Line Management Performance:
Applying the AMO Theory to Explain HRM Implementation Effectiveness

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Abstract

The AMO theory (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg, 2000) predicts individual performance by the *ability* individuals have to do the tasks they are assigned, their *motivation* for these tasks and the *opportunity* provided for doing them. We operationalize the AMO theory for the HRM performance of line managers in their responsibility for implementing HRM practices. Surveying line managers and their subordinates in 74 departments, we found that the *ability* and *opportunity* that line managers have increases their HRM performance, while *motivation* does not. Practical implications are given on how the AMO theory can be used to investigate HRM performance at the operational level.

Keywords: AMO theory, line management; HRM implementation effectiveness
Introduction

In many studies, the quality of HRM is measured by assessing the HRM practices a company has in place (Huselid, Jackson & Schuler, 1997; Kane, Crawford & Grant, 1999; Wright, McMahan, Snell & Gerhart, 2001; Chang, 2005) rather than the effectiveness of their actual implementation (Huselid et al., 1997; Gratton & Truss, 2003). However, the effectiveness of HRM depends not only on the presence of good HRM practices. The manner and context in which these practices are applied also plays a vital role (Han, Chou, Chao, & Wright, 2006; Wright & Nishii, 2006). Even if intended HRM practices are well designed, they will be ineffective when they are not properly implemented (Khilji & Wang, 2006).

As more and more HRM responsibilities have been devolved to line managers, they are responsible for implementing HRM practices in their daily work with employees (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992). However, line managers are generally seen as reluctant (Hall & Torrington, 1998; Harris, Doughty & Kirk, 2002; Lowe, 1992) and ‘neither capable nor motivated to take on these issues’ (Hope Hailey, Farndale & Truss, 2005: 64). McGovern, Gratton, Hope Hailey, Stiles & Truss even believe that ‘attempts to devolve HRM to the line in any grand sense can only be regarded as quixotic’ (1997: 26). In short, they seem not to perform very well in this respect. In this study, HRM performance is defined as the effectiveness of line managers in implementing HRM practices on the work floor and is measured by employee satisfaction regarding this implementation.

If line managers seem reluctant and even incapable, what makes them so? As they are no different from other individuals, their performance in a certain task could be explained by three well known factors. Line managers will perform well when (1) they are able to do so (they can do the job because they possess the necessary skills and knowledge), (2) they have the motivation to do so (they will do the job because they want to and are adequately rewarded for their behaviour), and (3) their work environment provides the opportunity, that
is, the necessary support and avenues to enable the desired behaviour. This implies not only that avenues are opened but that line managers are actively stimulated to implement HRM effectively. We argue that ‘reluctance’ might very well be an effect of in-\textit{ability}, non-\textit{motivation} or few \textit{opportunities} to perform HRM tasks.

The Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg, 2000; Boxall & Purcell, 2003) is often used in HRM-performance research (Boselie, Dietz & Boon, 2005; Paauwe, 2009). In these studies AMO guides the \textit{choice} of which HRM practices need to be used. According to Gerhart, HRM practices will influence people’s \textit{ability} (e.g., by using the appropriate selection, hiring, training instruments), \textit{motivation} (e.g., using pay for performance), and \textit{opportunity} (e.g., using teams or suggestion systems) to contribute to firm performance (2005: 175). In this paper we apply the AMO theory differently: instead of focusing on employee attitudes and behavior as a result of applied HRM practices (Becker, Huselid, Pickus and Spratt, 1997; Guest, 1997; Appelbaum et al., 2000), we expect line managers’ \textit{ability}, \textit{motivation} and \textit{opportunity} to predict their HRM performance and therefore operationalize the AMO theory for the effective implementation of HRM practices by line managers. Therefore, our research question is: \textit{In which way do ability, motivation and opportunity predict HRM performance of line managers in implementing HRM practices effectively?}

The contributions of this paper are threefold. First, we include the line manager in the HRM-performance relationship and define their performance as the effective implementation of HRM practices. It is the line manager who is responsible for the implementation of HRM practices (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992) and therefore he/she can influence the effect of HRM practices on performance by the way these practices are interpreted and applied on the work floor. Wright and Nishii (2006) and Khilji and Wang (2006) have rightly highlighted the need to distinguish between intended and implemented HRM practices. Therefore, we focus on the
way line managers implement these practices on the work floor, as suggested by Guest (2011). Second, we contribute to the further development of the AMO theory as presented by Appelbaum et al. (2000). This theory is indistinct on how the performance indicators relate to each other. It is theorized that all three have an additive effect on individual performance, but based on the expectancy theory we argue that only ability will directly influence HRM performance and that motivation and opportunity can enhance or reduce this relationship. Third, we operationalize and empirically test the AMO theory for HRM performance of line managers in effectively implementing HRM practices.

We structure this paper by first explaining how we apply the AMO theory to HRM implementation effectiveness of line managers. We then develop hypotheses about how ability, motivation and opportunity relate to HRM performance of line managers. After presenting the methodology of the research by specifying the population, data collection and measures used to empirically test the AMO factors of line managers on HRM performance, we will present the results and test our hypotheses. The results will be discussed and finally we will present the limitations, implications and conclusions of this study.

**Theory and Hypotheses Development**

The AMO theory is based on the formula $P=f(A;M;O)$. But what does this mean? According to Boxall & Purcell (2003), performance is a function of ability plus motivation plus opportunity. Considered like this, every antecedent of performance would have a direct and independent contribution, regardless of the other antecedents. In such an additive effect (Delery, 1998) using more of one factor should result in increased levels of performance (Lepak, Liao, Chung, & Harden, 2006). However, referring to the expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), we submit this is not the case. The famous theory on motivation is a multiplication, meaning that if any of the antecedents is 0, so will be the power of individual motivation. In
this reasoning A, M, and O would be interactive (Delery, 1998), and their ultimate influence depends on what other factors an individual has (Lepak et al., 2006). Guest (1997) therefore justly proposes that in the expectancy theory performance depends on individual motivation, possession of the necessary skills and abilities and an appropriate role and understanding of that role. We furthermore argue, however, that motivation and opportunity by themselves cannot directly influence HRM performance without the necessary skills and knowledge to implement HRM practices on the work floor. Ability is a necessary pre-requisite for performance to occur. Motivation and opportunity are also essential, but only after sufficient ability is guaranteed. Thus, ability is predicted to have a direct effect on performance, while motivation and opportunity can only increase or decrease this effect.

We believe that the AMO theory cannot be represented by an additive effect, because if A was zero, M and O would add nothing to performance. Motivation and opportunity have no additive effect in and of themselves but only in combination with ability. Nor is it a straightforward multiplication, meaning that a lack of any of the factors would lead to no effect at all, because we predict ability will always lead to better performance. Instead, we argue that the AMO theory is based on the formula P≈A(1+M+O). We hypothesize interactive effects only of ability and motivation (AxM) and ability and opportunity (AxO), but not of motivation and opportunity, because we predict that they alone cannot enhance performance. Only ability will have an independent and direct positive effect on performance. This effect can be positively or negatively influenced by motivation and opportunity.

**Ability and Performance**

Ability is defined as HRM-related competences necessary to successfully implement HRM practices on the work floor. Many examples of insufficient HRM abilities of line managers and its detrimental effects are suggested in HRM literature. According to Brewster and
Larsen, ‘there is a danger in allocating HR responsibilities to line managers who do not know about relevant legislation, pay too little attention to managing trade union relationships, or resolve problems in unnecessary expensive ways’ (2000: 208). Hope Hailey et al. (2005) and Whittaker and Marchington (2003) argue that line managers’ skills and competences in HRM practices are inadequate and that a lack of training will undoubtedly affect line managers’ effectiveness. Line managers often lack specialist knowledge of HRM, for example on legal requirements and agreed practices (Lowe, 1992; Hall & Torrington, 1998) and have limited people management skills (McGovern et al., 1997). They implement HRM practices based on their ‘common sense’ (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995) and often fail to deal with issues early enough (Harris et al., 2002). Competences in performing HRM practices can be developed through training. Some authors have shown the need for continual and systematic training in HRM practices (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; McGovern, 1999; Renwick, 2000). However, they also recognise the lack of sufficient or adequate training courses for specific HRM issues (Bond & Wise, 2003; Lowe, 1992) and a ‘leave well alone syndrome’ (Harris et al., 2002: 222).

We posit that ability is a necessary requirement for effective performance of HRM tasks. If one lacks the necessary skills and knowledge it is impossible to implement HRM practices in an effective manner, no matter how motivated one is and how well the opportunities for implementation are. On the basis of this statement, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The more ability that line managers have for performing HRM practices, the more effectively they will implement these practices on the work floor.

Motivation and Performance
Motivation is defined as the line manager’s desire and willingness to perform HRM tasks. While some managers are enthusiastic about acquiring HRM responsibilities, many feel that they are pushed upon them and are therefore reluctant to get involved (Harris et al., 2002). Motivation can be stimulated by personal incentives (Harris et al., 2002; McGovern, 1999) or institutionalised incentives (McGovern, 1999; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). In terms of personal incentives, line managers seem to show little interest in the subject (Brewster & Larsen, 2000), and are not convinced that HRM work is something they should spend much time on (Renwick, 2003). Regarding institutional incentives, the HRM role is not generally included in line managers’ performance objectives and line managers are only evaluated on achieving targets related to profits or sales and not in the area of managing people (McGovern et al., 1997). Such a lack of extrinsic factors can also affect the intrinsic motivation of line managers to perform HRM practices and lead line managers to prioritise operational issues over HRM issues (Harris et al., 2002; McGovern et al., 1997). Whittaker & Marchington (2003, p.250) clarify that ‘because line managers have many other pressing priorities than managing and developing the people working for them, it is likely that people management issues will be taken less seriously than production or service goals’.

Many HRM scholars doubt whether line managers have the motivation to perform HRM practices with their subordinates, and thus question whether they can effectively implement them (Bond & Wise, 2003; Harris et al., 2002; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). However, we argue that motivation in and of itself will not increase HRM performance, because, as noted by MacDuffie “motivated workers who lack skills or knowledge may contribute discretionary effort with little impact on performance” (1995: 1999). On the other hand, a line manager who not only knows what to do with HRM practices but also likes to put his ability to good use and is stimulated to do so will probably
be more effective than someone who knows what to do, but has little interest in doing it (Lepak et al., 2006; MacDuffie, 1995). Therefore, our second hypothesis reads:

**Hypothesis 2:** The motivation to implement HRM practices effectively moderates the relationship between line managers’ ability and their HRM implementation effectiveness.

**Opportunity and Performance**

Even if individuals have the ability and are motivated to perform HRM practices effectively, organizations must provide them with appropriate opportunities to use their skill (Lepak et al., 2006: 233), thus when the work environment provides the necessary support and avenues for expression (Boxall & Purcell, 2003). What determines this opportunity of line managers to perform well in HRM related activities? First of all, they need good support from the HRM professionals. Secondly, there should be adequate capacity in terms of time to get involved in HRM implementation. Third, roles should be clearly defined and divided, role ambiguity minimized and hence policies & procedures should be clear and supportive.

The literature shows that line managers need content-related advice and coaching from personnel specialists on how to perform HRM activities (Hall & Torrington, 1998; Harris et al., 2002; Hope Hailey et al., 1997) in order to perform well. It is even argued that line managers cannot carry out their HRM responsibilities at acceptable levels without the assistance of HRM professionals (Brewster & Larsen, 2000; Lowe, 1992) who coach and encourage them to meet their HRM responsibilities, and for consultation about non-routine matters (Bond & Wise, 2003; Hall & Torrington, 1998). However, HRM professionals do not always provide line managers with the services they need (Bond & Wise, 2003) because they do not have the time to advise them, are unable to provide effective support, or are reluctant to abandon their remaining HRM responsibilities and play a new organisational role in supporting line managers (Gennard & Kelly, 1997; Hall & Torrington, 1998). Whittaker and
Marchington found in a case study that ‘HR was shut up in its ivory tower, out of touch with commercial realities, anonymous and lacking visibility, leading some to suggest that there was a lot of cynicism about the function’ (2003: 256). Supporting line managers on how to solve people issues, advising them on legal issues and procedures, or sharing best practices with them, can help line managers carry out their HRM role more effectively. HRM support for line managers should be available and hence partially determines the opportunity for line managers to implement HRM.

In addition, line managers might perceive conflicting demands and competing priorities between operational and HRM tasks leading to a capacity problem (Hope Hailey et al., 2005; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Unlike HRM specialists, line managers also have operational responsibilities alongside their people management responsibilities, including authority for financial, technological and human decisions. They are responsible for keeping production running and in order to achieve this they need to perform various tasks, of which HRM is but one. The ‘constant demand to deal with a range of problems’ (McConville, 2006: 645), both operational or personnel, can result in a perception of overload in the line manager’s HRM role (Harris et al., 2002; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Restructuring (McConville & Holden, 1999; McGovern et al., 1997) often results in line managers getting increased workloads. They complain about additional responsibilities (Brewster & Larsen, 2000; Harris et al., 2002), more complex and more demanding tasks (McConville & Holden, 1999), wider spans of control (McGovern et al., 1997; Renwick, 2003), a lack of uninterrupted time (McConville & Holden, 1999) and more paperwork (McConville, 2006). Often, time pressure and pressure related to achieving business targets lead to problems for line managers in devoting sufficient time to communicating and consulting with subordinates (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995; McConville, 2006; McGovern et al., 1997; Marchington, 2001; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003) or result in them giving such activities low priority.
because of short-term operational priorities (Gratton et al., 1999; Renwick, 2000, Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Cunningham and Hyman (1999) even present a case study in which line managers were informally handing back HRM responsibilities in order to cope with production responsibilities. If line managers experience a lack of capacity to spend what they see as adequate time on HRM responsibilities, and complain about overload between their operational and HRM roles, obviously the opportunity to perform their HRM tasks is inadequate.

Finally, for their HRM role, line managers often lack a clear role definition (McConville, 2006) and therefore become unclear about their responsibilities (Lowe, 1992). Case studies reveal that there is significant perceptual divergence between line managers and HRM professionals on aspects of line management involvement in HRM (Harris et al., 2002; Maxwell & Watson, 2006). Many line managers still believe that managing people is HRM’s responsibility (McGovern et al., 1997). According to McConville (2006), line managers can perceive role dissonance and ambiguity when their role is not clearly defined. A way to remedy this uncertainty is to provide line managers with clear policies and procedures. HRM departments tend to worry that line managers might manage people in an inconsistent way (Bond & Wise, 2003; Harris, 2001; McConville, 2006; Sisson & Storey, 2000), and so they try to prevent line managers from interpreting, adjusting and fine-tuning HRM practices according to their individual idiosyncratic understandings (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Harris, 2001). To achieve this, they introduce ‘clear up-to-date written information’ (Bond & Wise, 2003: 70), ‘highly structured, depersonalised procedures’ (Harris et al., 200: 223) and ‘detailed personnel procedures and codes’ (Harris et al., 2002: 224), as well as frameworks, handbooks, toolkits and telephone helplines (Hall & Torrington, 1998) to ensure that line managers use HRM practices as intended. If line managers lack clear policies and procedures on which HRM practices they should follow, and how, and as a consequence are unclear
about their role and responsibilities regarding HRM implementation, their effectiveness in implementing these practices is likely to suffer. So both good policies and procedures are important for adequate opportunity.

Although line managers have sufficient HRM-related competences to perform their HRM role, being insecure about what their responsibilities are and what is expected of them could make them implementing HRM practices ineffectively (Adobor, 2006; Schuler, 1980). According to Brewster and Larsen (2000), line managers have insufficient knowledge about relevant legislation and trade union relationships, and therefore need to get clearly defined policies and guidelines. Also following training courses may help line managers to increase their HRM-related skills (Gennard & Kelly, 1997; Hall & Torrington, 1998; Lowe, 1992; Renwick, 2003) and thus can decrease inconsistencies in implementing HRM policies (McGovern et al., 1997). However, if line managers have limited time then it is questionable whether they devote this time to training courses (Hall & Torrington, 1998). The discussion on the interrelationships between line managers’ ability and the different aspects of the opportunity they have to participate in effective HRM implementation, leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The opportunity to implement HR practices effectively moderates the relationship between line managers’ ability and their HR implementation effectiveness.

Methodology

Population and Data Collection

Data has been collected through a survey in two organisations, an international naval defence company and a national construction company. For our independent variables, i.e. line managers’ ability, motivation and opportunity to perform HRM practices effectively, our population is made up of line managers at various hierarchical levels in these two
organisations, all supervising teams of operational employees. Our disaggregated sample is 174 line managers. For measuring our dependent variable, line managers' HRM implementation effectiveness, the research population is all those subordinates supervised by the line managers investigated. Here, our disaggregated sample amounts to 1065 subordinates. Matching the data of both samples, the line managers and their subordinates, one to one was not possible because of the anonymity guaranteed to the line managers. Instead, not the line manager but the department is the unit of analysis. In order to aggregate data, one needs to ensure consistency in the answers by respondents in the same group. For this, the standard deviations and the inter-class coefficients (ICCs) should be low, reflecting a low variance from the mean value. The standard deviations and ICCs of all variables are presented in Table 1 and demonstrate that the mean is a good reflection of the data gathered. The AMO factors are measured at the line management level and the performance is measured at the employee level. For the line management group, we were able to accept standard deviations and ICC values that would usually be perceived of as too high to accept the mean (e.g. capacity). This is because in approximately half of the departments, we had a response of one, and a response of three on average. The aggregated sample size is 74.

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According to Kulik and Perry, “the devolution literature has tended to emphasize case-study methodology, which provides limited generalizability” (2008: 550-551). In order to measure the factors necessary for successfully implementing devolved HRM tasks, we developed a research instrument to investigate ability, motivation and opportunity to implement HRM effectively as perceived by line managers. The AMO factors are operationalized on the basis...
of the constraints line managers perceive in implementing HRM practices (Nehles, Kok, van Riemsdijk & Looise, 2006). The five factors discussed by Nehles et al. (2006) were translated into a reliable and validated measurement instrument (Nehles, van Riemsdijk & Looise, 2008; Bos-Nehles, 2010). Table 2 shows the operationalization scales, number of items and Cronbach’s Alpha of each AMO factor. The five factors were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (‘disagree’) to 5 (‘agree’). The confirmatory factor analysis revealed a model with a good fit. A factor analysis was carried out for each of the five concepts separately. The goodness of fit and RMSEA measures respectively for each concept are as follows: 0.98 and 0.056 for competences; 0.94 and 0.069 for desire; 0.99 and 0.043 for support; 0.99 and 0.042 for capacity; and 0.94 and 0.073 for policy & procedures.

Dependent Variable

We measure HRM implementation effectiveness on the basis of employee perceptions about line managers’ effectiveness in implementing HRM practices. HRM effectiveness is commonly investigated by employee perceptions (Chang, 2005; Huselid et al., 1997; Kane, Crawford & Grant, 1999; Mitsuhashi et al., 2000; Wright et al., 2001). Research by Rousseau (2001), Bowen and Ostroff (2004) and by Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) support the view that it is employees who should evaluate HRM effectiveness. As proposed and performed by Tsui (1990) and Huselid et al. (1997), HRM effectiveness is measured by subordinates’ satisfaction, in our case regarding the way their line managers carry out HRM activities in practice. As it is the perceived effectiveness of the implementation process that is of interest, subordinates of line managers were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the way their line managers execute HRM practices on the work floor using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (‘not satisfied’) to 5 (‘very satisfied’). Subordinates are stakeholders in the HRM implementation process by line managers. We measure this satisfaction on the basis of
an indication of line managers’ perceived effectiveness in implementing the following five HRM practices: personnel administration; recruitment & selection; career development; evaluation & rewarding; and people management. The selection of HRM practices was based on Truss (2001). The 26 items making up the effectiveness measure were subjected to a factor analysis. We used Principal Component Analysis, with varimax rotation, to seek out the most reliable factor structure. Five factors, representing the HRM practices named above, were retrieved involving a total of 19 items. The HRM implementation effectiveness of line managers is an aggregated measure of these five HRM practices.

Control Variables

To reduce the risk of false results due to correlations among the variables of interest in our constructs, we control for the experience as a line manager, their education level, and the organisation investigated. According to Caza (2011) the education and experience of a manager is likely to influence the performance of an organization. Talented and skilled managers are expected to use managerial discretion more successfully than would a manager with less ability (Caza, 2011: 15). Controlling for age and span of control, as proposed by McGovern et al. (1997), did not show significant results and were therefore not used in the definite model. These variables were dummy coded (two experience dummies, and two education dummies). As the organisations investigated differed by sector, size and products, this is also controlled for (construction company = 1; naval defence company = 0).

Results

According to the AMO theory, line managers need to be able, motivated, and have the opportunity to implement HRM practices effectively. In order to investigate this, we
calculated the mean scores (Table 3) for the five operationalized factors and HRM implementation effectiveness. Our results show that line managers are able to perform HRM practices, are motivated to implement them on the work floor and have the opportunity to fulfil their HRM tasks and thus, according to the AMO framework, should be able to perform their HRM role well. Supporting the line managers’ positive opinions about their own HRM performance, subordinates also evaluated the implementation of HRM practices as effective (the mean score is 3.54).

A multiple regression analysis was carried out to test the formulated hypotheses. Given that all the independent variables are correlated with each other (as shown in the correlation matrix), they were included in a single model to calculate the best fit with the HRM implementation effectiveness of line managers. The five operationalized AMO factors were standardized in order to reduce multicollinearity. The control variables and interaction effects were added in a stepwise manner.

We used six regression models, as presented in Table 4: (1) without control variables, (2) with control variables, and (3-6) with interaction effects. Competences, the ability factor, significantly enhance HRM implementation effectiveness when controlling for the organizational context, experience and education level of line managers. Thus, we can accept Hypothesis 1 because line managers who are able to perform HRM practices will implement them more effectively. As predicted, their motivation and opportunity to perform these practices are not significantly relevant to implement HRM practices in an effective way. Clearly, the difference between the two organisations has a large impact on results however. When controlling for the organisations, the explained variance ($R^2$) increases from 0.28 to 0.41, a 13% increase. In the models 3 to 6, we add four interaction effects to the model, one for the motivation moderator and three for the opportunity moderator (the operationalization
of opportunity is capacity, support and policy & procedures as presented in Table 3). Only the interaction effect between competences and policy & procedures significantly affects HRM implementation effectiveness and improves the model. The effect of line managers’ ability on their HRM implementation effectiveness becomes stronger when line managers receive more policies and procedures for executing their role effectively. The direct effect of competences on HRM implementation effectiveness also increases by adding the interaction effect between competences and policy & procedures. We cannot support Hypotheses 2 for the motivation moderator, but we can accept Hypotheses 3 partially for the moderation effect of policy and procedures on the line manager’s ability to implement HRM practices effectively. Line managers who have the ability to perform HRM practices but get a low level of policies and procedures will implement these practices less effectively than those managers who get a high level of policies and procedures (Figure 1). The explained variance in the HRM implementation effectiveness of line managers increases from an $R^2$ of 0.09 (only control variables) to 0.47 (Model 6) by 38%.

Insert Table 4 and Figure 1 about here

Discussion

In this article, we argued that the AMO theory is based on the formula $P=A+(AxM)+(AxO)$. We hypothesized multiplicative effects only of ability and motivation and ability and opportunity. Only ability will have an independent and direct positive effect on performance. This effect can be positively or negatively influenced by motivation and opportunity.

The results showed that line managers are able, motivated and have the opportunity to execute HRM responsibilities. This result contrasts with the ideas of Teo and Rodwell (2007) that line managers are not ready to accept their operational HRM responsibilities. Line managers need to have the necessary skills and knowledge to implement HRM practices
effectively, as indicated by e.g. Brewster and Larsen (2000) and Hall and Torrington (1998). Thus, it seems that line managers who get trained in HRM issues and thus implement HRM practices using more than common sense (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995) and experience alone, they will become better HRM performers. As predicted, motivation and opportunity had no direct significant effect on HRM implementation effectiveness.

Motivation had neither a significant direct nor a moderation effect on HRM implementation effectiveness. But that does not mean that motivation is unimportant. Most line managers in our study are motivated to play a HRM role in the organization and thus seem to have sufficient personal and institutional incentives (Harris et al., 2002; McGovern, 1999) as visible in the high mean value and low standard deviation of the “desire” variable in Table 3. This result is clearly at odds with the general view expressed in the devolution literature that line managers are not motivated to execute HRM responsibilities and thus implement them ineffectively (McGovern, 1999; Harris et al., 2002, Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). It could be that those line managers in our sample are selected for a line management function because they are motivated to perform HRM tasks (they see the relevance) or that they want to perform HRM tasks because they can do it. As selection as well as training and development are usually regarded as HRM practices that are used to make line managers able to perform HRM (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Gerhart 2005, Guest, 1995), motivation seems to be guaranteed when line managers have the ability to implement HRM practices. Motivation would become a substitute of ability (Delery, 1998). If a line manager is able to perform well, motivation will add nothing except the expense of making him motivated (Delery, 1998: 293).

Surprisingly however, the more motivated line managers are to perform HRM practices, the worse they are perceived in performing such tasks on the work floor. Though controlling for the organizational context decreases this relationship to insignificance (just)
the negative sign remains the same. One possible reason for this may be that HRM professionals, line managers and employees define HRM effectiveness differently (Wright et al., 2001). HRM professionals are generally more positive about the effectiveness of HRM roles, HRM services and HRM contributions than are line managers and employees (Mitsuhashi, Park, Wright, & Chua, 2000; Wright et al., 2001). It could be that the more line managers want to do it right, the more they stick to the guidelines and rules set by HRM. They play it ‘by the book’ and hence lack the necessary room for manoeuvre and freedom in applying HRM practices. It is this freedom to manage in the way that line managers deem most appropriate which has a positive effect on performance (Caza, 2011). This can have two negative consequences for employees. First, line managers disregard the particular circumstances within their departments that should lead to adjustments of policies and instruments, these then become ’paper tigers’ with little practical significance. Second, line managers behave like bureaucrats and employees lose the benefits of striking mutually beneficial idiosyncratic deals between themselves and their line managers (Rousseau, 2001b; Rousseau, Ho & Greenberg, 2006). This result provides rich insights into what employees appreciate in terms of HRM implementation: the personal, context specific and even idiosyncratic way is preferred to “doing it right”.

*Opportunity* was found to strengthen the effect of ability on performance. The more policies and procedures that line managers have the better the skilled ones implement HRM practices. Those line managers who are provided with a clear role definition (McConville, 2006) and clear expectations about their role (Adobor, 2006; Schuler, 1980) and thus know what their roles and responsibilities are (Lowe, 1992) will be more effective in implementing HRM when they are adequately trained (McGovern, 1999; Renwick, 2000). Also written information (Bond & Wise, 2003) and structured procedures (Harris et al., 2001) provide the opportunity to perform well.
When the AMO theory is applied to HRM implementation by line managers, performance does not increase as a result an additive effect of all the antecedents independently, nor as a result of an interactive effect of all antecedents. However, both seem to be true to some extent. The resulting formula of the AMO theory based on the HRM implementation effectiveness of line managers is \( P \approx A(1+O) \): line management ability increases HRM performance and adequate opportunity enhances the performance of able line managers.

The regression analysis revealed that our chosen control variables have a strong effect on our results. Especially the organizational context variable is significant in each model. The organizational context influences the way ability, motivation and two of the opportunity constructs, support and capacity, affect performance. When the control variables are added only ability becomes significant. Empirically testing the AMO theory needs serious consideration of the organizational context studied. A naval defence company and a construction company, as in this paper, differ a lot regarding line management education level, organizational culture and organizational structure. These organizational context variables can easily influence the competences of line managers for HRM (ability), the status HRM gets in an organization and thus the amount of effort line managers give to HRM (motivation) and the way they are supported and the amount of freedom and time they get for HRM (opportunity).

**Limitations**

HRM performance was measured as the satisfaction of the line manager’s subordinates about the way HRM practices are implemented on the work floor. In this way, the line manager is evaluated on his/her way of applying company HRM practices. The line manager can be brilliant in implementing these practices, however, when the company policies and practices
are perceived as ineffective by subordinates, this could influence their perception of HRM implementation effectively negatively. In this study the perceived effectiveness of HRM practices (Nishii, Lepak & Schneider, 2008) was not investigated, but future studies should collect this data in order to control for this possible bias. Also the relationship between the line manager and his/her subordinate can influence the effectiveness of HRM implementation (Farndale, Ruiten van, Kelliher & Hope-Hailey, 2011) and should therefore be controlled for in future studies.

We needed to reduce the number of control variables in our model. Adding too many independent variables reduces the reliability and validity of the results when the sample is moderate. However, we tested the effect of the line managers’ age and span of control and came to the conclusion that no significant changes occurred when adding these control variables.

Another limitation of our research is the fact that we did not use other stakeholders except subordinates to evaluate HRM implementation effectiveness. The multi-constituency approach (Tsui, 1987; Tsui, 1990) suggests that it would be beneficial to collect data from multiple stakeholders surrounding the line manager, including subordinates, senior managers, and HRM managers (Wright, McMahan, McCormick, & Sherman, 1998; Paauwe, 2009), in order to include insights from their various perspectives. However, there is a lot of research describing the advantages of measuring HRM implementation effectiveness at the employee level (Rousseau, 2001a; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

**Practical Implications**

The devolution literature is rather congruent about the ineffective way in which line managers implement HRM practices. However, we did not find that line managers were failing in their HRM role as indicated by a number of authors (Hope Hailey et al., 2005; Lowe, 1992;
McGovern et al., 1997), but rather that they seem to have accepted their HRM role and found a way to carry out the expected HRM practices to the satisfaction of both themselves and their subordinates. Therefore, line managers can safely be given HRM responsibilities and trusted in implementing these effectively. Further, regarding the effect of any AMO factor on HRM implementation effectiveness, HRM managers seem to overestimate the effect of opportunities the HRM department can provide, such as sufficient time for HRM instead of operational responsibilities and support from HRM professionals. Opportunities do not make line managers better implementers of HRM, but can facilitate the effect of line managers’ ability in the form of HRM-related competences on HRM implementation effectiveness. HRM professionals get an important role in improving and facilitating the competences line managers need to perform HRM practices well. They should focus on (1) selecting those line managers who have HRM or leadership experience or are motivated to learn to become a good line manager, and (2) training line managers to become competent in performing HRM practices and implementing the HRM strategy on the work floor.

Our research also highlights that the necessity of line management motivation seems to be overestimated. As we did not find any effect of motivation on line management performance, HRM departments could reduce expenses by spending less money on line managers’ motivation to perform an effective HRM role. According to Appelbaum et al. (2000) and Lepak et al. (2006), expenses in the area of job security, performance management, compensation, incentives and rewards could be reduced because these policies help to increase motivation of individuals. Because of the expected substitute effect of motivation and ability, organizations can save e.g. on bonus expenses for HRM performance of line managers as these will not make them implement HRM practices more effectively.
References


Table 1: ICC and standard deviations of variables

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Table 3: Means, standard deviations and correlations

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Confidence level: * <= 0.10,  ** <= 0.05,  *** <= 0.01
Table 4: Multiple regression analysis

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N: 62
F: 4.51*** 4.64*** 4.23*** 4.53*** 4.31*** 5.12***
R²: 0.28 0.41 0.42 0.44 0.42 0.47
Adj. R²: 0.22 0.32 0.32 0.34 0.33 0.37

Dependent variable: line managers’ HR implementation effectiveness
Dummies: naval defence company, high experience, high education
Confidence level: * <= 0.10, ** <= 0.05, *** <= 0.01
Figure 1: Interaction effect between *ability* and *opportunity* in the form of policy & procedures on HR implementation effectiveness.