' development and psychology literature, particularly life transitions. The core of the awareness construct relies on a change in meaning schema. Awareness reflects making new sense out of the actual situation since old mental models no longer apply. Awareness comes from knowledge of and experience with the actual situation. However, since manipulation of knowledge and experience are particularly significant in environments of rapid change, knowledge accumulation and experience acquisition processes become crucial, but unable to sustain the evolution of capabilities when the environment changes. Hence, we focus our attention on awareness, assuming given endowments of existing or accessible knowledge, and given levels of managerial cognition about the need to upgrade the firm's knowledge and experience stock.

Awareness of internal and external environment

Environmental dimensions (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996) influence family firms' awareness. The more aware firms are about environmental changes, the greater the likelihood of strategic and organizational changes. The degree of awareness of environmental dimensions of a family firm influences its strategic and organizational choices. In sense-making processes, the family firm's leaders need to: i) Spot the need for change; ii) Understand it as a relevant drift that needs an action; and iii) Make choices about how to change. As family firms become aware of how to identify and implement choices, poor choices denote a more mechanical behavior, while rich choices assume the deliberate employment of human action (organic behavior). As firms become more aware of environmental dimensions, they can better cope with them. Therefore, a mechanical response denotes a lack of awareness by a family firm of the environmental conditions, asking the firm itself to handle them. Conversely, an aware response reveals a conscious understanding of the firm's environmental settings, and the capability to overcome or to exploit them in a proactive way. We propose the construct of awareness of environmental dimensions to describe the sense-making of the problem-setting of strategic and organizational choices since it describes the relationship between the antecedents and the behavior of a family firm

Organizational awareness

Conversely, family firms must additionally be aware of organizational variables that can affect their performance (Thomas, Clark and Gioia, 1993). Emerging from repeated interactions between individuals and close-knit groups who identify themselves with a larger collective can better develop it (Kogut and Zander, 1992), organizational awareness is a prerequisite in the development of competencies for organizational choices (Kirst-Ashman and Hull, 2015) to get a higher level of collaborative behaviors in family firms in achieving their goals. Coordinated family firms manage interdependencies using both explicit and implicit coordination mechanisms. Family firms coordinate themselves explicitly using task mechanisms (e.g., schedules, programs, plans, rules, procedures, and so on) or by communicating (e.g., orally, in writing, formally, informally, interpersonally, in groups). We call the need for these mechanisms "explicit" since family firms use them purposely to coordinate. However, family firms may prefer to coordinate "implicitly" (i.e., without deliberately trying to coordinate) through cognition. Cognition is grounded on shared knowledge and values about goals, tasks, and about each other. Shared knowledge and values help family firms realize what is going on, and anticipate what is going to happen next, and which actions are likely to be taken, thus supporting them to become more coordinated. Implicit coordination is crucial for family firms to ensure a value-creating co-alignment among individuals, whereby relational conflicts are mitigated while task conflicts are

encouraged, meanings are shared, and collaboration is supported. Therefore, implicit coordination mechanisms focus on fostering collaborative behaviors. Consequently, it is crucial the understanding of how needs for explicit and implicit coordination mechanisms complement and relate to each other. We propose a twofold theoretical framework to study the effects of organizational awareness on coordination in family firms. The framework includes both the need for explicit and implicit coordination mechanisms, which, as we discuss later on, ask to be jointly recognized because they may complement, influence, or interact with each other in framing the choice for HRMP in family firms. We begin by defining the need for a coordination construct, as the central element of the framework. We then propose how the need for implicit and explicit coordination mechanisms influences the configuration of HRMP in family firms.

Need for coordination

We define the need for coordination as the requirement for the efficient management of interdependencies among tasks, resources, and people. The family's contribution to tasks, resources, and people matters for performance, as well as their coordination (Helfat et al., 2007). Coordination can encompass two or more social entities; however, it may also define two or more resources that are non-social. The ultimate goal of coordination is to develop collaborative behaviors (Bedwell et al., 2012; Morgeson et. al., 2010) in an organization that shape performance outcomes. We adopt a six critical collaborative behaviors' definition. They include: (1) adaptation, (2) extra-role, (3) information processing, (4) leadership, (5) sense-making, and (6) task execution. We embrace this perspective about the need for coordination from the viewpoint of managing interdependencies to enlighten how different elements of the proposed framework fit together in nurturing collaborative behaviors. The need for coordination represents the extent to which interdependencies have been efficiently perceived as manageable ones. We define how the needs for implicit and explicit coordination mechanisms influences the configuration of HRMP in family firms.

Need for Explicit Coordination Mechanisms

Organizational literature suggests that organizations coordinate explicitly by using task organization mechanisms or by communicating. March and Simon (1958) suggested that organizations use task organization mechanisms (i.e., "task programming") for the most routine aspects of the task because the respective interdependencies are more predictable, and consequently they can be more simply coped with a programmed way. Others used different terms for this kind of coordination like "impersonal mechanisms" (VanDeVen et al., 1976).

Need for Implicit Coordination Mechanisms

More recent organizational cognition research suggests that as individuals in a firm interact with each other and gain expertise with a joint task, they develop awareness about the task and the others helping them coordinate implicitly (Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994; Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993). Such a need for implicit coordination refers to the perception of synchronization of individuals' actions based on unspoken assumptions about what others are likely to do (Eddleston et al., 2008; Collins and Smith, 2006). We define the need for implicit coordination mechanisms as those requirements for mechanisms that are available to family firms from shared cognition, which enable them to explain and anticipate task statuses and individuals' behaviors.

HRM practices' configurations

In building a HRMP configuration, literature indicates that potential strategic practices are: 1) Workforce planning (Mathis and Jackson, 2004; Chang and Chen, 2002); 2) Training and development (Khan, 2010; Katuo and Budhwar, 2006; Ahmad and Schroeder, 2003; Chang and Chen, 2002); 3) Recruitment and selection (Khan, 2010; Katuo and Budhwar, 2006; Kulik, 2004; Ahmad and Schroeder, 2003); 4) Performance appraisal (Khan, 2010; Chang and Chen, 2002); 5) Career planning management (Schein, 1996); 6) Compensation (Ahmad and Schroeder, 2003); 7) Internal communication (Oladipo and Abdulkadir, 2011); 8) Job design (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006).

Roles of complementarity, congruence, and synergy describe the firm's HRMP choice in the configurational perspective. The focus of this perspective reflects a direct connection between the performance and a specific HRMP configuration. The positive connection depends critically on assembling the right combination of practices such that all of them separately fit together, support each other, and develop the maximum attainable synergy. The performance effects of HRMP choice are multiplicative rather than additive, implying low returns if all but one or two of the practices fit together, but a consistent package might assure high returns if all are successfully implemented. The configurational perspective lends a systemic viewpoint from which to project HRMP composition and claims that the positive performance evolves from a bundle of interrelated HR practices which together form an internally consistent whole.

Four configurations of human resources practices

Combining the two sets of needs of coordination mechanisms leads to four configurations of aligned HRMP, described as the Administrative, the Shared, the Professional, and the Integrated one (see Figure 2).

Need for implicit mechanisms	High	<p>Shared</p> <p>Dynamic and complex environmental dimensions Organizational identity and affective commitment Mutual long-term exchange relationships Personal relationships and collaborative behaviors Practices related to motivation, results-oriented appraisal; practice related to opportunity Internal communication and flexible in compensation, benefits, training Emphasis on effectiveness Required knowledge, skills, and abilities are uncertain and changing Resource-based approach</p>	<p>Integrated</p> <p>Complex and highly dynamic environmental dimensions Family firm orientation, consistently with strategy Development of environmental and cultural scanning Emphasis is both on efficiency and on effectiveness Information and communication Long-range issues related to employees and organizational variables Organizational identity and affective commitment Personal relationships and collaborative behaviors Efficiency of the functions or of the divisions Both a resource-based and a control-based approach</p>
	Low	<p>Administrative</p> <p>Simple and not dynamic environmental dimensions Managing human resources through few rules and procedures Standardization of processes and efficiency Family firms are not aware or aware of the environmental dimensions, but they do not incorporate them in the personnel management Aware of the administrative role of HRM practices, realized through basic salary and benefit administration; basic record-keeping via manual employee profile; nonexempt hiring</p>	<p>Professional</p> <p>Relative stable and complex environmental dimensions Many rules, complex procedures, articulated plans, standardization of processes and efficiency Efficient organizational environment where family firms manage the functions or the divisions Emphasis on efficiency Transaction-based HRM practices with individual short-term exchange relationships Development of managerial skills Stable set of tasks Control-based approach</p>
		Low	High
		Need for explicit mechanisms	

Figure 2: Four configurations of HRMP

The Administrative configuration presents an organizational awareness of low levels of both the need for implicit and explicit coordination mechanisms. It refers to simple and not

dynamic environmental dimensions. It asks for managing human resources through few rules and procedures, aiming at the standardization of processes and efficiency. Family firms are aware of the environmental dimensions, but they do not incorporate them into the personnel management. They are aware of the administrative role of HRMP, realized through basic salary and benefits administration, basic record keeping via manual employee profiles, and non-exempt hiring (Baird and Meshoulam, 1988).

The Shared configuration presents an organizational awareness about a high level of the need for implicit coordination mechanisms and a low level the need for explicit coordination mechanisms. It refers to dynamic and complex environmental dimensions. Family firms search for organizational identity and affective commitment. Commitment-based HRMP are adopted, which emphasize mutual long-term exchange relationships. The goal is to create an effective organizational environment where family firms manage the personal relationships of individuals and employees work together showing collaborative behaviors. Collaborative behaviors stand, thanks to shared meanings and values. It is critical to create a culture and network of relationships that support effective strategy implementation. Family firms show awareness through a cooperative and involved managing of employees. The shared configuration includes interdependent work structures, clan fostering initiatives, and broader skill development. Family firms adopt practices related to motivation, including results-oriented appraisal, and practices related to opportunity, such as employee participation programs. Policies foster internal communication, and new employees' programs are added to flexibly respond to business needs in compensation, benefits, and training (long-range programs). The emphasis is on effectiveness in direct response to business needs. Since not being applied to stable tasks and processes, shared configurations are unable to reach high degrees of formalization. In unstable situations, much of the work is ad hoc, taken on to accomplish tasks that are unique and unprecedented. Job descriptions are improvised as fresh challenges appear. Required knowledge, skills, and abilities are uncertain and changing. Performance appraisal is equally uncertain and of limited value when selecting people for future, dissimilar, ad hoc tasks. In these circumstances, the use of stable, complex and articulated HRMP may be counterproductive, delaying timely action and consuming resources. With limited periods to reap their value, they are unlikely to pay back the resources put into their development. In the shared configuration, selecting, developing, and retaining human capital represent key steps in building the foundation for strategic capabilities and disciplines that create competitive advantage. HRM adopts a resource-based approach to the measurement of high-performance practices.

The Professional configuration presents an organizational awareness about a high level of the need for explicit coordination mechanisms and a low level of the need for implicit coordination mechanisms. It refers to relatively stable and complex environmental dimensions. The professional configuration looks for managing human resources through rules, complex procedures, articulated plans, by aiming at the highest standardization of processes and efficiency. The goal is to create an efficient organizational environment where family firms manage the functions, or the divisions of the organizational structure, in direct response to business needs. Family firms adopt interdisciplinary HRMP aimed at achieving functional/divisional goals. Transaction-based HRMP are adopted, which emphasize individual short-term exchange relationships. The professional configuration includes hard work structures, result-based initiatives, and trans-specialist development. Employees'

succession planning is a crucial issue. The professional configuration provides professionalization in functions/divisions and tries to incorporate and develop managerial skills. The management of the personnel function is grounded on control and measurements, evidencing advanced compensation and benefits policies, and devoting a great effort to designing job positions and profiles. With a relatively stable set of tasks, family firms can design and describe an enduring set of jobs. People can be recruited, selected, compensated, and trained for and selected into them, though effective data collection. A set of formalized procedures can be developed to administer these standardized processes in a transparent, efficient and effective way. The implementation of formal HRMP should not aim at ensuring conformity with what family firms perceive as best practices, but rather at developing systems that increase net benefits associated with HRM. Such systems should integrate well with other areas of the business and should create synergistic effects to enhance the total value of the family firm. Thus, decisions to implement structured HRMP must involve cost-benefit analyses. Benefits of structured HRMP include meeting legal requirements, maintaining records in support of decisions in the event of litigation, treating employees fairly, and increasing efficiency. The major costs are lower flexibility, less financial resources, and increased organizational inertia. HRM adopts a control-based approach to the measurement of high-performance HRMP.

The Integrated configuration presents an organizational awareness about a high level of the need both for implicit and explicit coordination mechanisms. It refers to complex and highly dynamic environmental dimensions. The management of the personnel function strives for family firm orientation, consistently with the strategic business direction. HRMP aim at developing a high environmental and cultural scanning, and long-range planning tension. The emphasis is on both efficiency and effectiveness in direct response to business needs. Information and communication are consistent with the adoption of planning, research, and analysis tools. Long-range and “what if” questions connect to employees and organizational variables. Family firms search for organizational identity and affective commitment, creating an integrated organizational environment where they manage both the personal relationships of individuals’ working together, showing collaborative behaviors, and the functions or the divisions of the organizational structure. HRM adopts both a resource-based and a control-based approach to the measurement of commitment-based HRMP.

The four proposed configurations consist of a unique combination of aligned HRMP (see Figure 3). The four configurations may all be effective ways of managing human resources practices in family firms.

Discussion

This paper aimed to develop a theoretical configurational model of HRMP for family firms facing strategic and organizational changes based on the concept of awareness. Here, we discuss the theoretical challenges, researchers and practitioners might face when adopting such an approach. The typology of ideal HRMP configurations we developed is grounded on i.) two organizational factors: awareness of the internal and external environment and organizational awareness; and ii.) two dimensions of organizational awareness: the need both for explicit and implicit coordination mechanisms. The first refers to the need for mechanisms explicitly adopted by a family firm to manage task or communication interdependencies. The second relates to those requirements for mechanisms that are available to family firms from shared cognition, which enable them to explain and anticipate

task statuses and individuals' collaborative behaviors, thus helping them manage interdependencies. We combined these results in four ideal configurations of HRMP (administrative, shared, professional, and integrated).

Need for implicit mechanisms	High	Shared	Integrated
		Recruiting and selection Compensation Training and development Internal communication	Recruiting and selection Compensation Training and development Internal communication Performance appraisal Workforce planning Career planning management Job design
		Administrative	Professional
		Recruiting and selection Compensation	Recruiting and selection Compensation Training and development Performance appraisal Workforce planning Job design
	Low		
		Low	High
		Need for explicit mechanisms	

Figure 3: Aligned HRM practices in the four configurations

Such aligned combinations of practices reflecting the awareness in term of need for coordination mechanisms in a family firm let us to propose and discuss seven propositions.

Proposition 1: Family firms present HRM practices' configurations that reflect any of the proposed combinations of the needs for implicit and explicit coordination mechanisms.

Proposition 2: Family firms in which HRM practices reflect any of the proposed configurations will outperform family firms in which HRM practices do not show any fit.

Proposition 3: Employees in family firms of which HRM practices reflect shared and integrated configurations will be more likely to go beyond the call of duty than employees from family firms with HRM practices that do not fit these configurations.

Proposition 3a: Family firms whose HRM practices reflect administrative and professional configurations will show higher levels of employee turnover than family firms with HRM practices that do not fit these configurations.

Proposition 3b: Family firms whose HRM practices reflect shared and integrated configurations will show lower levels of employee turnover than family firms with HRM practices that do not fit these configurations.

Proposition 4a: Family firms whose HRM practices reflect the administrative configuration will show lower levels of innovativeness.

Proposition 4b: Family firms whose HRM practices reflect shared and integrated configurations will show higher levels of innovativeness.

For many family firms, the dynamics and the complexity of the environmental dimensions has increased and effective responsiveness to the required strategic and organizational changes is a key concern.

The four proposed configurations consist of unique combinations of aligned HRMP. The four configurations may all be effective ways of managing HRMP in family firms. Therefore, we developed seven propositions to sustain the theoretical enhancement of the model. We adopted three assumptions in our approach: (1) that the sum of each HRMP is greater than its parts; (2) that the configurations of HRMP are additive rather than multiplicative; and (3) that one key aspect, awareness, of HRMP, is needed. We based these assumptions on the general notion of gestalt theory, which emphasizes that the whole-part relationships or the associative connections of each part will ultimately determine behavior and performance.

The configurational model proposed is close to a “fit-as-gestalt” approach, based on which, an additive configuration of HRMP for a family firm might explain a superior performance. The idea behind the model is that, to yield performance when facing strategic and organizational changes, a family firm may adopt a specific configuration of HRMP. More accurately, a specific configuration of HRMP helps to confer a potential competitive advantage on a family firm. Under this assumption, a successful family firm is expected to configure all the HRMP and link each one to all the others in a systematic manner.

For many family firms, the dynamics and complexity of the environmental dimensions have increased. Therefore, the effective responsiveness to the required strategic and organizational changes is a key concern. Responsiveness relates to the existence and pervasiveness of rules and procedures. Family firms characterized by many rules and regulations might stress responsibility for outcomes. In such situations, rules and procedures form the basis for coordination of efforts (standardization of behaviors). Such organization-centered family firms tend to be bureaucratic and low on strategic flexibility. In contrast, family firms with less emphasis on rules and regulations tend to put more responsibility for outcomes in the hands of individuals/employees. In control terms, family firms relying heavily on rules or direct supervision emphasize behavior and output control. Behavior control assumes managerial knowledge of cause-effect relationships, making it possible to prescribe and judge appropriate behavior. If desired outcomes or standards of performance are clear and measurable, family firms may use output control, where rewards are based on reaching predetermined performance targets. In turbulent environments, desired behavior and performance standards may be ambiguous or changeable, which makes relying on predetermined rules or performance targets to coordinate employees’ efforts more difficult.

There are two major reasons why we adopted our theoretical model in the attempt to investigate HRMP configurations-performance relationships in family firms. First, we would like to contribute to the debate on two conceptually distinct sets of HRMP, namely, “high commitment work practices” (HCWPs) and “high-performance work systems” (HPWSs). We know they can be interrelated to yield superior performance, but we offer a different perspective. Second, family business literature has long argued that success has largely been a matter of family firms’ unique ways of managing human resources. In particular, a stable commitment-based employment relationship, a large amount of investment in training and development, and a quality-centered approach to managing human resources are supposed to be the major sources of competitive strength for family firms. Nonetheless, the literature provides little theoretical reflection to date regarding how family firms structure HRMP in such a way as to pursue strategic and organizational changes. For these reasons, our paper proposes a model for explaining how different HRMP could be configured together to exert an influence on family firms’ performance.

A possible contribution that our model makes is that it provides a partial explanation to fuel the ongoing debate on the configurational perspective in the HRMP research field for family firms. We examined a particular construct (awareness) by which each configuration of HRMP is presenting internal alignment in family firms. We based it on the vast bulk of

literature both from HRM and family business, with a focus on understanding how a family firm can cope with strategic and organizational changes by leveraging the adoption of an aligned bundle of HRMP. Despite this possible contribution, the model presents limitations that necessitate caution when interpreting it.

Limitations

Do we have considered an exhaustive or at least comprehensive list of environmental dimensions?

How do we measure awareness (Timmermans and Cleeremans, 2015)?

Next steps of the research

We intend to support the proposed ideal-typical configurations through an investigation developed in a two-step process: first, we suppose to invest in an assessment realized by a panel of experts on the various variables considered in the model. We will adopt a panel of experts to assess the four configurations of practices in order to test our operationalization of the model and to reduce the risk of measuring random bundles. Next, we want to measure the distance between the ideal types and actual configurations of HRM practices in a significant sample of family firms.

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