

REGIONAL DISTINCTIVENESS IN RELATIONS OF HRM DECISION-MAKING AND FIRM-LEVEL OUTCOMES

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Abstract

The literature review giving the theoretical framework of the current research concept introduces the crossroads of two extensively discussed considerations of human resource management (HRM). The concept intends to incorporate the cornerstones of both approaches, namely the one focusing on the HRM – firm-performance linkages and the other intending to identify region-specific characteristics of the HRM. In the focus of the analyses we investigate five HR areas with respect of its decision-making practices and actors. Our current research concept tries to contribute with this consideration to the HRM model-developments, building on empirical evidence.

The data used for analysis is provided by the Cranet-network 2008/10 survey round. The primary results of analysis of the descriptive data raised the necessity of using more advanced statistical instruments. Chi-Square tests were implemented to test independency between two qualitative variables: the HR decision-making practices of the actors, and the levels of 6 firm-performance indicators. Cramer's V is used to measure the strength of the stochastic relationships. As a further investigation, correspondence analysis helped us to see the nature of the relationships in a more visible way (correspondence maps were drawn).

Key words: strategic HRM, line managers' role in HR, decision-making practices and actors in HR, firm performance, comparative IHRM, HRM in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

JEL classification: M12 – Personnel Management.

1. Introduction

Based on the empirical evidence provided by the high-profile Cranet network, the main aim of our paper is to strengthen the understanding of the nature of strategic HRM, with controlling the role of one usually neglected, consequently poorly understood indicator of it. The evidence about the regional differences in HR practices seeking to explain their reasons justifies our other intention to identify new features concerning both the well- and the under-researched regions of the world, with our special interest to the common and specific features of HRM in CEE region.

Although the data used in the paper describes organization level HR practices, the level of our analysis takes this to a higher level and searches for global and regional commonalities. Based on this, we expect that the research outcomes to be discussed in this paper would be of interest not only to scholars but also HR professionals and leaders – in the CEE (including Baltic) region and outside.

2. Theoretical background

Over the past 20 years, there has been a considerable expansion in theory and research about the relationship between human resource management (HRM) and organizational performance. In his contemporary review Guest (2011) identifies 5 – 6 distinctive phases of these developments, where according to his view the first phase presented only the promise of HRM in the form of semi-descriptive analytic frameworks alongside somewhat anecdotal cases that appeared to confirm the promise of the association between HRM and firm performance (Beer et al., 1984; Walton, 1985). Later survey-based, statistically analyzed studies began to appear and these indicated that the adoption of better HR practices was associated with higher performance (Huselid, 1995; Delery & Dotty, 1996). The implications

of further backlashes and reflections from one part lead to the recognition of the need for determining both the appropriate HR practices and the measures of performance (*Becker & Gerhard 1996; Dyer & Reeves, 1996*) and from the other part raised the question of generalisability. Along with the later, the universalist, contingency and configurational perspectives appeared (*Becker & Gerhard 1996; Delery & Dotty, 1996*).

Afterward the international comparative surveys provided evidence about the significant differences in HRM around the world (*Keating and Thompson, 2004*). These variations have been attributed to differences in national cultural and institutional (legal, economic and social) environments (*Clark, 1996; Brewster et al., 2000*). The needs for relevant explanations till now lead to sophisticated theories both at the institutional (*Wood et al., 2012*) and the cultural perspectives (*Reiche et al., 2012*) of comparative HRM.

The growing sophistication and complexity of the theory and research on HRM and performance incorporated the importance of several new elements, and actors. Such as the role of workers voice and perception (*Wright & Boswell, 2002*), and beside the collection of data on the presence of good HR practices, its proper implementation (*Bowen & Ostroff, 2004*) is also important and focusing on the role of the line management, as it is also particularly analyzed by Brewster and Larsen (*2000*). As a supplement to the potential actor, Guest (*2011*) states, that there is evidence (at least for the UK), that HR professionals pay little role in HR innovations and this raises the question of who takes decisions about HR innovations.

In line with the new developments, the original consideration about the HRM – performance linkage remained in heart of the concept. Nowadays the usage of HRM as a contribution to organizational effectiveness in many cases defines itself as strategic *HRM* (*Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2012*).

Building on the above mentioned current concepts of HR, our research from one point considers the HRM as a subject area, defined by Brewster & Mayrhofer (*2012*) and investigates five HR areas with respect of its decision-making practices and actors. From another point our analyses is seeking to find relationships between the decision-making practices and firm performances both in the total sample and in four different regions of the world, participating in the Cranet 2008/10 survey.

3. Methodology: research design and data analysis

Data and Sample

The data used for analysis is provided by the Cranet-network 2008/10 survey round. The standardized questionnaires containing six sections in all participating countries of the network were sent to most senior HR managers of the organizations employing more than 100 people. Along with around 10% overall response rates the received 6258 questionnaires arrived from 32 countries of the globe.

To fulfill the aims of the current research the investigated regions or clusters of the Cranet survey were created by combining the pure geographic regions with distinctive management cultures (*Gooderham & Nordhaug, 2011; Reiche et al., 2012*).

The total size of the sample regarding these questions was 4298. Figure 1 shows the distribution of this number by regions, where (and in the following) the regions are:

- **CEE** = 9 Central and Eastern European incorporating two Baltic (former socialist) countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia);

- **EU nonCEE** = a further 16 countries of Europe or close to Europe in a geographic sense;
- **nonEU AS** = 3 non-European Anglo-Saxon countries (Australia, South Africa, USA) and
- **SEA** = 3 countries of South-East Asia (Japan, Philippines, Taiwan).

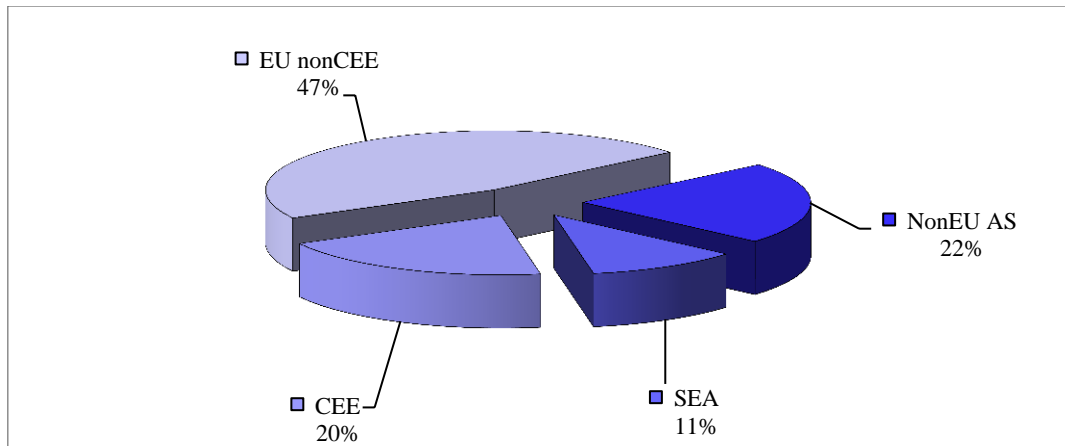


Figure 1: Proportion of organizations from the four regions in the Cranet 2008/2010 survey (own study)

The current paper focuses on the answers given only for two types of questions of the Cranet survey. The independent variable examined in the research – decision-making practices in key HR positions – is based on the question of Cranet survey standard questionnaire asking: “Who has primary responsibility for major policy decisions on the following issues: Pay and benefits, Recruitment and selection, Training and development, Industrial relations and Workforce expansion/reduction. Here we examined if the potential decision-makers (HR department, or line management) make decisions on their own or in consultation with the other parties. The six firm performance indicators (service quality, productivity, profitability, rate of innovation, stock market performance and environmental matters) as dependent variables are gained from the relative value judgments (compared to other organizations in the sector) of the respondents perceptions, given on a five-point scale as follows: poor or at the low end of the industry; below average; average or equal to the competition; better than average; superior. These self-report measures or perceived, subjective evaluations are widely accepted as reasonable substitute of objective measures of performance, since the examined cases showed convergent construct validity between the two measures (Wall *et al.*, 2004; Wan-Jing and Tung, 2005).

Primary results

The interesting outcomes of the descriptive data-analysis grouped into specific regions/clusters encouraged our research team to define and control the relevance of several hypotheses with the purpose of offering new contributions to the rich literature of the investigated “HRM – firm-performance” field. To reach this aim this paper introduces the results of the analyses supported by more advanced statistical instruments, but starting with the main findings of the descriptive analyses as an exploratory background.

Examining the descriptive statistic of the total sample we found that the most typical method of HR decision-making is the consultative one, resulting in shared responsibility: the

proportion of decisions made by line managers or HR specialists after consulting the other party was 60-70%. However the analyses by regions pointed out specific deviances from the general similarities of the full picture, as follows:

- While organization size distribution in the **EU nonCEE** region is very similar to the total sample, the *consultative decision-making and the shared responsibility* aspect of the key HR functions (except for IR) is stronger here. These results overshadow the individual decision-making of both participant parties.
- In **SEA** organizations (similar in size distribution to both the total sample and EU nonCEE region), *HR decision-makers are characteristically members of the HR department* (alone, or after consultation), rather than line managers.
- Organizations of **nonEUAS** countries, larger than those of the total sample, show a similarity to the SEA solutions: in addition to a mutually consultative HR practice resulting in shared responsibility, the *strong decision-making powers of the HR department* is the norm.
- In the organizations from the **CEE** countries (see right segment of Figure 2.) shared decision-making features in HR diverge to the other direction from the total sample than regions previously examined. The consultative aspect is less strong (40-60%) and *single decision-making is in the hands of the line management* rather than the HR department.

Hypotheses

In summary, based on the literature review and the indications of the descriptive analysis our general research assumption (H1) states that: *The actors and the way of HR decision-making affect the firm performances.*

Our *hypothesis* about the relationship in general (H2) assumes that: *The HR decisions made on a mutually consulted way – between the partners, sharing responsibility for managing people – leads to better firm-level performances.*

In particular this assumption states, that the higher the number of the HR issues (from the investigated five) where the policy decision are made either by HR department or line managers, but in consultation with each other, the better the chance for reaching higher levels of different organizational performance indicators. Consequently, the HR policy-decisions made by either potential actor, but alone, result in lower performance level.

Data analysis

To control the relevance of the hypothesis, Chi-Square tests were implemented to test the independency between the two qualitative (categorical) variables. Cramer's measure of association (also known as Cramer's V) is used to measure the strength of the stochastic relationships. As a further investigation, correspondence analysis helped us to see the nature of the relationships in a more visible way (correspondence maps were drawn). The software we used is IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0.

Research results

The focus of our research was therefore first to find out if there is a connection (and if so, in which regions) between the perceived relative level of the six organizational performance indicators (see Table 1) and the number of HR decision-making areas based on mutual consultation, where stronger consultation (covering the most of the five HR areas taken into consideration) leads to better organizational performance. For a counter-check, we

use decisions made alone, either by HR or line managers in the five HR subjects, where our hypothesis predicts the lowest performance.

Table 1: Relationships between the numbers of mutually consulted decision-making in HR areas and firm performance indicators in the total sample and in the four regions of Cranet survey 2008/10 (own study)

A	1. Level of service quality				2. Level of productivity				3. Level of profitability			
	N	Chi-Square	P value	Cramer	N	Chi-Square	P value	Cramer	N	Chi-Square	P value	Cramer
CEE	922	32.184	0.041*	0.093	840	21.706	0.357	0.079	848	43.410	0.002**	0.112
EU nonCEE	2325	39.437	0.006**	0.065	2305	33.589	0.029*	0.060	2207	43.031	0.002**	0.070
nonEU AS	584	20.871	0.405	0.095	579	189.237	0.506	0.091	513	37.642	0.010*	0.135
SEA	594	27.314	0.127	0.107	590	45.337	0.001**	0.139	593	40.723	0.004**	0.131
Total sample	4425	46.552	0.001**	0.051	4344	57.297	0.000**	0.057	4161	107.643	0.000**	0.080

B	4. Rate of innovation				5. Stock market performance				6. Level of environmental matters			
	N	Chi-Square	P value	Cramer	N	Chi-Square	P value	Cramer	N	Chi-Square	P value	Cramer
CEE	863	46.690	0.001**	0.116	549	53.664	0.000**	0.156	815	45.213	0.001**	0.118
EU nonCEE	2279	51.959	0.000**	0.075	1228	37.016	0.012*	0.087	2168	30.993	0.055	0.060
nonEU AS	566	26.174	0.160	0.108	282	22.638	0.307	0.142	535	47.459	0.001**	0.149
SEA	590	34.348	0.024*	0.121	500	11.244	0.940	0.075	484	27.294	0.127	0.146
Total sample	4298	115.816	0.000**	0.082	2559	103.074	0.000**	0.100	4002	63.812	0.000**	0.063

Based on Table 1, showing the comprehensive results of our analysis, and testing the validity of our H1 hypothesis, we can preliminary say that:

1. Globally, meaning on the total sample level, statistically significant correspondences are found between all six performance indicators and the number of HR decision-making based on mutual consultation, which is strong evidence for the validity of a less-examined aspect of strategic HR;
2. Europe (CEE and nonCEE both) shows a significant stochastic relationship for most (five out of six) performance indicators; nonEU AS the least (two out of six). These characteristics inspire further investigation of regional differences while also providing a chance to identify them;
3. While for one performance indicator (profitability) every region shows a significant relationship with consultative decision-making, for the other five it's only 3 or 4 out of the 5 regions that directs our attention to the value of examining the correlation individually for each performance factors;
4. Although we found that most of the examined stochastic relationships are significant (Chi-Square test's p-value < 0.05) values of Cramer's V put its intensity under the level medium – this is an indication to treat reasoned results carefully and provide additional evidence by new investigations.

Based on the above, we introduce the results of our research focusing on the three segments of the global features (total sample), regional and performance indicator characteristics.

The HR decision-making and firm performance relationship on global level

Primarily, we can state that as in the total sample, all six performance elements have a stochastic relationship with analyzed HR decision-making practices, and moreover out of the 30 controlled relationships, over 70% (22) is significant (Chi-Square test p-value < 0.05), our hypothesis (H1) on the existence of such a connection in the total sample and in the majority of the investigated regions holds mostly true.

In the total sample, the relationships we found also prove our H2 hypothesis on the nature of the correspondence, as results show, in line with our expectations, that HR decisions based on mutual consultation lead to a better organizational performance. Connections made visible by the correspondence maps show that for three out of the six performance indicators, the levels and degrees of each indicator are also harmonious with our expectations.

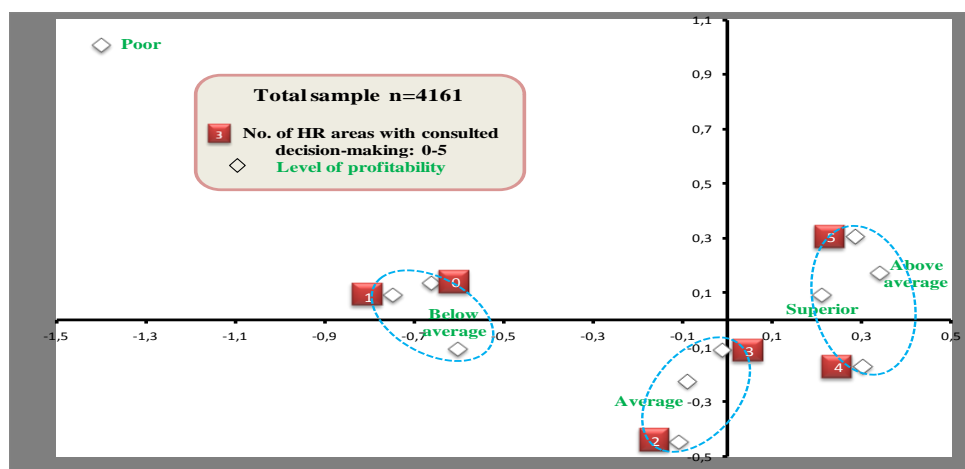


Figure 2: Relationships between the level of profitability and the number of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making – Total sample (own study)

For level of profitability, stock market performance and level of environmental matters it is true that unilateral decisions or consultation in only one HR field have a poor or at the low end of the industry or below average performance rating, consultation in 2 – 3 HR areas an average or equal to the competition, while consultation in 4 – 5 areas brings a better than average, or superior ratings. (See, for example, the correspondence map of profitability on Figure 2.)

In the case of the other three performance indicators of the total sample (level of productivity, service quality and rate of innovation), the linear relationships (if we consider the measurement scale of the categorical variables as ordinal) described above are true with an added factor, meaning that for each, HR decisions made unilaterally by either party can also lead to a rating of average (this due to CEE and SEA practices). (See, for example, the correspondence map of productivity on Figure 3.)

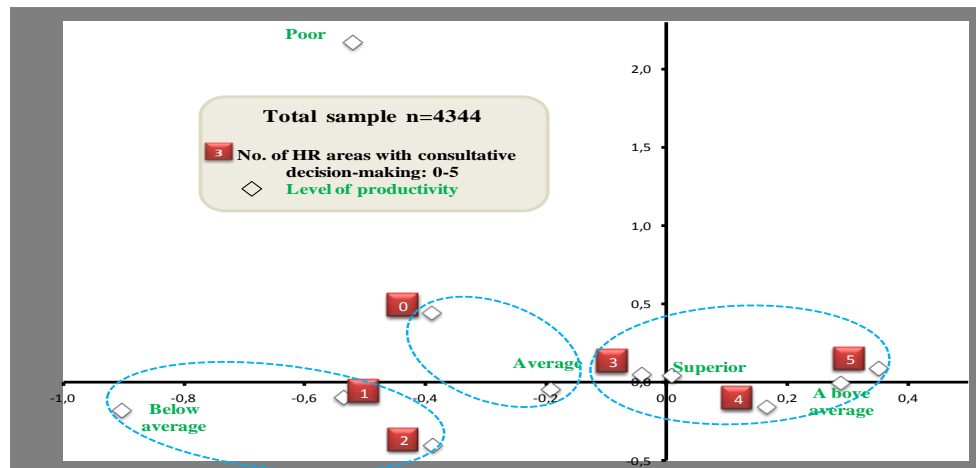


Figure 3: Relationships between the level of productivity and the number of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making – Total sample (own study)

Beyond this, though, we see on all 5 correspondence maps that the few (1 or 2) areas of consultative HR decision-making can be found in the surroundings of the poor, below average or average ratings, while the many (3 – 5) areas are surrounded by the better than average statuses (see Figure 4).

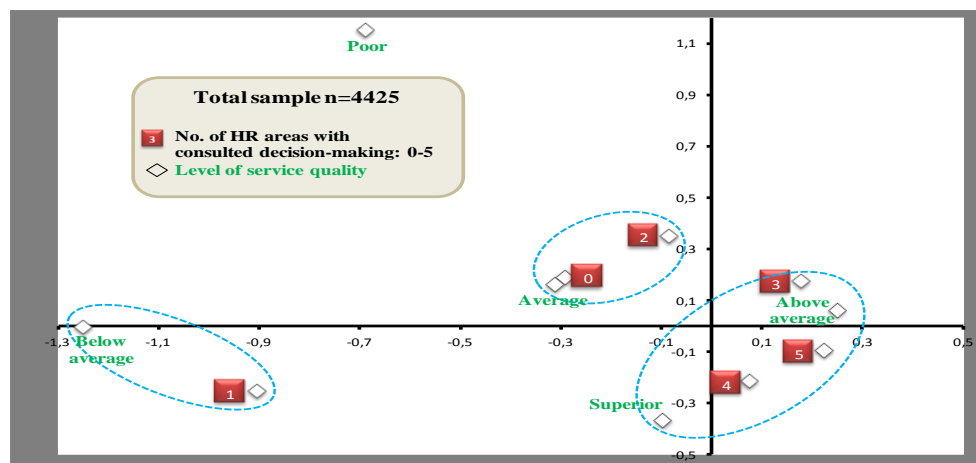


Figure 4: Relationships between the numbers of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making and the level of service quality – Total sample (own study)

The regional specifics of HR decision-making and firm performance relationship

Examination of relationships found in the total sample and proving our hypothesis on the level of regions shows specificities that differ from the harmony and similarities of the total sample – we will outline these differences in the following:

- HR decisions in **EU nonCEE** region show for two performance indicators (service quality and profitability) that consultation in “only” four areas brings better results than consultation everywhere (all five HR field) (see Figure 5 for service quality); also that for productivity, it is quite common for many consultation areas (4 or 5) to lead to a below average performance level.

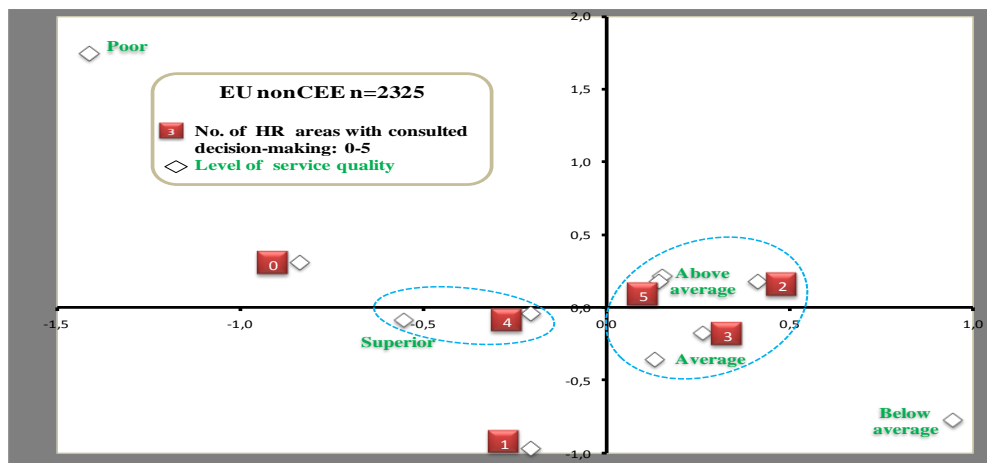


Figure 5: Relationships between the numbers of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making and the level of service quality – EU non CEE region (own study)

The evidence found in this region, where the respondents apply shared responsibility – consultative decision-making – most consistently, point out the limitations of its mechanical application.

- The **CEE region's** HR decision-making practices (different from both the total sample and EU nonCEE region) have as a main characteristic a strong role for line managers in determining HR practices by unilateral decisions. This practice leads to, in several performance indicators (e.g. service quality, innovation, see Figure 6), not to poor, but average levels of performance.

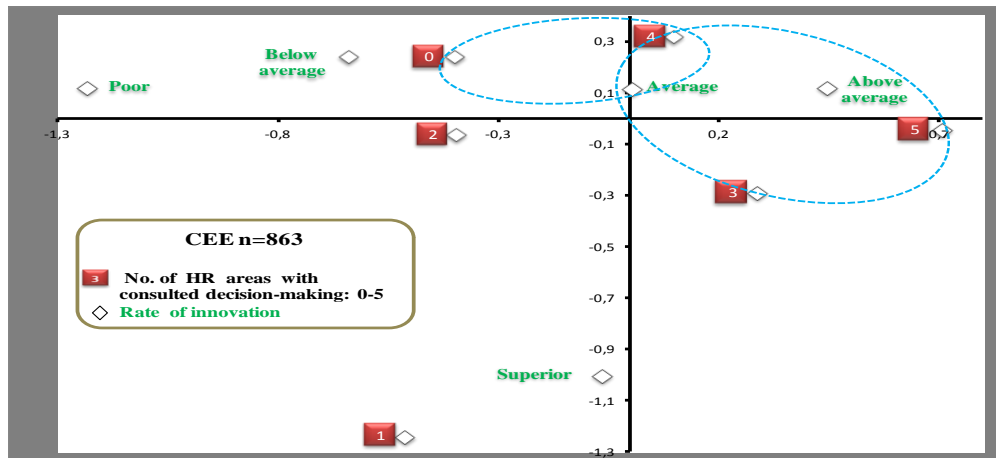


Figure 6: Relationships between the numbers of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making and the rate of innovation – CEE region (own study)

However, while there is a clear relationship between a restricted number of HR areas characterized by mutually consulted decision-making and lower than average performance, and also between more consultation and higher than average performance, these signs have no bearing on the organizations' HR decision-making in the region.

- Results from the **SEA region** show organizational behavior rather similar to that of the CEE region, except for the fact that here it is the HR professionals making unilateral decisions. This is true despite the outcomes of this practice showing that superior performance ratings are connected to consultation in 4 – 5 areas, while 1 or 2

areas on consultation are only enough to achieve below average performance levels – see an example of profitability on Figure 7.

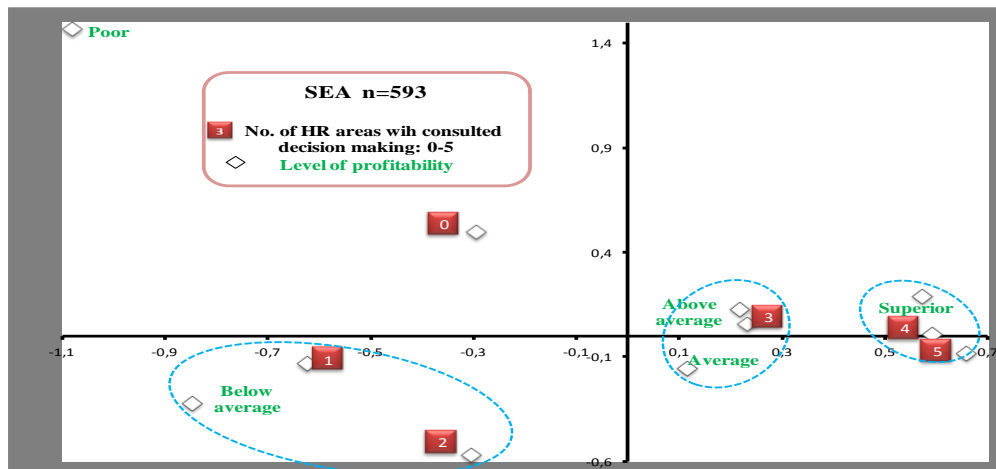


Figure 7: Relationships between the numbers of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making and the level of profitability – SEA region (own study)

- **nonEU AS** practices showed few particularities, although it is important to mention that compared to the harmony of the total sample, a similar correlation of high consultation and above average profitability can be seen, but at the same time, the relationships of the pairs also show a surprising disharmony in that here, consultation in 3 out of 5 HR areas leads to a superior profitability rate (Figure 8).

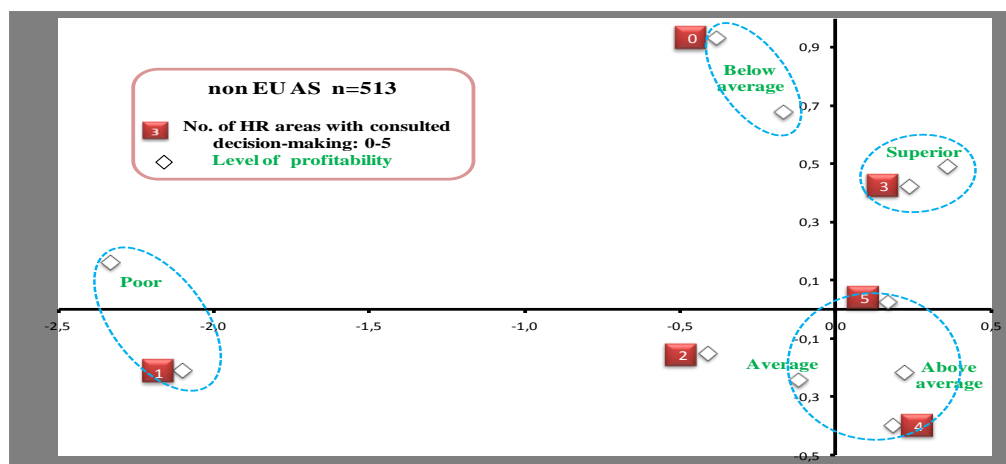


Figure 8: Relationships between the numbers of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making and the level of profitability – nonEU AS region (own study)

Particularities of HR decision-making and firm performance relationship, by performance indicators

Finally, we can also detect that compared to relationships in the total sample; it is possible to establish specialties not only by regions, but also by performance indicators. According to our results, the six elements analyzed show different expectations for disparate HR practices and recompense them also in a different way. From this aspect, on the one hand the profitability, on the other hand, the level of productivity and rate of innovation are worth mentioning.

Profitability, showing a significant relationship in all regions, is one that has the *lowest tolerance for non-consultative decision-making* (see Figure 3), and in two regions (non EU AS, CEE), disharmoniously predicts a superior performance already with 3 HR areas of consultation (see Figures 8 and 9).

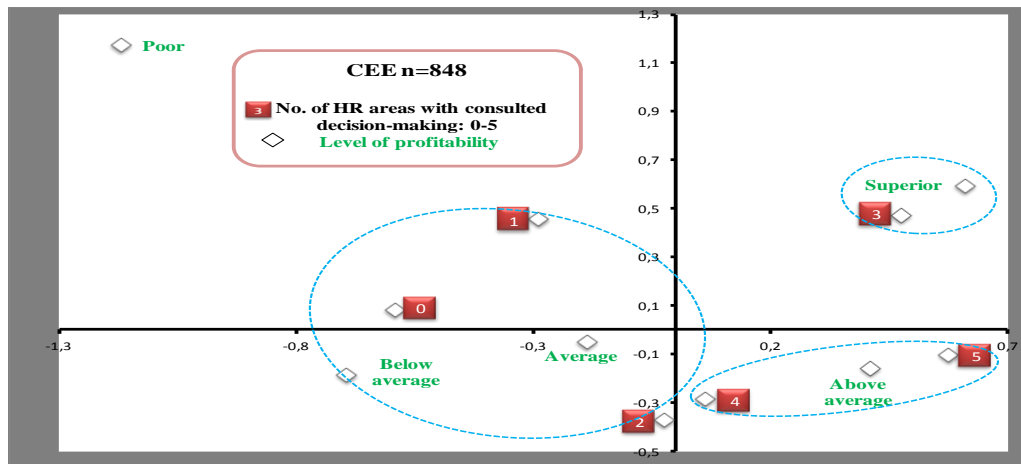


Figure 9: Relationships between the numbers of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making and the level of profitability – CEE region (own study)

Level of productivity and rate of innovation both show in two regions each that if average performance levels (the same as competitors) are acceptable for an organization, unilateral decision-making (practiced by either party) may be a sufficient choice.

Examining the *level of productivity* in the cross tables of the SEA region and the total sample (see Table 2) as well as the correspondence maps (see, for example, Figure 3), it is easy to realize that to get to an average level in this performance indicator, unilateral decision-making practices can be just as effective as the mutual consultation: it is possible to reach average or even in some cases superior levels with an individual HR decision. Data of the contingency tables also shows that in the SEA region, the ratio of unilateral decisions is much higher (~25%) (where number of consultative decision-making areas is 0) than in the full sample (~15%) and in the EU nonCEE countries (~7%).

Rate of innovation and HR decision-making methods show a significant relationship in four regions, the value of the rate was, however judged to be average rather than above average with one exception. The positive distinction can be observed in the EU nonCEE region, based on which we can state, that higher levels of innovation exist in an environment where the HR decisions are made usually on a mutually consulted way.

The CEE and SEA attributes are alike in their difference from the practices of the EU nonCEE region. They rate innovation average, rather than higher, and the lowest rating occurs more here (15 – 21%), than in the EU nonCEE sample (12%).

The interesting point shown in Figure 10 about results from the CEE region is that although high or low results indicate the same connections as the total sample, it is possible to reach average levels of innovation by unilateral decisions.

Table 2: Contingency tables of the three regions of Cranet survey 2008/10 showing significant relationship in the level of productivity (own study)

The rate of this performance indicator, compared to other organizations of the sector	Number of HR areas with decisions made by HR department or line management with mutual consultation						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	Total
EU nonce							
Poor, or at the low end of the industry	5	1	2	5	4	11	28
Below average	8	1	9	22	28	32	100
Average, or equal to the competition	50	45	78	168	233	253	827
Better than average	63	49	88	191	302	344	1037
Superior	36	20	28	51	100	78	313
Total	162	116	205	437	667	718	2305
SEA							
Poor, or at the low end of the industry	5	1	0	3	0	0	9
Below average	18	20	20	11	7	4	80
Average, or equal to the competition	64	40	45	26	28	40	243
Better than average	38	23	22	37	28	41	189
Superior	12	9	11	11	9	17	69
Total	137	93	98	88	72	102	590
TOTAL							
Poor, or at the low end of the industry	13	3	2	9	6	13	46
Below average	39	22	38	41	50	43	233
Average, or equal to the competition	219	114	199	281	379	411	1603
Better than average	216	99	191	319	475	568	1868
Superior	79	43	56	101	161	154	594
Total	566	281	486	751	1071	1189	4344

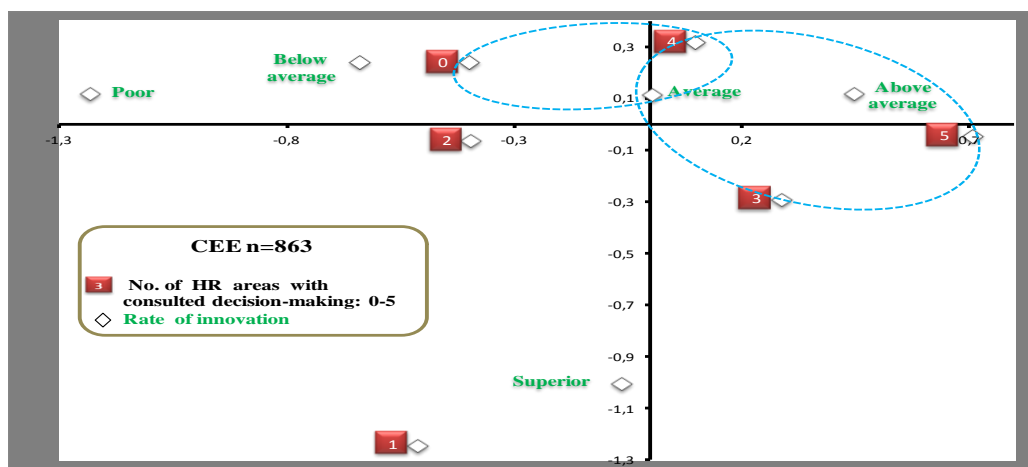


Figure 10: Relationships between the numbers of HR areas with mutually consulted decision-making and the rate of innovation – CEE region (own study)

The tendency in the SEA region is similar to that of the CEE, but stronger, as here not only average, but above average levels of rate of innovation are expected from unilateral HR decisions. Another significant difference is that in this region, decision-makers are HR professionals, while in CEE, the line managers.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Results of the analysis show that in the total sample all six performance indicators are in a stochastic relationship with the HR decision-making practice, moreover in the examined 30 relationships over 70% (22 cases) were significant (Chi-Square test's p-value < 0.05).

- Based on this, our research provides an *additional proof of the HRM – firm-performance linkage*, as such from one point it creates new marker of the strategic HRM and from another – in line with the mainstream of the literature reviewed – *reinforces the marks of its strategic nature*.

Harmony of the relationships is found on a global level in our research. However fairly distinguishable regional characteristics incorporate in three out of the four investigated regions in considering the decision-making practices and actors of the major HR policy decisions. *From theoretical point of view* these results

- are in line with the arguments of the institutionalist' and culturalists' approaches questioning the universalist school of thought in HRM (*Poutsama et al., 2013*);
- in supplement provide additional proof both from SEA and CEE to the culturalists' view, saying, that "HRM work models are applied regardless of their efficiency" (*Brandl et al., 2012*);
- add minor complete elements to the pictures about such well-investigated regions, as EU nonCEE or non EU AS drawn by high profile researchers (*e.g. Guest, 2011; Brewster, 2004; Werner et al., 2011*);
- provide us new arguments to characterize the CEE region, and lead us to classify the HRM work implemented in this region, as being in its pre-classic stage – in terms of the generic alternatives defined by Brandl et al., (2012).

Globally – meaning in the total sample – based on the investigated six firm-performance indicators, two subgroups could be formed. In case of three particular performance indicators the assumed relationship and the observed practice reproduced by the correspondence maps reflected total harmony; while the other subgroup could be characterized almost the same with a minor modification – appearing in the same place of the scale –, but disturbing the complete harmony.

- *These results in general are in line with the contingency school of thought*, allowing or accepting different decision-making practices for reaching different kinds of firm performances. *In particular* they show the areas where employing shared responsibility seems to be unavoidable. The *practical significance* of this is in helping to identify how to achieve the desired particular outcome.

In conclusion, we can say that our basic hypothesis has been proven. The results above enrich international comparative HRM literature manifold, as:

- they point out the existence a factor hitherto under-examined – a relation between actors involved in HR policy decision-making and organizational performance,
- reinforce regional specificities already discovered, pointing out, for example, a difference between US and Western European HR practices (*Brewster et al., 2004; Jackson et al., 2012*),

- add a new ingredient to the list of special HR solutions in CEE (Karoliny et al., 2009; Morley et al., 2012; and Kazlauskaitė et al. 2013).

We must not, however, forget the limitations present in both the survey and analysis methods, weakening our inferences – these we take as motivating factors for further research.

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