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Brookes, M. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1971-6442 and Brewster, C. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5314-1518 (2026) Assessing grand societal challenges and disruptions: back to the future for HRM? The International Journal of Human Resource Management. ISSN 1466-4399 doi: 10.1080/09585192.2026.2640045 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/128924/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2026.2640045

Publisher: Informa UK Limited

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The International Journal of Human Resource Management

ISSN: 0958-5192 (Print) 1466-4399 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rijh20

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To cite this article: Michael Brookes & Chris Brewster (06 Mar 2026): Assessing grand societal challenges and disruptions: back to the future for HRM?, The International Journal of Human Resource Management, DOI: 10.1080/09585192.2026.2640045

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2026.2640045

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2026.2640045

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Assessing grand societal challenges and disruptions: back to the future for HRM?

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ABSTRACT

We argue that the Call for Papers for this Special Issue is right to emphasise the nexus between Grand Challenges and the future of HRM as a critical issue. However, we believe it is wrong to imply that current circumstances are uniquely challenging. As a consequence, we argue that it is a mistake to think that the solution to the future of HRM lies in contributing 'new' theories such as new bundling of HPWPs, wellbeing HRM, agile HRM, and responsible, ethical and common good HRM. As a contribution to dealing with societies' Grand Challenges and future-proofing HRM, we argue for continuity as well as potential change in our societies and suggest that clarifying our concepts and working more carefully with some of our extant theories, such as stakeholder theory and contextual analyses may serve the future of HRM better than by adding to the 'jangle fallacy' of inventing new terms for existing ideas and chasing new fads and fashions.

KEYWORDS

Adjectival HRM; concept clarity; common good HRM; sustainable HRM; stakeholders; continuity and change in HRM

Introduction

The Call for Papers for this Special Issue is right to emphasise the nexus between Grand Challenges and the future of human resource management (HRM) as a critical issue for our subject. We argue, however, that it may be wrong to imply that the current circumstances are uniquely challenging or that the solution to the future of HRM lies in contributing new theories and insights. In this conceptual paper, we argue that this may lead us into weaker scientific research and suggest ways to enhance our understanding of HRM in the future.

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The belief that current circumstances are uniquely challenging is one that is shared by every generation of HRM specialists (practitioners and academics); it is a belief that is not only not obviously borne out by the facts but one that limits our ability to build our scientific knowledge over time by implying that each decade is brand new and can draw little from earlier work. By contrast, we argue, and we show, that much of the supposedly new approaches to HRM build very directly - even if not necessarily realised by the proponents - on analyses that have been part of HRM since its inception. Our subject, we argue, has less need of adding to the 'jangle fallacy' (Molloy & Ployhart, 2012) and understanding of new HRM approaches such as "new bundling of HPWPs, wellbeing HRM, agile HRM, and responsible, ethical, and common good HRM" (Call for Papers) and more need of construct clarity and serious engagement with extant theories. As a contribution to dealing with societies' Grand Challenges and future-proofing HRM, recognition of continuity as well as potential change in our societies and clarifying our concepts and working more carefully with some of our extant theories may serve the future of HRM better than inventing new terms for existing ideas and chasing trendy new fads and fashions.

To some extent, our text addresses many of the example questions posed in the Call for Papers, but we have focused on one in particular: *What theoretical perspectives should be used to understand and theorise ethical and responsible HRM paradigms in response to grand challenges?*

The paper takes the following form: first, we address the notion that we live in a uniquely challenging world, arguing that each generation feels that and offering an example of times when things were much more challenging. We relate that belief to the Grand Challenges that society faces. Then we address some of the examples of 'new' theories that have been developed to cope with the assumed 'new' situation, referring to them collectively as 'adjectival' HRM. We develop a critique of that literature, highlighting the lack of concept clarity, the failure to build on past analyses and the danger of increasing the scholarly/practitioner gap. Finally, looking to reverse those three concerns we offer recommendations for future research in HRM

A uniquely challenging world?

The suggested need for new perspectives on HRM is set in the context of an increasingly VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment for HRM (Ahlstrom et al., 2020); we note, wryly, that the VUCA concept itself was developed more than 35 years ago (Codreanu, 2016)—we are not told whether things are now just as tough, or whether they have been getting tougher over those 35 years. However, if is true that we

are *now* in a uniquely challenging situation, this may be an environment which, as the Call for Papers puts it, "has given rise to a new wave of 'grand societal challenges' (Baumann et al., 2024), which necessitate new HRM responses to deal with rapid change, threat, and disruption".

Grint (2022) postulates that every generation thinks things are worse than ever, with the context underpinning this being that there are always wicked problems present, they just present differently for each generation. We seek to highlight this with one example, among many possibilities, from the past. The authors of this piece, coming from Coventry and London respectively, have heard many tales of the Second World War air raid blitzes on our cities. We have shared with some amusement the idea of a time traveller going back to a senior manager then - a manager whose original trained workforce had departed for the armed services to be replaced by a totally new and inexperienced one, whose output had been switched from one they understood to a completely different product devoted to the war effort, who did not know each morning whether their premises would still be standing, or how many of their workers would have survived the night or could get to work—and the time traveller saying "you've got it lucky, mate, in the mid-2020s we are having to cope with a really difficult volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world".

It is fairly easy to construct similar stories relating to various scenarios occurring between the Second World War and current times, with a non-exhaustive list including events such as the Arab oil embargo; the Asian economic crisis; the bringing down of the World Trade Centre; the 2008 global financial crisis; the COVID-19 pandemic - after all of which the world went back to being much the same and attention shifted to different challenges, such as the climate crisis and the rise of populism. It is human nature to believe that we are living in a uniquely challenging world, but people have been believing that for many centuries (Grint, 2022). We need to examine the evidence more coolly.

The danger of believing that that our times pose *unique* problems is that we then risk ignoring the opportunity to stand on the shoulders of giants of the past and to assume that we must develop entirely new theories and analyses to cope with *our* environment.

Grand challenges?

However, despite our suspicions of the continual desire to believe that our own times are the most challenging ever, there is little doubt that the world faces (perhaps has always faced) some serious Grand Challenges. The literature is by no means consistent in how it addresses Grand Challenge (Seelos et al., 2023, discuss the differing conceptualisations), and lists of Grand Challenges show little coherence or consistency. It is

clear, however, that the focus of much of the business and management literature, including the HRM literature, on the efficiency and effectiveness of immediate management issues tends to ignore wider contextual and societal problems. It is important for human resource management studies that they should be able to place their understandings within the context of the wider society, and it is important for the wider society that HRM expertise address these bigger issues. The Call for Papers for this SI noted the "increasing calls for HRM research to engage with grand challenges (Buckley et al., 2017; Harney and Collings, 2021; Lazarova et al., 2023) with criticisms that HRM research is running out of steam and becoming less relevant beyond the organisation level".

It has been argued that the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) might be taken as a good guide to these societal challenges. Although such proposals hardly solve the problem (Brewster & Brookes, 2024), they propose that research that goes beyond contributing to understanding efficiency and effectiveness in the management of people, and addresses wider societal issues, should be privileged as more significant than narrow, organisationally focused, HRM studies.

It is important to be clear about our concepts and that is a particular problem for human resource management, which is itself not an uncontroversial subject. Ever since the seminal texts published in the early 1980s presented a 'new' topic that had been developed in a couple of leading US Business Schools in the years immediately before that (Beer et al, 1984; Fombrun et al, 1984) the concept has been debated. Is HRM a broad subject exploring how people are managed in different contexts; or is it a strategic topic exploring ways in which people can be managed to contribute to organisational success - in much the same way as other resources are; or are the two approaches reconcilable (good HRM will contribute to organisational success by ensuring that people are managed in a way that meets their interests)?

Over the years since 1984 (and even before that), different scholars have taken completely different approaches to the issue, usually not defining what they are researching or discussing but simply assuming that everyone will make the same assumptions as them. The Beer et al (1984) and Fombrun et al (1984) models, defining HRM as a strategic approach to managing people, emphasised the need for alignment between organisational goals and individual needs. Legge (2005) separated 'hard HRM' and 'soft HRM', with the former being focused on managing resources for business performance and the latter on encouraging commitment and trust as well as treating employees as valuable assets. This was, to some extent, at odds with the notion of Strategic HRM which saw HRM policies as contributing to business strategies to gain competitive advantage (Wright & McMahan, 1992). Similarly, Guest

(1987), proposed a normative model emphasising integration, commitment, flexibility and quality, highlighting potential tensions between employee commitment and managerial control, and questioning whether HRM can simultaneously serve both employee welfare and managerial prerogative. Boxall and Purcell (2003) identified "best fit" (contextual approach) and "best practice" (universalist approach) debates in HRM, arguing that effective HRM depends on organisational context, market dynamics and internal capabilities. There have also been critical perspectives from scholars such as Storey (1992) and Keenoy (1990) arguing that HRM may obscure power relations and managerial control mechanisms, often failing to deliver on its promise of employee empowerment and development.

The dominant school (most articles and books published) includes those who see that 'human' resources are a strategic contributor to firm success, and that, like any other resource, it is largely a cost/benefit issue for the firm and the task is to find universally applicable ways of doing that. In some cases (people who are highly qualified or have scarce skills) that may involve treating those staff well; but in others that may involve, like any other resource, exploiting them and then discarding them. By contrast, other commentators argue that human resources are unlike other resources in that there are multiple stakeholders (not just shareholders) who are concerned with the management and outcomes of relevant activities (Beer et al, 2015) and that the values of all stakeholders, in their individual contexts, need to be taken into account and may not be compatible, so that the task becomes one of balancing these varying interests.

New theories: adjectival HRM

One of the problems that arises when concepts are not clear is that people have a tendency to respond by inventing ever more new terms that, they hope, will clarify their meaning. This is the "jangle fallacy" (Molloy & Ployhart 2012). In most cases, it adds to the confusion. Here it has led, as is clear in the Call for Papers for this SI, to a series of attempts to distinguish new forms of HRM—attempts that, as they tend to involve adding adjectives to the front of the expression 'human resource management', we discuss under the rubric of *Adjectival HRM*.

The calls for business and management studies to address society's Grand Challenges (Brewster & Brookes, 2024; George et al., 2016; Ghauri & Cooke, 2022) have been mirrored in a variety of new approaches to HRM based on the need for it to serve the interests of a wider range of stakeholders. Scholars have developed notions of Triple-Bottom-line HRM or even Quadruple Bottom Line HRM, Green HRM, Socially

Responsible HRM, Sustainable HRM, and Common-Good HRM. The 'jangle fallacy' (Molloy & Ployhart, 2012) lives!

Ideas of *Triple-Bottom-line HRM* (Lopez-Cabrales & Valle-Cabrera, 2020) or even *Quadruple Bottom Line HRM* (O'Higgins & Zsolnai, 2017) have been around for a number of years, at least since the 1990s (Hammer & Pivo, 2017), as a way of discussing the need to balance three stakeholders (the shareholders, the employees, and the environment, or the three 'P's—profit, people and planet). Quadruple bottom line supplements these with (to follow the 'P's): purpose, or sometimes 'spirit' or 'future', assessing whether the organisation is meeting its purpose. The notion is that there are more stakeholders to organisational success than just the owners of the business, that sometimes the interests of these different stakeholders may not align and that there is a need to balance the interests of different stakeholders.

Green HRM (Alcaraz et al, 2019; Harris & Tregidga, 2012; Renwick et al., 2016) is even less clear as a concept, focusing on the physical environment as a stakeholder. Articles tend to examine the behaviours of employees in, preferably, looking after, or at least not negatively impacting, that environment: the role of managerial strategies or policies generally plays a smaller role despite one definition stating, rather tautologically that Green HRM consists of "HRM activities that enhance positive environmental outcomes" (Kramar, 2014: 1075). Green HRM includes management policies and practices encouraging workers to take care of the environment, usually either that local to their employer's operations but occasionally more generic targets such as ′water conservation′. According to Renwick et al., (2013: 12)" so far there are no reported studies of the impact of GHRM systems as a whole on either environmental outcomes, such as waste reduction, or on wider organizational performance metrics" and the subject matter is so unclear that commentators have started discussing "different shades of green" (Van Waeyenberg & Semeijn, 2025).

Socially Responsible HRM (Raubenheimer & Rasmussen, 2013; Sarvaiya et al 2018; Shen & Benson, 2016) involves the application of notions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to employees, arguing, in line with the long-established discussion in HRM about mutual or pluralist approaches to HRM (Boxall, 2021; Greenwood & De Cieri, 2007) that HRM can bring benefits for all parties and that operationalising socially responsible HRM leads to measurable financial results for businesses. Of course, such results have to be interpreted in specific societal contexts. In this form of adjectival HRM, management and employees are the key stakeholders and this has been made explicit in (more 'jangling') *human-centred* HRM (Cooke, Dickmann & Parry, 2022). The argument in most of these texts is that the best results follow when the interests

of these two key sets of stakeholders align; negative consequences will follow if they do not. Therefore, the HRM task is to bring these interests into alignment or, more cynically, to persuade people that these interests do coincide. It is assumed that the interests of management and employees can be aligned. Critics (Stahl et al., 2020) have pointed out that, to date, HRM has had little influence on organisational CSR.

Sustainable HRM is perhaps the most widely used of these adjectival forms of HRM (Mariappanadar, 2003; Mariappanadar & Kramar, 2014; Ren & Jackson, 2020; Stahl, et al., 2020) and may be the one that has the most different meanings within it. Sustainable HRM involves "people-management practices that take the development of social, environmental and human capital into account" (Guerci et al., 2016: 221), a definition that, to say the least, leaves much to be debated: what is the development of social, environmental and human capital? Are they always compatible? What does 'taking them into account' involve?

Perhaps the most comprehensive approach to adjectival HRM appears as *Common-Good HRM* (Aust, Matthews & Muller-Camen, 2020: 5) requiring, the authors argue, a "fundamental change" in our conception of HRM; a change that "has consequences regarding current understanding of the purpose, concerns and output of HRM". Common-Good HRM apparently means that organisations should "radically review their traditional profit-oriented viewpoint and *instead* focus more on environmental and societal impact" (our emphasis). This might cover the entire organisational approach to HRM (Aust et al, 2020; Lu et al., 2023) or it might apply to specific areas of policy (Taylor & Earl, 2023).

To add to the confusion around adjectival HRM, some papers discussing Common-Good HRM are clearly talking about what Aust et al (2020) have categorised as socially responsible HRM (Pham et al., 2023). The common good may encompass both immediate communities, local and global society, but may also encompass other living creatures and our shared natural ecosystem.

Critiquing adjectival HRM

These brief descriptions of the various newly developed adjectival versions of HRM may be a little unfair—unfortunately here we do not have space to explore each one in detail—but immediately it is obvious that they lack concept clarity and there is substantial overlap between them. Often these texts on adjectival HRM provide no definitions at all, assuming perhaps that their coverage is obvious The field is an almost perfect example of construct proliferation and redundancy (Klein & Delery, 2012). Because the new terms are not widely adopted, it is assumed that

the correct response is to invent or add more terms for very similar notions. In practice, this creates confusion and misinterpretation, and "old and new constructs overlap to such an extent they are largely interchangeable" resulting in a "proliferation of definitions, indeterminate construct boundaries, and confounded measures" (Klein & Delery, 2012, p. 59). The academics concerned have worked hard on their 'new' ideas but, despite their efforts, adjectival HRM lacks "clear agreement on the substantive definitional content" or any "contextually specific and clear definition of the term[s]" (Suddaby, 2010, p. 348).

From a different perspective, we could argue that adjectival HRM is a new fad or fashion. There is a valuable literature on managerial fads and fashions: notions that become popular, often starting with academics, who feel that new terminology will help them to explore a subject and then picked up by management consultants and spread into businesses. Sometimes the process is initiated by management consultants, trying to find new products to sell, and whose terminology is then adopted by academics and (sometimes) businesses. Scholars and managers are generally uncomfortable with uncertainty and do not like to appear anything but up to date. Whether the new idea really works or not, managers (and some scholars) do not want to be seen as trailing behind the latest bandwagon." Like dire wolves, researchers run in packs. Thus, the papers that appear in journals during an era often cluster around a relatively small set of topics and conversely, papers written on particular topics tend to cluster in time and it may simply be that topics fall in and out of fashion as researchers first crowd into areas and then eventually become bored¨ (Barley, 2006, p. 17). So, "management fads exist. Some fads become institutionalized within companies (e.g., MBO, matrix management, core competence); other fads fade (e.g., time management, zero-defects, T-groups). They are shiny new ideas that get attention but do not endure (e.g., learning organization, Japanese management, one-minute manager, re-engineering)" (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015: 236). Perhaps much of what we study, despite our scientific pretensions, is merely a question of fashionable ideas taking over and then dying away (Abrahamson, 1996; Brickley et al, 1997)? A case of 'old wine in new bottles' (Cappelli, 2008)?

Is this a particular problem in human resource management? As an example, Cappelli (2010) noted that in the last twenty-five years there was a remarkable similarity across large US organisations in their management development programmes, despite the limited evidence that they are cost-effective and that, if everyone is doing the same thing, competitive advantage is unlikely to accrue.

A lack of concept clarity is fundamental to 'trendy' topics (Benders & van Veen, 2001; Suddaby, 2010). A not very clearly specified,

generalised, definition, allows a wide range of scholars working on different topics to claim that they fall within its scope, adding to how fashionable the subject appears (Abrahamson, 1996; Brickley et al, 1997). Offering a variety of interpretations and articulations means that many situations and topics can claim to be covered (Benders & van Veen, 2001; Legge, 2005; Swan, 2004). Paradoxically, poor concept clarity is associated with increases in popularity. Whether these versions of adjectival HRM, will fade away like the examples noted by Rasmussen and Ulrich (2015), we cannot know now. Perhaps they will represent a real paradigm shift in HRM, and endure? Whichever view we take, there are undoubtedly some problems associated with adjectival HRM, and we note three in particular

Confusion of concepts

The various 'new' concepts of HRM that we have gathered under the rubric of adjectival HRM share a desire to challenge the notion that (as Milton Friedman may or may not have said) "the business of business is business"—the idea that if private sector businesses concentrate and devote themselves fully to making profits for their owners then the world will be better off. Each of these supposedly new forms of HRM shares the view that there are other stakeholders whose interests need to be considered. Depending on the version of adjectival HRM that is being addressed, these other stakeholders might be workers and other subgroups within the boundaries of the business, or they may be external, in the local community, or more distal, governments or the national society or even the whole world or the natural environment. A brief review is enough to establish that the range of stakeholders is not always clear, that many of the definitions overlap and that different authors have different ideas about whether the interests are reconcilable, benefiting everyone; or not, so that managers in businesses may have to choose between which stakeholders they serve.

Not learning from history

Like other fads and fashions, adjectival HRM, as a 'new' concept, tends to ignore or to under-value previous work on similar (although, we assume, these authors would argue, substantially different) topics. The different, and overlapping, versions of adjectival HRM suggest extension of the notion of HRM so that the management of human resources is evaluated not just against its contribution to the effective and efficient management of the organisation (measured against the short-term accounting criteria of profitability and share price, or their equivalent

cost-effective strategies in the public and third sectors) but by its contribution to meeting the interests of a wider group of stakeholders. The argument is that this should lead to a conception of HRM that gets closer to balancing the interests of the many different stakeholders. By focusing their work on their 'newly-defined' topic, they are able to present it as 'new', and to ignore the fact that this wider contribution has been debated ever since human resource management began to be accepted as a management topic—Beer et al. (1984) included a debate on precisely this topic of whether to serve one or many stakeholders, coming down firmly on the side of the need to include multiple stakeholders, a position reinforced by Beer thirty years later (Beer et al., 2015). Challenges to the pro-market-growth agenda of many current neo-liberal and exploitative economic ideologies (Matthews et al., 2018) have occurred throughout the period and predated the adjectival HRM approaches, with Stiglitz (2002) and Piketty (2014) being two of the most detailed critiques—but, because the proponents of adjectival HRM believe they are saying something new (and presumably because when they type their version of adjectival HRM into the search engines they get only a few recent hits), they ignore this previous learning.

Indeed, if we focus on models of HRM which pre-date the academic focus on sustainability, they are still able to take us a good part of the way to achieving a better understanding. Although Legge's (1995) and Guest's (1987) HRM models were not designed with 'sustainability' in mind, they offer valuable insights for aligning HRM practices with sustainability goals. Legge's distinction between 'soft' HRM, which emphasises employee development and well-being, and 'hard' HRM, which focuses on performance and control critiqued organisations for often promoting soft HRM rhetorically while practicing hard HRM. Back then she discussed concerns about the authenticity of sustainability and CSR efforts. Her model is particularly useful for evaluating whether sustainability initiatives genuinely support social well-being or simply serve business interests.

Guest's model, in contrast, is normative. He emphasised strategic integration, high commitment, flexibility and quality outcomes. These elements support embedding sustainability into HRM systems - for example, by aligning training, rewards and performance management with environmental and ethical objectives. Guest's approach helps drive employee engagement in pro-sustainability behaviours and would ensure that HRM strategy supports broader corporate goals.

While both models enhance our understanding of HRM's role in achieving sustainability - especially in ethical governance and employee engagement - they do not directly address environmental sustainability.

Testing against reality

There is little evidence that we are seeing a paradigm shift towards adjectival HRM,. That would require evidence of a growing importance of stakeholders other than the owners of businesses (see also, Lopez-Cabrales & Valle-Cabrera, 2020; Pfeffer, 2010)—indeed, in some versions of adjectival HRM *replacing* the interests of the owners by those of the other stakeholders (Aust et al., 2020). These 'worthy' approaches to what HRM should be tend to ignore not just the continuing historical debates in HRM about its focus and purpose but also the earlier and on-going discussions about the power and influence of HRM within firms (Galang & Ferris, 1997, Russ et al, 1998, Sheehan et al., 2014, Hermans & Ulrich, 2021). This varies from country to country (Brewster et al., 2018), of course, but the emphasis of this literature is to lament the minimal influence of HRM—even if contributors may be able to identify one or two exceptional cases of realignment of organisations away from the financial bottom line. Senior executives focused on, and rewarded for, survival and making profits seem unlikely to be deflected by proposals from well-meaning HRM specialists that they replace those simple targets with complex targets serving a wider range of stakeholders. Making such a proposal might be what is known as a "career-limiting move" … Still less likely, it seems to us, is that businesses will make such a change in response to academics telling them they are out of date. Adjectival HRM is not going to close the often-discussed gap between businesses and academics (Gubbins & Rousseau, 2015; Rynes, Giluk & Brown, 2007).

As a sub-text here, we note that around the world most organisations are small and medium sized businesses that operate without an HRM department and even without any HRM specialists. In such organisations, the owners of the business manage their people directly and, despite some laudable attempts to explore these locations, our knowledge of HRM in such places is limited. Although, in some cases, family-run, small businesses pay less attention to the bottom line and more to providing employment for members of the family (Haynes et al., 2021), small business, and informal business, is often related to forms of people management that are a long way from these new approaches to HRM (Bacon & Hoque, 2005; Verreynne et al., 2013). It is difficult to see how adjectival HRM will succeed in the vast majority of the world's businesses.

Recommendations

Our recommendations, unsurprisingly, develop from our analysis of the problems. There is less needed to develop "new HRM responses to the realities of grand challenges" (Call for Papers) than there is to be clear about our constructs, to learn from history and test our ideas against reality.

Construct clarity

In academic research, particularly within business and management studies, and in HRM, conceptual clarity is a crucial requirement for developing robust theory and conducting meaningful empirical investigations. Concepts used to describe phenomena of interest often suffer from ambiguous definitions and inconsistent use. Researchers need to undertake serious efforts to clarify, to define and to organise their concepts.

Sometimes, existing constructs need to be redefined or reframed, to better capture their essence or enhance their usefulness. This can involve redefining a construct to reflect new theoretical insights, differentiate it from similar terms, or adapt it to contemporary challenges. For example, Klein and Delery (2012) proposed a reconceptualisation of the concept of commitment, challenging existing assumptions and developing a more dynamic and multidimensional understanding of commitment that better aligns with modern organisational realities. Such reconceptualisation efforts not only clarify but also revitalise concepts, making them more applicable to new research questions and contexts.

One effective strategy for clarifying a concept is through integrative literature reviews. Such reviews critically evaluate and organise diverse streams of literature and identify patterns, contradictions and underlying assumptions across different academic examinations of a subject. A good example is the comprehensive analysis of 'transformational leadership' conducted by Minai et al. (2020). Their illustration of how inconsistent or partial usage across studies had led to conceptual confusion enabled them to develop a more consistent and coherent definition. Street and Gallupe (2009) did a similar thing with 'organisational change'. A detailed, critical review of the various approaches to adjectival HRM would help to delineate the structure, components and boundaries of these 'new' approaches.

Clarifying a concept includes distinguishing it from similar or overlapping terms - an obvious problem here. Developing frameworks or typologies is a valuable tool for delineating concepts, providing a visual or conceptual structure that helps to organise each concept in relation to other concepts. The proponents of adjectival HRM would advance their cause by showing precisely how their concept differs from others in the same area.

We need clear differentiation and a clear common lexicon, especially critical in emerging or interdisciplinary fields where construct boundaries and terminologies are still evolving, but singularly absent amongst these different forms of adjectival HRM.

Conceptual clarity is further enhanced by contextualising concepts or examining how a concept functions within a specific setting. Concepts often manifest differently depending on cultural, organisational or

industry-specific factors. That seems particularly important when the issue is the awareness of and power of different stakeholders - an issue fundamentally affected by national regulations and institutions. This highlights the importance of tailoring construct definitions to the setting in which they are applied, ensuring theoretical relevance and empirical validity.

Ultimately, well-defined constructs provide an operational structure, a set of criteria or indicators that guide empirical investigation. Operational clarity allows researchers to measure constructs reliably, test hypotheses and generate meaningful data. It also enables comparison across studies and contributes to cumulative knowledge building. Constructs that are vague or inconsistently defined are difficult to measure accurately, leading to unreliable results and flawed conclusions. Therefore, the development of unambiguous definitions is not merely a theoretical exercise but a prerequisite for rigorous empirical research.

Standing on the shoulders of giants

A problem that results from identifying 'new' topics is that the experts in adjectival HRM fail to engage seriously with the origins of their concepts and do not trace historical/chronological developments (not all worthwhile papers were published after 2020!). Just because earlier authors failed to use a specific terminology, so their paper does not show up in electronic searches, should not mean that we ignore all of their insights and analyses. It is important to identify the stages in the evolution of the concept, and it is important to situate it in its context.

Adjectival HRM is a good example of what is lost when these new terms are invented. These various new versions of adjectival HRM are, above all, a call to recognise that serving the short-term financial interests of private businesses may be detrimental for other stakeholders in our society. But a moment's consideration of the history of HRM shows that this is not a new thought: the 'purpose' of HRM (whose interests does it mean to serve?) has always been contested. The issue of the role and activities of a variety of stakeholders has been inherent from the inception of the topic as a subject in business schools (Beer et al., 1984) and, indeed, if we look at the headings under which aspects of the topic were taught before—industrial sociology, industrial relations, the sociology of work, etc—for much longer than that (Kaufman, 2014). Ignoring all this earlier learning does not help us to advance.

Testing against reality

HRM changes slowly: the fundamentals of recruitment, development, deployment and reward continue. Farndale, Ligthart, Brewster & Poutsma

(2017), Mayrhofer, Brewster, Morley & Ledolter (2011) and Mol, Brewster, Wood & Brookes (2014), use detailed analyses of the Cranet Survey to show that in HRM within rich countries, at least, continuity in practices is as common as change, or even more so. They argue that while some HRM practices might converge or evolve, the underlying institutional context continues to exert a significant shaping influence on HRM policies and practices.

Mayrhofer, Gooderham & Brewster, (2019) and Brewster, Wood & Brookes (2008) emphasise that the Cranet Survey data shows that HRM practices, even as they evolve, retain strong national and institutional roots. They highlight how factors like unionisation, legal frameworks and social norms within a country continue to shape HRM practices, leading to a degree of continuity: institutional context remains a potent explanatory factor. Therefore, in the areas where data is available and research is undertaken, there is as much evidence of a lack of change and an adherence to institutionally influenced local practices, as there is to convergence towards some model of best practice. However, this is just for the areas where research activity is regularly focused, and this does not include the vast majority of peoples' experiences of work. There is a dearth of research into HRM and employment practices in small and medium sized enterprises, particularly the smallest of employers. Equally, there is also a shortage of similar research within the informal economy, which is often the dominant form of employment in countries outside of the developed economies. Overall, this suggests that the majority of experiences of employment in the world have very little exposure to meaningful research, and it is our contention that smaller firms and informal employers are even more likely to be tied to institutionally influenced local practices.

Conclusions

Our scholarship needs to be dynamic, continually expanding and developing in response to changes in the external environment and we commend the Editors of this Special Issue for raising the issue and providing 'airtime' to those working at the margins. There are undoubtedly changes in our technologies that will (even if, during our lifetimes, for only a minority of people around the world) have substantial consequences. There is a danger that our current scholarship on HRM is focused on the small, and declining, elite of people who have contracts of employment. There is a danger that people in the majority world (Dibben et al, 2023) are being ignored. Above all, there is the need to ask who the beneficiaries of HRM are meant to be.

It is this final issue that adjectival HRM is intended to explore. But we argue that pretending that our generation is uniquely challenged by disruption does not help this exploration. Nor does a lack of concept clarity, a redundancy of concepts and the jangle fallacy. Overlapping of concepts and ignoring of history are not the best way to address the problem. Earlier theories of the role of stakeholders in HRM, the power of the HRM specialists and the importance of employee expectations and experience, remain relevant: we should build on them, rather than ignoring them. Being clear about the underlying issues, carefully defining and delineating our concepts and recognising the contributions of previous scholars, and then testing ideas against reality, will serve us better in our quest to future proof HRM so that we can deal with Grand Societal Challenges.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Neither this paper nor the research behind it was funded, except by our employment at our respective Universities.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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