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Socially responsible human resource policies and practices: Academic and professional validation

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the measurement and validation of socially responsible human resource policies from academic and professional points of view. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has made great progress in recent years in the theoretical realm, showing its importance through different perspectives such as the institutional theory, the stakeholder approach, the theory of legitimacy, and the process of shared value. However, from an empirical standpoint, more research is needed to provide new indicators and evidence of testing socially responsible policies on business performance. This paper aims to devise a set of socially responsible human resource policies, demonstrate the validation of their content through several practices, and review the analysis of their relative weights thanks to the contribution of a panel of academic experts and a professional pretest, conducted in large Spanish companies.

1. Introduction

In recent times, several researchers have started showing the relevance of undertaking socially responsible behaviours and actions by firms, and how this process could improve their financial results and relationships with stakeholders (Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández, & Romero-Fernández, 2016; Molina & Clemente, 2010; Saeidi, Sofian, Saeidi, Saeidi, & Saaeidi, 2015). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been defined by the European Commission (2011: 6) as the process of integration into business activities about the social, environmental, ethical and human concerns of their interest groups with a double aim: (1) to maximize the value creation of these groups; and (2) to identify, prevent and mitigate the adverse effects of organizational actions on the environment.

The previous definition revolves around the need to create value for all of the external and internal stakeholders, and the commitment to institutionalizing the responsible behaviour demanded by society. Employees are considered as one of the main internal stakeholders in the design and implementation of any organizational strategy. Hence, the satisfaction of workers and the value creation for them must be a key issue in the design of CSR strategies and organizational investments (De la Torre et al., 2015; Klimkiewicz & Beck-Krala, 2015). In this matter, it is of great importance to examine whether Human Resource Management (HRM) is assuming the challenge of introducing measurable and responsible indices that guarantee the sustainability for future generations.

Within an international scope, there are many indices which start to standardize and measure CSR policies and practices in the field of HRM. More specifically, Marimon, Alonso-Almeida, Rodríguez, and Cortez Alejandro (2012) highlight two of the main international CSR standards for their wide implementation by companies such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the ISO26000.

This study, based on the previous standards, aims to validate a set of Socially Responsible Human Resource Policies. Methodologically, the article provides results from a panel of experts over three rounds as well as a professional pretest, in which several human resource managers have participated. Finally, the study reports the content of eight socially responsible human resource policies, thirty-two practices and their relative weight. Professional implications, limitations and future lines of research are also presented at the end of the paper.

2. Designing an integrative model of Socially Responsible Human Resource Management (SR-HRM)

The integration of different research perspectives to explain an integrative model in the HRM field is one of the most relevant contributions extracted from the work of Martín-Alcázar,

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Romero-Fernández, and Sánchez-Gardey (2005). In this paper, Martin-Alcazar et al. propose a sequential and structured integrative model of human resources grounded on the premises of four complementary frameworks: universalistic, contingency, configurational and contextual.

Following the proposal by Martín-Alcázar et al. (2005) and Martín-Alcázar, Romero-Fernández, and Sánchez-Gardey (2008), this article explains the relevance and synergies of introducing socially responsible orientation in human resource management with regard to these four perspectives.

Firstly, the universalistic perspective of the integrative model of Socially Responsible Human Resource Management (SR-HRM) is based on the premise that there are universally successful recipes in the management of human capital for all firms (Delery & Doty, 1996; Fernández, 2001). Based on Martín-Alcázar et al. (2008), the first brick to lay in SR-HRM is the need to search for efficient human resource policies and practices, independent of the context, country or other variables. However, this is precisely the main weakness of the universalistic foundations, according to Delery and Doty (1996), namely, the lack of unity between practices and a coherent framework composed of relevant variables such as business strategy, the technology of the company, R + D investments, and other contextual variables. Taking into account the complexity of the environment, it seems logical that a wide number of external variables can affect the results of human resource practices. Therefore, the contingency perspective can contribute to this model by providing a better explanation of the effects and interactions between socially responsible human resource policies and the different internal contingency variables (structure, technology, size, business strategy, etc.) and external variables (organizational environment) with the aim of achieving a more consistent socially responsible system.

On the other hand, the third perspective, the configurational approach, has the value of defining a coherent system of socially responsible human resource policies through capturing the synergies and interactions of these policies with a larger number of internal and external variables. This adjustment can develop behavioural patterns in HRM defined by the organizational environment of the company, thus helping to improve the organizational performance. Specifically, Martín-Alcázar, Romero-Fernández, and Sánchez-Gardey (2009) show the value of the configurational perspective, examining how the combinations and synergies between policies and human resource practices encourage the consistency of HRM firms. In connection with our proposal, a socially responsible orientation must be coherent with the human resources strategy and CSR strategy, something that will provide consistency in the results of the policies and practices. Although the configurational approach provides a good explanation of the effects and interactions of the HRM system, we must consider the role played by institutional pressures and stakeholder requirements in order to gain a better understanding of the adjustments within the context. The contextual perspective could explain this fit (Brewster, 2004). The identification of contextual aspects has been developed in literature by several authors (Brewster, 1995; Ferris et al., 1998). In this article, we focus on two, from previous contributions: the socioeconomic context (legal, political, institutional, social, economic and environmental framework, the cultural aspect, trade unions and education system) and the organizational context (working-environment, company size, technology, innovation and interests of certain groups). Regarding the implementation of CSR actions, authors such as Bigné, Chumpitaz, Andreu, and Swaen (2005), Dahlsrud (2008) and Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández, Márquez-Moreno, and Romero-Fernández (2015) emphasize the idea that this behaviour is increasingly implemented and internalized by companies and institutions. The Global Compact of United Nations, the OECD guidelines, the Green Book of CSR and the White Book in Spain are some of the important initiatives developed, in terms of sustainability. In addition to the international initiatives, there are also associations which develop CSR standards with wide implementation among companies, such as the Global Reporting Initiative and the ISO 26000, as referenced in Castka and Balzarova (2008) and Marimon et al. (2012).

In the Spanish context, there are two important bases for adopting CSR behaviours: the White paper on CSR and the constitution of 1978. In 2005, Spain created a Parliamentary Subcommittee to enhance and promote the social responsibility of business through the establishment of recommendations known as the White Paper on Corporate Social Responsibility. This document has been listed as the first document outlining a socio-economic approach adopted by a national parliament in Europe. It contains 59 appearances of various stakeholders (companies, trade unions, environmental associations, consumers, media, academic experts and regional governments). Additionally, as Fuentes-Ganzo (2006) stressed, the Spanish Constitution, in itself, sets a precedent for responsible behaviour (*Article 1: categorizing Spain as a social and democratic state of law; Article 38: freedom recognizing company subordinate to the economic situation, Article 45.2: claiming the need and care of natural resources, taking collective solidarity account*). Other legislation at national level emphasizes the importance of promoting socially responsible organizational behaviour, such as the Protection Law of Consumers and Users 26/84, Law 4/1989 of March 27 Conservation of Natural Areas Law 38/1995.

The influence of the previous political, legal and regulatory framework, according to Martín-Alcázar et al. (2005) has a decisive influence on modelling and processing human resource policies and practices in enterprises. Based on these contributions, we deduct the need to find a middle ground between human resource strategy, CSR strategy and the external demands of responsible behaviours as reflected in Fig. 1.

After the theoretical framework of the research has been presented, we proceed to explain the process of developing and validating the content of the different socially responsible human resource policies and practices.

3. Method

With the intention of defining a set of human resource policies and practices that include a socially responsible concern for employees and their families, this study has three important tools:

(1) The analysis of professional content in CSR reports (Spanish IBEX-35 companies) and CSR standards (the GRI and ISO26000) based on Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández, and Romero-Fernández (2013).
(2) The development of a panel of experts, aimed at achieving a consensus on the content of the policies and practices; and, (3) A pre-test composed of a number of human resource managers.

The use of this triple method of validation pursues the creation of a set of socially responsible policies and practices, not only able to improve organizational performance in economic terms, but also to focus on the social enhancement aims of improving the satisfaction and well-being of the employees. Following the definition of CSR, as proposed by the European Commission (2011), we can define the term 'socially responsible human resource policies' as those which: (1) improve the ethical, social, human and working conditions of workers, promoting their satisfaction and proper development in the company; and (2) obtain a differential added value for companies as a result of this process, increasing in the last term the global employee's performance.