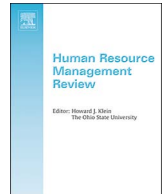




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A conceptual framework for leveraging team composition decisions to build human capital

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century organizations often rely on teams to enact their strategy and to enhance their flexibility in interacting with their external environment over time. Team composition, or the configuration of team member attributes, can influence team effectiveness and is an important consideration in the management of teams. To date, however, there is limited guidance on how seemingly smaller team composition decisions can contribute to organizational effectiveness and competitive advantage. We draw on strategic human resource management (HRM), HRM, and industrial and organizational psychology literatures to develop a conceptual framework for strategic team composition decisions. We describe how organizations use teams to enact their strategy (i.e., fit), and use adaptive teams and networks of teams to achieve fit in a dynamic environment (i.e., flexibility). Using the concepts of fit and flexibility, we develop four guiding principles for strategic team composition decisions.

1. Introduction

Twenty-first century organizations heavily rely upon teams and collaborative work structures to meet the demands of a dynamic and hyper-competitive environment. Given that teams are ubiquitous, the effective management of teams continues to be of interest to researchers and practitioners alike (Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008). Team composition, or the configuration of team member attributes, is an enabling condition of effective teamwork and a powerful means of affecting team performance (Bell, 2007; Hackman, 1987; Wageman, Hackman, & Lehman, 2005).

A wide body of literature, with a long history, indicates that aggregated and specific configurations of team member attributes are related to valuable team outcomes (Cattell, 1951; Haythorn, 1953). For example, team composition is empirically linked to shared cognition (Fisher, Bell, Dierdorff, & Belohlav, 2012), information sharing (Randall, Resick, & DeChurch, 2011), performance (Bell, 2007), and innovation (Richter, Hirst, Van Knippenberg, & Baer, 2012). While team experts acknowledge the importance of team composition and urge practitioners to consider team composition when making staffing decisions, there is limited understanding of how to translate team composition research into selection and placement decisions (Mohammed, Ferzandi, & Hamilton, 2010; Zaccaro & DiRosa, 2012).

Because of this science-practice gap, researchers have begun to explicitly connect team composition theory to team staffing. As examples, Mathieu, Tannenbaum, Donsbach, and Alliger (2014) forwarded a review and integration of team composition models that outlined how individual- and team-based composition models combine to predict team effectiveness. In a second paper, these authors

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described the team composition decisions practitioners are likely to encounter and questions to consider when composing teams (Mathieu, Tannenbaum, Donsbach, & Alliger, 2013). Bell and Brown (2015) summarized six steps and key questions to consider when selecting for and composing cohesive teams. In their chapter, they begin to link team composition research with the human capital literature (e.g., Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

Despite this progress, there is still much to learn about how team composition theory and research can practically inform the management of teams in 21st century organizations. Consistent with criticisms of the broader literature, there is a disconnect between micro-level research, such as that focused on team composition, and macro-level human resource management (HRM) literature (Hausknecht & Wright, 2012; Wright & Boswell, 2002). As a result, there is a lack of clarity regarding how team composition decisions can contribute to an organization's effectiveness and competitive advantage. This obscurity often limits the extent to which team-based considerations are included in the staffing process. Second, team composition can seem complex and includes a number of possible decisions, attributes, and configurations of team member attributes to consider. This complexity creates a lack of clarity regarding how to leverage the extant literature in team composition decisions. Finally, 21st century organizations are required to meet the demands of their dynamic environments, and seek strategic flexibility to do so (Chang, Gong, Way, Jai, 2013; Sanchez, 1995). As organizations utilize teams to meet changing environmental demands, team composition has become more dynamic with membership that is fluid and less bounded (Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cohen, 2012). To date, much of the team composition research has focused on bounded teams with membership that is intact (or assumed to be intact) over time. There is a lack of clarity regarding how organizations can best leverage teams that are relatively intact and teams with dynamic composition to meet the changing demands of their environment.

Given the above, the purpose of our article is to advance team composition theory by explaining how to leverage team composition decisions to enhance organizational effectiveness and competitive advantage. We integrate the ideas of team composition, human capital resources, organizational strategy, and competitive advantage, and present a conceptual framework for strategic team composition decisions. Our framework makes several important contributions. First, we explicitly link team composition decisions to the development of strategic human capital resources, and ultimately competitive advantage. This bridges macro and micro perspectives to make more apparent the potential value of team-based considerations during the staffing process, and allows practitioners to be strategic in how they approach micro-level team composition decisions. Second, we use a top-down approach guided by competitive advantage to identify key outcomes of interest, as well as between- and within-team staffing priorities. This helps narrow the potential team composition considerations to the key configurations of team-member attributes in teams, and networks of teams, that are most likely important for competitive advantage. Third, we explain how team composition decisions integrate with the larger human resource system. This sheds light on additional opportunities, beyond staffing, for organizations to use team composition information in the development of human capital resources. Fourth, we bring a greater understanding of a contemporary issue facing teamwork—dynamic composition—by explaining the strategic use of relatively intact teams and teams with dynamic composition to enhance flexibility (Tannenbaum et al., 2012).

We structure our article as follows. First, we briefly orient the reader to team composition research. Second, we position human capital resources as a source of competitive advantage, and teams as a means for organizing those resources to enact an organization's strategy and provide flexibility over time. We rely on the concepts of fit and flexibility to explain how HRM processes, such as team composition decisions, can help to translate individual-level knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) into a strategic advantage (Wright & Snell, 1998). Third, we overview a conceptual framework that links team composition decisions to competitive advantage. Finally, we forward four guiding principles to guide strategic team composition decisions, and describe how to leverage the extant team composition literature in those decisions.

2. Background

2.1. Team composition

Team composition is a potentially powerful point of leverage for organizations to influence team effectiveness (Bell, 2007; Bell, Villado, Lukasiak, Belau, & Briggs, 2011). Team composition is important for team design to the extent that configurations on specific variables predict organizationally desired outcomes (Bell, Brown, Abben, & Outland, 2015). Knowledge of how team composition relates to team and organizational effectiveness can inform the successful management of human resources. For example, teams can be staffed with members who move the team toward a configuration that increases the likelihood a team will meet its objective. When constraints (e.g., availability of preferred team members) do not allow for team composition information to be used in staffing, knowledge of how a team's composition influences team effectiveness can be used to design other organizational interventions (e.g., inform training priorities; Bell & Outland, 2017).

In practice, staffing teams can seem complex. There are several staffing situations practitioners may encounter (e.g., selecting a new member for an existing team, forming a new team), as well as a host of team member attributes (e.g., agreeableness, general mental ability, cognitive styles), team configurations (e.g., uniformly high, diversity), and outcomes (e.g., shared mental models, innovation) from which to choose. Recent team composition research has sought to bridge the science-practice gap.

Using interviews with subject matter experts (SMEs), Mathieu et al. (2013) identified six types of composition decisions based on the state of the team in question (e.g., existing, new) and their complexity in terms of the number of team members and teams involved. Table 1 summarizes these decisions. Decisions that involve multiple teams require the strategic prioritization of resources across teams. Decisions that include replacing one or more team members require consideration of how the potential team member fits with the team, the characteristics of the team members who are leaving (if any), and the receptivity of the team to new team

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