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Exploring the role of HR practices in supply chain

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Exploring the role of HR practices in supply chain

HR practices
in SC

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to establish the importance of human resource (HR) practices in achieving high levels of supply chain (SC) integration through a conceptual framework (depicting the moderation effect of HR practices on the relationship between information sharing and SC integration) and validating the framework empirically to establish the proposed relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – The conceptual framework is proposed based on gaps in extant literature. Data from 60 automobile component manufacturing organizations in India are used to analyse the relationship between the study variables. Regression analysis is used to find the relative impact of predictor variable (Information sharing) on SC integration and the moderation effect of HR practices (training, collaborative performance systems and reward alignment) on this relationship.

Findings – The results indicate that information sharing has a significant effect on SC integration, and the relationship between these two variables is found to be positively moderated by “training” and “reward alignment”, while “collaborative performance systems” does not emerge as a significant moderator in the proposed relationships.

Research limitations/implications – It is expected that this study will contribute to both academics and practice. Along with extending the scope of research at the academic level, it is also expected to help practising managers to understand the importance of HR in SC, and to identify various HR practices which can be focused on to improve SC integration.

Originality/value – The framework and analysis presented in this paper help to provide an understanding of how HR practices of organizations can help in improving the relationship between information sharing and SC integration.

Keywords SC integration, HR practices, Information sharing, India, Supply chain management, Human resource management

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Supply chain management (SCM) involves “the connected series of activities concerned with planning and controlling of raw materials, components and finished products from suppliers to the final customer” (Vickery *et al.*, 1999), which leads to a high level of interactions across multiple firms (suppliers, manufacturers, distributors and retailers) posing complex management challenges since, all the firms in the supply chain (SC) have different characteristics (size, culture, orientation and people). Therefore, efficiently and synergistically managing a SC can be an under-explored source of competitive advantage (Ketchen and Hult, 2007).

In order to make the SC effective, a high level of integration is needed between the firms in a SC. In fact, the very definition of SC has undergone a radical change from



SC being considered as “a set of entities, including supplier, logistic service provider, manufacturer, distributors and resellers, through which the materials, products and information flows” (Kopczak, 1997), to, SC is now considered to “combine and coordinate all the activities into an integrated and seamless process by linking all the supply chain partners” (Tan, 2001). This change in definition has led to a great variety of research in the area of SC integration focussing on two perspectives:

- (1) What are the different ways of achieving SC integration.
- (2) How this integration will help in improving the performance/effectiveness of the SC.

But most of the current research in the area of SC integration emerges mainly from the field of operations, information systems and information technology (IT). The predominance of such research is not unexpected, given that SC integration lays emphasis on integrating the various activities between the SC partners which can be achieved by proper operational processes and IT systems. Lacking in literature is research which focusses on the various human resources (HR)-related issues in SC integration, despite the fact that these issues may have a high level of influence on SC integration. For example, even though all the firms in a SC deploy proper IT and operation systems to integrate the SC, if the people are not reasonably motivated or are capable enough to work on those systems, it will be very tough to achieve the targeted integration. In a similar manner, for achieving SC success, some specific capabilities need to be developed by the SC partners such as developing trusting relationship between partners, developing a flexible organization, seeking total SC coordination, reducing inventory and cost, increasing transparency, etc. For attaining these capabilities, organizations need people who are capable, flexible, have broad set of skills and are adaptable (Chandra and Kumar, 2000); along with these skill the organizations also need HR practices such as training, compensation/reward systems, etc. which reinforce such behavior in employees.

Given the criticality and importance of SC in business, it becomes imperative to understand all aspects of management practices (including HR) that can help in improving the performance of the SC.

The aim of this study is to establish the importance of HR practices in achieving high levels of SC integration through a conceptual framework (depicting the moderation effect of HR practices on the relationship between information sharing (IS) and SC integration) and validating the framework empirically to establish the proposed relationships.

2. Conceptual framework and testable hypotheses

The Global Supply Chain Forum (<http://fisher.osu.edu/centers/scm/about-the-forum/mission>; accessed February 22, 2009) defines SCM as the integration of key business processes, from original supplier to end user, to provide products, services and information. To accomplish this, SC partners need to collaborate and integrate with each other in a way that they can leverage the capabilities of individual partners and manage the SC in a better manner. IS has been discussed as one of the key antecedents for achieving an integrated SC (Simantupang and Sridharan, 2005; Hsu *et al.*, 2008; Sezen, 2008). IS offers three major advantages to the SC members: information is distributed throughout the SC thus bringing in transparency in the chain, the sender and the receiver of the information come closer and develop trusting relationship

and with the availability of information timely actions are taken (Zhou and Benton, 2007). Thus, the essence of the conceptual framework for this study is that IS between SC partners is a key enabler for SC integration; this relationship between IS and SC integration is positively influenced by various HR practices (collaborative performance systems (CPS), reward alignment (RA) and training (TR)) of the organizations in the SC. As depicted in Figure 1, this study proposes that IS between SC partners helps in improving SC integration and at the same time the relationship between the IS and SC integration is positively moderated by HR practices of the partner organizations.

In the following sections, for each of the variable identified, we systematically establish the relevance of the variable based on the research literature and logical thinking and finally testable hypotheses are formulated for the same.

2.1 SC integration

In the SC, a number of organizations (suppliers, buyers, manufactures, distributors, etc.) work together. If these organizations work in coordination and collaborate with each other (e.g. through joint decision making, goal alignment, etc.), it is expected to give rise to an integrated SC. Increase in the level of integration in the SC will provide rapid access to required information, more sensitivity toward the needs of customers and faster response time as compared to competitors (Sezen, 2008). Well-integrated SCs create value for the shareholders by decreasing costs and increasing market share (Lee, 2000). SC integration is an area which has been highly researched using different perspectives. It is considered as a strategic tool, which attempts to minimize the operating costs, thereby enhancing values for the stakeholders by linking the SC partners.

SC integration has been conceptualized at different levels: functional, internal and external integration (Stevens, 1990). The successful implementation of SCM requires integrating internal functions of the firm and effectively linking them with the external operations of its partner firms in the SC (Holmberg, 2000). In this study, we have focussed on the external integration level. SC integration is defined as a process of coordination and collaboration of various interdependent activities in which SC partners work together in a cooperative manner to arrive at a favorable outcome for their organizations and the SC as a whole. The basis of this integration can be

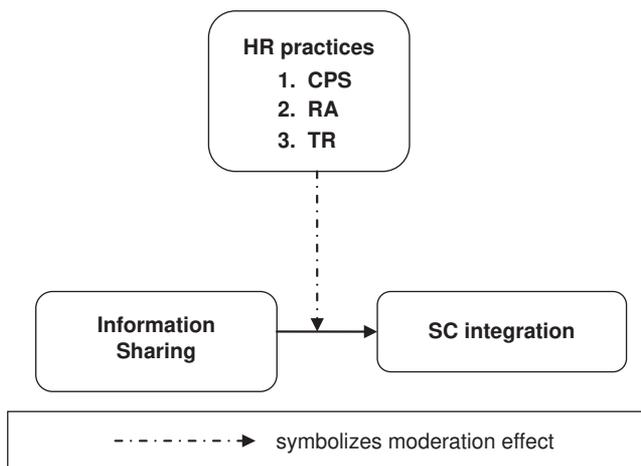


Figure 1.
The conceptual framework presenting the moderation effect of various HR practices on the relation between IS and SC integration

characterized by cooperation, collaboration, IS, trust, partnership and a fundamental shift away from managing individual functional processes to managing integrated chain processes (Akkermans *et al.*, 1999).

2.2 IS

Information is a vital part in the working of SC; many researchers have defined SC in terms of transfer of goods and information throughout the SC (Feldmann and Muller, 2003). Effective IS with the SC partners enhances visibility and reduces uncertainty in SC processes (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999; Handfield and Bechtel, 2002), which leads to improvement in the relationship and integration between the SC partners (Hsu *et al.*, 2008).

The increase in IS leads to improved performance of the entire chain (Yu *et al.*, 2001); selective IS based on inventory-level information and demand information can contribute to lowering the inventory levels and stock-outs, thus leading to improvement in performance of SC and the organization (Huang and Iravani, 2005). On the other hand, studies reveal that when the flow of information has a priority over the flow of goods and materials, inventory reduction and efficient use of resources becomes possible (Graham and Hardaker, 2000). High levels of willingness to share information are needed to support SC competitiveness (Fawcett *et al.*, 2006). Several aspects for IS like relevancy, accuracy, timeliness and reliability can be used to judge the contribution of IS toward SC integration (Simantupang and Sridharan, 2005).

In this study we define IS based on three aspects: willingness to share information, reliability of information shared and the content of the information being shared. The willingness to share information and the reliability of the information reflects the level of trust and commitment between the SC partners. A higher level of trust and commitment between SC partners leads to improved collaboration which in turn leads to improved SC integration (Kwon and Suh, 2005). The content of information being shared directly impacts SC integration as it brings transparency in the system. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H1. IS between SC partners will positively influence the level of SC integration.

2.3 HR practices

HR is a support function for most organizations, but the impact of HR practices on SC is an area which is lacking in literature. An early study by Ernst and Whinney (1987) in collaboration with the council of logistics management found that HR are a critical factor in achieving logistic excellence. SC is a function which has high level of dependence on the other functions within the organization (operations, marketing, etc.) and between the organizations (of SC partners) and when there is a high level of dependence in work between functions and organizations, there is higher scope of conflict if the interdependence is not managed properly. Robust HR practices can play a crucial role here. Moreover, HR practices such as training, reward management, performance management, job design, staffing, etc. are considered important for making an integrated SC which in turn leads to improved SC performance in terms of cost, quality, delivery and flexibility (Shub and Stonebraker, 2009).

HR practices can be roughly categorized into those relating to internal consistency with a firm's own competitive priority and those relating to external consistency with the priorities the firm has agreed with its SC partners (Souviron and Harrison, 2007). In this study we deal with the second type of HR practices which will help in improving

the interphase between the SC partners and will maintain external consistency. The HR practices which are considered in this study are TR, RA and CPS.

TR is considered to be the most important HR practice for improving SC practices and performance (Gowen and Tallon, 2003; Souviron and Harrison, 2007; Othman and Ghani, 2008). The central outcome of a training initiative in support of SC is organizational commitment (Gunasekaran *et al.*, 1994). Our study focusses on training practices which will help develop collaborative relations between SC partners like training on team work, collaborative training of SC partners and training practices emphasizing importance of relationship and collaboration in SC.

RA is a practice which will motivate the employees of various SC partners to work in a manner which is consistent with their mutual strategic objectives, as both benefits and costs will be shared among all the SC partners. The theory underlying incentive alignment assumes that “the individual chain members tend to act in a certain way based on the expectation that the act will result in mutual benefit and on the attractiveness of that benefit to individual chain members” (Simantupang and Sridharan, 2002). Thus, RA between SC partners is expected to improve the SC integration.

CPS is the process of introducing and implementing such performance metrics by all the SC partners which demands and reinforces the performance of the SC. All the SC partners need to measure their performance using a metrics which also reflects the performance of the SC as a whole. Through this, the interdependence which is shared by all the SC partners will become visible in their performance figures too; hence all SC partners will collectively work toward improving the SC performance. Thus, we hypothesize that:

- H2a.* CPS has a significant and moderating effect on the relationship between IS and SC integration.
- H2b.* RA has a significant and moderating effect on the relationship between IS and SC integration.
- H2c.* TR has a significant and moderating effect on the relationship between IS and SC integration.

3. Research methodology

For empirically validating the proposed framework a survey research methodology was used. In the following sections the various steps followed (like scale development, sample, analysis techniques used) are discussed.

3.1 Scale development

A survey instrument was used to collect data. The items used for measuring the constructs SC integration and IS were adapted from previous studies in the SC literature, while the items under HR practices construct were developed based on the existing literature and discussions with industry and academic experts. Multiple items were used to represent the three constructs of interest. All the constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 5).

Questionnaire items for the dependent variable “SC integration” were adapted from Wisner (2003). IS was measured using five sub-sections: willingness to share information (four statements), IS with suppliers (five statements), IS with customers

(five statements), information shared by suppliers (five statements) and information shared by customers (five statements). The questions for the last four parts were adapted from Stank *et al.* (1999), while the questions for the first part were adapted from Hsu *et al.* (2008).

Concerning the measure for HR practices, there were no previously established scales in the SC literature. Thus, developing a reliable and valid scale for HR practices was a challenging task in the study. As elaborated in previous section in this study HR practices as a construct addresses three different variables: CPS (five statements), RA (five statements) and TR (five statements). The items for CPS and RA were developed based on the description of the variables by Simantupang and Sridharan (2005).

3.2 Sample characteristic

To study the impact of IS on SC integration and the moderation effect of HR practices on this relationship, data were collected from tier 1 automobile component manufacturing organizations in India. The sampling frame for this was the list of tier 1 automobile component manufacturing companies listed with Automobile Component Manufacturing Association (ACMA), India.

The unit of analysis considered for this study is an organization. Questionnaires were distributed to 150 organizations through e-mail, postal mail and personally out of which 62 filled questionnaires were received back (response rate of 41.3 percent). Most of the surveys which were received back were the ones which were personally administered. Out of the 62 responses, two responses were discarded due to large number of missing values. The respondents were top or senior level of managers working in the domain of SCM or materials management or purchase and logistics management or operations.

3.3 Establishing the validity and reliability of the measurement scale

The scale was reviewed by five industry professionals in the area of SCM, five academic experts working in the same area and ten senior researchers working in the area of HR and SCM for face validity (mere appearance that a message is valid) and content validity (the degree to which the scale provides an adequate depiction of the conceptual domain that it is designed to cover). Based on reviewers' suggestions, the language of some of the items were reconsidered and corrected.

Reliability of a scale is the extent to which the instrument measures the intended issue consistently. For testing the reliability of the scale, Cronbach's (1951) α was calculated, the minimal advisory level of which is 0.6. The Cronbach's α values for all the variables and constructs are reported in Table I. It was seen that the α value for all the constructs and variables were above the minimum advisory level and hence the scales were considered as reliable.

Variables	No. of items	Cronbach's α
Information sharing	24	0.937
SC integration	19	0.930
HR practices	16	0.906
CPS	5	0.776
RA	5	0.801
TR	6	0.876

Table I.
Reliability scores for
the variables

3.4 Statistical analysis used

Simple linear regression was used to establish the relationship between IS and SC integration. The moderation effect of HR practices (as a construct and for each variable taken separately) was checked utilizing Baron and Kenny’s (1986) method. The full analysis was done using the statistical package SPSS (version 15).

4. Findings

The regression coefficient for the independent variable (IS) was found to be positive and statistically significant, suggesting that IS has a significant effect on SC integration in a positive manner, thus supporting the hypothesis *H1*. The result of the regression analysis is reported in Table II. The relationship between IS and SC integration was found to be positively moderated by “TR” and “RA,” while “CPS” did not emerge as a significant moderator in the proposed relationships, thus supporting the hypotheses *H2b* and *H2c*, while no significant support was found for hypothesis *H2a*. Table III gives the results for effect of each moderator variable (CPS, RA and TR) separately.

5. Discussion

This study appears to confirm a positive and significant relationship between IS between SC partners and SC integration as hypothesized. Among the various HR practices variables which were expected to moderate the relationship between IS and SC integration; RA and TR significantly moderated the relationship, while no significant evidence were found for CPS as a moderator.

The reason for CPS not emerging as significant may be attributed to the new concept of CPS. Although the respondent firms talk about collaboration and coordination with their SC partners, when it comes to performance, the performance matrix of the organization reflects only their own performance without reflecting the SC performance. Clearly, awareness about this concept is still lacking in the industry.

<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	β	Significance
0.828	0.686	0.681	0.828	0.000

Table II.
Regression results

Moderator	SC integration		
	CPS	RA	TR
<i>R</i> ²			
B	0.686	0.686	0.686
A	0.520	0.751	0.717
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²			
B	0.681	0.681	0.681
A	0.512	0.738	0.702
Significance level	0.128	0.000	0.003

Table III.
Results for moderation
effect of various
HR practices

Notes: B, before adding moderator; A, after adding moderator

This study, however, reveals that HR practices such as RA (for motivating the employees to work for a common goal) and TR (for providing the employees the necessary skill set to work in a highly interdependent environment with collaboration) will improve the relationship between IS and SC integration, thus bringing out the importance of HR in the area of operations. The moderation effect reveals that even if the IS between the SC partners (operational variable) is able to positively influence the SC integration (operational variable) to a certain extent, the influence of HR gives an added advantage to this relationship. It is thus clear that it is not essential to focus on factors like HR with operations to improve on the operational performance, but it is necessary to do so to get an added advantage/improvement, which can become the source of competitive advantage for the organization and the SC.

6. Managerial implications of the research

It is expected that this study will have contributions for both academicians and practitioners. Along with extending the scope of research at the academic level, it is also expected to help practicing managers to understand the importance of HR in gaining SC effectiveness. In today's business scenario two things have become very evident, the first being the replication of technology and systems and the second being the interdependence between functional areas.

Because of the easy replicability of any technology and system it has become very tough to compete in the market. If an organization wants to make its mark in the market it has to come up with certain systems which cannot be replicated easily by the competitors and here comes the area of HR, any system where the main focus is on people cannot be replicated easily. Thus, the present research draws the focus of the practicing managers on an area that can be tapped on to improve the operational performance of the SC. With the increased interdependence between functions it becomes essential for organizations to bring in certain HR practices which help the people of the organization to deal with such interdependence. The present study gives an idea on what types of HR practices will help in dealing with interdependence. The study results are also expected to help the managers to identify various HR practices which need to be focussed on to improve SC integration.

7. Limitations and conclusion

Despite the contributions, this study does leave scope for further improvement. For example, the sample size used for the study is small, the construct validity of the new measurement scale for HR practices has not been established yet, the study has been conducted only in one sector and there is a need to do similar study in other sectors also. The study tries to integrate only two functional areas: HR and SC, while there are other areas like strategy, marketing, etc. which can also have impact on the operational performance.

At an overall level, the framework and analysis presented in this paper is expected to help in providing an understanding of how HR practices of the organizations can help in improving the relationship between IS and SC integration.

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