

## The Nature and Consequences of Teamworking in Human Resource Management Research

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**Abstract:** Teamworking is one of the important components of human resource management that plays a significant role in terms of reorganising work and quality output of an organization. With an objective of continuous development of teamworking process and development of team members in regard of quality productivity and ways of making tasks done, HRM researchers have emphasised to do research on this issue that started from 1950s. This paper attempts to examine the methodological issues of teamworking used in some HRM research works, namely survey method in Harley's research (2001), case study in McCabe's study (2000) & in Murakami's research (1995), questionnaire method in Murakami's study (1997), critical incident & questionnaire methods of Findlay et al (2000). This essay tries to see the functional relationship between the theoretical aspect of teamwork and practical result at the workplace with an emphasis on the nature and consequences of teamworking process in HRM research. This is basically the study of critical review on HRM research works of above mentioned four scholars.

### 1.0 Introduction

Teamworking has emerged in recent years as the most significant way of reorganising work in the workplace. In the recent Workplace Employee Relations Survey it is found that 65 percent of workplaces in the UK use the team based working system (Cully et al., 1999, Procter and Currie, 2004). However teamworking is an idea with a long history and the putting out system based in the rural areas of the UK used in the eighteenth century which dominates manufacturing and process industries and retains elements of teamworking in the twentieth century (Buchanan, 2000, Nolan, 2007). Teamworking is concerned with the organisation where fundamental questions about customers and competitors are dealt and it leads to make productive and efficient organisation (Buchanan, 2000, Procter and Currie, 2004).

Teamworking is one of the key areas of research in human resource management (HRM) as the 'best practice' in the workplace and the

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development of research into teams especially into sociotechnical and lean teams that starts in 1980s (Forde, 2007). It is a guidance for the company allowing employees to increase the scope of skills and experience providing a foundation for continuous improvement which is presented to boost morale of employees and satisfy them (McCabe, 2000:208).

The aim of the essay is to assess the nature and consequences of Teamworking including human relations, quality of working life, workers' satisfaction, team process, autonomy of team, selection of team leader used in the HRM research area.

## 2.0 Teamworking:

Teamworking is a working process or a group of working people with the same goals and objectives to meet and same values and norms. These goals and objectives of the company are for its existence or greater productivity. Teamworking has a long history at the workplace. In the 1970s teamworking was seen as the technique of alleviating some problems such boredom, fatigue, productivity, absenteeism, labour turn over as the main concern of most of the employers. In the 1980s the role of teamworking was redefined to fit the strategic goals and objectives of organisations shifting it to winning competitive advantage in the markets transforming the approach to people management (Nolan, 2007). Teamworking has different shapes and dimensions (Appendix-1). The idea of teamwork in organisations is viewed as 'the naturally occurring phenomenon, intuitively and spontaneously adopted by people working in what they perceive to be adverse working conditions and the technique readily appropriated by management consultants and academic commentators as an 'organizational solution' for a range of attitudinal and performance-related problems' (Mueller et al., 2000). Scholars have attempted to define teamworking in many ways. Grayson (1990:1) cited in Marchington (2000:63) defines teamworking a 'self regulating work group' as 'a democratic form of work organisations which ascribes to the group of workers responsibility for the regulation, organisation and control of their jobs, and the conditions immediately surrounding them'. Some scholars term teamworking as high performance work design, semi-autonomous or self managed groups (Marchington, 2000).

## 2.1 Characteristics of Teamworking:

Team has distinct characteristics<sup>2</sup> indicating its nature and function associated with the organisation and team members. It starts with the common goal to be achieved with utmost sincerity of each and everybody in the organization. Teamworking has some other issues which are linked with the high performance<sup>3</sup> of the team within the organization.

## 3.0 Methodological Issues in the research area of Teamworking in HRM:

Researchers use various methods in the research area of teamworking in HRM. Case study has been used by McCabe (2000) to find out normative dimensions of teamworking and nature of team members. In the study of Harley (2001) the WERS98 data set has been used to identify team members non-members. Findlay et al., (2000) used sample survey methods in some companies and also critical incident methods based on behavioural centred methodology. Murakami (1995, 1997) also used case study methods in a motor industry for introducing teamworking for a comparative research. Stephenson (1996) used interview method where workers were interviewed through informal network. Researchers use different methods to explore teamworking in HRM research to investigate various aspects of nature and consequences of teamworking which include team members, role of team leader, autonomy of the team, management and employee relation, employee behaviour, workers' experiences and satisfaction, impact on productivity. Various research methods such case study, critical incident, questionnaire, survey, interview methods have shaped the research in HRM. Moreover it is seen that case study method is widely used in teamworking research.

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<sup>2</sup> the team works on a common task; the team has its own work space or 'territory'; team members organise their own task allocations; members encourage and organise multiskilling; team has led discretion over work methods and time; team has a leader or spokesperson; members can influence recruitment to their team (Mueller and Purcell, 1992 cited in Buchanan, 2000:30)

<sup>3</sup> Self-managing, self-organising, self-regulating; front to back responsibility for core process; negotiated production targets; multiskilling- no job titles; shared skills, knowledge, experience and problems; skill-based payment system; peer selection, peer review; open layout, open communications; Support staff 'on the spot', not in remote offices (Buchanan and McCalman 1989:120).



#### 4.0 Strengths and weaknesses of research strategies and techniques used in teamworking of HRM research

Team research began in 1950s through sociotechnical approach where case studies were used with the objectives to develop quality of life, to improve spontaneous development on skills and technology. Research agenda was centred on promoting job enrichment and redesign. Then the research moves to look into ideas of collaboration and sharing of knowledge and ideas linking to Just-in-time systems. Then the researchers emphasize on organisational benefits where success depends on much buffer stock, improvement, quality linking to the lean team concept (Forde, 2007). Following these societal, economic, employee relations and organisational issues researchers explore their researches in teamworking area of HRM.

##### 4.1 Survey Method in Harley's Research:

Harley (2001) discussed team memberships and experience of work in Britain analysing the Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS98) data conducted in 1997-98. She conducted her research to explore two broad approaches: positive and critical accounts of teamwork with a series of questions on team membership, employee discretion, commitment, satisfaction, management-employee relations.

From the positive accounts of teamwork it is found that team empowers workers to control their work as they are provided opportunity. For this positive empowerment of workers they feel belongingness to the organisation, become more committed and satisfied. This positive approach highlights organisational performance that is based on organisational behaviour and HRM. These are important for the autonomy or the self-management of teamworking. This boosts up the team members. Besides, the researcher acknowledged some limitations of the approach. She ignored employee experiences of teamwork, negative outcomes on the basis of the positive employee attitudes and team working that enhances employee discretion.

In the critical accounts of teamwork she discussed questions that have positive views and emphasis on the negative outcomes for team membership of employees. From this perspective employees work hard that helps to increase productivity and employees enjoy high level of discretion over work.

Harley (2001) used secondary data in her research. The WERS98 data



were based on large scale quantitative data set that makes a general idea and the impact of teamwork. This large scale data are the strength for using to do research in any field including HRM as the quality of data is relatively high. These were collected from reliable sources and high degree of confidence is maintained that increases validity and reliability of the research. As she used secondary data, she got these very easily and these were cost effective for her study. Other strength is that the data set allows the identification of team members or non-members but maintains confidentiality and retains wide range of facts about employees. In addition, secondary data can provide a method of triangulation. However, data set excluded a significant number of employees at the workplace and it could be possible to collect data as it was large scale survey. She found the limitation that 'data are collected from wide range phenomena but not in great detail'. There are some limitations of the survey which may affect the Harley's research as this WERS98 data were collected for the specific objectives. Definitions of variables may have changed over time.

Although the teamworking is defined as self-managed which enjoys autonomy (Buchanan and McCalman, 1989; Marchington, 2000) Harley (2001) found no team members having characteristics of autonomy from the data set. She used a set of variables to explain employees, team members and non-members indicating workplace, employee, employee status, working conditions with everything. Definitions of these variables may differ from the definitions used in the WERS98 data.

Further more Harley concluded saying 'rigorous empirical analysis of reliable large-scale data has provided no support for either account. It seems that the enthusiasm of positive accounts and the dire warnings of the cities, may have been based on rather over-excited evaluations of the extent to which teams represent a change or organisational forms and patterns of work and the extent to which employees' experiences of work are touched by such practices'. Her concluding remarks seem pessimistic (Forde, 2007).

#### 4.2 Case Study in McCabe's research:

McCabe (2000) did his research in an automobile manufacturing company (UK based) to investigate the meaning and experience of teamworking following the case study method and normative dimensions. These methods cover management discretion that changes in attitude and behaviour of employees to operate teamworking effectively at the workplace. For the attitudinal aspects the case study is the best

method. In his research a variety number of employees with a variety experiences and realities were in investigation that provides diversification in teamworking. However, it is difficult to make a universal generalisation from the diversified response. The researcher followed interview techniques, document investigation, strategy statements, corporate memos and briefs, training materials and union management documents which help to develop the research providing sufficient information. It is seen that the teamworking concept serves as the guideline for the employers to permit workers to increase the scope of training and practice providing continuous improvement which can help to encourage workers and can satisfy them. It is conveyed in an entirely positive way where employees can enhance both their skills and work experience. Corporate training materials suggest that TW promotes ownership, involvement, quicker decision making, being competitive, improving communication, motivation, information sharing (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2002:185).

The study was very much comprehensive which was conducted over a six month period and 60 employees from different levels were interviewed very closely. Each of them was interviewed for minimum 45 minutes to capture individual responses to teamworking though is difficult for the interviewee to be on track for a long time. However, the researcher used 'our' concept in questionnaire that helps employees to feel them belongingness to team as well as to feel together to corporate interest. Moreover he used in depth interviews to explore the individual experience of team (Forde, by email correspondence). He allowed team members to speak freely on teamworking from their experiences in order to see the insights of the theme. Interviewees did so that proves some valuable comments made by them. One lack is found that interviewees were selected by the management and management people were half of the target population. Interviewees might respond to the interviewer keeping the management decision in mind as they were selected by the management. In that case real experience might keep behind the light. Yet the researcher tried to find out real thing in teamworking and in most cases he became successful to explore the ability of the employee. Some employees showed negative response to some changes in the company including teamwork and at the same time teamwork was termed as 'brain purification'. In fact researcher utilised the workers experience in his research to explore both sides of the coins.

The researcher interviewed a group of employees in the team and identified three categories of team members according to their behaviour and participation at work. Team members are categorised into bewitched, bothered and bewildered where every category has certain characteristics. Bewitched is a term that is applied to employees who largely supported team working and adopted the corporate line. Employees who most clearly support teamworking has often prompted to team leader positions or onto special projects. Bothered means employees are worried about their colleagues who absorbed the teamworking discourse. These employees are opposed to the normative dimension of teamworking. Some employees are bewildered by the new teamworking approach because of its ideological or normative implications. It attaches their way of doing things. Normative implications of teamworking appear as the background noise for them. They do not see it as a new in particular (McCabe, 2000:209-217; Knights and McCabe, 2000). However his in-depth interviews expose a complex picture about the nature of teamworking.

### 4.3 Case Study in Murakami's Research:

#### 4.3.1 Murakami (1995) tried to see teamworking as beneficial to trade union

representatives, workers and management in his case study of Germany based motor industry. He conducted ( in 1994) his case study using questionnaire methods was a small questionnaire survey considering 51 teams on the basis of 9 items<sup>4</sup> in the scales to see four levels<sup>5</sup> of autonomy. The team size was between 8 and 13. As the team is not constituted by a specific number of members which may involve 3, 10 or even 33 individuals. There may create problem to share responsibilities because of the size of the team. If the team members are more, work allocation would be very tough and facilities will not be enjoyed same as the small team members get (Nolan, 2007). The researcher used one set questionnaire on team speaker, team members' involvement, role of team speaker, coordination etc. in the scale of four topics: all the time, often,

<sup>4</sup> A) The selection of the teamleader, B) New member on team, C) Distribution of work, D) Time flexibility, E) Acceptance of additional work, F) Representation outside of the team, G) Methods of production, H) Production goals (output) and I) Production goals (quality).

<sup>5</sup> 1. No participation by a team; 2. Team participates in decision; 3. Co-decision making and 4. Autonomous team decisions.



once a while, never. Again he used a set of 10 structured questions to evaluate the attitudinal aspects of team workers in the format of agree or disagree. Here team members are bound to say in favour or against whereas it should have been another criterion neither agree nor disagree or it would be better to use Likert scale. However the researcher uses quantitative analysis using numerical value that claims more value of significance. It is seen that the teamleader term has been avoided replacing it with team-speaker. They thought team-speaker is more than teamleader who does as mediator, communicator and moderator. Team-speaker would be selected on a six month basis in the first election and then on a one year basis following the democratic voting system by raising hands. This seems justified and rational process of selecting team leader.

4.3.2 In his another research Mukarami (1997) conducted comparative research on the autonomy of teams in the car industry which was cross national comparison among 19 plants in 5 countries. It was a huge and thorough study. Questionnaire method was used in his case study which was on the basis on 9 items related to four levels of autonomy of teams. He tried his best to make the research successful. He used semi-structured and quantitative questionnaire. Some of the plants were visited personally by researchers to cross-check the data with the written documents on teamwork. Even he cross-checked and validated the data collected from Nissan (UK) visiting the place in person. To collect data Japanese interpreter was appointed and data were cross-checked discussing with teamleaders at Nissan (Japan). These strategies increase the validity and reliability of data used in teamwork research and prove the authenticity of data. However, the research finding is that team does not possess the real autonomy, just some degree of influence on management decisions (Nolan, 2007). Even it is difficult to handle interviewees as every company has its own cultural context including language barriers, trade unions for example political power and trade union practices are exercised in the UK. The study seems to be affected by the UK and German culture at the workplace as 14 companies out of 19 were of them. As Teamworking is across national contexts it may be shaped by political, cultural and economic factors (Forde, 2007).

#### 4.4 Critical Incident and Questionnaire Methods of Findlay et al.

Findlay et al., (2000) examined the introduction and development of teamworking in four Scottish plants of two large spirit companies where the main focus was on three dimensions- technical, governance and normative to explore the different types of teamworking and social context thereof. The investigation conducted with 10 teams, 2 from each whereas 4 teams from Newton. However, there is no explanation why four teams were selected from this plant.

They investigated the study following critical incident method and questionnaire method combining an examination of attitude and practices for analysing behavioural aspects. This is very much effective methodology used to task oriented job analysis. As these types of methods are generally used to develop performance appraisal system and training initiatives where researchers did the right thing in their research in 'flexible when it suits them: the use and abuse of teamwork skill'. It is a good technique for analysing behavioural aspects. Here the researchers used Likert scale for team members about problem solving issues and workers ability to do any kind of job and found that workers could solve more problems after introduction of teamworking at the workplace. Findlay et al., (2000) conducted a good comparative research on the nature of teamworking. However they interviewed mostly female workers whereas they did not mention the ratio of male and female in the company, even no explanation was stated in favour of this sample selection. The case study may be affected by the one group. On the basis of sample selection it can be concluded that the study is not gender neutral.

#### 5.0 Conclusion

As an important issue of HRM research in teamworking it began in 1950s and has increased in 1990s. Researchers tried and are trying to shape and make successful use of teamworking in the workplace. However, investigating some articles it is found that there is no real team or real autonomy in teamworking at the workplace and even in the UK 'autonomous teams' are rarer (Harley, 2001; Murakami, 1995 & 1997; Benders, 2005 cited in Forde, 2007). These findings differ from the definition of team. Teamworking is suggested as a positive way where employees can enhance both their skills and work experience. Corporate

training materials suggest that teamworking promotes ownership, involvement, quicker decision making, being competitive, improving communication, motivation, information sharing (McCabe, 2000:208). So it claims more research. Here it can be concluded saying that 'a well-designed and properly implemented system of teamworking can bring benefits to both employers and employees. Increased motivation and job satisfaction can lead to gain in productivity through better use of employees' full range of skills and expertise. Self-managed teams, in particular, are becoming more common as companies seek to flatten their traditional, hierarchical management structures'.

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*Appendix: 1*

Teamworking exists in many different shapes and forms, varying across a number of important design and dimensions, such as

1. Teams can be created on a temporary basis in order to solve a specific work problem; or they can be permanent teams to work in a certain area of operations.
2. Teams can be led internally by an elected spokesman, or externally by an appointed team leader or coordinator.
3. Teams can be mixed from a variety of functions, hierarchical levels and occupations, or can be relatively homogeneous.
4. Members can come from different work or functional areas or exclusively from one.
5. Members can participate voluntarily or as part of their employment responsibility (e.g. by being nominated by a superior).
6. Teams can be strictly limited in their duration or can operate on a more or less permanent basis.
7. Teams may meet during working time or outside working time.
8. Team members may or may not receive financial compensation for their team efforts.
9. Teams can meet according to a fixed time plan or as and when required.
10. Team members may or may not be part of the implementation of their proposals.

Source: Mueller, F., Procter, S. and Buchanan, D. (2000) 'Teamworking in its context(s): Antecedents, nature and dimensions' Human Relations, 53(11): 1387-1424: