



Call for Papers

Human Resource Management on the Frontlines: Confronting the Challenges of Service Work Transformation

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Rationale and Objectives

This special issue seeks to extend knowledge on the management of workers who occupy frontline roles. We live in a service-dominant global economy where almost three-quarters of the workforce in industrialized nations are employed in frontline service roles requiring the delivery of services, rather than the production of tangible goods (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016; Buckley & Majumdar, 2018). For instance, in the US, six of the top ten occupational groups are composed of frontline workers employed in industries such as retail (17%), healthcare and social assistance (16%), leisure and hospitality (11%), professional services, and education, among others (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). A further 10% of the labor force in the US consists of workers who directly serve customers by performing gig work mediated by temporary help firms and online platforms (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Duggan et al., 2023). What is common for workers across these varied categories is a focus on delivering intangible, perishable, and heterogenous (highly variable in content and quality) services to customers, often with significant levels of interpersonal interaction and co-production with external stakeholders (Lovelock, 1983; Lovelock & Gummesson, 2004).

A ‘perfect storm’ of technological and socio-economic forces is beginning to transform frontline service work in ways never witnessed before. We believe that a comprehensive understanding of these forces and their effects on frontline service work is integral for developing HRM theories and practices that are both, responsive to the changing nature of service work and responsible for promoting economic outcomes that are aligned with individual and collective well-being. This special issue is, therefore, aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal # 8 (UN SDG 8) aimed at ‘promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all’.

Specifically, we encourage papers in two broad focal areas: (a) managing the human side of technological change on the frontlines, and (b) decent, inclusive, and sustainable employment for frontline workers.

Human Side of Technological Changes on the Frontlines. Technological innovations including digitization, artificial intelligence, and robotics are reshaping the world of work. On the organizational frontlines, technology can (a) augment workers' knowledge and skills by performing analytical tasks such as sifting through data to identify opportunities for targeted solutions; (b) substitute or eliminate the need for workers; and (c) orchestrate connections between people, as well as manage and monitor tasks in the case of online platforms (e.g., Connelly et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). The adoption of one or more of these technological changes requires a concerted HRM strategy focused on developing core frontline worker competencies such as enabling customer-technology interactions, providing a higher tier of customized services, and demonstrating interpersonal and emotional skills that cannot easily be substituted by technology (e.g., Bowen, 2016; Larivière et al., 2017). Further, given the substitution of human supervision with algorithmic management in gig work (which is particularly dominant in frontline work; Duggan et al., 2020) and in more traditional frontline work where technologies such as chatbots augment customer interactions (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2021), there is a need to revisit our conventional models of inducement-contribution relying on social mechanisms such as social exchange.

In parallel, as digitization replaces frontline workers the onus of service production is increasingly placed on customers, who are required to act as 'partial employees' (e.g., check-in for flights, retail checkouts) (Bowen, 1986; Duggan et al., 2020). This raises many interesting questions, such as whether HRM practices currently recommended for enhancing employee ability-motivation-opportunity can be adapted to the management of customers. For instance, can role descriptions be clearly defined for customers to make them more productive? What are effective strategies for training, socializing, and incentivizing customers to display citizenship behaviors? How are HRM policies and approaches informed by, and shape stakeholder considerations well beyond the classical organization? (Snell et al., 2023).

Decent, Inclusive, and Sustainable Employment for Frontline Workers. It has often been noted that a significant proportion of frontline workers occupy low status, precarious, and stressful roles. In emerging economies and impoverished contexts, workers can face significant subsistence pressures, often risking their very lives to maintain a livelihood. Further, external pressures such as the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the stark disparities in resources, healthcare access, and job-related strains between frontline workers and knowledge employees who have the capability to work remotely without incurring health risks (Voorhees et al., 2020). Indeed, one of the impactful lessons of COVID-19 is a "reflection on the full spectrum of worker experiences and roles, especially those deemed essential by society that have been hitherto silenced or underrepresented in our scholarship" (Harney and Collings, 2021, p. 7). These issues point to the importance of providing decent work on the frontline that is free from the experiences of marginalization (e.g., low status, insufficient opportunities for expressing their voice) and economic constraints (e.g., limited work availability, low pay) (Duffy et al., 2016).

While governmental policies related to job creation and guarantees of worker rights can create the environmental context for decent work (International Labor Organization, 2012), HRM practices can directly promote decent work in service contexts through the provision of physical and psychological safety, adequate opportunities for rest, work-family balance, job

security, equitable compensation, and access to healthcare (Lysova et al., 2019). Similarly, there is a need for HRM scholarship to consider the large and growing proportions of the global workforce that do not have access to the advantages accorded to those performing managerial and knowledge work. As others have noted, conventional notions of job and career flexibility and volition/agency cannot be taken for granted for frontline workers who engage in stressful and unsafe work without safety nets, voice mechanisms, fair treatment, and equitable wages (Duffy et al., 2016). Further, existing scholarship has been somewhat dominated by insights from so-called WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) nations, neglecting global experiences and local constraints (Field et al., 2021). There is therefore a need for scholarship to holistically embrace the varying conditions and contexts of frontline service work in order to foster a more inclusive and sustainable understanding of the role and prospective impact of HRM (Ren et al., 2023).

Expected Contributions

In line with the aims and scope of *Human Resource Management*, this Special Issue intends to make important contributions to theory and practice in HRM by extending knowledge through an interdisciplinary approach. We encourage perspectives drawing from different fields including, but not limited to, services, psychology, sociology, marketing, organizational behavior, and human resources. The papers in the Special Issue will be globally inclusive and will examine HRM at the frontlines from multiple levels: at the individual and dyadic level concerning the experiences of frontline workers and the changing role and interactions with customers; at the team/group and organization level, in the form of the HRM strategy and practices; and at the societal level, considering governmental policies and institutional pressures that are prompting norms and regulations addressing issues of fairness, decent work, and the sustainable introduction of technology. Also, consistent with HRM's methodologically inclusive approach, we welcome secondary research including systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and bibliometric analyses; as well as original primary research utilizing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. A **sample list** of potential topics is provided below.

Human Side of Technological Changes on the Frontlines:

1. New HRM practices and systems for technology-infused service frontlines.
2. Competencies required to succeed in technology-infused service frontline roles.
3. Approaches to job design that account for the interactions between workers, technology, and customers or users on the frontlines.
4. The role of algorithm-based HRM practices in regulating the behaviors of frontline workers.
5. The role of HRM policy in supporting sustainable careers for frontline workers in the context of the augmentation of work and the elimination of some jobs through automation.

Decent, Inclusive, and Sustainable Employment for Frontline Workers:

6. HRM influences on worker health and well-being in marginalized and low-status frontline roles, across global and economic contexts.
7. HRM models, approaches, and solutions to assess and mitigate the effects of disruptive events (e.g., workplace violence, social unrest, pandemics) on frontline workers.
8. HRM practices in underrepresented service contexts including social assistance/community sector (e.g., disability care, at-home care), public sector, low-income and low-status work, and transient and migrant labor.

9. The role of unionization, grassroots efforts, and governmental regulations in building a sustainable and inclusive frontline workforce.
10. Utilization of HRM theory and practices for managing customers on the frontlines – selection, training, and reward systems that encourage customers to engage in compliant, creative, and civil behaviors.

Further Navigating HRM on the Frontlines:

11. The role of HR professionals in developing governmental and organizational policies to create healthy and sustainable work on the frontlines.
12. Definition and practice of responsible HRM policies and practices within the context of technological and socio-economic challenges.
13. Measurement of HR value that takes into account employee and customer experience (EX and CX) and well-being.
14. Customer incivility and mistreatment on the frontline.
15. Institutional pressures and mimetic processes influencing the adoption of responsible and sustainable HRM practices on the frontlines.

Submission Information

Authors can submit papers between **1 – 29 February 2024** to *Human Resource Management* for review. Details on the manuscript submission process will be made available nearer to the submission period. Papers should be prepared and submitted according to the journal's guidelines: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/1099050x/homepage/forauthors.html>. All papers will be subject to the same double-blind peer review process as regular issues of *Human Resource Management*. Authors seeking advice or clarity on the scope and parameters of their potential submission are encouraged to reach out to Mahesh Subramony (msubramony@niu.edu) with their queries.

Submission window: 1-29 February 2024

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