Managing the Human Resources in the Supply Chain

The supply chain function in organizations has evolved significantly in recent decades and is today recognized as one of the most important strategic functions in the implementation of companies’ business strategy. At the same time, as a consequence of increased competition, globalization, commoditization and technological changes supply chains themselves have become very complex. Despite the realization that managing the supply chain effectively can provide a crucial competitive advantage, there appears to be insufficient realization that this rests on human performance in the supply chain. While few will contest the fact that effective and strategic management of human resources can provide an equally strong source of competitive advantage, very little of this realization has been applied to managing people in the supply chain. Strategically managing human resources in the supply chain requires HR configurations that adapt themselves to the broader organizational strategy, while not excluding adaptations to the more specific supply chain strategy in the context of ever changing outsourcing trends and proliferation. While both supply chain management (SCM) research and human resource management (HRM) research have independently focused on improving competitive advantage of organizations, they have barely begun to collaborate on strengthening their mutually interdependent (functional) bases for the broader organizational objective.

A bulk of the supply chain management research emanates from the logistics and operations discipline, while some of it comes from informations systems & technology, and marketing. Likewise, strategic human resource management literature mainly derives from work on strategy and HRM disciplines, with the strategy contribution being broad in focus. Thus, neither the SCM discipline nor the HRM discipline has worked sufficiently with each other in trying to develop crucial human capital and people competencies within the specific supply chain domain. Although recent work in the SCM/HRM overlap has focused on topics such as new job types in the 21st century supply chain, and buyer influence and knowledge transfer in the HR domain to vendors in the supply chain, this work has barely begun to address issues such as the requisite skills, human performance, and occupational profiles for supply chain and logistics professionals, the interaction of human resources and management systems, and the ever important role of trust in inter-organizational supply chains.

When we accepted being guest editors of this special issue, we were primarily focused on further encouraging and facilitating such collaborative and interdependent research between SCM and HRM academics and professionals. We are proud to introduce this special issue on ‘Managing the Human Resources in the Supply Chain’ consisting of one invited article by a renowned thought leader in this field, and five research articles focused on these issues at the interesting intersection of these two important yet underutilized sources
of competitive advantage. Obviously this special issue at the intersection of these two crucial bases of competitive advantage is not going to be able to address the remarkable breadth of issues awaiting investigation. However, we do hope that we will have provided the impetus to interested scholars and professionals to further focus and align their research interests in this crucial domain of knowledge development. Below, we provide a brief introduction to each of the articles in the special issue.

Eminent thought leader Martin Christopher provides a historical analysis of the evolution of the field of supply chain management, identifying three key elements that have changed this landscape, viz., globalization of supply chains, continued outsourcing, and widespread adoption of ‘lean’ practices. He then analyzes the impact of these three key elements on the need to manage across boundaries, the need for both left-brained and right-brained skills, and most importantly the understanding and creation of a broad skills-profile for successfully managing the complexity in the supply chain. We hope that the insights of Martin Christopher inspire you, the reader, to identify new and unaddressed areas of research that can make crucial contributions to this interesting knowledge domain.

Carrying forward this spirit of requisite skills and evolving occupational profiles, we are happy to introduce to you the five research articles spanning research contexts from Asia to North America via Europe, and spanning domains from in-store replenishment operations, buyer-seller relationships, and logistics. The first research article by Swart, Hall, and Chen provides a new conceptualization of human performance in the supply chain by drawing on resource based theories and discussing the contribution of HRM practices in enhancing such human performance.

Focusing on collaboration within the supply chain, Srinivasan and Srivastava provide an interesting study of the critical role of trust in buyer-seller relationships and the moderating role of supply risk in such collaboration.

Rahman and Yang provide an interesting importance-expertise matrix analysis of both the hard and soft-skills required by logistics professionals in China, while identifying important findings in this regard.

Based on a multiple case study exploratory approach, Trautrimss, Grant, and Wong identify human resource factors that are critical in better managing in-store logistics tasks and operations, by studying European retailers.

Finally, Large and Kenner investigate the increasing influence of inter-functional and inter-organizational coordination on occupational profiles and job satisfaction on logistics professionals while identifying important managerial implications.

The editorial team would like to express our sincere thanks to all the reviewers who diligently read the manuscripts, provided timely feedback, and constructively facilitated the authors’ works to this final destination. We fully realize that high journal standards can only be maintained with high quality reviewers and we are thus grateful to all the reviewers who have contributed to this special issue.

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