

## **Top management: the missing stakeholder in the HRM literature**

### **Abstract**

Despite the significant influence that top management exerts on different aspects of people management, it remains the missing stakeholder in the HRM literature. In this paper, we take stock of previous research, and conclude that it is scarce and lacks consolidation. On the basis of our findings, but also thinking in terms of what is still missing, we develop a conceptual framework that may guide further research, advocating for the need to consider co-evolutionary approaches in an attempt to integrate selection and adaptation perspectives, as well as multi-level and multi-actor factors. Future work should systematically address and distinguish top management characteristics from top management agency and link these more clearly to a diversity of HRM dimensions. By doing so, scholars will help to firmly incorporate the role of top management in the research agenda of HRM and pursue different avenues that can be scientifically sound as well as practically relevant.

### **Keywords**

Top Management, HRM, HR Department, Upper Echelons, Role

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### **1. Introduction**

By action or omission, top management –which in this paper refers to CEOs as well as top management teams (TMTs) more generally in order to reflect the highest managerial agents in organisations- exerts a key influence in the decisions affecting people management. Since the advent of HRM, top management was introduced as a key stakeholder of the function (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Quinn Mills & Walton, 1984; Beer & Spector, 1985; Dyer & Holder, 1988) and for about three decades their role has been assumed crucial in guiding strategic HRM (Schein, 1986; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Maxwell & Farquharson, 2008; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013).

As the main decision-maker in an organization, top management’s beliefs and attitudes towards the HR function (Brandl & Pohler, 2010) as well as towards the value of HRM and their employees more generally (Arthur, Herdman & Yang, 2016) may crucially shape HRM effectiveness and the extent to which HR departments may contribute to business strategy. Bowen & Ostroff (2004, p. 209) insist on this idea when saying that “the success of HRM systems ... depends largely on top management support, including top managers’ beliefs about the importance of people, investment in human resources, and involvement of HRM professionals in the strategic planning process”. Top management may, through their actions, increase the legitimacy of HRM policies, commit resources and influence consensus within the organizational hierarchy to create a strong HRM climate (Kramar, 2014). They also play an important role either as primary implementers or as primary evaluators in arguably all the different stages of HRM adoption including the decision to introduce new HRM policies, the

design of those policies, and the quality of their implementation (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). Finally, top management may even redefine, with their actions, the meaning and purpose of HRM within their organizations, beyond that of maximizing shareholder value (Beer, Boselie & Brewster, 2015).

Paradoxically, and despite their relevance, top management have been largely absent from the HRM literature (important exceptions being Brandl & Pohler, 2010; Stanton, Young, Bartram & Leggat, 2010; Frear, Cao & Zhao, 2012; Arthur et al., 2016). And even when they do appear in the HR literature, they do so as a secondary topic or as an outcome of exploratory work (e.g. Trullen, Stirpe, Bonache & Valverde, 2016). This means that some of the knowledge about top management and their relationship with HRM is not very visible for other researchers to build upon. The lack of scholarly attention to top management within the HRM literature could be partly explained by a variety of factors. For example, methodologically, it is not easy to collect data on CEOs or TMTs (Hambrick, 2007). In addition, and regardless of data collection concerns, the fact that HRM scholarship has been driven by a strong focus on the relationship between HRM policies and performance (Guest, 2011; Pauwee & Boselie, 2005) has meant that more attention has been paid to HRM content rather than process (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), hence limiting the amount of research dedicated to HR actors such as CEOs.

Therefore, there is great potential in addressing the role that top management plays in HRM (Beer et al., 2015; Guest, 2011), in as much it is still uncharted territory. A focus on top management is consistent with previous work emphasizing the distribution of HRM responsibilities and roles among a variety of organizational actors (Valverde, Ryan, and Soler, 2006), such as line managers at different levels (Stanton et al., 2010) or the different roles enacted by HR professionals (Ulrich, 1998; Ulrich, Younger, and Brockbank, 2008). Maybe

even more importantly, this is a topic that HRM practitioners deem extremely relevant. As shown in a recent, very comprehensive longitudinal review of the HRM field (Markoulli, Lee, Byington, & Felps, 2017), “the practitioner literature places a much stronger emphasis [vis-à-vis the academic literature] on company executives – and especially on the relationships between HR departments and the company executives who tend to be key gatekeepers of organizational resources (e.g. “CEO”, “board”, “senior vice president”, “officer”, “executive”, “director”, and “president”)” (p. 19). As noted by these authors, HR professionals are craving for knowledge about top managers and how to get their support and cooperation.

This study takes a first step in this direction. Its main intended contribution is to firmly incorporate the role of top management in the research agenda of human resource management. This research agenda is anchored in the literature review carried out in the first part of the paper, and it incorporates the knowledge to date in order to establish, in the second part, a number of proposals for researchers interested in taking up this line of work. We articulate this agenda in a conceptual framework. With these proposals, we hope to stimulate debate on the topic and provide researchers with different avenues that can be scientifically sound and practically relevant.

## **2. Methodology**

To explore the available literature on the role of top management in connection with HRM processes, we started out by searching for articles that included combinations of keywords such as “CEO”, “top management”, “TMT”, “role”, “stakeholder”, AND “HRM” among others, in their title and abstract, within the Scopus and Web of Science databases (two of the most comprehensive in management) without date or journal restrictions. The results were quite

disappointing, as only a handful of studies that were already known in that realm (e.g. Brandl & Pohler, 2010 or Arthur et al., 2016) came out of that search that were truly relevant to our topic of interest. This initial search showed us that there were very few papers where the relationship between top management and HRM took a prominent role, and that it was possible that interesting insights could also be found in other papers where the top management-HRM relationship was addressed only in passing or as a secondary theme.

We thus decided to perform a much broader search with less constraints, even at the risk of including irrelevant papers. To do so, we carried out an analysis of all mentions of CEOs and top management within seven of the leading JCR catalogued HRM journals, namely: Human Resource Management (HRM), Human Resource Management Journal (HRMJ), Human Resource Management Review (HRMR), The International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM), Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources (APJHR), Personnel Review (PR) and Employee Relations (ER). This focus on domain oriented targeted journals seemed pertinent given that our research question focused exclusively on HRM, but unlike previous reviews that focus on one or two journals (e.g. García-Lillo, Úbeda-García, & Marco-Lajara, 2017), ours intended to incorporate a more extensive number of publications (e.g. Batt & Banerjee, 2012) in order to be as comprehensive as possible within the niche knowledge field we are dealing with (e.g. Markoulli et al., 2017). More specifically, we searched in “all text” for the term “CEO” and “top manage\*” (the truncation was in order to pick up on different labels). In order to be able to access the full text of all papers in searchable formats, we cut the search date to 1993 for all seven journals. With this procedure, we obtained a total of 681 papers.

After a first general inspection of the sample of papers, we proceeded to apply a protocol of succession of exclusions. The first exclusion was made with all those papers where the presence of top management was merely incidental and thus had no content to be reviewed. For example, sometimes top management was only mentioned in the bibliography section (n=72). Other times there were mentions in the text, but the articles related to different topics such as talent management, ethics and social responsibility, psychological contracts, or descriptions of firm structure (n=438). As a result, a total of 510 manuscripts were excluded in this first round of exclusion, leaving 171 articles in our database. The second exclusion consisted of the appearances of top management in the sample when they featured solely as respondents of a HRM study because the researchers had thought that they would be good informants for the study, that is, as respondents of the empirical work. When this was the only presence of top management in the paper, they were also excluded (n= 63).

After this second exclusion, we were left with 108 papers that did indeed deal with top management and HRM. From here, the next criterion for exclusion was a conceptual one: at this point we distinguished between the papers where top management featured as actors or stakeholders (i.e., where they exerted their influence or acted in any particular way towards the HR function and managing people by and large) from those where they appeared as recipients of HRM policies or strategies (i.e. where they were the object of the HR policy). Since the objective of this study was to examine the agency of top management in HRM, we excluded the latter. In this final wave, we excluded 8 papers about top management selection, 11 about their succession, 27 about compensation and 32 about other HR practices. This final exclusion round of 78 papers left us with a final sample of 30 articles for analysis. The complete list of articles appears in our reference section marked with an asterisk, and the Annex provides Table

1, which summarises the general focus of each article, its findings about top management and HRM, as well as other characteristics.

Our next step (analysis) was to thoroughly review these 30 articles, paying attention to how they addressed our topic of interest. A first classification was between articles where the topic was the protagonist of the paper versus those that dealt with it on a secondary basis (see Table 1). However, both groups had equally relevant findings, so they were kept together for the analysis of their content. Next, the three authors read all the papers and extracted what we considered were key themes in the papers specifically in connection to our topic of interest. We then met to first create an extensive list of themes on the basis our own initial coding, and second to try to summarize all these themes into a more comprehensive list of major topics. Some of the themes identified included the following: HR managers' perceptions of their relationship with top management, HR managers attempts at upward influence, top managers' perceptions of HR managers and HR departments, top managers' opinions about HRM, top management support of HR initiatives and its impact, relationships between top managers' background and their HR related beliefs, relationship between top managers' background and implementation of HRM initiatives, CEO's leadership style and its impact on HRM systems, and CEO as HRM implementer. We then summarized all these themes into three major content areas according to the categories that were more saturated. Thus, the structure of our results section simply reflects the thematic contents about top management and HRM where more research efforts have been applied to date (for the main ideas of each paper separately, see Table 1). These categories are: top management views on HRM, top management actions towards HRM, and the impact of top management background on both their views and actions. The results of this analysis are explained in the following section.

In describing findings in these studies, we use the term CEO rather than top management when the authors' focus was exclusively on CEOs, and not on other top managers in the organization. Likewise, when authors specifically refer to TMTs, we also make that explicit. In general, though, our interest is always on top management, understood as including the firm's CEO as well as its TMT.

### **3. Top management and HRM: What do we know?**

While research on top management as recipients of HRM policies and practices -such as work on top management compensation or board members' selection- has grown steadily through the years with a reliable track of empirical findings and consolidated theories (e.g. Van Essen, Otten, Carberry, 2015; Withers, Hillman & Cannella, 2012), this is not the case for work that looks at top management as HR actors who can potentially influence HRM within their organizations. Such work about the role of top management in relation to the function of managing people is relatively scarce. Although the search was widespread, we identified only a total of 30 papers, and in only 6 was that the main topic of the article (Arthur et al., 2016; Brandl & Pohler, 2010; Frear et al., 2012; Kelly & Gennard, 2007; Maxwell & Farquharson, 2008; Stanton et al., 2010). There are nonetheless a few key themes that can be extracted from this incipient literature, and which can help us later delineate a set of possible directions for future research. These themes are 1) the relationship between top management beliefs and attitudes and the role played by the HR specialists and department within the firm as well as the HR practices being adopted, 2) the relevance of top management's actions to support for the adoption and implementation of HR initiatives such as new policies or practices, and 3) the influence that top management background may play on their HR related beliefs and actions.

### ***3.1. Top management views on HRM***

Several studies report on top management's perceptions or beliefs about the role played by the HR department within their organizations. Results vary widely reflecting some characteristics of each study, such as time, national location or size of the companies in the sample (for these details, see Table 1 in the Annex). For example, Maxwell & Farquharson (2008) investigated the perceptions of top management in companies in the *Sunday Times* list of UK best employers on the practice of HRM in their organizations. They found that these managers portrayed a very positive picture of the role played by HRM (being involved in strategic decisions and supporting business needs) in their organizations. Differently, Nankervis Compton, & Savery (2002) painted a bleaker picture of the role played by the HR function, showing that CEOs from more than one hundred small and medium sized Australian companies did not think HR managers' work was strategic, and tended to view these specialists as rather passive and, for the most part, not relevant. More recently, Gurkov & Settles (2013), based on survey results of 201 CEOs of domestic industrial companies located in central regions of Russia, showed that the status of the HR function remains merely administrative, even in most innovative companies. Finally, Bartram, Stanton, Leggat, Casimir & Fraser (2007) compared CEOs' perceptions of the strategic importance of HRM with those of senior line managers and HR managers themselves, and found that it was indeed senior managers who differed from the views of CEOs and HR managers and rated HRM more poorly. While these studies tell us about the views of top management on HRM, their descriptive nature, while necessary at a first stage of research, limits what we can learn from them in terms of top management-HRM relationships. This is not to say that further thorough descriptive studies on the topic are not necessary. Indeed, because of the limited number of studies to date, it is not yet possible to derive many inferences in terms of some of variables such as national context, company size

or industry. For example, if we focus on the size of the company, only 6 of the 30 studies contain some fieldwork carried out in SMEs (see Table 1 for details). Of these, three do not mention whether there were any differences between SMEs and larger companies; two of them used company size as a control: Bennett et al. (1998) found no significant differences and Bartram et al. (2007) found differences in the perceptions of strategic HRM between functional managers on one hand and CEOs and HR managers on the other in large companies, but not in SMEs. Finally, Nankervis et al. (2002), whose sample was entirely composed of SMEs, found a very low status, administrative perception of the HR function by the CEOs of those companies.

Other studies go beyond such descriptive aim and explicitly connect top management views with the status of the HR function within their organizations. In this literature, whether the HR department takes a more or less strategic role seems to heavily depend on top management beliefs and attitudes. When CEOs see HR departments only as an auxiliary function, they tend to centralize all major HR decisions (Khatri & Budhwar, 2002; Gurkov & Settles, 2013) in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. In such occasions, CEOs may believe they have the necessary competencies to take on HR responsibilities themselves, and/or that they do not count with the necessary control mechanisms that allow them to delegate those tasks (Brandl & Pohler, 2010). Be as it may, the fact is that CEO beliefs matter a great deal for the role that the HR department will eventually enact within the firm and the type of responsibilities they will be asked to undertake. For example, Thite, Budhwar & Wilkinson (2014) showed in a sample of Indian IT service multinational companies that CEO perceptions of HR importance in these firms influenced the extent to which the HR department could become a strategic business partner. They also found that the amount of importance that CEOs gave to organizational culture influenced whether the HR department could exert its role as guardian of culture. In another

study with investment banking firms, Aldrich, Dietz, Clark & Hamilton (2015) found that the extent to which HR professionals could make strategic decisions depended significantly on the CEO's perception of the HR function and his or her HRM philosophy. Similarly, Bennett, Ketchen & Schultz (1998) showed that top management views of employees as strategic resources was positively associated with the extent to which HRM was integrated with business strategy. Quite paradoxically, though, these authors also found that when HRM was more strategically integrated, top management had higher expectations for the HR department, and also were more easily disappointed with the HR department. Finally, Kelly & Gennard (2007) found that whether the HR manager was invited to the CEO's close group of advisors depended on the CEO's inclination towards the HR function. Similar findings were also obtained in other studies (Glaister, 2014; Sheehan, 2005). The conclusion is that CEOs' views on HRM and HR professionals may affect the power and influence that the HR department may hold. On occasion, though, if such views are not translated in more power, they may end up in disappointments on both sides (Bennett et al., 1998).

While interesting, these studies still tell us little about how top management beliefs and perceptions are formed, and they also tend to treat these beliefs rather simplistically as either positive or negative. Two exceptions are the studies by Brandl & Pohler (2010) and Arthur et al. (2016), which take a more thorough approach. Brandl & Pohler (2010) distinguish three types of CEO perceptions as necessary conditions for HR departments to acquire a strategic role. CEOs must (1) feel they have a wide scope for action regarding HRM policy and activities themselves; (2) they must be willing to share this responsibility with others; and (3) they must choose the HR department to take over this responsibility. As for the Arthur et al. (2016) study, it is the most sophisticated so far both in terms of beliefs analysed as well as specification of construct relationships. The authors propose and test, in a multisource data set collected from

120 hotel franchisees, a model in which CEOs' HR cause-effect beliefs (that is, beliefs concerning the financial pay-offs of investments in HR) influence the intensity of adoption of high performance work practices (as perceived by managers), which in turn influence their implementation as perceived by employees. They also show that CEOs' employee-centred value beliefs (defined as the extent to which managers believe that they should take employee welfare into account in making business decisions and to seek out employee input) positively moderate these relationships.

### ***3.2. Top management actions towards HRM***

A second group of studies focuses less on top management cognitions and more on their actions in connection with the adoption and implementation of new HR initiatives. Top management is recognized as the main responsible for strategic decision making and leadership in people management in key areas such as staff reduction, collective bargaining, instigating change, as well as designing the organizational structure (Valverde et al., 2006), and in some companies, it may also be involved in other HRM-related operational tasks such as hiring, identifying training needs, carrying out performance appraisals, etc. Top management also plays a crucial role in the successful introduction of new HRM policies and practices. For example, Tootell, Blackler, Toulson & Dewe (2009), based on six case studies on the adoption of HR measurement systems in six large organizations, showed how the degree of support from the CEO and the TMT increased the chances that it was accepted by employees. Support could be exerted by espousing the benefits of the new system, or by making changes in the organizational structure to support their introduction (for example, appointing an HR manager directly reporting to the CEO on those issues). CEOs may also support the introduction of HRM initiatives in more symbolic ways by, for example, using HRM as part of their language

in speeches (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper & Brooks, 2014). In a study that analysed the implementation process of twenty-nine different HR practices in different firms, Trullen et al. (2016) showed, in line with Tootell et al. (2009) and Sheehan et al. (2014), that CEO support was very important to make sure that the practices were well received by other stakeholders. In particular, the authors found that CEOs could contribute to effective implementation through legitimating discourses, role modelling, and sometimes by exerting direct pressure. More recently, a paper by Lopez-Cabrales, Bornay-Barrachina & Diaz-Fernandez (2017) shows that CEOs leadership styles (transformational or transactional) influence the type of HR system adopted (skill-based development vs. job-based development), which in turn mediates the relationship between CEO leadership and organizations' dynamic capabilities.

Notwithstanding the relevance that top management holds for the introduction of new HR policies and practices, work in this area also shows that top management support alone may not be sufficient for ensuring successful adoption, as line managers and supervisors' implementation behaviours may not necessarily be aligned with the top management message (Bartram et al., 2007; Kirton, Robertson & Avdelidou-Fischer, 2016; Stirpe, Trullen & Bonache, 2013). In any case, top management remains responsible for providing HR with leadership, legitimacy, and resources, and for the extent to which HRM messages are clearly transmitted through the organizational hierarchy. Stanton et al. (2010) show this in comparing the strength of the HRM system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) in three organizations and noticing how CEO actions, such as granting the proper authority to the HR manager to implement decisions, helps explain differences across systems.

### ***3.3. Top management background as a predictor of top management agency***

While the research reviewed above emphasizes the significance of top management beliefs and actions towards HRM, it does not address what triggers them. Upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) provides a preliminary explanation by stating that top managers' experiences, values and personalities significantly influence the way they interpret situations and the choices they make. Following this lead, some researchers have looked at top management background (such as their education or previous experience) to understand top management agency. For example, Sheehan & De Cieri (2012), based on interviews with senior HR professionals and TMT members in a variety of Australian firms, concluded not only that TMT support was crucial for the success of HR initiatives, but also that diversity of experience from both the TMT and the CEO enhanced their awareness of HR priorities. More specifically, they argued that board members who had extensive experience in other boards, because they were exposed to a broader range of business issues, were also more likely to develop a greater appreciation for HR issues. Diversity of experience has also been pointed out as an important predictor of top management attention to HRM by other authors. For instance, senior HR managers in UK firms -some of them, also board members- interviewed by Caldwell (2011) argued that the CEO personality and experience played a very important role in the extent to which he or she took "effective ownership" of the HR agenda or "fully absorbed" it in the boardroom. They argued that when the CEO came from a purely finance background it clearly harmed the chances of the HR manager to be more influential, whereas CEOs with experience in more than one functional area were considered more inclusive.

While diversity of experience seems positively associated with providing support for HR initiatives, some studies find that it is whether or not top management has HR-related experience what really makes a difference. For instance, Oh, Blau, Han & Kim (2017) found that when the CHRO (as a member of the TMT) had a strong HR specific human capital, this

increased HR managers' commitment to the organization through an increase in the perceived organizational value of HR; and Tootell et al. (2009), in the study on HR measurement quoted before, also found that when the CEO had some HR experience, it seemed easier that he or she supported HR measurement (although it also helped that the HR manager had business experience in non-HR areas, as this enhanced the chances for common understanding).

In another study, Frear et al (2012) investigated the role played by CEO's backgrounds in the adoption of Western-style HRM practices (i.e. high commitment work practices) by foreign invested firms in China, based on a sample of 309 firms. This study differed from previous ones because it tested background related hypotheses in a larger sample, and also because it operationalized background not in functional terms (as previous studies had done), but focusing on education, nationality, and age. The authors found that firms with CEOs with a management or social science degree were more likely to adopt Western-like HR systems. They also found that firms with older Chinese CEOs were less likely to adopt Western-like practices, when compared with firms with either young Chinese CEOs or old foreign ones. Frear et al.'s study was also interesting because it combined upper echelons theory with institutional theory, showing that CEOs backgrounds were partly dependent on the larger institutional context in which the CEO was embedded (Chinese vs. international). While other studies (e.g. Martin & Gollan, 2012) have also pointed at the role that larger contextual or environmental factors play in the type of CEO that leads the firm, and hence, in its approach to HRM, for the most part studies looking at predictors of CEO agency in connection with HRM have not gone that far.

#### ***3.4. Discussion of the literature to date***

The articles reviewed in the previous section show that top management is a crucial actor in HRM. They show that, because of executives' position at the top of the hierarchy, their HRM-related beliefs and actions may shape the organization's overall HRM philosophy, as well as the type of HRM policies and practices that are adopted. With their actions, top management may also affect how middle managers and employees experience and react to the initiatives of HR specialists, thus influencing in turn the credibility and reputation of HR departments.

Despite its relevance, the attention that HRM scholars have paid to this topic so far seems quite scarce (30 articles in 20 years), particularly if we compare it, for instance, with the profuse production of studies on the HR role of line managers and supervisors (e.g. Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Moreover, as stated before, only a handful of these 30 articles are fully devoted to the study of top management in connection with HRM. Thus, even when present, top management often takes a secondary role within existing research, and is not a central aspect of the research questions placed in the study. Because of this minor protagonism given to the topic (as the main contribution of most papers is related to other themes such as the role of HR specialists), authors seem not to be building on each other's findings, which harms field consolidation and theory building around this key area. Indeed, an analysis of cross-references in the sample of the 30 papers included in the review shows the extent to how scattered the topic is: half of them have cited none of the others, 13 have only referenced one or two others, and only two articles cite three other papers. Similarly, the citations received among them are scarce and very loosely spread: 18 of the articles have received no citations to date (although a third of these have been published between 2016 and 2017) and the others have received between one and three citations, with the exception of Brandl & Pohler (2010), which has received four.

Our review, though, also shows that research efforts have been well oriented, pointing at issues of crucial importance such as the analysis of top management beliefs and values in connection with HRM, or the role played by individual differences in top management backgrounds. Hence, any attempt at further developing this area of research necessarily has to build on what we already know, consolidating research findings and creating more connections between the different studies.

Indeed, the studies in this review all seem to point in a similar direction, emphasizing the relevance that top management holds for HRM. This is also evident when examining their theoretical frameworks, which share certain commonalities. The most common theories in which this collection of papers is anchored include a variety of power and influence perspectives, upper echelons theory, strategic choice theory, and HRM system strength (for details, see central column on Table 1). Additionally, we also found single studies using other theoretical approaches such as signalling theory, leadership, and sensemaking and sensegiving, all of which relate in one way or another to top managers' ability to shape HRM in their firms. In some cases, top management influence is bounded by context, and parallel theoretical frameworks such as neo-institutional theory or contingency/configurational approaches are used. It is this *co-evolution* between top management agency and contextual constraints that ends up shaping HRM (Brandl & Pohler, 2010), and which we argue can serve as a basis for further research.

#### **4. An agenda for the study of top management's role in HRM: a roadmap**

In this section, we present a suggested roadmap for what we see as a crucial research line of enquiry in HRM. We establish this roadmap in the form of a conceptual framework, illustrated

in Figure 1. This framework is supported by the literature to date and by existing management theories, but it does not follow exactly the categories outlined in our results section, as its objective is to articulate the areas of research where we see promise and potential. That is, the results section focuses on existing knowledge and the present section (summarised in Figure 1) projects into future studies. We use the word “roadmap” intentionally as our aim is not to be exhaustive, but rather to be open and flexible enough to suggest and accommodate different research areas within this field of interest.

*Figure 1 about here*

Our framework is supported by three main theoretical approaches: one that places top management agency (i.e. upper echelons theory) at the starting point of the analysis, another that pays attention to the boundary conditions of such agency (i.e. neo-institutional theory), and a last one that gives a prominent role to power and influence, acknowledging that other organizational actors, including HR specialists, are also able to exert a degree of influence on top managers’ actions and decisions (i.e. a power and politics perspective). We first describe the logic, structure and connections of our roadmap and next devote one subsection to the further research we envisage for each of its constituent blocks.

Following upper echelons theory, as well as some of the reviewed findings, we expect top management to have a large influence on different HRM dimensions such as the role of the HR department, the adoption and implementation of HRM initiatives, and the overall HRM philosophy of the organization (shown at the far right of the framework under the title *Resulting HRM*). How they impact these different dimensions will depend in turn on the way in which they interpret different HRM problems and situations and act upon those, either directly (arrow

2) or through their influence on other actors (arrow 7, supported by concepts of power and politics). At the same time, as pointed by Hambrick (2007) and in line with our review, those interpretations will necessarily be limited and biased by *Top management characteristics* and individual differences (arrow 1).

As stated previously, and complementing this view, *Top management agency* will not occur in a vacuum, but rather will be both enabled and constrained by a wide array of *Contextual factors* at different levels of analysis, as well as by the agency of other organizational actors (*Other HR actors agency* in the framework). Contextual factors, considered by neo-institutional approaches, may shape how top managers make sense and act upon HR issues (arrow 3), but they may also act as boundary conditions for the effect of top management agency on HRM (arrow 4). An example of the former can be observed in Frear et al. (2012) study, where the system in which Chinese top managers were embedded shaped their (lack of) willingness to adopt high performance work systems (arrow 3). Similarly, an example of the later (arrow 4) was offered by Martin & Gollan (2012) study, where governmental influence constrained the extent to which top management at Royal Bank of Scotland could redefine their HRM system.

In addition to the role played by contextual or neo-institutional factors, we also found some evidence of similar effects in connection with other HR actors' agency, reflecting a power and politics perspective. In particular, the study by Trullen and Valverde (2017) shows how other actors (in that case, HR professionals) may directly influence top management agency (arrow 5). Similarly, research by Bartram et al. (2007) and Stirpe et al. (2013) suggests that top management influence may sometimes be faced with resistance from other managers in the organization, who may not effectively translate top management HRM priorities to employees (arrow 6).

In addition to the described relationships, which constitute the main links that further research on the role of top management in HRM could focus on, Figure 1 also displays additional links in the form of dotted lines reflecting other relationships that occur in the organisational arena, but that are not the direct object of study when addressing the role of top management in HRM. Thus, *Resulting HRM*, apart from being influenced by top management's agency is also affected by other HR actors' agency (arrow 10), as is commonly studied by HR scholars looking at the role of HR departments, line managers, etc. Similarly, resulting HRM will be directly affected by the institutional environment (arrow 9). Finally, while institutional factors certainly shape *Top management agency*, it is also possible that top managers may occasionally also impact the institutions in which they are embedded (arrow 8) (e.g. large firms' top management lobbying of government officials). Thus, these three final arrows represent relationships that exist but are outside the scope of the research line proposed in this paper.

It is important to highlight that the three theories that have helped articulate the roadmap for further research on top management's role in HRM must be taken as an initial but not exclusive backdrop to future research endeavours. In fact, it would perhaps be too easy for researchers to heavily rely on upper echelons theory as the main conceptual avenue simply because of its popular background within the field of strategic management. Instead, in order to reflect the complexities of the reality under study, we suggest that researchers adopt co-evolutionary approaches (Lewin & Volberda, 1999; Madhok & Liu, 2006) in order to encompass the impacts and interactions that generate from simultaneously making choices and adapting to a multi-level range of contextual factors and multi-actor influences. In this sense, the consideration and combination of different theories should constitute a useful support when trying to understand and explain the role of top management in HRM.

In the following subsections, we offer a more comprehensive explanation of each of the constituent blocks of our roadmap.

#### ***4.1. Top Management Characteristics***

As suggested above, work on executives' characteristics necessarily builds on upper echelons theory. The underlying idea is that there are several psychological and demographic or directly observable personal characteristics that may influence executive sensemaking and action in connection with HR issues. Despite the fact that some of the research that we reviewed in the previous section does focus on some of these characteristics, there is still a great deal to be discovered when applying upper echelons theory elements to the HRM realm. For example, researchers could look into executives' personality traits by studying the big five personality traits (Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014), narcissism (Gerstner, König, Enders & Hambrick, 2013; Pattel & Cooper, 2014), CEO's affective traits (Delgado García & De la Fuente-Sabaté, 2010), locus of control (Roth, 1995), temporal orientations (Nadkarni & Chen, 2014; Chen & Nadkarni, 2017), and regulatory focus (Gamache, McNamara, Mannor & Johnson, 2015). Any of these traits, which have been explored in other literatures in connection with upper echelons, could be also investigated in connection with the HRM choices made by top management. Still in the realm of psychological characteristics, a fruitful line of research, as shown by Arthur et al. (2016) and Brandl & Pohler (2010), relates to top management HR-related beliefs and values. As noted in the findings section, most research treats such values or beliefs rather simplistically in terms of whether top managers see the HR function within their organizations as strategic or not. More research is needed that distinguishes between different types of beliefs and values, including those related to HR, such as the importance of human capital, whether employees are considered strategic resources that can add value to the firm, X vs Y theory,

extra-role behaviours, etc., and more general values and beliefs, such as fairness or social justice, which can ultimately mould their decisions towards HRM.

Additionally, one could also focus on observable characteristics such as functional background, earlier career experiences, education, socio-economic roots, financial position, gender, race, age or tenure (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hambrick, 2007). So far, previous HRM related research has looked only at a very small subset of these characteristics such as functional background (Caldwell, 2011), gender (Ng & Sears, 2017), or education (Frear et al., 2012). Within this group of factors, it would be essential to gather how knowledge in HRM, whether acquired through formal education or previous managerial experiences, shapes managers' subsequent HRM decisions.

But work on top management characteristics also needs to go beyond the analysis of CEOs or individual board members. As acknowledged by Hambrick (2007), TMTs are much better predictors of strategic choices than CEOs alone, as leadership in complex organizations is commonly a shared activity. Despite this insight, the fact is that none of the papers reviewed in our database focuses exclusively on TMTs, and only Sheehan & De Cieri (2012) use a TMT level construct (i.e. behavioural integration) in connection with the resulting HRM function. Hence, this is an area with plenty of room for exploration. While characteristics may include all the ones described above when talking about single executives, the fact that they are assessed at the group level opens new possibilities for research. One could explore the role that heterogeneity vs. homogeneity in TMT members' characteristics affect HRM choices, and some research in strategy has done so (Ferrier, 2001). For example, are TMTs more diverse in terms of age, race, or functional backgrounds, more eager to introduce innovative HRM practices? As relevant as the study of team diversity is investigating the correlation of forces

and interests within the TMT, such forces may vary from situation to situation (Edmondson Roberto & Watkins, 2003) in shaping HRM in organisations.

Last but not least, a lot can also be learnt from leadership theories to understand the role of top management in HRM. While the topic of leadership in connection with HRM has been explored in the context of line managers (e.g. Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007), we need more work looking at different types of top management leadership styles (transformational, transactional, authentic, etc.) and linking it to HRM related actions and outcomes (see Lopez-Cabrales et al., 2017 for an example of this). Finally, CEO leadership may also be linked to TMT processes, and in turn to HRM. More recently, for example, Chen & Nadkarni (2017) have shown that temporal leadership (understood as how CEOs managed the temporal aspects of TMTs' activities), mediated the effect of CEO's temporal orientation (an individual trait) on strategic outcomes. It is important to note that we have considered leadership styles in the group of managers' characteristics, but the effective behaviours that managers enact in particular situations should also be included in the agency of those managers, which is dealt with in the next section. In any case, more research on top executives' leadership and HRM is needed.

#### ***4.2. Top Management Agency***

While top managers' personal characteristics may be relevant to explain how they eventually understand the function of HRM and their own position towards it, what really matters is what they eventually do (or reject to do) in terms of people management, that is, his or her HRM-related agency. By agency we understand the way in which top executives engage with particular HRM related situations. Agency is a broad concept that may involve several intertwined dimensions such as cognitive or interpretive, emotional or attitudinal, and specific

actions or inactions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), always in connection with specific situations in particular contexts. Thinking of agency in this way also has the advantage of allowing researchers to incorporate different conceptual approaches beyond cognition and sensemaking, such as work on emotions and executive action (Huy, 2011) as well as practice-based approaches to HRM (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale & Sumelius, 2014). It also allows for a more detailed analysis of power (Sheehan et al., 2014) and how top executives use it to shape HRM.

Some studies to date have started to address the implications of top management perceptions about their own HR departments (e.g. Brandl & Pohler, 2010), but much more can be done both in terms of in-depth understanding and extensive quantitative work. In terms of the HR actions and decisions enacted by top management, the study of time and effort devoted to HR topics should also be further explored. For researchers interested in this line of work, some classic studies on what managers do are at hand (Mintzberg, 1973; Steward, 1970), and later contributions even include the measurement of time devoted to HRM tasks (Luthans, 1988) and the different importance attributed to such tasks between middle and top managers (Van der Velde, Jansen & Vinkenburg, 1999). Further research should nuance these earlier studies with explorations of the functional HR areas and decision-making levels where top management focus their attention; in sum, what do they do in relation to HRM.

Agency may also be explored at the team level. How do TMT members interact with one another and how do such interactions affect subsequent HRM choices? Among the myriad of processes that could be studied, three seem to stand out (MacCurtain & West, 2009): conflict, agreement/consensus seeking behaviours, and team reflexivity. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain these in detail, but suffice it to say that in certain situations such as steep

economic crisis, the extent to which TMT members are reflexive enough and seek to reach consensus rather than look for a quick solution, may have crucial consequences for HRM choices such as lay-off decisions. Hence, future research could explore more systematically how, not only the composition of TMTs but also the way TMTs members interact with each other, have an impact on HRM. There is no research that we know of that has addressed this topic.

#### ***4.3. Contextual Factors***

Despite the clear prominence that top management holds in upper echelons theory, their influence on strategic decisions, and by and large, HR-related topics, is necessarily limited by contextual constraints. In addressing the role of environmental factors, different approaches and different levels of analysis are possible. For instance, researchers could build on stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston, 1995) to show how a wide array of external actors, such as institutional activists, the media, investors, security analysts or even customers (Busenbak et al., 2016; p. 255) may shape top management interpretations of HRM issues and their corresponding actions. The role played by external actors can also be addressed by studying TMT members' external networks. It is possible that CEOs' external networks affect the way they perceive HRM within their own organizations, given the impact that ties to external networks may have on CEOs schemas (Fernandez-Pérez, García-Morales & Pullés, 2016). Research on management fads (Abrahamson, 1991) may also shed some light on how CEOs HRM-related decisions may be affected by their social networks. A promising line of research in connection with this topic has to do with corporate elites (Jensen & Zajac, 2004; McDonald & Westphal, 2011), and the extent to which these closed-knit groups affect CEO decision making.

Contextual elements are indeed varied and can be understood at different levels of analysis, all constraining (and also enabling) executive agency. At the supranational level, it is well established that there are signs of directional convergence in HRM systems (Mayrhofer & Brewster, 2005), which certainly affect the types of choices made by top management. At the national level, one could think of the role of the state, the role of trade unions, patterns of ownership, and of course cultural values as crucial factors that may influence HRM (Brewster, 2007). Similarly, there are other factors at the industry level (business cycles, regulations, etc.) and at organizational levels (company size, whether a firm is private or public, whether it is a subsidiary or not, whether it is family owned, workforce characteristics, corporate culture, corporate governance and executive compensation, etc.) that may affect top management's HRM agency within the organization and thus their effects should be considered in future studies.

A special mention should go to the literature on corporate governance. In terms of governance mechanisms, there is certainly a vast amount of literature, on the basis of agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), which looks at the effects of different types of compensation schemes and monitoring mechanisms for CEOs on their strategic actions. With regards to compensation, indeed, previous research has addressed whether compensation schemes align the interest of the CEO and that of shareholders (Zajac & Westphal, 1995), and has focused on the relationship between CEO pay and organizational performance (Makri, Lane & Gomez-Mejia., 2006; Shin & Seo, 2011). Hence, future research could explore these same topics in connection with HRM. How do CEO compensation schemes ensure alignment of CEO and employees interests? How do different CEO compensation schemes affect HRM outcomes? At a more general level, recent efforts to connect HRM with corporate governance such as in Martin,

Farndale, Paauwe & Stiles (2016) can provide a good background to bring to our topic of interest.

#### ***4.4. Other HR Actors' Agency***

Apart from the wide array of contextual factors in need of exploration outlined in the previous section, a rich understanding of the agency of top management in the field of HRM must include the consideration of how executives interact with other actors involved in the management of people. Because HRM is a managerial function distributed among different agents (Valverde et al., 2006), top management's HRM decisions will somehow be reciprocated by other actors in the organisation, mainly HR specialists and line managers at different levels, but also trade unions or other actors. In order to study such interactions, the stakeholder perspective mentioned above, as well as a processual view of HRM (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) can be of aid in this regard.

Within this line of enquiry, some attention has been given to the study of efforts exerted by HR specialists in order to gain upward influence, thus concentrating on HR managers agency. For example, Sheehan & De Cieri (2012) notice that HR executives who operate in organizations with less supportive CEOs are not necessarily powerless and instead can exert influence by, for example, increasing information sharing with members of the TMT, as well as starting leadership development programs that encourage them to "think outside of their functional areas and reassess the importance of strategic people management" (p. 157). Also based on qualitative evidence on interviews with executives from a variety of functional areas, including HR, Kelly & Gennard (2007) described a variety of informal channels through which HR managers, even if they were not part of the board of directors, can influence the formulation of

business strategy: “direct access to the CEO, having an office in proximity to the CEO, attendance by invitation from the CEO to meetings and/or ‘away days’ of the CEO group” (p. 114), having a business rather than functional orientation and not talking “technical language”. Finally, Glaister (2014) shows how sometimes HR executives try to gain influence by fulfilling CEO expectations, only to make matters worse.

Other efforts in the study of interactions between different HR actors include the work by Stanton et al. (2010), showing the importance of aligning HR messages across top management, HR specialists and executives at different managerial levels, and that by Trullen & Valverde (2017), observing how CEO’s support is important for the successful implementation of new HR practices, but it becomes less essential when HR managers are able to effectively use influence tactics. Given the limited contributions in this regard, we consider the processual study of interactions between HR actors, including top and line managers as well as HR specialists, to be a necessary and potentially fruitful line of enquiry.

#### ***4.5. Resulting HRM***

The framework in Figure 1 relates its different elements onto how HRM will be embodied in an organisation according to the various top management characteristics, agency and influences. This set of elements can be considered as an array of possible outcomes or dependent variables of future studies of top management’s role an influence in HRM. Here we may distinguish outcomes related to four main HRM dimensions, namely, the architecture of the HR function, the adoption of different HR practices, the implementation of the chosen HR practices, and the overall HR philosophy of the organization.

The architecture of the HR function relates to *who* is responsible for managing people in the organisation: will there be a devoted HR department, and if so, how large, with what decision-making power? Will the person in charge of this department have a place on the board, a strategic role? What degree of centralisation will there be? To what extent will HR activities be outsourced, and will these be externalised in order to reduce costs or to afford the internal HR specialists time for more strategic tasks? The adoption of HR practices relates to questions about *what* types of HR policies will be in place, such as high commitment working practices (e.g. Arthur et al., 2016), talent management approaches, etc. This area includes the contents of HR practices and their characteristics, such as whether they are horizontally coherent and vertically aligned. The implementation of HR practices tackles questions related to *how* HR policies are brought from design to materialisation, how they are enacted and the processes at play in each scenario. Finally, the organisation's HR philosophy is concerned with more fundamental *why* questions of the HR function: the consideration of employees as a cost or as an investment, hard vs. soft approaches to HR, in-house vs outsourced use of the labour force, etc. This group of elements are directly related with the most strategic aspects of HR, thus representing a key area where top management's influence should be felt, and therefore a fertile ground for contributions on this topic.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

With the present paper, we bring to the fore the role of top management in the HRM arena and highlight the need for a dedicated, comprehensive and integrated line of research on this topic. It has been argued that strategic HRM is too important a subject to be addressed with insular approaches (Cascio, 2015) and the lack of attention paid to date to this crucial actor in the management of people reminds us of this all-too-common shortcoming of our discipline.

The present study makes three main contributions to the HRM literature. First, by means of a thorough literature review that binds together the (limited) existing findings on the role of top managers in HRM from a variety of—otherwise unrelated—studies, this work provides visibility to a topic that, in spite of its undeniable relevance, remains to a large extent overlooked in HRM journals. Second, by adopting a co-evolution perspective (Lewin & Volberda, 1999; Madhok & Liu, 2006; Brandl & Pohler, 2010), which highlights the interaction of top management agency (e.g. upper echelons theory) with contextual factors (e.g. neo-institutional theory) and other actors' agency (e.g. power and politics) in influencing HRM, we provide a grounded and flexible roadmap to guide future research. Finally, on the basis of this roadmap, we open several research lines to be pursued by scholars that are interested in this topic.

We hope that by having brought together the currently scattered but highly relevant studies to date, and by having proposed a future research roadmap that researchers can pursue and practitioners can ultimate benefit from, we may facilitate the inauguration of a much-needed research line in HRM.

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**Table I. Findings of the studies about top management’s role in HRM.**

ID article	Central or Secondary	Information about the sample	Theories used	General focus of article	Specific findings about TM-HRM
Kelly & Gennard (2007)	Central	49 organizations (interviewing 72 various functional directors): 20 MNC, 10 multidivisional, 7 single business, 12 public sector. Location: not specified (UK?). Size: all sizes (only 9 SME). Sector: manufacturing and service.	Influence, HR competency models	Examines the locus of strategic decision making in organisations, who makes those decisions and the characteristics and competencies of strategic decision makers.	Strategic decision making occurs within a close group of advisors to the CEO, regardless of board membership. Whether the HR manager is invited to the CEO’s close group of advisors depends on the CEO’s inclination towards the HR function.
Maxwell & Farquharson (2008)	Central	TM, HR and operations directors in 6 organizations. Location: UK. Size: 365-12,094. Sector: legal firm, health insurer, financial, building society and whiskey distiller.	Descriptive	Investigates the perceptions of TM on the practice of HRM in “best employer” organisations.	Top managers but not necessarily senior level operations managers commit to and support the HR function. They also portray an important role for HRM when centred on business needs.
Brandl & Pohler (2010)	Central	5 CEOs. Location: Austria. Size: 700-33,000. Sector: insurance, energy, electronics, logistics and education.	Co-evolution	Analyses CEOs’ perceptions of the role of the HR department in their organizations, and the conditions under which CEOs are willing and able to delegate strategic responsibilities to HR.	Identification of three types of CEO perceptions as necessary conditions for HR departments to acquire a strategic role. CEOs must (1) feel they have a wide scope for action regarding HRM policy and activities; (2) be willing to share this responsibility with others; and (3) choose the HR department to take over this responsibility.
Stanton et al. (2010)	Central	3 case studies (interviewing 28 BoM, CEO and Executive Team and 7 focus groups with middle and line managers and HR Team). Location: Victoria (Australia). Size: 260-2,900. Sector: public hospitals.	HRM system strength	Explores the HR system’s relationship with organizational strategy and the transmission of the HRM message across the management hierarchy.	The role of the CEO is crucial in providing HR legitimacy, leadership and resources that create a distinctive HR system.

Frear et al (2012)	Central	309 foreign-invested enterprises. Location: China. Size: not specified. Sector: manufacturing, services and high-tech.	Neo-institutional, Upper echelons	Develops and tests an institutional explanation of how CEO characteristics affect the adoption of Western-style HR practices in China's transitional economy.	CEO exposure to HR ideology positively relates to firm adoption of Western-style HR practices, and CEO embeddedness in the Chinese institutional environment negatively relates to Western-style HR adoption.
Arthur et al. (2016)	Central	120 franchised hotels. Location: USA. Size: not specified. Sector: hotel.	Upper echelons & HRM system strength	TM HPWS values moderate the relationship between HR cause-effect beliefs and the intensity of HPWS programs reported by managers as well as the relationship between HPWS programs and employees' perceptions of implemented HPWS practices.	Firms' ability to translate top managers' cause-effect beliefs about the economic value of HR investments into adoption of HPWS programs, as well as their ability to effectively implement these HPWS programs, is significantly affected by the value based HR beliefs held by top managers.
Bennett et al. (1998)	Secondary	148 organizations. Location: USA. Size: 15-50 (60%); 51-100 (20%); more than 100 (20%) (i.e., at least 80% SME). Size used as a control and found not significant. Sector: manufacturing and services.	Strategic choice	Investigates the factors associated with the extent that HRM is integrated with strategic decision-making processes. Examines the relationship between HRM integration with strategic decision making and performance related indicators.	TM views of employees as strategic resources is positively associated with the extent to which HRM is integrated with business strategy. Paradoxically, when HRM is more strategically integrated, TM had higher expectations for the HR department, and also are more easily disappointed with the HR department.
Khatri & Budhwar (2002)	Secondary	9 case studies (interviewing 35 CEO, line and HR managers). Location: Singapore. Size: 60-3,800 (1 SME). Sector: manufacturing.	Descriptive	Investigates the role and status of HR function according to different criteria such as HR strategy, HR competencies and HR outsourcing.	When CEOs recognise the importance of HR, the status and role of HR departments is more integrated and strategic. They see a need for HR professionals to develop business wide competencies if they want to go beyond performing an administrative role.
Nankervis et al. (2002)	Secondary	107 organizations. Location: Australia. Size: SMEs (92.5%).	Descriptive	Investigates SMEs CEOs' perceptions about the roles of HR specialists in strategy formulation,	CEOs from SMEs Australian believe that HR managers' work is not strategic and they do not play a relevant role within the organization. Both CEOs and

		Sector: manufacturing, retail trade, construction, wholesale trade and transport.		policy development, organisational restructuring and change.	HR professionals must play a role to move towards a strategic HRM paradigm.
Bowen & Ostroff (2004)	Secondary	Conceptual article.	HRM system strength	Develops a framework for understanding how HRM practices, as a system, can contribute to firm performance by motivating employees to adopt desired attitudes and behaviours that help achieve the organization's strategic goals.	HRM system strength occurs when the HRM function is perceived as a high-status, and high-credibility activity. This is most likely when HRM has significant and visible TM support.
Sheehan (2005)	Secondary	13 case studies organisations. Location: Australia. Size: 300-11,600. Sector: manufacturing, chemicals, packaging...	Descriptive	Analyses the status and processes underlying SHRM integration within organisations.	To achieve SRHM integration, TM needs to establish some symbolic elements such as making the HR manager part of the senior committee (and also allowing them to be in the inner circle) and setting up a direct HR reporting relationship. But also, TM needs to directly commit to integrating HR within corporate culture.
Valverde et al. (2006)	Secondary	231 organizations. Location: Spain. Size: 200+ Sector: services and industry.	Descriptive, Strategic choice	HRM is not the sole responsibility of HR departments, but also of other agents inside and outside the organisation, such as top and line managers, and external HRM service providers. It examines how different organisations distribute HRM activities and responsibilities among these agents.	TM is recognized as the main responsible for strategic decision making and leadership in people management in key areas such as staff reduction, collective bargaining, instigating change, as well as designing the organizational structure.
Bartram et al. (2007)	Secondary	132 organizations. Location: Victoria (Australia). Size: 61 companies with <146 empl., 65 companies with 147-430 empl., 58 companies >430 empl. Sector: public healthcare providers.	HRM system strength	Investigates the adoption of strategic HRM from reported experiences of CEOs, HR directors and other senior managers to identify differences and similarities between their perspectives.	The views of CEOs and HR managers about SHRM were aligned, but they differed from those from other senior managers, who also rated the practice of SHRM more poorly.

Tootell et al. (2009)	Secondary	6 case-study organisations. Location: New Zealand. Size: 100+ Sector: retail, hospitality and research.	Descriptive	Examines the current HR measurement practices used by companies and their HR measurement needs, acknowledging their variability between organisations and discussing the need for relevant shared HR measurement models.	The degree of support from the CEO and the TMT increases the chances for the HR measurement system to be accepted and used to inform both strategic and operational decision-making. This occurs more readily when the CEO has some HR experience or a wide spectrum managerial experience.
Caldwell (2011)	Secondary	880 HR managers (255 HR board members and 625 non-board HR director/head). Location: UK. Size: -250 (173); 251-5,000 (462); 5,001-25,000 (101); more than 25,000 (38). Sector: industry.	Symbolic capital, symbolic power	Explores the perceived importance of HR boardroom representation, both in a formal and symbolic sense, and to what extent HR directors can exercise strategic influence without it.	Attitudes of CEOs towards the HR function are vital to the influence it can exercise within organisations. CEO personality and experience play a role in the extent to which they take “effective ownership” of the HR agenda: When the CEO comes from a purely finance background it clearly harms the chances of the HR manager to be more influential, whereas CEOs with experience in more than one functional area are considered more inclusive.
Martin & Gollan (2012)	Secondary	1 Bank (interviewing 8 senior HR executives). Location: Scotland (UK). Size: large. Sector: financial.	Corporate governance, Configuration framework	Outlines a configurational framework linking different models of corporate governance to their associated ethical, strategic management and SHRM policies, in order to analyse the role of HR and top management in the rise and failure of a bank.	It highlights the importance of outside (government) influence in constraining the role of TM in defining HRM. In this case, the HR function also plays a limited role at board level and its weak ability to help leaders to reflect on their leadership style and on organizational culture to bring about change.
Sheehan & De Cieri (2012)	Secondary	Interviews with senior HR practitioners and members of TMT. Location: Australia. Size: not specified. Sector: not specified.	Influence	Investigates the nature and role of Australian HR function in the last five decades and how it has positioned strategically at the senior management level.	Organisational features such as a supportive CEO, an experienced board of directors and a high level of information exchange within the TMT can positively impact on HR influence.

Gurkov & Settles (2013)	Secondary	201 CEOs. Location: Russia's central regions. Size: 150-16,100 (median: 500). Sector: industrial companies.	Upper echelons, normative theory of organizational design	Provides a theoretical framework to study HRM systems in extremely turbulent times of crisis and postcrisis recovery based on the normative theory of organizational design.	Faced with the fact that HR appears to merely fulfil an administrative function in Russian firms and remains incapable to provide strategic advice to TM, CEOs make all final decisions on strategic HR issues and systems.
Stirpe et al. (2013)	Secondary	9 organizations (298 employees). Location: Spain. Size: 700-8,000. Sector: banking, insurance, social services, software, electronics, telecommunications, etc.	Sensemaking / sensegiving	Analyses factors that help the HR function gain greater acceptance for its proposals and innovations by employees. It also investigates the consequences that differential levels of support from supervisors and TM can have for the acceptance of HR innovations.	There is a positive and significant association between TM support and acceptance of the innovations. Analysis suggests the need for the HR department to work together with TM and also line managers so that its initiatives are well received.
Glaister (2014)	Secondary	27 organizations (interviewing 27 senior HR professionals). Location: not specified (UK?). Size: 250-13,000. Sector: various.	Descriptive (outsourcing)	Examines how HR Outsourcing (HRO) impacts on HR's role, competencies and senior management team relationships, and compares each of these to non-outsourcing companies.	HR outsourcing stymies HR efforts to transform into a more strategic function and limits skill development. By contrast, non-outsourcers are better able to establish trust and support from TM.
Kramar (2014)	Secondary	Conceptual article.	Sustainable HRM	Presents the concept and major features of sustainable HRM.	CEOs provide legitimacy to HRM policies, commit resources and influences within-group agreement within the organisational hierarchy. Their support enhances HR policy implementation.
Sheehan et al. (2014)	Secondary	14 organizations (interviewing 13 senior HRM executives, 11 TMT and 2 management consultants). Location: Australia. Size: 1,400-40,000. Sector: industrial, financial, technology, public sector, etc.	Power dimensions	Explores the reasons for the success or failure of HRM initiatives associated with organisational outcomes and classifies them as dimensions of HRM power. It focuses on how the HRM function can enhance the	TMT involved in HRM when HR function exerts power of processes (TMT behavioural integration when HR manager acts as a network hub) and power of meaning (when HR gathers CEOs' support for HRM initiatives in symbolic ways by, for example, using

				context within which HRM practices are implemented.	HRM as part of their language in speeches).
Thite et al. (2014)	Secondary	4 case studies MNCs. Location: India. Size: 40,000-145,000. Sector: IT services.	HR roles, Contingency, Neo-institutionalism	Analyses the core roles played by the HR function of Indian IT services MNCs in their global operations and highlights the key determinants of these roles and the challenges ahead.	CEO perceptions of HR importance in these firms influences the extent to which the HR department can become a strategic business partner.
Aldrich et al. (2015)	Secondary	22 institutions in the capital markets (interviewing 47 senior HR professionals). Location: UK. Size: large. Sector: banking.	Influence & Credibility	Explores the levels of influence and sources of credibility for senior HR professionals, and examines the challenges they face in establishing credibility.	The extent to which HR professionals can make strategic decisions depends significantly on the CEOs' perception of the HR function and their HRM philosophy.
Kirton et al. (2016)	Secondary	1 MNC case study (interviewing 26: 4 senior managers, 20 middle managers and 2 board members). Location: UK. Size: 10,000+ Sector: IT sector.	Diversity frameworks	Explores male and female managers' perspectives on valuing diversity and the extent to which they see value in diversity for the effectiveness of their project teams.	CEO initiation and support are necessary for the successful introduction of diversity management. However, many times, CEOs' attention to diversity is only at the rhetorical level.
Trullen et al. (2016)	Secondary	29 CEOs, HR manager and members of HR team in 8 companies. Location: Spain. Size: 500+ Sector: different industries.	AMO	Examines the role of the HR department in contributing to line managers' effective implementation of HRPs and comparing the actions of HR departments in both effective and ineffective implementation processes in different firms.	HR departments can make a difference by taking initiatives such as seeking CEO support with actions like being actively involved in the new policy to the extent of adopting it themselves, publicly speaking or writing memos to sponsor the new policy, or even exerting direct pressure.

López-Cabrales et al. (2017)	Secondary	107 organizations (HR, production and marketing managers). Location: Spain. Size: not specified. Sector: manufacturing.	Leadership, Dynamic capabilities	Analyses the antecedents to the development of dynamic capabilities from an HRM perspective, and proposes that HR systems are an effective vehicle that may be influenced by a CEO to develop dynamic capabilities.	CEOs leadership styles (transformational or transactional) influence the type of HR system adopted (skill-based development vs. job-based development), which in turn mediates the relationship between CEO leadership and organizations' dynamic capabilities.
Ng & Sears (2017)	Secondary	278 companies Location: Canada Size: largest in country. Sector: different industries.	Strategic choice, Upper echelons, Resource dependency	Examines organisational characteristics and strategies as predictors of an organisation's level of representation of women in management.	The presence of a female chief executive officer is positively associated with a firm's percentage of women in management.
Oh, Blau, Han & Kim (2017)	Secondary	146 organizations (146 HR managers). Location: South Korea. Size: not specified. Sector: not specified.	Socio-cognitive human capital, Signalling	Examines HR managers' own and their chief HR officer's (CHRO) HR-specific human capital as antecedents of their commitment to HR, and the mediating mechanism through which the CHRO's HR-specific human capital positively influences HR managers' commitment to HR.	When the CHRO (as a member of the TMT) had a strong HR specific human capital, this increased HR managers' commitment to the organization through an increase in the perceived organizational value of HR.
Trullen & Valverde (2017)	Secondary	82 successful and 74 failed HR implementation processes. Location: Spain. Size: 50-9842 employees, mean: 885. Sector: different industries.	Power and influence	Examines the use of influence tactics by HR professionals to increase the likelihood that HR practices (HRPs) are effectively implemented.	CEO's support is important for the successful implementation of new HR practices, but it becomes less essential when HR managers are able to effectively use influence tactics.

**NOTES:**

- TM = Top Management.
- Size of organisation is expressed in number of employees.

Papers ordered according to top management in HRM being a central or secondary topic in the paper, then year, then alphabetically.

Figure 1. A roadmap for the study of the role of top management in HRM

