Transferability of Human Resource Management practices across borders

A European reflection on Greece

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Summary

In the last few decades, companies have been confronted with increasing economic competition and international co-operation. Forces of globalisation, such as the liberalisation of international trade, the international production integration, as well as the emergence of major economic regions like the European Union, has forced corporations to invest overseas in order to gain or maintain competitive advantage.

Recently, more and more companies have realised that, because of the complexity of the business environment, it is necessary to use all possible traditional and non-traditional sources of competitive advantage. Since traditional sources, such as capital, technology or location have become widely accessible and therefore less significant for competitive advantage, companies have turned to other, less traditional sources. It is argued that human assets are one of such sources. Therefore, HRM is evolving from being a mere support function to one of strategic importance, under the light of globalisation.

Recent and present research in this area has revealed that companies in different countries differ with respect to their HR practices and policies. It has also been noted that transferring HR policies and practices to different countries can be quite problematic. A major issue and one of the central questions in the literature on the MNCs is the extent to which their subsidiaries act and behave as local firms (local isomorphism) versus the extent to which their practices resemble those of the parent company or some other global standard (internal consistency). Which factors are then affecting MNCs' choices regarding localisation versus importation of HRM practices?

The purpose of this paper is to provide an insight of the interplay of several national, cultural and organisational factors that make the transfer of HRM practices across borders a very complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The research setting involves Greece as a host-country for MNCs' subsidiaries with headquarters in different European countries.

Key words: Human Resource Management, Multinational Companies, transferability of practices, localisation, internal concistency, national culture, corporate culture, institutions, Europe.

1. Introduction

The present doctoral research concerns the transferability of home-country Human Resource Management (HRM) practices across borders. More specifically, it deals with multinationals (MNCs), host-countries and HRM practices applied to host-country nationals. One of the major research questions is to what extent MNCs do or should adjust their HRM practices to the traditional local ones versus importing their home-country practices.

Consequently, major research areas of the project include International Human Resource Management (IHRM), Cross-Cultural and Cross-National Management, as well as Comparative Management studies.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an insight of the interplay of several national, cultural and organisational factors that make the transfer of HRM practices across borders a very complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The research setting will involve Greece as a host-country for MNCs' subsidiaries with headquarters in different European countries. Subsidiaries of US and Japanese companies will be also included, although Europe will be the focus of the research.

2. Background literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Importance of International HRM

In the last few decades, companies have been confronted with increasing economic competition and international co-operation. Forces of globalisation, such as the liberalisation of international trade, the international production integration, research and marketing by the major MNCs, as well as the emergence of major economic regions like the European Union, has forced corporations to invest overseas in order to gain or maintain competitive advantage (Ferner and Quintanilla, 1998; Huang, 1998). Mergers and acquisitions are common practice in almost every industry. The majority of the world's large corporations perform an increasing proportion of their business activities outside their home-countries. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in overseas business by MNCs has increased at an average annual rate of 95 percent over the past thirty years (Begin, 1997).

The intensified international investment and competition involve not only the movement of capital, machinery and products but also the interaction and movement of people across national boundaries. Recently, more and more companies have realised that, because of the complexity of the business environment, it is necessary to use all possible traditional and non-traditional sources of competitive advantage. Since traditional sources, such as capital, technology or location have become widely accessible and therefore less significant for competitive advantage, companies have turned to other,

less traditional sources. It is argued that human assets is one of such sources (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989; Schuler and Rogovsky, 1998).

HRM is evolving from being a mere support function to one of strategic importance, under the light of globalisation (Teagarden and Von Glinow, 1997). Bartlett and Ghosal (1989) have argued that HRM policies and practices are becoming crucial because they can act as mechanisms for co-ordination and control of international operations. Values and HR systems help to shape the organisational culture and the people who operate within and influence that culture. *"Some have even identified HRM as the glue that holds global organisations together"* (Teagarden and Von Glinow, 1997). Moreover, the function of HR is increasingly viewed as a crucial component of the firm's overall corporate or business strategy (Schuler and Rogovsky, 1998).

However, *"human systems are also one of the major constrains in implementing global strategies"* (Adler and Bartholomew, 1992). This is mainly due to the complexities that operations in different countries involve, as well as to the employment of people with different national backgrounds (Morgan, 1986: p 44, as cited in Scullion, 1994).

For such reasons, HRM has become more and more the focus of top management attention (Sparrow and Hiltrop, 1995). Managers need to know how people are managed in different parts of the world and how their counterparts perceive or react to similar concepts and pressures. This has resulted in an increase in the number of cross-national HRM studies (Brewster et al, 1996).

Nevertheless, while it is recognised that the effective management of human resources is one of the major determinants of success or failure in international business, the area of international HRM is slowly developing as a field of academic study (Laurent, 1986) and much remain to be done in this direction (Tung and Punnett, 1993). Moreover, there is relatively little empirical research about the international HRM strategies and practices of MNCs that are not North American (Scullion, 1994). Above all, significant debates which will be dealt at the next section persist, calling for further and more comprehensive research in the area of HRM.

2.2 Transfer of Human Resource Management practices

As we have mentioned before, HRM can be seen as part of the overall strategy of the firm. In this respect and generally speaking, a MNC has, according to Perlmutter (1969), three strategic choices: ethnocentric, polycentric and global.

A company with an ethnocentric strategy uses similar HRM practices at its overseas subsidiaries with these at home. In this case, most aspects of the HRM system are transferred. On the other hand, under a polycentric strategy the MNC chooses to adhere to the local HRM practices, so the degree of transfer is minimum. Lastly, a gobal strategy is when a company implements a common world-wide HRM policy for all its subsidiaries.

However, such a clear-cut typology does not give accurate answers when it comes to the transfer of HRM practices abroad. Other, usually external factors, like the host - country environment, limit the MNC's freedom to choose among the above strategies. In reality, MNCs are more likely to use an hybrid strategy and, as Tayeb (1998) puts it, opt for the strategy that fits best with each subsidiary's local conditions. In this way, a company that has subsidiaries in many foreign countries may adopt an ethnocentric strategy for some of them and a polycentric or even a global one for others.

Furthermore, as many authors have argued, such a typology treats management practices in terms of an overall orientation which may overlook their internal differentiation (Rosenweig and Nohria, 1994). According to this view, a company is an organisation composed of numerous differentiated practices. Some of them may be more sensitive to pressures of local adaptation, while others may be more prone to internal consistency.

Similarly, in the same subsidiary, some management practices might closely follow the parent-company ones, while others may more resemble those of the host-country. In addition, there could be other practices that follow a global standard.

As a consequence, the above typology may be too simplistic to describe complexity in MNCs and capture the magnitude of the parent/subsidiary relationship. In this respect, it is important to emphasise the fact that certain parts of the company are more likely to be universal, while others are more culture/context specific (Tayeb, 1988).

According to Tayeb (1994), the universal aspect of organisations lie in their visible structure. Dimensions of this structure, such as centralisation of decision-making, specification of functions or formalisation are more or less common for most MNCs. On the other hand, there are the specific ways, processes and actions by which these dimensions can be achieved. These are the more context-specific aspects of an organisation, that can sometimes be invisible and more difficult to comprehend.

This is the point where organisations stop being universal. Although all face similar problems, each one has its own different way to solve them, depending on the particularities of the socio-cultural environment in which they are located.

Recent and present research in this area has revealed that companies in different countries differ with respect to their HR practices and policies (for a selection of such studies, see Ferner 1997; see also Brustein (ed.), 1995; Tyson (ed.), 1993). It has also been noted that transferring HR policies and practices to different countries can be quite problematic (Rozenweig and Nohria, 1994; Hofstede, 1980; Yuen and Kee, 1993; Bae et al, 1998; Kovach,

1994). Some of the major obstacles are closely related to the host-country national and cultural environment. Local conditions need to be carefully examined in order to understand the particular processes, philosophies and problems of national models of HRM (Hofstede, 1993).

A major issue and one of the central questions in the literature on the MNCs is the extent to which their subsidiaries act and behave as local firms (local isomorphism) versus the extent to which their practices resemble those of the parent company or some other global standard (internal consistency) (Rosenzweig and Nohria, 1994; Jain et al, 1998). Of course, localisation versus importation is not a black or white proposition. MNCs are characterised by an internal differentiation of management practices (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989). More specifically, HRM practices in a MNC *"are shaped by the interplay of opposing pressures for internal consistency and for isomorphism with the local institutional environment.."* (Rosenweig and Nohria, 1994, p.230) or, as Milliman et al (1991) have put it, HRM practices should both fit the internal/external environment and be flexible enough to facilitate the organisation's ability to adapt quickly and efficiently to changing circumstances.

Which factors are then affecting MNCs' choices regarding localisation versus importation of HRM practices? The issue is very complex and can be seen from several different angles. Recent research that has focused on MNCs' subsidiaries and HRM, has already shed light to some of these factors (Beechler and Yang, 1994; Rosenweig and Nohria, 1994; Janssens et al, 1995; Guest and Hoque, 1996; Newman and Nollen, 1996; Bae et al, 1998; Huang, 1998; Muller, 1998; Ngo et al, 1998).

2.2.1 Host-Country Specific Factors

One of the most significant factors that moderates MNCs' efforts to import HRM practices and also inhibits such a transfer to various degrees, is that of the host-country national context.

Although the dominance of American management theory has led to the belief of universal management practices that can be effectively applied everywhere, Hofstede's (1980, 1991) comprehensive research has made it clear that managerial attitudes, values and behaviours differ across national cultures. There is no-one best way to manage a business, since differences in national cultures call for differences in management practices. Hofstede (1993) also argues that not only practices, but the validity of management theories may stop at national borders, as well. Present research provides evidence that MNCs adapt to a certain degree to national cultures in which they operate (Schuler & Rogovsky, 1998). It has been found that subsidiaries that were managed consistently with national cultural expectations were performing better compared to subsidiaries that did otherwise (Newman and Nollen, 1996).

According to Rosenzweig and Nohria (1994), research has shown that HRM tends to follow local practices more closely than other corporate functions. Reasons for this could be the strong local regulation, government intervention or the labour market environment. Such reasons lead to another important host-country specific factor, apart from that of the cultural context, which is the institutional context. Recently, significant research has developed both theoretically and empirically the notion that there are distinct "national business systems" (for example, see Whitley, 1992). According to that, different business systems result in characteristic patterns of business behaviour in different countries. Business systems include managerial structures, functional divisions of labour, labour market institutions etc. (Ferner, 1997).

Certain HRM practices are more sensitive to local regulations; wage determination, hours of work, or forms of job contract are highly subject to local institutional arrangements, therefore it is less likely to be affected by the parent country practices. Other aspects of HRM are less subject to local regulation so they can be easily transferred.

This institutionalist perspective comes as a complement to the culturalist approach discussed before. When talking about the host-country national environment we should address both culture and systems in order to explain differences between countries (Ferner and Quintanilla, 1998).

At this point, we should mention two important issues which are linked with the previous discussion. The first is that of the "cultural distance". Research has shown that the greater the cultural distance between home and host country, the least likely will be for the MNC to transfer home-country practices (Newman and Nollen, 1996; Wasti,

1998). We should have this in mind when conducting research in similar cultural environments as some cultural effects could be hidden. Secondly, as far as the institutional effect is concerned, most research has been done in deregulated countries such as the UK (Muller, 1998) and the US, which could have masked forces of local institutional adaptation.

2.2.2 Country-of-Origin Specific Factors

Apart from the forces of local isomorphism, several studies have given evidence that MNCs HRM practices are also shaped by forces for internal consistency (Rosenzweig and Nohria, 1994; Ferner, 1997; Ferner and Quintanilla, 1998; Yuen and Kee, 1993; Ngo et al, 1998; Bae et al, 1998). So, certain HRM practices may more closely resemble home-country practices.

Rozenzweig and Nohria (1994), found that the degree of local isomorphism varies significantly with the MNC parent country. Additionally, Ferner and Quintanilla (1998) provide evidence that MNCs subsidiaries in the UK become "Anglo-Saxon" in a manner that retains many elements of their country-of-origin national business system. It is also recommended that both cultural and institutional approaches should be taken into account. Another finding that supports the country-of-origin effect is that firms from some countries are better able to adapt to local conditions than other firms from different countries, which are more likely to transfer home-country practices (Ngo et al, 1998).

At this point it is important to be cautious when interpreting the "country-of-origin" effects. Can the home-country specific factors explain all the differences among MNCs HRM practices or do they act for other more immediate causal factors? (Ferner, 1997). The phase of internationalisation, corporate structure and other organisational variables should be taken into account as well. At the next section we highlight some of these factors indicated by recent research.

2.2.3 Organisation Specific Factors

In addition to the home and host-country effects discussed before, a number of studies have placed importance on the organisational context as well. Factors such as organisational strategy, firm size and management values in relation to HRM and technology, are found likely to affect the HRM strategy of a company. More specifically, Bae et al (1998), have found that values and perceptions of top-management regarding the HR function and its role as a competitive advantage, play an important role in shaping the firm's HRM strategy. Others have indicated extensive links between the firm's corporate strategy (competitive advantage) and the specific HRM practices to fit with the strategy (Schuler and Jackson, 1987; Teagarden and Von Glinow, 1997).

"Administrative heritage", i.e. the corporate business culture or the unique corporate philosophy, is also found to be a significant factor which influences the international transfer of HRM practices (Beechler and Yang, 1994). Additionally, parent-company variables such as the history of the company, the role of the subsidiary, as well as the particular characteristics of the relationship between the parent and affiliate should not be ignored (Beechler and Yang, 1994; Rosenzweig and Nohria, 1994).

A number of other factors that have certain influence on the transfer of HRM practices has been identified in the reviewed literature. These include: subsidiary size (Muller, 1998; Bae et al, 1998), industry/sector (Bae et al, 1998; Ferner, 1997; Rosenweig and Nohria, 1994), ownership type of subsidiary, years that the subsidiary runs in the same host-country (Bae et al, 1998) etc.

Table 1 gives a summary of all the factors we have mentioned up to now. It is a 2 by 3 typology along two dimensions: home (headquarters) or host-country (subsidiary) and cultural, institutional or organisational context. Furthermore, Figure 1 gives an illustrative overview of the HRM transfer from the headquarters to the foreign subsidiary and the factors involved.

Table 1 Factors affecting the transfer of HRM practices across borders

Cultural	attitudes, values, behaviour	
Institutional	local regulations, government intervention, labour market conditions	
Organisational	phase of internationalisation company history subsidiary role relationship between HQs and subsidiary	size industry ownership type experience

FIGURE 1: TRANSFER OF HRM PRACTICES FROM HQs TO SUBSIDIARIES IN HOST - COUNTRIES
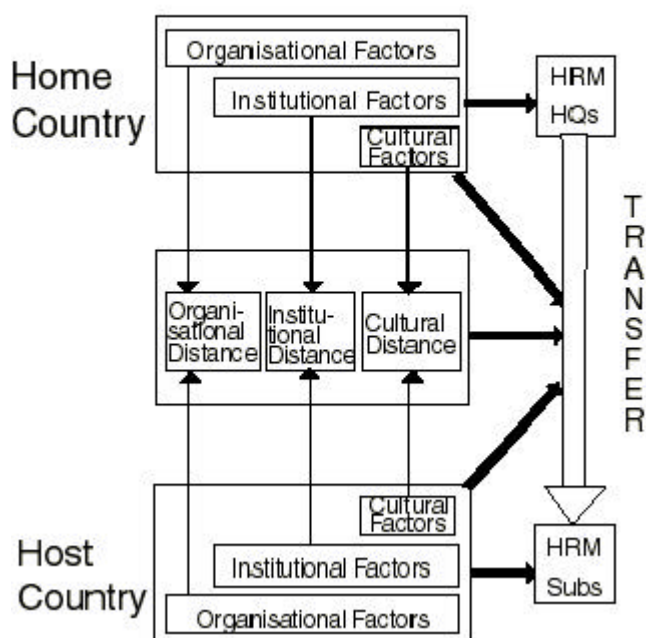
We would like to note here that there is another set of factors that influence the transfer, which we have called cultural, institutional and organisational distance. These have emerged from the comparison between the contextual factors (cultural, institutional, organisational) of each country (home or host). Cultural or institutional distance can be easily perceived. However, organisational distance has a much
limited scope and refers to differences in corporate culture and business strategy between the headquarters and the subsidiary.

By reviewing and discussing the relevant literature in cross-national, comparative HRM, we believe we have revealed the magnitude of the complexity that governs the issue of the transfer of HRM practices across borders. The constant interplay of the factors that determine such a transfer cannot be captured unless a comprehensive and integrated framework is designed. Up to now, little empirical research has been developed on such a framework (Milliman et al, 1991; Schuler et al, 1993; Beechler and Yang, 1994; Taylor et al, 1996; Bae et al, 1998; Ngo et al, 1998). Therefore, there is a need for further research towards that end.

2.3 Research Gaps

Taking the thread from the previous suggestion further, we would like to emphasise some issues that have not been covered or have been covered by a relatively small number of studies.

Several studies suggest and it has been also obvious from the literature review, that a lot of research has been concentrated largely on US, Japanese and, to a lesser extend, UK companies. Research in European MNCs is still underdeveloped (Ferner, 1997; Ferner and Quintanilla, 1998). Europe, with all its borders, constitutes an ideal environment to test the importance of cross-national or cross-cultural variation (Hofstede, 1993). Nevertheless, many have suggested that one can still identify clusters of countries where people have similar values, attitudes and behaviours towards management (Wilderom, 1996). But are such similarities adequate to lead to a "European Management"? European firms can be different from US firms, but this does not rule out differences among several European countries. On the other hand, strong forces of unification and integration and the European Union umbrella will have considerable implications for the management of HR (Prindle, 1991; Brunstein, 1995). It will be interesting to research how recent developments may influence the transfer of HRM.

Another noteworthy gap in the literature is the case of developing countries. The contextual differences between developing and industrialised countries call for the need of more "indigenous management" (Kanungo and Jaeger, 1990; Wasti, 1998), which also has implications for HRM. Specifically, there is a lack of current research on Greek management (Bourantas, 1996), and the present doctoral research intends to fill this gap in some way.

There is also a need for conducting research in highly regulated host-countries, as most of the studies have concentrated on relatively weak-regulated environments. In such a case, local isomorphic pressures will become more obvious as they impact on the HRM transfer (Ferner and Quintanilla, 1998).

It has been implied by many researchers that several studies have been limited in the number of HR policies and practices studies and/or the number of countries examined (Schuler and Rogovsky, 1998). Some also argue that the impact of cultural and institutional factors on HRM practices is still not

adequately explained and that there is no attempt to directly measure cultural constructs (Sparrow and Wu, 1998).

Gaps in the management literature such as those already mentioned, constitute another evidence that the field of comparative, cross-national HRM is relevant for investigation.

3. Research questions and objectives

The present research aspires to fill in some of the gaps existing in the literature. The transfer of HRM practices across borders involves several national, cultural and organisational factors that need to be examined under the light of the European context and the developing, highly-regulated environment of Greece.

- 1. To what extent MNCs do or should adjust their HRM practices to the traditional local ones versus importing their home-country practices?
- 1.1 Which of the factors we mentioned before are more crucial in affecting MNCs choices regarding localisation versus importation of HRM practices?
- 1.1.1 How does this developing, high-regulated environment affect the headquarters' decision to transfer HRM practices to the subsidiaries?
- 1.1.2 Do MNCs from different countries have distinct approaches, and to what extent does country-of-origin matter? How differently do European MNCs behave comparing to their US and Japanese counterparts and how important is cultural distance?
- 1.2 Where do the foreign subsidiaries' labour productivity and turnover stand compared to those of the local firms? Does HRM consistency with local practices have any performance effects?
- 1.3 Which HRM practices are more easily transferred and which are better to resemble the local ones?
- 1.4 How does the transfer of HRM practices take place (rules, expatriates etc.)

- 1.5 Finally, are we heading towards a "European HRM" or will the forces of divergence prevail?

4. Conclusion

The conceptual framework presented indicates that the transfer of HRM practices across borders is a very complex and multidimensional phenomenon. This therefore calls for a multi-level analysis (i.e. home-country, host-country, HQs, subsidiary, HR managers) and the inclusion of various different factors that are key players in international transfers.

Based on the work of several prominent scholars in this area, we developed a model especially designed to capture most of these factors, giving equal importance to each one of them. We hope that our future research and analysis of findings will produce an equally thorough understanding and give answers to some of the open questions.

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