



# Mapping Human Resource Management: Reviewing the field and charting future directions



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## ABSTRACT

Using recent advances in science mapping, this article systematically reviews the Human Resource Management (HRM) field. We analyze 12,157 HRM research articles published over 23 years to reveal the topic content and intellectual structure of HRM scholarship. A downloadable, searchable HRM topic map is provided (<http://bit.ly/HR-Map>) that reveals: a) 1702 HRM article topics, b) the number of articles on each topic, c) topic relations, trends, and impact, and d) five major HRM topic clusters. We discuss the overall intellectual structure of HRM scholarship and review the five topic clusters. Next, the topic content of HRM scholarship is compared to that of 6114 articles from the practitioner-oriented outlet *HR Magazine*. We identify 100 topics emphasized to a much greater degree in the practitioner-oriented literature. Seven key themes for future research that could help align HRM scholarship with the interests of HR practitioners are identified and discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In the Human Resource Management (HRM) field, review articles typically consider only some of the “trees”, but lack the scope to provide a synthetic overview of the “forest” of HRM scholarship. In particular, HRM review articles typically focus on examining the contents of a small number of articles on a specific topic or research question. As such, scholars are likely to have a fragmented and incomplete view of the field overall, which may result in research silos, redundant research efforts, and lost opportunities for meaningful conversations *between* topic areas. Moreover, narrow, disconnected, and incomplete views of the HRM field can limit scholars' ability to detect research opportunities.

In recent years, new alternatives to the traditional narrow review have emerged. In particular, what can be called *structural reviews* 1) examine the relations *between* topic areas, and 2) use some form of quantification to succinctly summarize a large literature (Porter, Kongthong, & Lu, 2002). As Porter et al. (2002), a broad scan of a literature “can extend the span of science by better linking efforts across research domains. Topical relationships, research trends, and complementary capabilities can be discovered, thereby facilitating research projects” (p. 351). In addition, because structural reviews employ some form of quantification and objective analysis, such reviews “improve the review process by synthesizing research in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible manner” (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003, p. 207). In doing so, structural reviews help overcome a key limitation of traditional review articles: their lack of rigor (i.e. biased, subjective, impressionistic description).

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In this article, we employ science mapping from the discipline of bibliometrics to provide the most comprehensive and systematic review of the HRM field to date. In particular, while a traditional review might analyze 50–200 articles, this review is based on a rigorous analysis of 12,157 systematically identified HRM research articles published over >23 years. The science map analysis on which this review is based is presented to readers in the form of the downloadable HRM Map, which allows readers to explore: a) 1702 topics in HRM scholarship, b) the number of articles on each topic, c) topic relations, trends, and impact, and d) five systematically identified, major HRM topic clusters. After presenting this analysis, we describe how scholars can use the downloadable HRM Map and systematic reviews provided to identify promising future research opportunities from across the HRM literature using the process of abductive reasoning.

In the latter portion of this article, we turn our attention to identifying research opportunities that can help bridge the “research-practice gap” in HRM. In particular, a number of HRM scholars have raised concerns that there may be discrepancies between the topics studied in HRM scholarship and the topics of interest to HR practitioners (e.g. *Deadrick & Gibson, 2007, 2009; Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007*). However, prior attempts to identify if/where these gaps exist have drawn on limited samples of HRM scholarship, and employ methods that only identify discrepancies at the level of broad topic categories (e.g. Strategic HRM) (e.g. *Deadrick & Gibson, 2007, 2009*). As such, it is difficult to know a) whether the discrepancies identified previously are artifacts of the limited sample of HRM scholarship analyzed, and b) which *specific* topics warrant greater scholarly attention. The second major section of this paper aims to address these issues by providing a comparative topic analysis of 1) the 12,157 HRM research articles versus 2) 6114 articles from a key practitioner-oriented outlet: the Society for Human Resource Management's *HR Magazine*. We systematically identify 100 specific topics with the greatest discrepancy in emphasis between HR practitioner-oriented writing versus academic HRM. We then review seven topic themes for future research that could help align HRM scholarship with the interests of practitioners.

This article endeavors to make four substantial contributions to HRM scholarship. *First*, we aim to provide the most rigorous description of the intellectual structure of HRM field to date – offering readers a bibliometrically grounded taxonomy of HRM literatures, a searchable topic map of the field, reviews of five systematically identified major topic literatures in HRM, and views of changes in the field over time. *Second*, we describe how opportunities for future scholarship can be detected by applying abductive reasoning to the downloadable HRM Map and topic cluster reviews. *Third*, the identification of 100 specific topics emphasized to a much greater degree in practitioner-oriented (as compared to academic) HRM provides actionable insights as to which topics HRM scholars could attend to help address the “research-practice gap”. *Fourth*, we conclude with a number of provocations meant to evoke “big picture” reflection by HRM scholars on the status and trajectories of their literatures, and to flag what we see as key challenges and opportunities for these literatures going forward.

## 2. Prior reviews of the HRM field and the added value of science mapping

Existing reviews on the HRM field can be categorized as either: 1) narrative reviews, or 2) structural reviews. Traditional narrative reviews tend to be impressionistic, offer a paper-by-paper analysis, and consider a fairly narrow topic area (e.g. green HRM - *Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013*; e-HRM - *Stone & Dulebohn, 2013*). As can be seen from *Table 1*, the majority of narrative reviews in the HRM literature – i.e. 94 out of 115 articles – offer in-depth consideration of a particular HRM topic area. While valuable, these narrow reviews profile the “trees”, but not the “forest”.

At a macro level, 19 *narrative field-level* reviews have attempted to provide a broad description of the HRM field (see *Table 2*) from methodological (e.g. *Guest, 2001; Williams & O'Boyle, 2008*), historical (e.g. *Kaufman, 2014*), and theoretical (e.g. *Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook, & Frink, 1999*) standpoints. However, as such narrative reviews are impressionistic (rather than systematic) in their analysis, the validity of their descriptions and conclusions are questionable (*Tranfield et al., 2003*). Indeed, many of the questions considered in narrative field-level reviews of HRM (e.g. What are the field's major topic areas? What are the topics that have received the most research attention? How well integrated are various literatures within the field?) are ultimately empirical questions that can be answered through quantitative analysis of scholarship.

In contrast with narrative reviews, what we label as “structural reviews” take a different approach. Structural reviews have a macro focus and use some form of quantification to consider patterns across multiple topic literatures (*Porter et al., 2002*). Five structural reviews have attempted to profile the HRM field overall in various ways, and identify its subfields (*Deadrick & Gibson, 2007, 2009; Fernandez-Alles & Ramos-Rodriguez, 2009; García-Lillo, Úbeda-García, & Marco-Lajara, 2016; Hoobler & Johnson, 2004*). These articles are a substantial improvement over assertions about the major categories of HRM scholarship that are not grounded in any quantitative analysis of scholarship (e.g. *Martín-Alcázar, Romero-Fernández, & Sánchez-Gardey, 2008*). While these prior works make important contributions, they also all have major limitations.

First, prior structural reviews of the HRM field have tended to rely on intuition to determine the major categories of HRM scholarship, *and* rely on subjective assessments to assign topics and articles to these categories. While authors' intuitively derived categories of HRM scholarship can be informative, they can also inadvertently introduce author bias and mischaracterizations into the picture of the field they present (*Tranfield et al., 2003*). For example, new topic areas or those that authors are unfamiliar with can be overlooked. Indeed, given the size of the HRM literature, intuitively derived topic categories are unlikely to fully and accurately represent the field's topic content and structure. In contrast, new bibliometric approaches can be used to systematically identify 1) scholarly topics, 2) higher-level topic domains, and 3) which topics empirically “belong” to which topic domains.

Second, the few articles that attempt to empirically identify major HRM topic areas rely on article samples from one or two journals that represent only a fraction of the HRM literature (*Deadrick & Gibson, 2007, 2009; Fernandez-Alles & Ramos-Rodriguez, 2009; García-Lillo et al., 2016; Hoobler & Johnson, 2004*). Drawing on non-representative samples can misrepresent

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