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Using research informed approaches to Strategic HRM teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines research that was guided by the broad question: What teaching and learning (T&L) strategies should be employed in SHRM? This question was answered using data gathered in three focus groups involving T&L specialists, business strategy and HRM academics, and HRM practitioners. Through a process of successive focusing, potential T&L strategies were initially identified and then tested and refined in the focus groups. Drawing on literature and input from the participants, we contend that SHRM can be effectively taught through a combination of primarily problem-based and case-based approaches. We also argue that process worksheets are an effective method of providing problem solving support to students when they carry out complex learning tasks based on authentic SHRM problems.

Key words: Strategic HRM; teaching methods; focus groups; problem-based learning, authentic assessment.

HRM professionals have long been exhorted to make greater strategic contributions to their organisations in order to help the organisation achieve a competitive advantage through the effective management of human resources (Barney & Wright 1998; Wright, McMahan & McWilliams 1994). Whilst the goal of a more strategic approach to HRM is generally agreed (Sheehan & De Cieri 2012), the necessary change in orientation of HRM practitioners away from the transactional and compliance mindset to a focus on strategic issues is not yet universally evident (see, for example, Becton & Schraeder 2009; Fegley 2006; Lawler & Boudreau 2009). As the HRM profession seeks to develop a more strategic orientation, it is increasingly important to ensure that students graduating with a specialisation in HRM have a sound appreciation of the contribution that HRM professionals can make to achievement of a competitive advantage through the alignment of HRM with the organisation's business strategy. This necessitates a well-developed understanding of the strategic approach to HRM. However, as outlined below, academics involved in seeking to develop such an authentic understanding among students are faced with two fundamental problems.

The first problem is that there is uncertainty regarding *what* should be taught. SHRM integrates the fields of Strategic Management and Human Resource Management (HRM), and is a discipline that is still taking form (Boxall & Purcell 2011). While its intellectual roots can be traced back to the 1920s, most academic literature on SHRM has been published over the last 30 years (Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade & Drake 2009). Moreover, as Truss, Mankin and Kelliher (2012) have noted, SHRM is a complex area to understand "because of the sometimes confusing array of terminology that is used, the variety of approaches that have been adopted, and the differing levels of analysis" (p.86). These features of SHRM create challenges for academics when they consider what should be taught. The body of knowledge as to what

constitutes SHRM is still not well defined in comparison to fields such as Management and Marketing. The learning and performance of SHRM students is likely to be impeded if academics are unable to provide students with a sufficiently coherent, organised representation of the SHRM literature (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett & Norman 2010).

The theory-praxis gap represents a further challenge to academics seeking to ensure their students acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) deemed highly relevant by experts in the academic and practitioner communities. Studies (e.g., Deadrick & Gibson 2007; Rynes, Giluk & Brown 2007) have shown that HRM academics and practitioners often view different topics as important for practice. As a result of these different interest areas, HRM academics and HRM practitioners are likely to hold differing views on the composition of a core SHRM syllabi. Such a gap between theory and praxis in SHRM education would affect the students' ability to develop understanding and professional knowledge that stems from both theory and practice.

The second fundamental problem facing SHRM academics is deciding *how* to effectively teach SHRM. In SHRM, students must understand complex concepts and many students commencing their undergraduate SHRM studies in particular lack beginning knowledge and experience that is necessary to provide an adequate foundation for their new learning. The gaps and insufficiencies in their prior knowledge and experience also make it difficult to get students to participate in whole class and small group discussions in a meaningful way. Furthermore, the lecturer is unable to tap into students' prior knowledge and experience and employ it as a resource for the learning of others as often occurs with social-constructivist teaching and learning.

Within the context outlined above, this paper briefly summarises a study that sought to identify the core KSAs that SHRM students should acquire. The KSAs that were identified through this prior study were subsequently translated into learning outcomes. Authentic assessment tasks were then developed that could be employed to help students learn these KSAs and to help assess their achievement of the learning outcomes. This paper then discusses the use of process worksheets as one of the pedagogical techniques identified through the focus group process for bringing complex whole tasks within the reach of the learners' existing capabilities. In order to demonstrate how a problem-based approach supported by process worksheets can be used to make students' learning of complex whole tasks more effective, three process

worksheets have been incorporated into this paper. One focusses on a whole task designed to develop a core skill in SHRM (as identified in the previous study), the second shows a task that is intended to foster a desired core attitude of SHRM and the third forms the basis for an authentic major assessment drawing on the range of learning covered through the unit.

WHAT SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN SHRM?

We employed the Delphi method (Linstone & Turoff 1975) to address the question: What core KSAs should SHRM students acquire? Three sequential surveys were administered to elicit opinions of 37 leading SHRM academics and senior HRM practitioners located in six different countries. In *Round 1* panellists were presented with lists of KSAs derived from literature and asked to indicate how important each is in SHRM and to add any items that they thought were important but missing from the lists. The *Round 2* survey listed knowledge and skills that panellists thought were important additions to our lists and they were asked to rate the importance of these additional items. Participants generally agreed with the attitude statements in Round 1, so they were asked to rank them in order of importance. In the *Round 3* panellists were provided with consolidated lists of researcher - and panellist-provided knowledge areas and skills and asked to select their top ten core knowledge areas and top five core skills.

Processes involved in the Delphi study generated 30 knowledge areas, 11 skills and 5 attitudes that panellists confirmed were important in SHRM. They also helped to discriminate among these KSAs in terms of their relative importance for graduates by generating ranked lists of 10 knowledge areas, 5 skills and 5 attitudes. Of these KSAs, *the ability to think strategically about HRM* was a highly ranked core intellectual skill. Similarly, demonstrating a belief in or an appreciation of *employees as a strategic asset and a potential source of sustainable competitive advantage* was a highly ranked core attitude. Accordingly, in the following two sections of the paper we examine the notions of strategic thinking as well as attitude and attitude formation around *employees as a strategic asset and a potential source of sustainable competitive advantage*.

STRATEGIC THINKING

Within the field of HRM, strategic thinking has been identified by HRM professionals as a key competency required of effective senior HRM leaders. For example, this was a key finding of the HRM Leadership Competencies Poll conducted by the United States Society for Human Resource Management (Society for Human Resource Management 2009). The poll was conducted among HRM professionals employed by

organisations operating in the United States, Canada, India, and the Middle East and North Africa. According to this research, across all four countries/regions, one of the most highly rated competencies was strategic thinking. Furthermore, about two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents expected that strategic thinking will increase in importance five years into the future.

There is broad consensus among SHRM academics and educationalists that the ability to think strategically can be developed (e.g. Casey & Goldman 2010; Society for Human Resource Management 2009; Sloan 2006; Waters 2011). However, there seems to be much less agreement about the meaning of strategic thinking and what constitutes the most effective approaches to developing strategic thinking. Regarding the approaches to developing strategic thinking capability, some commentators (e.g. Sloan 2006) emphasise the contributions that informal and incidental learning processes make to developing strategic thinking and seem to attach very little, if any, importance to formal learning approaches. These commentators may even doubt that such thinking can be formally taught. For instance, Sloan (2006) notes, “when senior executives were asked a series of questions about how they learned to make strategy, none referenced any formal learning approaches, except through negative connotation” (p.39). In contrast, other commentators (e.g. Liedtka 1998; Waters 2011) envisioned a significantly more important role for formal learning approaches, such as traditional classroom-based activities, in developing strategic thinking capability.

In regard to its meaning, strategic thinking is considered to be a somewhat perplexing concept (Waters 2011). To illustrate, Casey and Goldman (2010) define strategic thinking as “conceptual, systems-oriented, directional and opportunistic thinking leading to the discovery of novel, imaginative organisational strategies” (p.169). In contrast, Waters (2011) contends that strategic thinking requires critical, creative, and systems thinking to be effective. Liedtka (1998), on the other hand, defines strategic thinking as a particular way of thinking, with specific attributes: systems perspective; intent-focused; intelligent opportunism; thinking in time; and hypothesis-driven. In the HRM Leadership Competencies Poll mentioned previously (Society for Human Resource Management 2009), strategic thinking was defined as “seeing the big picture, having a long-term line of sight and understanding the interconnectedness of decisions and activities within the various lines of the business” (p.4). It could reasonably be argued that system thinking is a common ingredient of these definitions of strategic thinking. This contention is consistent with Liedtka’s (1998) view that “strategic thinking is built on the foundation of a systems perspective” (p.122).

ATTITUDES AND ATTITUDE FORMATION

For the purpose of this paper we adopted Bohner and Dickel's (2011) concise definition of an attitude: "An attitude is an evaluation of an object of thought" (p.392). In this definition, attitude objects comprise anything a person may hold in mind including things, people, groups, and ideas. Consistent with this definition, attitude change is conceived as a change in the evaluation of an object of thought. However, in regard to attitude change the authors note that attitude definitions differ in the extent to which they adopt the view that attitudes are stable entities stored in memory (e.g. Visser & Mirabile 2004: "array of summary evaluations stored in memory") versus temporary judgments constructed on the spot from the information at hand (e.g. Schwarz 2007: "evaluative judgements, formed when needed, rather than enduring personal dispositions"). Attitude researchers who adopt a more intermediate position (e.g. Eagly & Chaiken 2007) assume that strong attitudes are more stable across situations and over time and, hence, can consistently be recalled from memory, whereas weak attitudes are less constant and thus more susceptible to context influences (Bohner & Dickel 2011).

Attitudes are learned (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975) through formal, informal and incidental learning processes (Watkins & Marsick 1992). In the context of higher education, literature on teaching and learning suggests that students' attitudes are influenced by each of the formal ('taught'), hidden and null curricula (Martin, Lloyd & Singh 2002; Woloschuk, Harasym & Temple 2004). In some undergraduate and postgraduate education, subjects like human sexuality and business ethics are purposefully included in the formal curriculum to afford a proper place to developing professional attitudes and with a view to accomplishing explicit attitudinal objectives (see, for example, Chonody, Siebert & Rutledge 2009). In contrast, the hidden curriculum includes those elements of education that implicitly impact on students' attitudes. Rowntree (1981, cited in Ottewill, McKenzie & Leah 2005, p.90) defines the hidden curriculum as: "All the beliefs and values and understandings that are passed on to the student in an educational institution, not through formal teaching but, unconsciously, through what the institution implicitly demands of the student". It is thought that the hidden curriculum may influence students' beliefs about the professional field as strongly as the formal curriculum (Van Puymbroek, Austin & McCormick 2010). The null curriculum, on the other hand, refers to material that is left out of the curriculum, the absence of which transmits a message of unimportance (Woloschuk et al. 2004).

In addition to formally exposing students to salient attitudinal content, a variety of teaching and learning (T&L) strategies have been demonstrated to be effective in promoting attitude change. For instance, Chonody et al. (2009) employed an information-plus-exposure (to gays and lesbians) T&L model in a Human Sexuality course. To gauge students' attitudes toward gays and lesbians they used the Index of Attitudes Toward Homosexuality as a measure. The pre- and post-test scores on the Index suggest that the course improved students' attitudes toward gays and lesbians. In Sinatra, Kardash, Taasobshirazi and Lomabardi's (2012) study students were asked to read a persuasive text about human-induced climate change and were pre- and post-tested on their attitudes about climate change and their willingness to take action. Their findings suggest that reading persuasive texts about human-induced climate change is effective in promoting both attitude change and students' commitment to take action. In the literature that discusses development of professional attitudes in higher education (e.g. Brown, Manogue & Rohlin 2002; Martin et al. 2002; Woloschuk et al. 2004) a range of other T&L strategies such as reflective portfolios and case-based teaching on ethical and professional issues are also purported to be effective in fostering desirable attitudes. Persuasive communication is a common ingredient in many of these T&L strategies that are deemed suitable for accomplishing attitudinal objectives. Persuasion in the context of these pedagogical interventions is generally understood as evoking a change in students' understanding or judgement relative to a particular object of thought (Murphy 2001).

HOW SHOULD SHRM BE TAUGHT?

Having gathered expert opinion in relation to *what* should be taught in SHRM (as outlined in the second section of this paper), our next challenge was to tackle the *how* question. To deal with this challenge we undertook a study that was guided by the question: *What T&L strategies should be employed to foster students' acquisition of the core KSAs identified in the Delphi study?* This question was addressed in three focus groups that followed a process of successive focusing to initially identify and then test and refine the T&L strategies.

In designing the focus group study we identified three groups of people who had insight on the topic: T&L specialists, HRM and business strategy academics, and HRM practitioners. Each focus group would provide information from a different perspective. We adopted the guidelines provided by Krueger and Casey (2009) regarding the composition and size of each focus group. In regard to group composition, with the aim of ensuring that participants would feel comfortable saying what they think, we avoided mixing people who

may feel they have different levels of expertise related to the focus group topic. We restricted the sizes of the focus groups to five to eight participants as in the opinion of Krueger and Casey, this is the ideal size of a focus group for most non-commercial topics.

All participants in our study were personally recruited by the researchers from our lists of personal contacts. We contacted potential participants through face-to-face, telephone or electronic mail communications and provided them with an Information Letter that outlined the study. The focus groups were facilitated by the members of the research team, one moderated the discussion (Zikmund 2010) and the other two took notes to support the digital recordings (Liamputtong 2009). The first focus group comprised T&L specialists (7) and the discussion explored a range of potential T&L strategies that could be employed to help students demonstrate achievement of SHRM learning outcomes. As outlined below, the second and third focus groups comprised HRM and business strategy academics (5) and HRM practitioners (5) respectively and they helped us to address issues relating to implementation of the T&L strategy that was distilled from the first focus group.

Given that the purpose of the study was quite narrowly defined, elaborate data analysis was not needed or deemed appropriate (Krueger & Casey. 2009). The discussion in the focus groups was captured using audio recording, field notes and flip charts. Recording information on flip charts during the focus group afforded the participants opportunities to verify and amend summaries of the discussion. Soon after the focus group the research team compared notes to provide internal checks and balances. Notes-based analysis was employed to discover the core ideas, with audio used as a backup and to clarify any confusing aspects of the notes.

A TEACHING STRATEGY FOR SHRM

Our analysis of the field notes suggested that a T&L strategy involving *a combination of primarily case-based learning and problem-based learning* would be appropriate for achievement of the SHRM learning outcomes. Given that the research team was already familiar with case-based learning, a decision was made to explore implementation issues relating to problem-based learning in the subsequent focus groups. As part of our preparation for the focus group with the HRM and business strategy academics we developed sample process worksheets to support problem-based learning approaches (see Figures 1, 2 & 3). These process worksheets are discussed in the work that follows.

A review of literature on problem-based learning (PBL) (see, for example, Savery 2006; Strobel & Barneveld 2009; Jonassen 2011) reveals that the origins of PBL in higher education can be traced to medical schools and suggests that its key characteristics are well-known among proponents of PBL. Three frequently mentioned characteristics of PBL learning are: (1) learning is problem focussed – a complex and authentic problem embodied by alignment to professional practice is the focus of all learning; (2) student centred – the teacher takes on a facilitative role that allows students the freedom to learn independently; (3) self-directed – students determine what they need to learn. Advocates of PBL (e.g. Strobel & Barneveld 2009) often contrast PBL with the traditional learning approach which is characterised as being large class, instructor-driven, lecture-based deliveries. Several studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of PBL compared to lecture-based approaches (see, for example, Sungur, Tekkaya & Geban 2006; Walker & Leary 2009). However, the available evidence offers little support for the superiority of PBL over traditional approaches to date (Savery 2006). Nevertheless, PBL has been used successfully for teaching in a wide range of domains such as medicine, engineering, science and economics for several decades (Savery 2006; Strobel & Barneveld 2009). These are all domains where students need to apply theoretical knowledge and understanding to address specific problems in the workplace, for example diagnosing illness, developing treatment plans, designing building specifications and so on. SHRM students similarly will need to utilise their theoretical knowledge and understanding and apply this to people and business problems they will encounter in their organisations.

The process worksheet is an effective method of providing problem solving support to students when they are required to carry out complex learning activities that are based on real life tasks (Van Merriënboer & Sweller 2005; Nadolski, Kirschner & Van Merriënboer 2005; Hummel, Paas & Koper 2004) and may actually increase learning. Such realistic whole learning tasks often require problem solving skills (Van Merriënboer & Sweller 2005). The process worksheet describes the phases that students should go through when solving a complex problem. Students can consult the process worksheet as they are working on the whole learning task. While the process worksheet provides supportive process-oriented information and a systematic approach to problem solving (Hummel et al. 2004) it does not guarantee a correct solution (Van Merriënboer & Sweller 2005). Splitting up the whole learning task into a number of smaller steps or task assignments also affords opportunities to provide formative feedback on the quality of the individual task

assignments (Nadolski et al. 2005) while leaving the essence of the whole task intact (Van Merriënboer & Sweller 2005).

The efficacy of process worksheets has been empirically supported. For example, using law students as their participants Nadolski et al. (2005) examined the effects of process worksheets on the whole learning task of preparing and pleading a case in court. They found that the availability of a process worksheet with the optimum number of steps to guide the learner through the problem-solving process of the whole learning task had positive effects on the content and coherence of participants' plea performance. Furthermore, learners who received guidance through process worksheets outperformed learners who were left to discover the appropriate problem-solving process for the whole learning task themselves.

Process Worksheet 1 (Appendix I) is designed to address the learning outcome: *Students will be able to demonstrate a belief in, or appreciation of, employees as a source of sustainable competitive advantage.* This learning outcome comprises a cognitive outcome as well as an affective (attitudinal) outcome. Thus, to foster the learning necessary to accomplish this learning outcome, a combination of *problem-based learning* and *role play* is employed. The learning experience is initiated by presenting students with an authentic assessment around the problem: *How would you persuade a company board of directors that employees and the ways in which they are managed are a potential source of sustainable competitive advantage?* The process worksheet is designed to bring this complex whole task within the reach of the learners' capabilities by segmenting it into five meaningful task assignments: (1) develop conceptual arguments; (2) develop empirical (evidence-based) arguments; (3) develop selected arguments using data from high-performing organisations; (4) prepare a persuasive presentation; and (5) give a persuasive presentation. Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2 and 3 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5. As indicated in the process worksheet, in the final task assignment students give an oral presentation (as part of a small group) in which they address the problem statement. Each student group has an opportunity to play the role of a HRM team, while another student group takes on the role of a company board of directors. There is empirical evidence that certain types of role playing experiences can facilitate the acceptance of new beliefs and opinion change (see, for example, Janis & King 1954; McGregor 1993). Thus, involving students in a role playing experience has the potential to positively shape their attitudes toward viewing employees as potential source of sustainable advantage.

Process Worksheet 2 (Appendix II) is designed to address the learning outcome: *Students will be able to employ systems thinking to identify and analyse a range of key factors that will influence management strategic choices in HRM.* As noted, system thinking is a core element of strategic thinking. To foster the learning necessary to accomplish this learning outcome, primarily *problem-based learning (PBL)* is employed. This learning experience is initiated by presenting students with the problem: *What key internal and external factors are likely to have shaped the HRM systems that are currently being employed in a selected organisation or across a selected sector?* To make students' learning more manageable, this complex authentic assessment has been split up into five steps: (1) build the theoretical and conceptual foundation; (2) identify and analyse relevant internal subsystems; (3) identify and analyse the organisation's (or sector's) key stakeholders; (4) conduct a scan of the organisation's (or sector's) external environment; and (5) conduct a review of contingencies that might affect HRM in an organisation (or sector). Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2, 3 and 4 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5. To complete the final task assignment students work as part of a small group to conduct a written review of the contingencies that might affect HRM in a selected organisation or the HRM model that is generally employed within a specific sector.

Process Worksheet 3 (Appendix III) presents a more complex requirement for post graduate student groups. It is designed to address the learning outcome: *Make a persuasive business case for HR investments.* To foster the learning necessary to accomplish this learning outcome, a combination of *problem-based learning* and *role play* is employed in an authentic assessment designed to complement formal material delivered throughout the teaching semester. The unit is designed around providing structured team based learning experiences that are supported by each stage of the process worksheet. These comprise three structured debates within each student group throughout the semester. These require the group to reach consensus on three key questions that drive development of their business case. The small group debates require students to reach group consensus on firstly, which of four proposed companies will be the focus of their business case. Secondly, which of four areas of strategic business risk is the most crucial to address for the company chosen and finally, after development of a minimum of four potential HRM strategies, which strategy will be most effective in addressing the identified risk: this decision forms the basis for students to develop the business case. To make students' learning more manageable, this complex authentic assessment has been split into six steps: (1) research the goals and current performance of the selected organisation; (2) identify

and analyse possible HRM initiatives that could be effective in improving alignment between the workforce and organisational goals; (3) identify and gather data about 'real world' examples to demonstrate how the proposed initiative has previously been effective in achieving alignment; (4) develop targeted arguments to influence key stakeholders; (5) build a logical, balanced argument to support the implementation of the preferred initiative; (6) present the business case to the company board of directors. Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2 and 3 and summative feedback after completing tasks assignment 5 and 6. To complete the final task each group of students act as the company board of directors to whom another group presents. After 'board deliberations' groups provide feedback on whether the business case is deemed adequately persuasive to be accepted.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGY

As noted, the focus group with T&L specialists helped uncover a T&L strategy for SHRM that involved a combination of primarily problem-based learning and case-based learning. In the subsequent focus groups with academics and practitioners we explored implementation issues relating to problem-based learning. The HRM and business strategy academics in our focus group identified several potential educational benefits of the proposed problem-based T&L strategy. These include: (1) learning tasks based on real-life tasks are the driving force for learning; (2) the process worksheets provide problem-solving support; (3) the provision of formative feedback after each sub-task should enhance the quality of students' whole task performance; and (4) the approach fosters a student-centred and self-directed learning environment. However, the participants also identified implementation challenges, in particular, determining the most appropriate level of scaffolding necessary to support: (1) students' learning to solve different kinds of problems; and (2) different kinds of learners. Scaffolding (see, for example, Fitzgerald & Larkin 2008) is a process in which support is provided to students so that they can complete a task that could not be completed independently. The support is gradually removed when the students begin to demonstrate understanding of the task.

Members of the HRM practitioner focus group maintained that the postgraduate SHRM unit should involve a significant component of practice-related learning and that the whole learning task(s) should be based on an actual organisational problem or opportunity in HRM as an authentic form of assessment. Thus, SHRM students could work in small groups to produce consultancy-type project reports providing a business case for implementation of a specific HRM strategy for a particular organisation. In this context, the individual task assignments in the process worksheet should parallel the stages of a problem-solving process towards

development of a business case. The practitioners emphasised the importance of students learning how to accurately diagnose and define the organisational problem or opportunity being investigated. Furthermore, the design of whole learning tasks should also afford students opportunities to develop the KSAs involved in strategy implementation.

CONCLUSION

At this stage we are not able to provide evidence regarding the efficacy of the proposed T&L strategy, however as evidenced by the literature we have a strong belief that students will learn just as well and indeed better than more traditional methods. Anecdotal feedback to date indicates a positive student response to the T&L strategies implemented. More work however, is needed to gather data that can be used to assess the effectiveness of the proposed T&L strategy. As a starting point we are in the process of employing four methods to collect data about the effectiveness of the T&L strategy in practice. First, lecturers involved in teaching the SHRM postgraduate and undergraduate units will maintain reflective journals. Second, students will be required to submit reflective journals and with their permission the journal entries will be content analysed. Third, students will be asked to complete a survey designed to gather their opinions on the effectiveness of the T&L strategies employed in the unit. Fourth, the university's centrally administered survey (Unit and Teaching Evaluation Instrument) that seeks student feedback on the quality of their units and teaching within those units will be used to collect data about effectiveness of the T&L strategies. While there are obvious limitations associated with this approach of relying on primarily students' reactions to the T&L strategy and we need to educate students as to the benefits of this approach, further studies that employ quasi-experimental research designs should provide more definitive evidence.

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APPENDIX I
Sample Process Worksheet 1
Whole Learning Task:
 Make a case for viewing employees as a potential source of sustainable competitive advantage.

Task assignment 1	Task assignment 2	Task assignment 3	Task assignment 4	Task assignment 5
Develop conceptual arguments.	Develop empirical (evidence-based) arguments.	Develop arguments using data from high-performing organisations.	Prepare a persuasive presentation.	Give a persuasive presentation.
<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must identify, analyse and summarise relevant conceptual arguments (e.g. resource-based theory, distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge, organisational culture as a source of sustainable advantage).</p>	<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must identify, analyse and summarise studies that show positive associations between HRM and organisational performance (e.g. studies involving High Performance Work Practices and employee engagement studies).</p>	<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must identify and gather data about high-performing ‘real world’ organisations and their HRM practices.</p>	<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must prepare a persuasive presentation by drawing on the evidence and information gathered in task assignments 1-3.</p>	<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must play the role of an HRM team giving a presentation to a company board of directors.</p>

Note: Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2 & 3 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5.

Source: Adapted from Nadolski, R.J., Kirschner, P.A. & Van Merriënboer, J.J.G. (2005). Optimizing the number of steps in learning tasks for complex skills. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 75, 233-237.

APPENDIX II
Sample Process Worksheet 2
Whole Learning Task:
 Identify and analyse the array of factors that might influence management strategic choices in HRM.

Task assignment 1	Task assignment 2	Task assignment 3	Task assignment 4	Task assignment 5
Build the theoretical and conceptual foundation.	Identify and analyse relevant internal subsystems.	Identify and analyse the organisation's key stakeholders.	Conduct a scan of the organisation's external environment.	Conduct a review of contingencies that might affect HRM in an organisation or sector.
<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must analyse and summarise relevant theories and concepts including open systems theory, contingency theory, stakeholder theory and the Harvard framework.</p>	<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must identify and analyse internal subsystems (e.g. business strategy, quality system, manufacturing technology) that might influence management choices in HRM.</p>	<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must identify stakeholders that might influence management choices in HRM and analyse each stakeholder's influence and its intensity.</p>	<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must identify and analyse contextual factors (e.g. socio-cultural factors, legal and political factors) that might influence management choices in HRM.</p>	<p>Brief task description:</p> <p>Students must conduct a review of the contingencies that might affect HRM in a selected Australian organisation or sector.</p>

Note: Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2, 3 & 4 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5.

Source: Adapted from Nadolski, R.J., Kirschner, P.A. & Van Merriënboer, J.J.G. (2005). Optimizing the number of steps in learning tasks for complex skills. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 75, 233-237.

APPENDIX III
Sample Process Worksheet 3
Whole Learning Task:
 Make a persuasive business case for organisational investment in HR strategies that align the workforce with organisational goals.

Task assignment 1	Task assignment 2	Task assignment 3	Task assignment 4	Task assignment 5	Task assignment 6
Undertake background research.	Develop conceptual arguments.	Develop empirical (evidence-based) arguments.	Develop targeted arguments to influence key stakeholders.	Prepare a persuasive business case.	Give a persuasive presentation.
<p>Brief task description: Students research the goals and current performance of the nominated organisation and identify, analyse and summarise evidence for any lack of alignment (or potential for improved alignment) between the workforce and organisation goals.</p>	<p>Brief task description: Students identify, analyse and summarise some key HRM initiatives that could be effective in improving alignment between the workforce and organisational goals (e.g. value based HR initiatives such as employee health and well-being, cost saving HR initiatives and HR initiatives that have the potential to increase revenue i.e. the service-profit chain).</p>	<p>Brief task description: Students identify and gather data about ‘real world’ examples of how the proposed initiative has been effective in achieving alignment in other organisations (e.g. empirical studies involving culture change, employee engagement, organisational change as well as specific case studies that support the literature).</p>	<p>Brief task description: Students consider key stakeholders whose support is necessary for implementation of the initiative. Students analyse and demonstrate the potential benefits and drawbacks of the initiative from the key stakeholders’ perspectives, including explanation of how they can be managed or overcome.</p>	<p>Brief task description: Students build a logical, balanced argument to support the implementation of their preferred initiative. The case should highlight how the initiative will increase alignment, emphasising benefits and management of any negative aspects. The case should indicate how its effectiveness can be evaluated, how costs can be monitored and managed etc. in order to demonstrate the initiative is achievable within budget, on time etc.</p>	<p>Brief task description: As the HR team recommending the strategy, students present their business case to the company board of directors. Students also take on the role of key stakeholder decision makers for another HR team as that company’s board. Board member / stakeholders are required to review the case following initial presentation, develop insightful questions and respond to the presenting HR team.</p>
Purpose of each task assignment:					
To understand what the company’s goals are and where there are current problems, misalignment or improvement opportunities.	To research possible strategies that might be useful in achieving improved alignment.	To source evidence that will assist in ‘selling’ the proposal by showing how the proposed strategy has been effective elsewhere.	To ensure students are able to identify and acknowledge potential issues or concerns that might need to be discussed and develop plans to overcome them.	To ensure students are able to convince the board that their strategy can be implemented effectively within company parameters and to explain how effectiveness can be measured/demonstrated.	To give students the opportunity to present and defend their proposal. As the board, students are in a position to understand how such a proposal might be received by the board.

Note: Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 3 & 4 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5 & 6.

Source: Adapted from Nadolski, R.J., Kirschner, P.A. & van Merriënboer, J.J.G. (2005). Optimizing the number of steps in learning tasks for complex skills. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75, 233-237.

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