

# **Correlations between knowledge management practices and the existence of strategic human resource management elements: A quantitative study in Brazilian companies**

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## **Abstract**

The strategic management of people in organizations is a challenging interest, given the need to value human capital as a source of organizational competitiveness. Knowledge can be created, modified, transferred and applied in organizational activities and, due to its potential contributions, it's important to identify relationships between knowledge management [KM] and strategic human resources management [SHRM]. To understand these factors, this research analyzed configurations linked to KM and SHRM from 365 large organizations in Brazil using data from '*As Melhores Empresas para Você Trabalhar*' ['*Best Companies for You to Work For*'] [MEPT] survey. A quantitative approach with factorial analysis identified that organizations with more SHRM elements also have more KM practices, thus supporting the proposed two-way interaction between these factors.

**Keywords:** Knowledge Management; Strategic HR Management; Factorial Analysis.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

To keep competitiveness in complex and volatile environments, organizations needs to manage themselves while trying to gather resources that could enable competitive advantages. Organizational knowledge, one of these resources, can be strategic if enoughly valuable and rare while impossible to imitate or substitute (Nonaka, 2004; Probst, Büchel, & Raub, 1998).

A better understanding about how knowledge is created and applied in organizations depends on knowledge-generating ambience (Nonaka & Toyama, 2003) and elements related to human factor at work, so knowledge can flow and improve human capital (Camelo-Ordaz, García-Cruz, Sousa-Ginel, & Valle-Cabrera, 2011; Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). Human resources [HR] management and its demands changed due to markets, demographics and an

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economy based in knowledge and services, which led HR to emphasize organizational effectiveness (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

This paper intends to better understand knowledge management [KM], its practices and how it coexists with HR configurations in Brazilian large organizations and, in order to do so, used data from the survey 'As Melhores Empresas para Você Trabalhar' ['Best Companies for You to Work For'] [MEPT], published annually since 1997. The main question that this research tried to answer is: *Is there relation between the length of adoption of knowledge management practices and elements from strategic human resource management?*.

### **1.1 Objectives**

The main objective is to identify KM practices in participating organizations and their relations with strategic human resource management [SHRM] practice configurations, resembling two of Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall (2009) proposed research themes: human capital leveraging and knowledge as a mediator between SHRM and competitive advantage.

The MEPT survey was used because of its focus on supporting human resources management [HRM] studies and its target audience, that focuses on HR professionals (Fischer, Amorim, Fevorini, & Silva, 2018). There are also two secondary goals, as follows:

1. Identify the length of adoption of KM practices in studied organizations;
2. Ascertain the amount of elements linked to SHRM in studied organizations.

### **1.2 Justification**

Conceptually between HRM practices and the essential competencies of an organization, knowledge management depends on human behavior so information can flow

and leverage intellectual capital, whose importance increased as grew the importance of knowledge towards competitive advantage building (Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001).

From the perspective of the organization, the ability to generate, disseminate and constantly use knowledge to stand out from the competition can be seen as a durable asset capable of generating competitive advantage, as noted in Nonaka (2004, p. 29):

When markets shift, technologies proliferate, competitors multiply, and products become obsolete almost overnight, successful companies are those that consistently create new knowledge, disseminate it widely throughout the organization, and quickly embody it in new technologies and products.

A field of study that has maintained its importance over the years, SHRM presents two emerging areas for studies related to this text: human capital leverage, which can lead an organization to achieve competitive advantage through personnel, and the role of SHRM as a mediator between KM and competitive advantage (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2009).

SHRM in organizations aroused recurrent interest, given the need to cherish human capital as a source of value and competitiveness. Based on the concept of knowledge as a strategic resource, considering its techniques, practices and initiatives, and because it's an intangible resource difficult, if ever possible, to copy or substitute, knowledge must be fostered in a way to identify, select, organize, share, and disseminate capabilities.

Given the possibility to create, modify, transfer and subsequently applying knowledge in problem solving, corporate learning, innovation, strategy development and decision making, it seems to be important to identify whether there is a relationship between knowledge management and SHRM in the companies that participate from MEPT survey.

The MEPT survey has been conducted since 2006 by a partnership between its publisher, Editora Abril, and the Program of Studies in People Management of Fundação Instituto de Administração [PROGEP-FIA], and is currently coordinated by professors André Luiz Fischer and Joel Souza Dutra, from University of São Paulo [USP] (Favorini, 2018).

From an academic point of view, the MEPT survey seeks to support HRM studies and contribute to scientific production, where their data are transformed into articles directed to a professional audience, active in human resources (Fischer, Amorim, Fevorini, & Silva, 2018).

## **2 THEORETICAL ASPECTS**

### **2.1 Knowledge Management**

Based on a set of experiences, information and values that allows to evaluate and embody new data in a fluid and structured way, knowledge can help to make better decisions that translate into actions to attain organizational objectives (Davenport & Prusak, 2003).

For Nonaka and Toyama (2003), knowledge creation, subject to its context, is centered in the dialectic of structure and agency, that opposes and integrates contrasting elements to transcend their original contradictions and meanings while exerting and receiving influences. Organizations generate and use knowledge and therefore must manage it, although knowledge is more a process than an object (Davenport, 1998). Knowledge creation needs to be conscious and intentional but not unprecedented, only new to the organization itself.

KM is the systematic coordination of people, technologies, processes and structures for adding value through creation, sharing and applying of knowledge, as well as feedback from lessons learned, best practices and elements for corporate memory aimed at continuous learning (Dalkir, 2005). In dynamic markets with dispersed resources, organizational structures must foster learning and the generation of new knowledge to integrate the companies' intangible assets and use it as a sustainable competitive advantage (Teece, 2007).

Barroso and Gomes (1999) defines KM as the conversion of intangible assets into values through the analysis, development and use of processes related to this knowledge, while directly relates the importance of KM to the growth of intangible assets of companies.

Knowledge creating contains dynamic interactions between organization, individuals and environment to understand and overcome conditions and contradictions (Nonaka & Toyama, 2003). Developing corporate memory is to continually identify, code, adapt, modify and disseminate insights in a ever changing environment (Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2011).

Foss, Pedersen, Fosgaard and Stea (2014) bespeak that HRM practices can influence on motivation towards knowledge sharing, when people perceive a system that rewards knowledge sharing and have a work climate that foster this practice while not being bounded by a restrictive job design, indicating that KM may be influenced from HRM and its systems.

KM and HRM, along with information technology [IT], form a triangle of strategies whose fit helps to explain and enable organizational performance, and, while IT itself remains out of the focus of this article [mostly due to space constraints], there are four main systems between KM and HRM whose fitting shows the importance to better understand both factors and how they relate to each other: human-reward systems, system-HR flow, system-reward systems, and system-work systems (Chen, Yeh, & Huang, 2012).

## **2.2 Strategic Human Resource Management**

The strategic human resources management, despite of searching appropriate configurations to organizational strategies, should also contemplate the impact of strategies and practices on organizational performance (Delery & Doty, 1996).

The premise underlying a SHRM system is that the greater its efficiency, the better will be usage of synergies to implement strategies and generate competitive advantage (Huselid, 1995). Strategy in people management is the orientation used that gives coherence to the set of practices implemented for HR management (Leite & Albuquerque, 2011).

Similarly, Primo, Oliva and Kubo (2014) argue that human resource management gains a strategic tone when its practices are aligned with previously established objectives. It

should be emphasized that there are still several organizations that don't adopt strategic policies for people management, which implies in a bureaucratic role of little autonomy or relevance (Almeida, Costa, Altaf, Castro & Troccoli, 2013).

Literature review allowed to identify four main aspects to consider HRM as strategic:

1. HR member at executive or senior executive level (Welbourne & Cyr, 1999);
2. Influence of HR on organizational performance by involving with decision-making groups (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Welbourne & Cyr, 1999);
3. HR with formal strategic guidelines (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007);
4. Companies with more than 100 employees (Collins & Smith, 2006; Huselid, 1995).

In Brazil, the initial landmark of the literature on SHRM is Albuquerque (1987) Habilitation thesis. According to Fischer (2015), until the middle of the following decade the studies of this subject were scarce and presented little empirical contribution.

Given the expansion of SHRM-related production, it still lacks studies that identify HR practice configurations and relate to performance in Brazilian organizations (Fischer, 2015). In a meta-study using 2469 articles from 13 of Brazilian top rated journals between 2007 and 2012, Brito and Oliveira (2016) pointed that only 0.6% [16] of these works, who supposedly were related to both HRM and organizational performance, in fact analyzed the relationship between these factors [quantitative studies = 10, qualitative studies = 6].

Lepak and Shaw (2008) discussed the meaning of strategic people management, pointing three main differences between this area and traditional people management researches: the analysis level, which aims organizations, establishments and business units; the emphasis on aligning people management and other organizational factors or aligning its own people management practices; and the emphasis on organizational outcomes, including financial results and managerial perceptions about organizational performance.

Aiming the long-term, SHRM focuses on enabling human capital and the HR role as long term advantage sources, by involving and aligning management practices with reward systems based on mutual gain (Salaman, Storey, & Billsberry, 1998).

### **2.3 HRM Practices and Knowledge Management**

Organizations can't create knowledge without individuals, who are fundamental in processes of knowledge creation and innovation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005). For Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall (2003), KM leverages human capital and enables organizations to respond to threats, problems and changes. The HR role in this context requires creative integrating its traditional practices, rethinking and innovating.

There are four main reasons about why HR should act as knowledge facilitator, according to Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall (2003):

1. Other areas [e.g. technology] doesn't have the skills and capabilities to focus on the human element on knowledge management;
2. KM goes beyond the traditional HR 'training and development' function, integrating it directly into value gathering processes;
3. HR must be a primary agent of change management in organizations;
4. KM requires a flexible and holistic approach that integrates factors of organizational culture, technology and objectives, so HRM must integrate and link these elements.

The literature on knowledge management recognizes the fundamental role played by social and human factors in knowledge creation processes (Boxall & Purcell, 2000; Foss, 2007; Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2009). However, only recently researchers begun emphasizing the need to link HRM and KM (Hislop, 2003; Sánchez, Marín, & Morales, 2015; Scholl, König, Meyer, & Heisig, 2004)

KM systems can improve individual and organizational performance with commitment and involvement in activities while organizing knowledge and enabling interactions (Akbari & Ghaffari, 2017). Hypothesis 1 [H1] of the research bases on the need to link HRM and KM, and is presented as follows: *Companies with greater extension in the adoption of knowledge management practices present strategic management of human resources.*

Despite the conceptual link between strategic HR and KM, there is little research that deals simultaneously with both issues (Jyoti & Rani, 2017). Given the number of articles on KM or HR between 2008 and 2017, there are still few studies that simultaneously address both themes. Journals specialized in one of these particular themes, however, publishes studies necessarily related with their focus, that and may - or not - be related to other themes.

The InCites platform was used to filter main international journals by Impact Factor, while search for most relevant Brazilian journals was made from the Qualis list, where the minimum grade used in this study was B1. The listing of journals with most articles in each category [KM, HRM, and simultaneous, with both KM and HRM] can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: List of topics and journals with more publications.

Themes/journals	Most KM articles	Most HRM articles	Most simultaneous articles
<b>International</b>	Long Range Planning [89], Journal of World Business [56], Journal of International Business Studies [52]	Journal of International Business Studies [212], Journal of World Business Academy of Management Journal [179]	Journal of International Business Studies [33], Journal of World Business Academy of Management Journal [11]
<b>Specialized</b>	Journal of Knowledge Management [674], Knowledge Management Research & Practice [415], International Journal of Human Resource Management [123]	International Journal of Human Resource Management [788], Journal of Human Resources [344], Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources [196]	Knowledge Management Research & Practice [162], Journal of Knowledge Management [157], International Journal of Human Resource Management [65]

<b>Brazilian</b>	Revista de Administração e Inovação [40], Revista de Gestão USP [28], Revista de Ciências da Administração [16]	de REGE - Revista de Gestão USP [151], RAI : Revista de Administração e Inovação [51], Revista de Contabilidade e Organizações [30]	REGE - Revista de Gestão USP [12], RAI : Revista de Administração e Inovação [8], Revista de Ciências da Administração [5]
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Source: Prepared by the authors.

Camelo-Ordaz et al. (2011) has shown that HRM practices contribute towards knowledge creation and innovation by generating affective commitment for employees and making them prone to share their knowledge. A comprehensive HR configuration is required to contribute to other organizational areas, such as knowledge actions or organizational performance (Yamao, Cieri, & Hutchings, 2009).

Applied HR strategies and the consequences of employee attitudes and behaviors may differ from one professional group to another (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997; Lepak & Snell, 2002). Lepak and Snell (2002) also demonstrate that organizations apply different HRM configurations based on value and rarity of human capital in each professional group.

Connections can be made between SHRM and knowledge sharing, who mediates the latter between top management and middle managers, giving the possibility to reinforce effects made by SHRM systems towards organizational ambidexterity [i.e., to simultaneously explore new opportunities and existing competencies] (Chen, Tang, Cooke, & Jin, 2016). However, recent study by Donnelly (in press) warns that ambiguous messages and conflicting interests can erode KM collaborative-based initiatives, such as knowledge sharing, and points to the need of a SHRM system that foster these practices by recognizing and rewarding knowledge sharing in a trustful working environment.

Given the number of related variables, HRM studying is complex and despite the fact that there isn't a unique configuration for strategic managing personnel, a trend can be noted towards individualistic approaches that individualize people by their capacities and contributions while demanding that they care about their own development (Amorim, 2017).

Also, the need to harness intellectual potential and resources from individuals at work as sources of competitive advantage can be underlined (Salaman et al., 1998; Ulrich, 1998).

### **3 METHODS**

All data used in this quantitative study were collected from MEPT survey. To allow statistical analysis, binary questions related to a same item were grouped in a Likert format. The MEPT survey contains 79 questions [16 with identification-purposes] related to this article, with a total of 365 organizations from 33 industries. Data analysis was made using the R statistical environment, version 3.4.4, with three characterization variables and two factors.

Comparison between factors used position, central tendency and dispersal, with a 95 percent confidence interval, and factorial analysis was used to create indicators that portray the factors, with dimensionality, convergent validity and reliability tests. Convergent validity test used average validity extracted [AVE] (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Discriminant validity tests, to assure that each factor is empirically unique, were made by checking if AVE was greater than shared variance (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009), while confiability tests used Cronbach's Alpha [CA] and composed reliability [CC] (Chin, 1998). The minimum required level for both CA and CC indicators is 0.6 (Hair et al., 2009).

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin [KMO] criteria was used to check if factorial analysis usage was adequate, with a 0.5 minimum required level. Factors were calculated using main components extraction. Correlations between indicators used Spearman's correlation, and comparison between binary items used Mann-Whitney test (Hollander & Wolfe, 1999).

### **4 DISCUSSION**

Data reveals that most of participating organizations are until 34 years old [50.9%] and have at least 600 employees [51.8%]. Most common industries were ‘miscellaneous services’ [11.2%], ‘retail businesses’ and ‘miscellaneous industries’ [7.7% each]. The initial model have two factors: Knowledge management practices [‘KM’, Table 2, 4 items] and strategic HR management elements [‘SHRM’, Table 3, 11 items]. Binary items shows that most organizations lacks formally defined HR guidelines [89%] and formally defined identities.

Table 2: Knowledge management practices: Indicators.

Indicator	Description
C1.1	Do the organization adopts a established formal corporate learning system?
C1.2	Do the organization makes systematic evaluations of training and developing actions?
C1.3	Do the organization adopts specific practices for young employees?
C1.4	Do the organization have a program that incentives employees involved with long-term courses (technologist, undergraduate and postgraduate)?

Source: Obtained from MEPT survey.

Table 3: Strategic human resource management: Indicators.

Indicator	Description
C2.1	Do the HR area or model have strategical formally defined guidelines?
C2.2	Point the main responsible for most HR decisions in the following area: Payment.
C2.3	Point the main responsible for most HR decisions in the following area: Recruitment and selection.
C2.4	Point the main responsible for most HR decisions in the following area: Dismissal.
C2.5	Point the main responsible for most HR decisions in the following area: Training and development.
C2.6	Point the main responsible for most HR decisions in the following area: Working relations.
C2.7	Point the main responsible for most HR decisions in the following area: Increase or decrease in the number of employees.
C2.8	Do the organization have a formally defined organizational identity (mission, vision and values)?
C2.9	Does the company adopt formal practices to define, disseminate and evaluate the understanding of its business strategies?
C2.10	Is the main responsible for HR area involved in developing the business strategy?
C2.11	Do the organization define goals in a formal and structured way?

Source: Obtained from MEPT survey.

Factorial analysis was made to exclude items below the minimum 0.5 factorial charge standard: C2.2 [0.38], C2.3 [0.46], C2.4 [0.26], C2.5 [0.42], C2.6 [0.38], C2.7 [0.38] and C2.8 [0.29]. While binary item C2.1 hadn’t correlations calculated due to methods, other items’ correlations were positive and between 0.23 and 0.41 level [with p-Value below 0.001 level], so it can be said that organizations with more of KM practices tends to have more SHRM-related items. Initial and final models are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Factorial analysis.

Factor	Items	Initial model			Final model		
		FC <sup>1</sup>	Com. <sup>2</sup>	Weight	FC <sup>1</sup>	Com. <sup>2</sup>	Weight
KM	C1.1	0.78	0,61	0.34	0.78	0.61	0.34
	C1.2	0.78	0.60	0.34	0.78	0.60	0.34
	C1.3	0.73	0.54	0.32	0.73	0.54	0.32
	C1.4	0.73	0.53	0.32	0.73	0.53	0.32
SHRM	C2.1	0.52	0.27	0.21	0.64	0.41	0.29
	C2.9	0.64	0.41	0.26	0.77	0.59	0.35
	C2.10	0.68	0.46	0.27	0.76	0.58	0.35
	C2.11	0.61	0.38	0.25	0.78	0.62	0.36

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Factorial charge, <sup>2</sup> Commonality. Source: Prepared from data obtained.

Validation assured that both factors are unidimensional, have convergent and discriminant validities (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and acceptable CA, CC and KMO levels (Hair et al., 2009). Figure 1 shows the resulting model, its indicators, their explaining power, the resulting relationship between factors and its coefficient. Considering that the resulting relationship between KM and SHRM was both positive [0.44] and significant [below 0.001], results obtained points that proposed hypothesis H1 is acceptable in this study.

Table 5: Factors validation.

Factor	Items	AVE	SV <sup>1</sup>	CA	CC	KMO	Dim. <sup>2</sup>
KM	4	0.57	0.12	0.64	0.77	0.76	1
SHRM	4	0.55	0.12	0.60	0.76	0.74	1

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Shared variance, <sup>2</sup> Dimensions. Source: Prepared from data obtained.

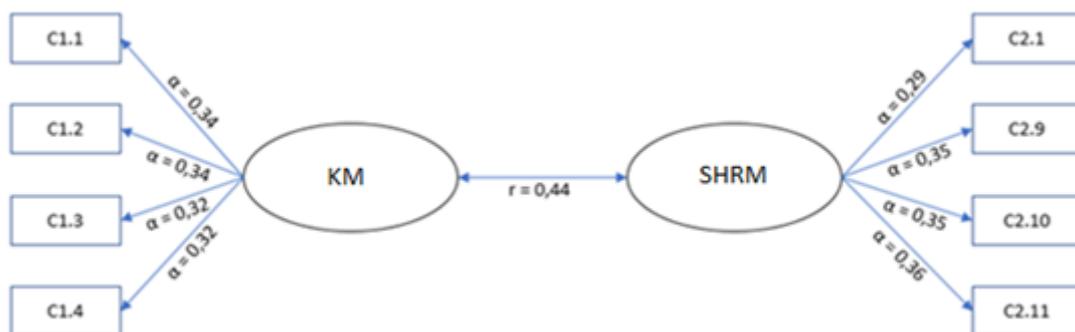


Figure 1: Theoretical model. Source: Prepared from data obtained.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This study identified evidence of a relationship between the presence of KM-related practices and elements that identify SHRM. Under the academic point of view, it reasserts the consistency of MEPT survey and extracted data and contributes to existent knowledge about knowledge management and strategic HRM (Fischer et al., 2018).

By relating organizational practices to strategic performance of organizations in Brazil, it also contributes to an aspect pointed out by Fischer (2015) as in need of further study. It's an area that particularly lacks more studies in Brazilian literature, but even international literature points that there could be more research relating KM as mediator between SHRM and organizational performance (Donnelly, in press; Jyoti & Rani, 2017).

Further explaining how KM impacts on SHRM also allows to, as a practical implication, to think these factors strategically both in isolated and synergical ways. A constraint to be made is the representativeness of the sample. Participation in 'best companies' surveys shows interest towards public recognizing their HRM efforts, but due to its voluntary nature, still may exist other companies with advanced HR management levels.

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