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Disentangling the nexus between enabling HRM practices and lean implementation in the service operations [Abstract]

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Disentangling the nexus between enabling HRM practices and lean implementation in the service operations

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Purpose

Service organisations implement lean to continuously improve their service delivery processes (Bowen and Youngdahl, 1998). However, lean implementation is people-centric (Sparrow, Hird and Cooper, 2014), meaning that service organisations need to enable and support their employees to engage in lean implementation. For that reason, overlooking the role of the lean-relevant HRM practices in lean implementation not only fails service organisations in orienting their employees to buy-in to lean but also makes them unable to ensure that their employees have the required lean knowledge and skills to implement it (Bonavia and Marin-Garcia, 2011).

Despite the fact that previous scholarly works acknowledge the indispensable role of the workforce in lean implementation (see, for instance, de Koeijer, Paauwe and Huijsman (2014) and Sunder, Ganesh and Marathe (2017)), there is significant ambiguity around the HRM practices that service organisations utilise to enable their workforce to support it (Sunder, Ganesh and Marathe, 2017). However, these works provide different lists of lean-relevant HRM practices. Therefore, there is a lack of consensus about the number, the use of specific HRM practices and their relevance to lean implementation in service operations. They also do not offer a contextual and real-world understanding of the suggested lean-relevant HRM practices.

For that reason, this study attempts to thoroughly explore what HRM practices service organisations utilise to support lean implementation. In doing so, the researchers answer how relevant is HRM practices to lean implementation and, then, what HRM practices service organisations utilise to support lean implementation.

Design/methodology/approach

A comprehensive literature review revealed that there is no consensus among scholars about what constitutes lean-relevant HRM practices. Such ambiguous nature of the previous findings necessitated going back to the real-world context of HR-enabled lean implementation to explore what HRM practices service organisations utilise to support lean implementation (Barratt, Choi and Li, 2011). Therefore, the research gap warranted the use of qualitative data and case study strategy (Yin, 2014).

To collect the primary data, semi-structured interviews, direct observations and documental evidence were used (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). A total of twenty-

seven semi-structured interviews (plus four pilot interviews) were conducted across five diverse case study organisations from service sector.

The interviews were supplemented with observation and site visits. Additionally, multiple sources of secondary data such as organisational charts, photos of visual boards, reports, lean guides and news articles of lean journey were collected to triangulate the interview data.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the qualitative data were coded using NVivo 10. Themes were generated from the codes following the six stages of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clark (2006). While case study research does not produce statistical generalisation, by collecting data from five case studies, the researchers were able to develop a vigorous, generalizable and robust understanding of what HRM practices contribute to lean implementation in service organisations (Yin, 2014).

Findings

The findings confirm the significant role of HRM practices in orienting employees towards lean implementation. As a result, in the absence of a proper utilisation of HRM practices, lean implementation is merely a list of tools and techniques with limited application.

The HRM practices that service organisations utilise to support lean implementation are recruitment and selection, role profiling, capacity planning, absence management, succession planning, retention and release, training and development, career development, performance management, reward and recognition, groups and teamwork, employee voice, employee communication and collaboration, labour relations, employee motivation, employee involvement, employee empowerment and employee health and safety.

These practices are the type of activities that service organisations conduct to manage their human resources and direct these resources to support lean implementation. They enable them to improve the buy-in of their employees to lean implementation.

Relevance/contribution

The findings provide a grounded understanding of the HRM practices that enable employees to implement lean in the service sector. In doing so, the theoretical contribution is to elaborate, refine and extend the existing understanding of HR-enabled lean implementation (de Koeijer, Paauwe and Huijsman, 2014; Sunder, Ganesh and Marathe, 2017). The practical contribution is to increase the awareness of service organisations of lean-relevant HRM practices that they need to utilise to orient their employees to support lean implementation (Holt, 2017).

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