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## Collective assessment of the human resources management field: Meta-analytic needs and theory development prospects for the future☆



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### A B S T R A C T

The other articles in this special issue of *Human Resource Management Review* present meta-analyses of specific topic areas, or articles on methodological issues associated with meta-analyses, within the human resources management field. Ours is a bit different in that we do not present actual meta-analytic results, but instead conduct a thorough review of the field in order to identify areas where meta-analyses have not been conducted. Then, we discuss why such analyses have not been provided, suggestions for how we might like to see research proceed in such areas, and also implications for theory development in these areas of the field. We conclude our paper with some additional thoughts on issues to keep in mind as we seek to utilize meta-analysis to its fullest potential, and thus yield the best results possible.

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Meta-analysis is a formal procedure for cumulating research results across studies, thus providing a more accurate picture of the true relationships among scientific phenomena. This technique has been around for nearly 40 years, it has weathered criticisms and controversies during that time, and through all of that, meta-analysis not only has survived but also thrived across numerous scholarly disciplines. Meta-analysis is used in fields including medicine and biological sciences, as well as fields of education, psychology, sociology, to name a few.

Our interest in this special issue of *Human Resource Management Review* is the application and results of meta-analysis in the Human Resources Management (HRM) field, as we see in the articles published in this special issue. Our article has a slightly different focus and set of objectives. We seek to identify areas of the HRM field where meta-analyses have been conducted sparingly if at all, and as we identify those areas, we also attempt to provide reasons for such lack of use, as well as what might have been the consequences of this lack of meta-analytic application. Finally, embedded in our analysis and conclusions are the implications of our meta-analytic findings for theory development in both well-represented and under-represented areas of the HRM field. However, we first begin with a brief historical development of the meta-analysis technique and its intended contributions.

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## 1. History and background of meta-analysis

The set of research techniques we know as “meta-analysis” has its origins in the 1970s, and is credited to the significant work of both Glass (1976) and Schmidt and Hunter (1977), who sought to cumulate results across a large body of research studies. In the four and a half decades since its inception, meta-analysis has grown into a very popular method of treating data in a wide variety of fields from the social sciences to the physical sciences (e.g., Baur, Ellen, DeOrtentiis, Buckley, & Ferris, 2013). The term “meta-analysis” was coined by Gene V. Glass in an article where he referred to meta-analysis as the “analysis of analyses,” which he described as “the statistical analysis of a large collection of analysis results from individual studies for the purpose of integrating the findings” (Glass, 1976, p. 3). Glass argued that there was a “complex and methodological problem” in research then that precluded scholars from deriving a clear understanding from a large group of studies (Glass, 1976, p. 8), and he came up with this realization through his examination of another scholar’s review of psychotherapy studies (Smith & Glass, 1977). Taking serious issue with the methods employed by that other scholar, Glass believed there was a need for a more formalized method to review prior research, stimulating his development of meta-analysis.

John E. Hunter and Frank L. Schmidt also were dissatisfied with the statistical tools used to review prior research. Working independently from Glass in the 1970s, Hunter and Schmidt developed their own methods of meta-analysis. Their objective was to create a method of data analysis that could be applied across a sample of studies, and produce results that would “permit validity generalization to new settings without carrying out a validation study of any kind” (Schmidt & Hunter, 1977, p. 529).

Prior to the development of meta-analysis, most reviews were conducted in a narrative and subjective manner, and typically represented one individual’s views on what past research had proven and where future research should be directed, with rarely any empirical support. Thus, the first meta-analysis served the major purpose of formulating and synthesizing a generalizable statement about past research. Meta-analysis has enabled the “cleaning up and making sense” of research literature through a large-scale empirical evaluation (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004, p. 21). Meta-analysis provided the ability to make generalized statements about prior research that were supported by true statistical testing, thus creating a greater comprehension of accumulated knowledge, and a good sense of what we know and do not know.

Although by no means a principal driving force behind the development of meta-analysis, there has been debate concerning whether meta-analysis can be used for the development of new theory. There is no doubt that the generalizable statements resulting from a meta-analysis can represent a good starting point for new theory development. However, neither Smith and Glass (1977) nor Schmidt and Hunter (1977) used their meta-analysis techniques to develop new theory. Hunter and Schmidt discussed meta-analysis and its role in theory development by stating that “the results of meta-analysis are indispensable for theory construction; but theory construction itself is a creative process distinct from meta-analysis” (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004, p. 22).

## 2. Review and meta-analytic needs for human resources management research

Significant advances in the field of human resources management research have been documented by way of several meta-analyses that have been conducted (e.g., Gonzalez-Mulé, Mount, & Oh, 2014; Van Iddekinge, Roth, Raymark, & Odle-Dusseau, 2012; Heidemeier & Moser, 2009; Byron & Khazanchi, 2012). Although, scientific knowledge has increased in the topic areas of staffing, human resource development, and performance evaluation, there are fewer meta-analyses on topics that include compensation and rewards, withdrawal, and strategic human resource management. A goal of this discussion is to highlight HRM topic areas where there has been and continues to be a substantial number of meta-analyses conducted, and identify areas where there has been little movement on a topic. Bringing to the forefront those topic areas that continue to receive much attention, and those that have received much less treatment, will guide HRM researchers on future directions for the field. The end goal of any research program is to advance knowledge and to acknowledge where research should be going for the future.

In light of this concern, it seems reasonable to address questions such as the following: What are the reasons where few if any meta-analyses have been done in such areas? Are there too few studies published to accurately interpret the meta-analysis? Is there declining research interest in the topic over time and currently? Are there topic areas where a single meta-analysis might have been done many years ago, and the effect of that meta-analysis was to effectively shut down research on that topic, as Humphrey (2011) argued happened to the job design area after the publication of the Fried and Ferris (1987) meta-analysis, or the Iaffaldano and Muchinsky (1985) meta-analysis did for the performance-satisfaction area?

Our purposes for reviewing the topic areas are to: (a) provide a description of topical areas that have received the most and least, as well as increased and decreased, attention over the past forty years; (b) describe these results in light of current HRM trends; (c) discuss implications for the field of HRM research and theory development, and propose directions for future research.

**Table 1**  
Human Resource Management (HRM)

HRM topic area	Number of studies
Strategic HRM	11
Staffing (both internal and external, and including topics such as promotions, succession, recruitment, and selection)	78
Performance evaluation	24
Compensation and rewards	9
Development of human resources (including training, socialization, and mentoring)	34
Organizational withdrawal (including turnover and absenteeism)	11

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