

# PERSPECTIVES

## Invited article

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## TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN BRAZIL: CONVERGENCE OR DIVERGENCE?

### INTRODUCTION

Conceptually, human resource management (HRM), as it is known today, originated in attempts by scholars from American universities to understand the so-called "labor problem" in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At that time, this issue arose because of the emergence of wage earning following industrialization. Since then, labor conflict has moved into the institutional arena, where union actions and specific legislation to address this issue have created external milestones for organizations when hiring employees.

In this way, large companies began to follow the principles of Taylorism and Fordism. In the middle of the twentieth century, they also incorporated the perspectives provided by the school of human relations. At this point, with interest in the psychological dimension of workers developing as early as the mid-1960s, the inner workings of organizations became increasingly important. The opening of markets and the intensification of globalization in the 1980s required organizations to increasingly focus on identifying both the knowledge required for jobs and the desired behavior of employees based on the organization's strategic direction.

Since then, the human resources (HR) function has been considered necessary for an organization to be competitive. The collective function of labor relations, represented by negotiations with trade unions, has become a secondary focus of HRM. Instead, major efforts have been made to create methods and metrics to gauge organizations and people's knowledge and behaviors and to align them and make them more efficient through competence-based management.

At an abstract level, this path operates in the context of the prevalence of democratic societies in the West, the acceleration of the dissemination of technology for productive processes, and globalization.

At the international level, the need for better HR has led to the dissemination of HRM knowledge not only by scholars but also, primarily, by professionals working for large consulting firms or professional schools. In an associated phenomenon, the consolidation of the professional community across different countries is indicative of the plurality with which HRM knowledge is produced for and flows between organizations.

When this flow of knowledge reaches Brazil, it encounters unique context. This study therefore aims to briefly reflect on the trajectory of the Brazilian experience in teaching and research in people management (PM) given the trajectory of the so-called mainstream thinking in the USA and Europe. Given this purpose, a key to this study lies in the "convergence x divergence" dichotomy of

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HRM teaching and research compared to that produced abroad. The convergence and divergence of HRM policies and practices have been used in comparative studies of countries and regions based on an institutional approach to HRM (Mayrhofer, Brewster, Morley, & Ledolter, 2011).

Thus, following this introduction, this article includes a brief history of PM/HRM in Brazil; a discussion of the sources of PM/HRM in Brazil; perspectives on teaching PM, including a discussion of whether PM is still necessary; and final considerations for the near future of teaching and research in HRM

## PM/HRM IN BRAZIL: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FIRST DECADES

We first identify when teaching and research regarding HR emerged in Brazil. As in the developed countries that comprise the mainstream, HR emerged along with discussions regarding labor in Brazil, that is, from the 1970s to the 1980s and so on.

Dissemination of work for salaries and urbanization were consolidated in Brazil after three decades of transformation. During this period, major economic plans were put in place, and, owing to internal market protections, these plans enabled the establishment of a durable consumer goods industry based on large multinational companies and investments by state companies in energy and telecommunications. Furthermore, in the mid-1960s, authoritarian military governments were established, lasting 20 years. Thus, in the early 1980s, companies faced critical situations for at least two reasons: the resurgence of unions and unemployment and companies' internal emphasis on cost reduction. Despite the economic difficulties of this period, democratic advances took place, including the civil government in 1985 and the Constitution of 1988.

The trade union movement was consolidated and became an important player in the field of labor relations during the last eight years of military government. As a result, the HRM of organizations in such sectors as industry and banking considered labor conflicts, which had not been an issue since the first half of the 1960s, to be a real possibility. In a phenomenon typical of labor markets, the demonstration effect was sufficient for managers in other sectors to be cautious. Until then, organizations' HR only considered the labor practices required by law when hiring workers. When they began to use advanced practices, however, they also provided operation training programs restricted to their workers and managers in a procedural way.

Managers were not prepared for the need or possibility of dialogue with an external element outside of the absolute control

of their organizations. The academic understanding of this new environment showed that the functionalist approach that formed the basis of research and teaching in business administration did not account for the new components of the political environment linked to labor relations that emerged in Brazil.

At that time, the effort was twofold: to position administration as an applied social science on the academic front and to modernize its practice on the professional front. The professional sphere reacted more quickly, as meetings of the so-called professional groups of managers were conducted to exchange information and experiences related to collective bargaining with trade unions. Inflation and wage policies were the subject of all wage campaigns in the 1980s. The movements for quality, productivity, and reengineering were already acting within companies, although their echoes only resounded throughout the country in the 1990s. In academia, the timing to obtain results was slower, and the movement took at least two directions. The first direction had more evident managerial purposes, and initial studies considered the need to identify a strategic role for HRM. The second direction had a more critical bias, and studies focused on topics related to organizational culture in Brazil to provide a better understanding of the inherent mechanisms of power.

In this sense, the academic challenge was to bring the social sciences closer to business administration and, in doing so, influence management by placing greater weight on labor relations. In both directions of research, the great ambition was to provide an additional line to management policies that included the management of work at its greatest complexity.

With regard to the emergence of structural and large-scale unemployment, the important fact was that, for the first time in 30 years, the dynamism of job creation in the Brazilian labor market suffered significant losses. The first systematic studies of unemployment in Brazil at the beginning of this decade indicated the importance of unemployment as an economic and social issue.

In cyclical terms, the issue of unemployment for HRM is linked to the need to adjust companies to an environment with lower economic growth and greater constraints on labor costs. From a more structural perspective, however, organizations position themselves as contractors in a labor market with an excess supply of people and a high degree of informality. Thus, in Brazil, HR policies and practices, in a way, make less effort to attract and retain workers, which is always reflected in high levels of turnover.

In a nutshell, the consolidation of greater demands on HR performance contributed to the need to train professionals who could also deal with more complex management scenarios. That is, through this line of reasoning, just as the issue of work

implied a need for the proper conceptual approach that emerged in modern HRM in the USA and Europe, in Brazil, *mutatis mutandis*, the issue of work also necessitated the emergence of HRM as a field of study and teaching in academic and professional circles.

The 1990s reaffirmed this need. Economic openness and globalization imposed a difficult adjustment process on the Brazilian economy, resulting in a definitive drop in inflation. Thus, HR became a sensitive element in organizational management. Many of the adjustments performed by organizations were reactively made possible by the organizations' HR functions through outsourcing processes, turnover, and the gradual introduction of management by competencies associated with the notion of employability. HRM became technically more sophisticated as it aligned with organizations' strategies. At the end of this decade, the gap in specialized training between younger and more experienced HR professionals became evident. This gap enabled the creation of the first MBA courses specialized in HRM in Brazil and created the need to broaden the focus on similar topics in senior management training courses.

At that time, the teaching of HRM for undergraduate degrees in business administration used manuals that reproduced similar works to those used in the USA. Teaching had a very pragmatic focus based on the paradigm of simplicity. As Morin (1991) stated, the focus was to demonstrate the relevance of the HR area to achieve the objectives of companies. Knowledge was based on the supremacy of fragmentation and super specialization; thus, HRM was a specialty for those wishing to follow a certain HR trajectory.

In parallel, it was not easy to reverse the perspective of HRM as a purely procedural, executive, and reactive area in students' mindsets. They concluded that the problems encountered in HRM were associated with a non-innovative area that had great difficulty quantifying its results relative to other areas. In other words, it was seen as beautiful and well-intentioned speech with little proof that it added value to organizations.

Although HRM professors focused on advocacy for the topics of organizational culture, team management, skills development, performance management, and financial and non-financial rewards, their enthusiasm was not enough to overcome the prevailing view that HRM was a "necessary evil" whose value was associated with maximizing worker efficiency at minimum cost. Thus, in the 1990s, researchers were already warning of the need to rethink the HR function along with the redistribution of responsibilities across line managers. However, students considered HRM useful only for training future HR professionals and not for training future managers.

An explanation for this phenomenon is that most undergraduate students in business administration sought

internships in large corporations that were precisely at the initial stage of HR professionalization. The first MBAs began to emerge in the early 1990s and, specifically in HR, in 1996. These MBAs already had some strategic bias (focusing on organizational culture and, later, competencies and strategic planning) and less procedural bias. However, the demand for specialized courses in PM and HR in MBA programs only arose in the early part of the 2000s.

Tragtenberg (1999) clearly described the effect of uncertainty on organizations in the late 1990s as "a permanent climate of insecurity, which, in turn, brings inevitable damage to the productivity and health of its members, as it unfolds into disorientation, emotional overload, fear, and stress" (p. 2). In this sense, the author explains the change of focus to teaching and training based on the paradigm of complexity. This paradigm is understood not as one that advocates for recipes or a set of simple ideas but rather as one that stimulates critical reflections and points out creative solutions that can be ambiguous and retrocausal.

In this brief retrospective, it is important to emphasize that the arrival and development of HRM teaching and research in Brazil are both aligned with the country's socioeconomic development. Given that Brazil is a developing economy with many multinational companies, it is understandable that its HRM is aligned with that of the USA and Europe but still lags these countries structurally.

Thus, HRM teaching and research in Brazil incorporate central topics, such as management by competencies, as they converge with the HRM teaching and research practiced and taught in developed countries. The first studies on some topics, such as strategic planning in HR, were published in the mid-1980s. Other topics, such as innovation and organizational change, began to emerge between the mid-1990s and early 2000s. However, they spread with a delay of at least ten years. Nevertheless, over time, and especially after the turn of the century, this gap has been closing.

Interestingly, this movement of alignment and temporal lag reduction has involved some contradictions. In Brazil, the renaming of the HRM field as Human Resource Management occurred in the late 1990s and was seen as an advance by researchers, professors, and even national professionals. Their latent concern was about employees being predominantly treated as organizational resources rather than as humans. This concern was probably linked to the fact that the so-called school of human relations was quickly overtaken by management by competence in Brazil. Another concern may also have been linked to the culture of Brazilian management,

which is known to be less open to participation. In contrast, as a kind of *jabuticaba*, or typical Brazilian thing, the expression “people management” and the existing effort toward its dissemination in the academic and professional environment demonstrate divergence from international viewpoints. At first, this expression does not seem to correspond to a similar term in the international sphere, as HR is the main term used to refer to the field and does not imply that foreign researchers have less concern for people.

## KNOWLEDGE OF THE SOURCES OF PM/HRM IN BRAZIL

In the last decade, the globalization process has brought the core sources of knowledge production closer to its users around the world. Brazil and the HRM of Brazilian companies, despite their *jabuticabas*, were not exempt from this dynamic, which may reinforce the idea that Brazil is moving towards convergence.

The initiatives of multinational companies to adopt globalized practices in their subsidiaries and the influence of international consultancies on the definitions of best practices, which are applied indistinctly across organizations and societies, have been homogenizing the knowledge that identifies HR professionals. Such terms as “leadership pipeline,” “business partner,” “employer branding,” and “employee value proposition” are part of the common language that legitimizes professionals in the field. They represent courses of action whose understanding and practical application are accessible in virtual networks and are present in specialized training curricula, particularly in professional graduate schools.

At the academic level, institutions have been globalizing for long time, and the physical or virtual presence of researchers, professors, and even advanced campuses of European and American schools in so-called emerging countries has become normal. This ease of contact has also intensified the participation of Brazilian researchers in international networks, providing more continuous exchanges and engagement in joint research processes and a greater dissemination of HRM knowledge.

This movement provides rich diversity, bringing different perspectives on research topics that were previously discussed only among English-speaking researchers. Moreover, international networks level participants from different countries at the same stage of knowledge, ensuring that everyone involved almost simultaneously shares the advances made by collective production. However, the predominance of international research groups in the institutional teaching and research environments in

countries such as Brazil shows that academic topics and interests are clearly converging.

Another characteristic sign of this movement is the criteria for evaluating articles produced by academics. Those who work in this field know that, in recent years, Brazilian researchers have been strongly encouraged to publish their work in international journals. Articles accepted by national publications are much less valued by both employer institutions and the entities that evaluate graduate courses. National journals themselves strive to internationalize and, for this purpose, seek to attract authors from other countries. These academic policy initiatives are more justified because submitting Brazil’s researchers and editors to international judgment tends to enable the constant and accelerated improvement of Brazil’s research potential. However, it seems evident that this policy guides academic production towards convergence, as it attaches greater importance to topics of global interest, to the detriment of local issues. In the specific case of HRM, local issues, such as changes in employment relations, the institutions that govern work and welfare, and the age composition of society, begin to gain academic status only when they raise the attention and interest of editorial boards composed of international researchers.

These findings seem to determine a unique path for HR teaching and research in Brazil: to become increasingly associated with the major centers of production and knowledge dissemination in the field and to follow its dissemination among Brazilian organizations.

However, in practice, this solution may not address the challenges posed not only for HR teaching and research in Brazil but also for those who work in the field. Frequent reports obtained from experienced professionals indicate that the globalized practices of multinational companies do not always produce the intended results when applied to their Brazilian subsidiaries. Often, these practices are not even fully implemented because they conflict with the institutional, cultural, or even organizational factors that are characteristic of Brazil. Consultancies strive to adapt models that they bring from their experiences in developed countries, but, in some situations, they can even mischaracterize the initial purposes of these models.

This idea leads to a conclusion that the literature on resources, skills, and capabilities reached some time ago. Organizational skills in PM/HRM are dynamic capabilities, which, according to Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997, p. 516), can create or reconfigure other competencies. Several authors have shown that dynamic capabilities are not acquired mechanically and immediately; instead, they are path dependent and result from a generally time-consuming and contradictory transition during



which processes, habits, organizational roles, and relationships are developed. In other words, changes in HR practices, unlike other organizational transformations, always constitute interventions in the social systems of companies and, thus, must engage in a dialogue with this social system to be viable. In this sense, local issues that cannot be predicted or understood by externally produced knowledge will always exist, limiting the simple transfer of practices and knowledge that have proved useful and adequate in other sociocultural contexts.

Thus, it is important to understand how the dilemma of convergence or divergence in teaching and research in the field of PM/HRM can be resolved OK. Authors that compare HRM among different countries from an institutional perspective have come to interesting conclusions that may help identify ways to address this dilemma. They found a tendency for HR practices to converge; among the different countries researched, all are moving in the same direction in terms of the types of practices adopted. However, this convergence is not final. That is, although these practices are all moving in similar directions, there is no evidence that they will reach the same point because they did not start from the same origin (Mayrhofer et al., 2011). The rhythms, speed, and adaptations that are part of the process of adopting practices and models do not indicate that one unique, homogeneous global HRM model will exist in the future. Opportunities for the emergence of national jabuticabas arise.

We consider that much remains to be investigated on the topic to obtain more conclusive findings. Nevertheless, comparative studies indicate that although the various countries researched follow a common direction for HR practice, the institutional and cultural conditions of each country provide a unique character to the applied and accepted practices. In this case, the issue of implementing HR practices, which is not always addressed in these analyses, seems to gain relevance.

Implementation is a complex process and is often more complex than the development of a practice (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). In fact, implementation is not a direct translation of the practice proposed in the countries of origin but rather is a process of adapting the practice to several local conditions, such as the business environment, legislation, the local organizational culture, and leadership characteristics, among others. These structural contingencies sometimes require a structural reformulation of the original project's vision.

In this sense, implementation is equivalent to providing a new conception of the proposed policy or practice. This process requires the HR community to develop a range of skills and knowledge. Particularly, its two main actors, that is, specialized professionals and managers, must develop

these skills. To do so, HR professionals must understand the demands of the business in the specific locality, which can be very different from those in the developed countries where the practice originated. Professionals must recognize and analyze the specific contingent demands that are external and internal to companies, such as legislation, trade union relations, characteristics of the labor market, business strategies, and the cultural and organizational climate. Business and team managers, as the individuals primarily responsible for the effective implementation of practices, should understand HR and the importance of its role and should develop team management skills and conduct organizational change processes.

Based on these analyses, we present an initial suggestion for HRM teaching and research in Brazil. Research should be conducted locally, using and reformulating globally produced theories, because it is important to position Brazil as an exporter rather than an importer of theory, especially because several Brazilian multinationals and unicorns operate in several markets. The aim is to better educate managers and HR professionals who face daily challenges in organizations of all kinds and to focus research efforts on the implementation of policies and practices in companies established in Brazil. Unfortunately, this aim has not yet been met, as academia is far from able to draw a credible picture of the operation of the field of HR in Brazilian organizations.

Knowledge is limited, not cumulative, and is dispersed in research groups that rarely communicate with each other. Moreover, the results of these rare studies on practice in the classroom is very limited in terms of didactic texts, consultancy projects, and even non-academic dissemination. Thus, international studies continue to be reproduced or criticized, but researchers do not have alternatives that can meet the demands of organizations.

According to data from the Ministry of Labor, Brazil had 18,811 organizations with more than 200 employees in 2015. This company size requires some level of HR professionalization. (MTE-RAIS). Forty-eight million people worked in these companies in the same year (Brasil, 2015), and it is estimated that 430,000 specialized professionals are currently working in HR (Program of Studies in People Management – Fundação Instituto de Administração, 2018). More than 100,000 business management undergraduate students graduate each year, as do thousands of HR technologists. Research and teaching need to respond to the challenges of these professionals, as they are ultimately responsible for the competitiveness of Brazilian companies and, consequently, for the economic and social development of the country.

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEACHING OF HRM: IS HRM STILL NEEDED?

Given this background, undergraduate students in business administration exhibited growing interest in HRM in the second decade of the 2000s. In surveys of expectations regarding the HRM course, students reported wanting to learn how to create a culture of engagement, implement a diverse learning environment, and create organizations that favor autonomy and flexibility. Young people were already putting themselves in the positions of managers and were participating in the construction of a new type of company, guided by solid values.

This situation can be explained by several phenomena of the 21st century, including the intensification of the digital world, increased interest in entrepreneurship, the promotion of start-ups, the growth of social business, and the search for work with more meaning and value. Students and professionals are aware that their careers are no longer limited to one or a few companies and that the possibilities are not bound by certain organizations or even types of activities.

Given these changes in society and the labor market, it is easy to show that the success of organizations depends on good HRM. However, proving the relevance of HRM teaching is less straightforward.

If, in the 1990s, the main *modus operandi* followed the paradigm of simplicity, it later became imperative to follow the paradigm of complexity. The first fundamental aspect of this new paradigm is to show students that the current problems experienced by organizations have no single correct solution. The appropriate answers are suitable for certain contexts and for a certain time. In the theoretical field, the institutional approach is an important path in this direction. Moreover, environments must be open to testing solutions, with quick reviews if the desired results are not achieved. In other words, the environment must stimulate innovation in HRM. It is therefore important to understand what is currently considered innovative in the field of HRM.

The observation of new organizational formats that have attracted students' attention helps to identify some key elements of teaching in HRM:

- Teaching should reflect on the necessary and sufficient conditions to implement a culture of engagement. To do so, it is necessary to detach from the PM model created in the command-control paradigm and to structure a model of autonomy-responsibility, that is, freedom of action and responsibility for the result.
- Teaching should reflect on ways to create a learning environment that promotes continuous reflection on errors and failures rather than hunting down the guilty.
- Students must be aware of the importance of active communication, including frank dialogue within organizations. People need to feel as though they are part of the dynamics of an organization, and they need to feel connected to something that has a purpose. People stay in environments where they can learn, recognize the importance of their work to achieving collective goals, and trust the group.
- Teaching should be guided not just by benchmarks of success but also by strategies to overcome errors and failures in organizations.
- Students should be trained with a critical and systemic view based on an awareness that HRM is the responsibility of every manager. A good manager can identify and take advantage of people's positive attributes and can enthusiastically convey the value and purpose of the organization.

The challenge of reinventing organizations necessarily involves reinventing management for people who seek more purpose in their lives and who want to experience pleasure not only in their personal lives but also in their professional lives.

## AN OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSION

In this essay, we addressed the HR policies and practices observed and studied in organizations in Brazil, described their conceptual evolution for analysis, and indicated what to teach and learn in this field and an appropriate process for doing so. The challenge posed to HR teaching and management is complex, and there is always a need to reconcile opposites. For example, HR must deal with both globalization, by adopting international models and approaches, and national culture, by contemplating the specificities of organizations in Brazil's economic and social contexts. HR must prioritize the feelings and opinions of individuals at work but must also stimulate teamwork. HR must be aligned with the needs and meet the requirements of its organization but must not treat the organization's sustained, responsible contribution to society and the country as secondary.

In other words, Brazil must find a balance between convergence and divergence urgently but carefully.

In general, we can affirm that patience and tolerance with frustrations within organizations is shrinking, thus signaling a potential for individual action. Thus, the field of HR needs to act doubly, eliminating all possible obstacles to excellent work and good results for people and organizations while also stimulating patience and tolerance, which are essential elements for social life. The pace at which things happen in the world is increasingly accelerating. Thus, the process of convincing through patience and tolerance is not well understood by organizations. Business Schools need, with longer and more demanding time frames and deadlines for reflection and knowledge deepening, must focus on this issue.

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