Team responsibility structure and team performance

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Keywords Teamwork, Human resource management, Performance, Self-managing teams

Abstract The purpose is to analyse the impact of team responsibility (the division of job regulation tasks between team leader and team members) on team performance. It bases an analysis on 36 case studies in The Netherlands which are known to have implemented team-based work. The case studies were executed in 1997 by means of face-to-face interviews with HRM staff and line management. It concludes from the analyses that two different types of team responsibility prevail. In a “hierarchical team” team leaders take responsibility for decisions concerning work preparation, support and control, while in the “shared-responsibility team” decisions are taken by the team members themselves. The analyses show that “shared-responsibility teams” are thought to contribute more substantially to team performance outcomes than “hierarchical teams”. The analysis helped gain a better understanding of the relationship between HRM and organisation performance, as it is viewed in the “human resource-based view of the firm”.

Section 1. Introduction

Considering its prominent place in the prevailing organisational discourse, team-based work has proven to be a favourite formula for organisational redesign. It is a promising concept which offers autonomy, responsibility and job enrichment in order to meet the aspirations of the employees. At the same time, team-based work is believed to enhance performance outcomes such as productivity and quality, on both the team and the organisation level. Hence, management fashions such as business process re-engineering, lean production, the modern socio-technical approach and human resources management (HRM), all embrace the core principles of team-based work (Benders and Van Hootegem, 1999; de Sitter et al., 1997; Kuipers and van Amelsvoort, 1990; Kleinschmidt and Pekruhl, 1995; Womack et al., 1991).

A major argument for introducing and for developing team-based work stems from recent insights into the impact of human resources on organisational performance. In the current debate on HRM, the “resource-based view of the firm” states that the intangible, imperfectly imitable and imperfectly substitutable internal resources of the organisation enable a firm to
generate and to sustain its competitive advantage (Doorewaard and Meihuizen, 2000). This statement is true especially with regard to the impact of human resources on organisational performance in team-based work organisations. The performance in team-based working largely depends on the employees’ competencies and attitudes with regard to planning, performing and controlling team tasks in an autonomous way.

When analysing which features of team-based work add to the enhancement of team performance, management literature (for example, de Sitter et al., 1997) focuses in particular on the team responsibility structure: i.e. the division of job regulation tasks between team leader and team members. A larger allocation of job regulation tasks within the team among the team members is supposed to contribute more effectively to organisational goals than the allocation of these tasks to a separate team leader. However, hardly any empirical evidence exists regarding the relationship between team responsibility structure and team performance (Benders et al., 1999). Based on the results of a “quick-scan” research, which was carried out in 1997 in 36 different organisations in The Netherlands, our paper aims at clarifying the impact of the structure of team responsibilities on team performance. In order to do this, we distinguish between teams with a high level of team member responsibility (“shared-responsibility teams”) versus teams with a low level of team member responsibility (“hierarchical teams”). The purpose of our research is to analyse the perceptions of managers and HRM staff with regard to the impact these two types of team responsibility can have on team performance outcomes.

In Section 2, we develop a simple, diagnostic framework of the relationship between types of team responsibility and team performance outcomes. After a short presentation of our research methodology in Section 3, and an analysis of the two types of team responsibility structures in our sample (Section 4), we then focus in Section 5 on the impact of team responsibility structures on team performances. In Section 6, we discuss the contribution of our analysis towards achieving a better understanding of how team responsibility structures have an influence on team and organisational performance.

Section 2. Team responsibility structure and team performance

The human resource-based view of the firm

In order to point out the importance of human resources in gaining a firm’s sustainable competitive advantage, HRM literature refers to the “resource-based view of the firm” (for example, Barney, 1991; Boxall, 1996; Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1984). While investigating which features of internal resources determine whether or not these resources contribute to the sustainability of rents, the “resource-based view of the firm” points to intangibility, imperfect imitability and imperfect substitutability. These particular features should function as the so-called “isolating mechanisms” or “barriers to imitation”, which make it very hard for competitors to copy successful organisational practices. Recognising that intangibility, imperfect imitability and imperfect substitutability are particular characteristics of the human resources in organisations, HRM literature (for overviews, see Beatty and Schneider, 1997;
Becker and Gerhardt, 1996; Doorewaard and Meihuizen, 2000) emphasises the ability of HRM practices in contributing to organisation performance outcomes in a unique and inimitable way. In analysing the impact of one particular HRM practice (i.e. the team responsibility structure) on team and organisation performance outcomes, this paper fits within the central reasoning of the “human resource-based view of the firm”.

For the purpose of our analyses, we have developed a simple, diagnostic model (Figure 1) of “team responsibility structure” and “performance”.

We briefly discuss the elements of this framework.

**Team responsibility structure**

In this paper, we focus on the two relevant features found in the team responsibility structure. We analyse both the variety of the job regulation tasks and the nature of the division of responsibilities.

Team responsibility concerns three groups of job regulation tasks:

1. **Work preparation** refers to activities, which have to be carried out before the main task can be executed. Work preparation decisions concern work standards (“What do I have to do? How and when is this to be done? In which order?”), work material (“Which components or what input do I need? How and when do I check the quality and the quantity of this input?”) and work equipment (“Which instruments do I need? Do I need to adjust this equipment?”).

2. **Work support** refers to regulation tasks, which create the conditions of a smooth job performance. These tasks concern job maintenance, job improvement and an overhaul of the work process (quality check, training, and so forth).

3. **Work control** refers to the regulation of the work process itself (adjustments of work performance parameters, job co-ordination, and so on).

**Figure 1.**
Team responsibility structure and performance
Apart from the variety of job regulation tasks, the nature of the division of responsibilities is important in order to analyse the influence of the team responsibility structure on organisational and team performance. According to Benders and Van Hootegem (1999), the concept of team responsibility is rather vaguely elaborated. Sometimes, team responsibility is conceptualised as being the autonomy of the team as a whole, whereas at other times the concept strictly refers to the responsibility of individual team members. Bryman’s analysis (1996) of “leadership” appears to be adequate in providing a further elaboration of the concept of team responsibility. His analysis focuses on leadership “as a process”, rather than on leadership as a formal position within an organisation.

As a process, leadership consists of a set of decisions concerning the coordination and regulation of work processes. Such a decision-making process can be organised in many different ways. In teams with autocratic or participatory leadership, for example, the responsibility for decisions is located within a formal position of “team leader”. In teams with so-called “dispersed” leadership (where a team leader appears to be absent), team members themselves make all the decisions. In day-to-day practices, various hybrid structures of team responsibility exist (for example, the team responsibility for work preparation, support and control might be restricted to a few team members only, or responsibilities might be divided among various team members).

For the purpose of this paper, we analyse the impact of two extreme types of team responsibility, positioned at the opposite ends of a continuum with regard to the division of regulation tasks. At one end of this continuum, a “shared-responsibility team” can be found: a team with a high level of responsibility for all team members. In this responsibility structure, team members themselves make decisions concerning work preparation, support and control in an autonomous way. At the other extreme end, we locate “hierarchical teams”, in which most responsibilities are assigned to the team leader.

The distinction between “hierarchical teams” and “shared-responsibility teams” is highly relevant, since many team work analyses implicitly assume that team autonomy stands for team member autonomy (for example, Benders and Van Hootegem, 1999). However, many so-called teams (for example, lean production teams (see Womack et al., 1991) do not leave much autonomy to team members, whereas all responsibility remains in the hands of the team leader.

Team performance
The purpose of our research is to find out whether there is a (significant) difference in impact of “shared-responsibility teams” and “hierarchical teams” on team performance.

For conducting an analysis of the influence of types of team responsibility on team performance, we have concentrated on two groups of outcomes indicators. First, we investigate the influence of the team responsibility
structure on performance outcomes with regard to the work process itself. We focus on the following issues:

- team productivity (the ratio between output revenues and production costs);
- the ratio productive labour/non-productive labour;
- product development (the team capacity to further develop products and services offered);
- product quality (the degree to which product or service characteristics meet the required level of quality);
- work process transparency (the predictability of changes in work flow processes);
- adjustment time (the amount of time a team needs to adjust work processes and work equipment);
- through-put time (the amount of time the team needs to complete a team task); and
- delivery time (the amount of time a team needs to deliver a number of products or services).

Second, we focus on so-called HRM outcomes, which may contribute to the required performance outcomes of the organisation (Guest, 1997). The well-known Harvard-list of human capabilities (Beer et al., 1984) identifies core HRM outcomes, concerning competence and commitment. In our research we analyse the impact of the team responsibility structure on personnel turnover, personnel absence, personnel involvement and personnel competencies.

Section 3. Methodology
In order to investigate the relationship between the team responsibility structure and performance, we carried out extensive research on team-based work in The Netherlands. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in 1997 in 36 organisations in industry ($n = 28$) and the service sector ($n = 8$) via open interviews with managers (line management and HRM staff) in each organisation and via a contents analysis of relevant documents.

A total of 57 organisations, recently involved in team-based work implementation, were requested to participate in this research, of which 40 agreed to allow researchers into the organisation in order to gather the data required and from which 36 observations provided valid and reliable information, complete enough to be included in the overall analysis. Since the small number of cases and the complexity of our research make it difficult to carry out elaborated statistical analyses, quantitative data are presented only at a descriptive level.

The complexity of the research object and the diversity of organisations involved required a sophisticated research strategy, for which we developed a quick scan-check-list, consisting of an extended number of team-based work-
related issues. In order to assure the comparability of the data of these case-comparisons, factual data concerning team-based work have been recorded in a questionnaire with fixed answer categories. Answers to these questions were gathered in in-depth interviews with line managers and HRM staff in each organisation. In order to analyse the relationship between team responsibility structures and team and organisation performance, we rely, to some extent, on the expert opinions of our respondents. Hence, we report on the perceived influence of the team responsibility structure on team and organisation performance. However, as respondents were protagonists in the implementation and elaboration of team-based work within the organisation, their perceptions of the results are based on the committed and expert opinions which must be taken into account, especially since the future fate of team-based work in the organisation will also be based on such perceptions.

In each case, we chose to concentrate on the development and evaluation of team-based work in one particular production department, which is assumed to represent the overall HRM strategy of the organisation. This choice offered us an excellent opportunity for carrying out more in-depth analyses of the actual facets of team-based work in the organisations. In each organisation, the quick scan charts the main characteristics of team-based work, the organisation’s output market strategies, the characteristics of production processes and service flows, personnel flow management and development and implementation of team-based work. Unfortunately, the selection of our research population did not allow us to compare organisations with and without team-based work.

Section 4. Team responsibility structures: “shared-responsibility teams” and “hierarchical teams”

In order to address the core research issue on the perceived impact of team responsibility on team performance in Section 5, we will first analyse the differences between “shared-responsibility teams” and “hierarchical teams” with regard to the team responsibility structure.

Although all organisations have recently introduced and implemented team-based work, these implementations differ remarkably in the field of the team responsibility structure. We asked our respondents to indicate who in the teams was responsible for each of 41 regulation tasks concerning “work preparation”, “work support” and “work control”. Answers to these questions provide us with an in-depth insight into the two types of team responsibility structure under investigation. In order to determine any empirical evidence for the existence of “shared-responsibility teams” and “hierarchical teams” in our research sample, we have concentrated on two indications:

1. **Team responsibility**: to what extent is the team as a whole responsible for regulation tasks?

2. **Team member responsibility**: will it be the team leader’s responsibility to take care of these tasks or will it be the responsibility of all team members?
Team responsibility
Unsurprisingly – since our research concentrates on actual operating teams – 70 per cent of the listed regulation tasks were performed by the teams themselves. Some of the tasks were performed by all of the teams (for example, “dealing with internal suppliers”, “on-the-job-training of new team members”, “task exchange schemes”, “cleaning up”, and so on). Seldom did other tasks belong to the team responsibility (“wages auditing”, “dealing with external suppliers”).

We analysed to what extent a team is responsible for each of the regulation tasks. Such an analysis enables us to distinguish between 18 organisations, in which teams have ample responsibility (dealing with more than 70 per cent of the regulation tasks which are relevant for the team) versus 15 organisations, in which the teams have only a restricted responsibility, performing less than 70 per cent of team-relevant regulation tasks.

Since the list of regulation tasks consists of tasks concerning work preparation, support and control, we are able to investigate the relationship between the extent of team responsibility with regard to these different task categories.

Table I shows a remarkable correspondence in the level of regulation: when teams have ample responsibility with regard to work preparation and support, they do so equally with regard to control tasks. The same goes, mutatis mutandis, for teams with restricted responsibility. Our analysis suggests that, in order to deal with work control activities, a team needs to be responsible for sufficient tasks concerning work preparation and support. In other words, a team needs “something to control”, in order to be able to perform control activities.

Team member responsibility
In Table I, we analysed the level of team responsibility (ample versus restricted), as a first indication of the team responsibility structure. A second indication is the division of responsibilities among the members of the team (“shared-responsibility teams” versus “hierarchical teams”). Both indications may vary independently. The distinction between “hierarchical teams” versus “shared-responsibility teams” is merely based on the internal division of team responsibilities among various team members and does not depend on the level of team responsibilities. Hence, a team with restricted responsibilities may be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team responsibility</th>
<th>Restricted responsibility</th>
<th>Ample responsibility</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“work control”</td>
<td>“work control”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted responsibility</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ample responsibility</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.
Team responsibility: teams with ample versus restricted responsibility
considered a “shared-responsibility team”, provided that all team members are responsible for those few regulation tasks.

However, in contrast with the conceptual independence of both indications of team responsibility, our empirical data suggest that both indications might be linked to each other. In our research sample, a significant number of “shared-responsibility teams”, in which most of the team responsibilities are allocated to all team members, also retain an ample number of job regulation tasks at the team level, and vice-versa. Table II indicates this relationship with regard to the division of regulation tasks of work preparation and support and, to a lesser extent, with regard to the division of control tasks.

Table II suggests that the teams with a high level of responsibility are also “shared-responsibility teams”. In other words, the delegation of responsibility tasks to a team as a whole appears to be strongly connected with the involvement in regulation activities of all the team members. Hence, the two indications of team responsibility seem to reinforce each other. In teams with restricted responsibilities, team members are hardly involved in regulation, while in teams with ample responsibilities regulation is part of the job of all the team members.

Section 5. The impact of team responsibility structures on team performance

Does team-based work contribute to team performance goals, according to the opinions of line managers and HRM staff? Does this contribution differ according to the level of team responsibilities and the allocation of these responsibilities within the team?

We asked our respondents to evaluate the benefits of team-based work for the team performance, concerning a number of evaluation criteria. Figure 2 presents an overview of their opinions concerning the perceived profitability of team-based work.

We will focus on the most important outcomes of this analysis. Figure 2 indicates that line managers and HRM managers highly value team-based work for the perceived stimulation of this organisational device for two core

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hierarchical teams</th>
<th>Shared-responsibility teams</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Diverse)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Work preparation” and “work support” (a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With restricted responsibility</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With ample responsibility</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hierarchical teams</th>
<th>Shared-responsibility teams</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Diverse)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Work control” (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted responsibility team</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ample responsibility team</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. The level of team responsibilities and the allocation of responsibilities in “shared-responsibility teams” and in “hierarchical teams”
HRM outcomes: the development of the competencies of the team members and the stimulation of the involvement of the team members. Apparently, they consider team-based work to be a stimulating environment for personal development and wellbeing. Our respondents do not indicate that team-based work might influence employees’ decisions to stay with a company or leave it (personnel turnover).

Apart from human resource management issues, our respondents perceive various positive effects of team-based work on work process outcomes regarding “product quality” and “team productivity”. Both criteria are considered to profit optimally from the introduction of team-based work. Fewer
effects, however, are mentioned regarding issues of “adjustment time”, “through-put time” and “product development”.

The overall evaluation is highly positive and our respondents indicate that all organisations under investigation tend to continue the new policy of team-based work. Nevertheless, we noticed a remarkable difference in their evaluations, depending on the level and the internal distribution of responsibilities in the teams. These differences became more visible when we contrasted the evaluations of the teams with ample responsibility with the evaluations of teams with restricted responsibility.

First, since team-based work is expected to have a positive influence on performance (see Figure 2), it may be suggested that this positive influence will increase when the level of responsibility of the team increases. Our set of data confirms this hypothesis (Table III). In general, teams with a high level of responsibility are perceived to contribute more to the performance of the team. According to the opinions of the HRM staff and the line management, this holds true for both HRM outcomes and work process outcomes. With regard to the HRM outcomes, the policy of giving team members plenty of opportunities to regulate their own work has a positive influence on the issues of “personnel involvement” and “personnel competencies”, in particular. A broad range of team responsibilities also strongly supports the work process outcomes “product development”, “team productivity”, “adjustment time” and “through-put time” strongly. “Delivery time”, however, might be influenced by team member responsibility in a negative sense. This analysis clearly indicates that, in order to improve the effectiveness of team-based work, management should not hesitate to delegate various responsibilities to the teams with regard to work preparation, work support and work control.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HRM outcomes</th>
<th>Personnel involvement</th>
<th>Personnel competencies</th>
<th>Personnel absence</th>
<th>Personnel turnover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work process outcomes</th>
<th>Product development</th>
<th>Team productivity</th>
<th>Adjustment time</th>
<th>Through-put time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ + +</td>
<td>+ + +</td>
<td>+ + +</td>
<td>+ +</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ratio productive/non-productive labour | 0 |
| Work process transparency           | 0 |
| Product quality                     | 0 |
| Delivery time                       | - |

**Table III.** Evaluation of the impact of team responsibility on team performance indicators, according to the level of team responsibility (ample/restricted (n = 28))

**Note:** The number of signs (+ or −) stands for the difference between the evaluation of teams with a high level of responsibility versus teams with a low level of responsibility: each sign stands for a 10 per cent difference
Second, since stimulating the team members’ involvement is considered one of the most valued results of team-based work (see Figure 2), it may be suggested that “hierarchical teams” (in which team members are involved only in a minor part of the regulation tasks) have a less positive influence on performance, compared to “shared-responsibility teams” (in which all team members are involved in a major part of the regulation tasks allocated to the team). Our data confirm this hypothesis. Table IV clearly indicates that line managers and HRM managers hesitate in evaluating team-based work positively in the case of hierarchical teams. This relatively lower evaluation is particularly clear in the criteria directly related to the work process itself (“team productivity”, “product quality”, “adjustment time”, and “product development”). Less prominent, but likewise visible, is the negative perception of the impact of the team responsibility structure of “hierarchical teams” on HRM outcomes of “personnel competencies”, “personnel involvement” and “personnel absence”. Hence, if management wants to maximise the contribution of team-based work to performance, it should refrain from allocating most of the team responsibilities to the team leader.

Conversely, Table V affirms that, compared with “hierarchical teams”, “shared-responsibility teams” have a more positive impact on team performance. HRM staff and line management highly value the impact of shared responsibility on work process outcomes, such as “team productivity”, “work process transparency”, “delivery time”, “product development”, and, in particular, “adjustment time”. When it comes to HRM outcomes, our respondents have indicated that a positive effect might be expected with regard to “personnel absence”. Apparently, responsibility for more regulation tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HRM outcomes</th>
<th>Allocation of the team responsibilities to the team leader (high versus low)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personnel turnover</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel absence</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel involvement</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel competencies</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work process outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery time</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio productive/non-productive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labour</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through-put time</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work process transparency</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product development</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment time</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team productivity</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product quality</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table IV.**

Evaluation of the impact of “hierarchical teams” on team performance indicators, according to the degree of allocation of responsibilities to the team leader (high/low)

**Note:** The number of signs (+ or –) stands for the difference between the evaluation of teams in which team responsibilities are allocated to the team leader versus those in which fewer tasks are allocated to the team leader: each sign stands for a 10 per cent difference
concerning work preparation, work support and work control affects employees’ decision on whether or not to stay home from work.

If we keep in mind that “shared-responsibility teams” are closely connected to high levels of team responsibilities (see Table II), we may expect a combined positive effect of (a) teams with ample responsibility and (b) “shared-responsibility teams” on team performance indicators. Our research findings (Tables II and V) suggest that line managers and HRM staff evaluate the effects of team-based work more positively in “shared-responsibility teams” with ample responsibilities, compared with the evaluation in hierarchical teams with restricted responsibilities. In general, the perception of our respondents leans very favourably towards teams in which all team members have ample responsibilities.

Section 6. Team-based work and performance
The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of the HRM-decisions with regard to the team responsibility structure (i.e. the division of job regulation responsibilities between the team leader and the team members) on team performance outcomes. Despite the relatively few cases and the limited opportunities for analysing quantitative data, this study is the most comprehensive study on team-based work perspectives which has been carried out in The Netherlands up to the present date. In 1997, according to the opinions of the line managers and the HRM managers involved in the implementation of team-based work in 36 organisations in The Netherlands, the team responsibility structure seemed to contribute to team performance substantially. Further analysis (not presented in this paper) indicates that there is a high correlation between the anticipated contribution of team-based work
and the respondents’ indications of an organisation’s performance criteria. This indicates that team-based work is supposed to support the organisation’s general goal.

Most significant is the insight, resulting from our research, that teams with high team responsibility and team member responsibility (“shared-responsibility teams”) with regard to decisions concerning “work preparation”, “work support” and “work control” have been found to contribute positively to team performance outcomes. In particular, HRM outcomes with regard to “personnel competencies” and “personnel commitment” as well as work process outcomes (“product development”, “team productivity”, “adjustment time”) seem to benefit from the HRM policy which stimulates shared responsibilities in team-based work. Less positive effects can be expected from teams with few responsibilities and from teams in which the team leader makes most of the decisions concerning these regulation tasks (“hierarchical teams”). Hence, according to our respondents, the impact of team-based work depends on the extent to which responsibility tasks form a substantial part of the overall task structure of the team and the team members. From this point of view, we might question the effectiveness of the implementation of teams with a restricted team member responsibility, as is said to be the case in so-called “lean production” teams (Benders and Van Hootegem, 1999).

Our research strongly supports the central reasoning of the “human resource-based view of the firm”, which states that the intangibility, imperfect imitability and imperfect substitutability of the human resources in organisations will contribute to gaining and sustaining a competitive advantage. This insight emphasises the potentiality of HRM practices in contributing to organisation performance outcomes in a unique and inimitable way.

The HRM policy of stimulating the team responsibility structure of “shared-responsibility” will bring about the required uniqueness of the human resources and will influence human resources’ contribution to superior organisational performance. “Shared-responsibility teams” will make job regulation decisions concerning work preparation, work support and work control according to their own particular standards of performance. In doing so, they have internalised the competencies and the commitment pattern, which belong to “entrepreneurship”. Members of self-managing teams regulate their activities based on the internalised attitude of the archetype of the entrepreneur: someone who takes care of his or her activities according to his or her own standards of what is good or bad for the business (Doorewaard and Brouns, 1999). Entrepreneurship kills two birds with one stone. On the one hand, it stimulates the employees’ loyalty and commitment and the development of personnel competencies, as a matter of course. On the other hand, entrepreneurship allows the team to develop their own specific way of dealing with regulation, which enforces the required uniqueness and inimitability of a team’s performance; these features should function as “barriers to imitation”, which (in turn) should provide a steady stream of rents. In terms of the “human resource-based view of the firm”, HRM policies which
stimulate “shared-responsibility” will contribute substantially to the organisation’s success, according to HRM staff and line managers involved in team-based work.

As a consequence, the HRM practice of implementing “shared-responsibility teams” with ample responsibilities might place high demands on the HRM approach of human resource mobilisation (Doorewaard and Meihuizen, 2000). Bureaucratic regulation reduces uncertainty using strict orders, contractual arrangements and destruction of the worker’s autonomy. Human resource mobilisation “mobilises” – as opposed to manages – employees’ knowledge, skills and motivation. It reduces uncertainty by appealing to workers’ commitment, responsibility, entrepreneurship and loyalty. The implementation of “shared-responsibility teams” is assumed to rely on human resource mobilisation rather than on bureaucratic regulation.

Our research further stresses the importance of integrating HRM practices which concern personnel flow management (recruitment, selection, training, supervision, release) with management strategies with regard to the (re)design of organisational structures. To connect these practices is an important challenge for both HRM literature and literature on organisational redesign (Becker and Huselid, 1998; Kalleberg et al., 1996; MacDuffie, 1995). In the past focusing on organisation behaviour theories, HRM literature and theories of organisation development have often neglected to pay sufficient attention to organisational redesign. For example, the importance of team working has been stressed over and over again in HRM studies, but an in-depth analysis of how to (re)design organisational structures and work processes in order to create different types of team-based working is missing.

The same goes – mutatis mutandis – for scientific and management literature concerning organisational redesign. Advocates of team-based work focus on the importance of HRM practices concerning organisational culture, training and workers’ motivation. Nevertheless, the organisational design principles seldom pay attention to the “design” of the diversity of personnel and of organisational (sub)cultures. Our research indicates the need to bridge recent insights from both HRM and organisation design literature. This bridge could form a rich basis for the theory and the practice of designing and implementing team-based work successfully.

References


