

HRM Perceptions and Cognitive Frames: Constructing and Implementing Effective HR Initiatives.

Koen Nijenhuis
University of Twente
P.O. Box 217, 7500AE Enschede
The Netherlands
k.nijenhuis@student.utwente.nl

This paper offers recommendations as how to construct strong HR systems and effective HR initiatives. The focus lies on minimizing incongruence among individual perceptions through the analysis of cognitive (HRM) frames. A case study, consisting of interviews and documentation analyses, has been performed within an organizational setting to determine frames at the intended, actual and perceived levels of analysis regarding the HR policy under study. Perceptual and behavioral differences and their roots have been determined in order to come up with recommendations as how to create more congruence within the organization under study and to strengthen its HR system. No significant differences in perceptions and behaviors between the intended, actual and perceived levels of analysis have been found concerning the goal and value of the policy. It has been found that flaws in the communication have led to ambiguities of line-managers regarding the correct way of implementing the policy and a lack of overall knowledge of employees concerning the policy. This lack of clarity forces line-managers and employees to consult their personal cognitive (HRM) frames while interpreting distinct aspects of the policy, leading to differences in opinions, expectations and behaviors regarding some of those aspects. It is concluded that two things are important for the creation of strong HR systems. Firstly, managers have to take into account a number of characteristics of strong HR systems while constructing HR initiatives. Secondly, the usage of direct instruments of communication, during the initial- as well as during later phases of the implementation of HR initiatives, is essential for the constructing and sustaining of strong HR systems. This study delivers value by offering a framework for the organizational perception and framing process, a measurement tool to determine the HR system strength of organizations and recommendations as how to construct and maintain strong HR systems.

Supervisor: Dr. A.C. Bos-Nehles
External member: D. Schilling Msc.

Keywords

Strategic Human Resource Management, perceptions, intended, actual and perceived HR practices, HR system strength, organizational climate, social cognition, HRM frames.

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3rd IBA Bachelor Thesis Conference, July 3rd, 2014, Enschede, The Netherlands
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List of Abbreviations

WVP:	Wet Verbetering Poortwachter (Law Improvement Gatekeeper) Dutch Law that has been passed in order to reduce the number of long-term disabled employees in the Netherlands. The guiding principle which is pursued is that a rapid and effective intervention shortens the length of employee absenteeism. It prescribes obligations for employers as well as employees in order to create a joint effort to make the employee able to return to his/her working activities again as soon as possible.
CBA for Hospitals	Collective Bargaining Agreement for Hospitals In each sector in the Netherlands, collective agreements are made between employer- and employee organizations concerning the working conditions in that specific sector. These working conditions apply for everyone in that sector and are to be taken into account while determining individual contracts between employers and employees.
OHD	Occupational Health Department (Arbodienst) The OHD assists employers with the development and implementation of policies regarding working conditions, absenteeism and reintegration. It also advises employers and managers on issues regarding absenteeism, reintegration and risk assessment and evaluation. In the Netherlands, employers can decide to hire external OHD officers, to issue a contract with an external OHD or to install an internal OHD.
OHD Officer	Officer of the Occupational Health Department An internally employed or externally hired professional specialized in the area of Occupational Health.
DBS	Document Beheer Systeem (Document Administration System). The intranet of MST, where all official, non-confidential documents are accessible.
AFAS	Absenteeism reporting system (Name of developer: AFAS). The official absenteeism reporting system of MST in which employee absenteeism is reported and the reintegration process is documented.

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies in the area of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) have determined several best practices that are ought to improve organizational performance (Boselie, 2010). Wright and McMahan (1992, p. 289) identify SHRM as “the pattern of planned Human Resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to reach its goals.” During the 1990’s, most models of SHRM assumed that HR practices influence organizational performance positively through their influence on employee skills, attitudes and motivation (Koch & McGrath, 1996; Huselid, 1995; Wright, McMahan & McWilliams, 1994; Wright, McCormick, Sherman & McMahan, 1999). Other studies concluded that appropriately designed HR initiatives are positively related to employee commitment and satisfaction (e.g. Artur, 1992; Osterman, 1994; Tsui, Perace & Porter, 1995; Tsui, Pearce, Porter & Tripolo, 1997; Whitener, 2001). However, recent studies have indicated that these relationships are not a given and that they can be weakened significantly when there are large differences in the perceptions of employees regarding the same HR initiatives, leading to differences in behaviors. It can even be argued that, when those differences in interpretations lead to deviations of employee behavior from intended policy, organizational performance could be decreased. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) followed this notion by referring to the concept of HR system strength. According to their claim, strong HR systems result in strong organizational climates in which there is congruence, or alignment, of employee’s perceptions of the meaning of the situation and a common interpretation of what behaviors are expected and rewarded. This ‘strong’ HR system is supposed to affect organizational effectiveness and HR goal-achievement positively. On the contrary, in weak HR systems, HR initiatives will send ambiguous messages which are more likely to be interpreted differently and on which can be reacted to incongruously. As a result, HR goal-achievement is expected to be low and its contribution to organizational performance might be minimized. Nishii and Wright (2007) point to the differences within organizations between intended, actual and perceived HR practices. According to their study, intended policies and practices, as developed by HR managers and articulated in formal documents, often differ from the actually implemented practices by line-managers and perceptions and behaviors regarding these practices of employees. As a result, actual employee behavior can differ significantly from the behaviors expected of them by HR management. When linking the above claims, it can be argued that in weak HR systems, differences are likely to arise between perceptions and behaviors of the three stakeholder groups of HR professionals, departmental supervisors and employees, leading to differences between intended, actual and perceived HR practices. In earlier research, Nishii (2006) noted that the same HR practices can be interpreted differently by employees. A significant cause of these differences in perceptions can be found within the theory of social cognition and cognitive (HRM) frames, which prescribe that the way in which individuals respond to certain stimuli is dependent on their cognitive frames. Nishii and Wright (2007) concluded that the same organizational context can give rise to a variation of perceptions regarding HR practices depending on the cognitive processes, pre-employment history and organizational roles of distinct actors. Other studies confirmed this notion, concluding that employees react to environments as a function of the meaning and significance that those environments have for them (Gray, Bougon & Donnelon, 1985; Jackson & Dutton, 1988; James, James & Ashe, 1990; Thomas, Clark & Goia, 1993). Schneider (1994) concluded that employee perceptions are not always shared, nor are they necessarily aligned with the intentions

management has while constructing certain practices. Other research concluded that leaders and line managers influence employee perceptions of HR practices through their leadership-styles (Daniel, 1985) and their personalities and behaviors (Schneider, Ehrhart, Mayer, Satlz & Miles-Jolly, 2005).

These insights have significant implications for the way (HR) managers construct organizational policies and practices. The proposition that differences in perceptions and interpretations of individuals are always likely to exist indicates that differences between perceptions at the intended- perceptions of HR professionals and the contents of formal organizational documents-, actual- perceptions of departmental supervisors-, and perceived-perceptions of employees- levels of analysis are always present within organizations. Though strong HR systems are ought to reduce these differences, leading to clarity concerning which behaviors are demanded and which are not, weak HR systems are ought to be incapable to do so, increasing the possibility of deviations of employee behavior from intended policy. Therefore, weak HR systems are ought to be unable to achieve the goals of the HR department and to increase organizational performance, leading to a lack of recognition of the importance and relevance of the HR function. Due to the fact that Bowen and Ostroff (2004) solely offered three variables to measure HR system strength, a gap remains in the literature concerning specific and practical recommendations as how to create strong HR systems. Therefore, further research in the area is needed.

This paper focuses on the construction of sound HR initiatives which are effectively able to influence organizational performance. Therefore, the central research question posed is: *How can managers construct and maintain strong HR systems and in doing so, minimize the differences between intended, actual and perceived HR practices?* Existing literature on social cognition has been analyzed to identify reasons for the existence of differences between cognitive (HR) frames of organizational actors and to determine to what extend these differences can be used to explain behavioral differences within organizations regarding organizational practices. Next, a case study is conducted within an organizational setting to discover to what extend these general claims are justified by that setting. Perceptions, intentions and behaviors of HR professionals, departmental managers and employees, and the extent of differences in perceptions between these three levels of analysis have been analyzed to determine their roots. Based on this analysis, recommendations are given as how to create more congruence among the several organizational actors. As the paper focuses on the perceptions and behaviors of several individuals within organizations- not only between the three levels of analysis- it also analyzes differences between actors of the same level, and their implications for the construction of strong HR systems. In doing so, it provides a comprehensive guide as how to construct and implement strong HR systems and effective HR initiatives.

2. UNDERSTANDING VARIABILITY IN THE PERCEPTIONS OF HR PRACTICES.

In order to be able to construct strong HR systems with a low amount of differences between perceptions and behaviors of HR professionals, departmental supervisors and employees, potential roots for the development of such differences between individual organizational actors need to be identified. In an ideal organizational setting, characterized by congruence and alignment between various processes and actors, managers are ought to be well capable of rationally developing and implementing practices which direct employee behaviors in order to reach organizational goals effectively. However, as

concluded by Schneider (1994), perceptions and interpretations are not always shared among employees, nor are they necessarily aligned with the intentions of management. In order to find the roots of significant incongruence of perceptions and behaviors, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) distinguished between two interrelated features of an HR system: content and process. With HR content, the individual practices, intended to achieve particular objectives, are meant. Studies focusing on the content of HR systems have determined several best practices that are ought to improve organizational effectiveness (Boselie, 2010). According to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), the process of HR systems is shaped by its design and administration. They underlined the importance of the integration of the content and process aspects of HR systems in order for such systems to be able to affect organizational performance. When the design and administration of a HR system does not elicit congruence among all organizational actors, significant differences between behaviors and perceptions are likely to arise, leading to the fact the content of the HR system is unable to affect organizational performance. Thus, without the appropriate design of HR systems, a collective, organizational climate- “the shared perceptions of employees regarding the practices, procedures and kinds of behaviors that get supported and rewarded within a particular setting.” (Schneider, 1990, p. 384; 1998) – does not arise out of the psychological climates of individual employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). This underlines the importance for the HR system to introduce congruence, or ‘sharedness’ of employee perceptions and behaviors regarding HR initiatives. However, HR systems often fail to do so. Guzzo and Noonan (1994) argued that all HR initiatives communicate messages constantly and in unintended ways, and that the messages can be understood incongruously, whereby two employees interpret the same practices differently. To be capable of constructing effective HR initiatives, insight into the reasons for these variations of perceptions and interpretations within organizations is essential

2.1 Influences on perceptions and interpretations.

Central to the interpretation of organizational practices is the concept of cognitive frames, which is described by Gioia (1986) as a “repertoire of tacit knowledge that is used to impose structure upon, and impart meaning to, otherwise ambiguous social and situational information to facilitate understanding” (p. 56). Differences in cognitive frames can lead to different interpretations of the same phenomenon. Applying this concept to HRM, so called HRM frames can be defined as “a subset of cognitive frames that people use to understand HRM in organizations, which include different knowledge, assumptions and expectations about the HRM system (Bondarouk, Looise & Lempsink, 2009, p. 475).” Using HRM frames people make sense of HR initiatives and develop new interpretations which form the behavior and response towards them (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Differences in individual frames, leading to varied interpretations of the same phenomenon and possibly, to different behaviors, are caused both by individual and contextual factors. These two categories of influences are described in the subsections below.

2.1.1 Individual influences on perceptions

The first factor which is assumed to influence individual frames can be found within the theory of social cognition, which describes that cognition is an important determinant of individual attitudes and actions. According to Fiske and Taylor (1991), people attach different meaning to social stimuli based on differences in the cognitive frameworks that they use to make sense of social information. Based on the way that people

perceptually filter external information, their attitudinal and behavioral responses to that information may differ. Thus, natural information processing mechanisms of individuals influence the way they experience situations. Other studies have supported the notion that individuals bring different motivations (Locke & Latham, 1990), past experiences (Rousseau, 2001), demographic backgrounds (Cox, 1993), values (Judge & Bretz, 1992; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998), personality (Hough & Schneider, 1996) and attitudes (Brief, 1998) which all influence their ways of interpreting and reacting to organizational experiences. Concerning the HR practice of compensation, for example, it has been found that younger workers without children might be more favorable towards receiving minimal extra benefits but above-market pay levels, while older employees might be more favorable towards receiving comprehensive benefits (Milkovich & Newman, 1999). Judge and Cable (1997) concluded that individuals who rate high in conscientiousness are more attracted to organizations with cultures characterized by a need for achievement. These differences in the personal valuation of benefits and cultures, developed through the personal goals and preferences an individual has, can lead to a varying extend to which people are satisfied with, and react to, certain measures and messages within organizations. Guzzo and Noonan (1994) concluded that the very same set of HR practices can be perceived positively by some employees but not by others, depending on the level of perceived fit between those practices and individual values, personality, goals and schematic expectations. Studies following the notion of social exchange theory have concluded that employees balance their contribution to the organization based on what they perceive that the organization is providing them (Nishii, 2006; Ostroff & Bowen, 2000; Schmit & Allscheid, 1995; Whitener, 2001). The more employees feel that HR practices are beneficial for them, the more they will respond in positive and beneficial ways. Nishii, Lepak and Schneider (2008) concluded that employee’s attributions regarding the motivations of management for implementing particular HR initiatives have important consequences for their commitment and satisfaction. According to this study, the attribution that certain HR practices are motivated by the organization’s concern for enhancing service quality and employee well-being is positively related to employee attitudes, while the attribution that HR practices are motivated by reducing costs and exploiting employees was negatively associated with employee attitudes. Therefore, in order for new initiatives to be effective, it is essential that management makes the motivations of its actions clear to employees. The above studies all are supporters of the claim made by Nishii and wright (2007) that “individual climate perceptions, or frames, provide organizational actors with cognitive representations of their organizational environment that act as a lens through which they attach meaning to organizational events and determine the attitudes and behaviors that will result in desired outcomes” (p. 10). Given the large amount of influences on these frames, perceptual differences regarding policies and practices between organizational levels of analysis as well as within distinct organizational levels are likely to arise.

2.1.2 Contextual influences on perceptions

Besides individual factors, studies discovered several contextual factors influencing the framing process of individuals. These factors are shown to be related to nationalities, languages and times (Yosshioka, Yates & Orlikowski, 2002), to organizational or industry levels and to within-organizational levels (Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994). Dabos and Rousseau (2004) concluded that the position that people occupy within their organization’s informal networks influences their perceptions of

HR practices due to its impact on their access to valued resources and career opportunities. Individuals with a central position in influential informal networks have more control over the allocation of resources, and hence have better opportunities for achieving their personal goals than those not having such a position. As a result, they develop more favorable perceptions of the employment relationship (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004) and HR practices (Nishii & Wright, 2007). The study of Orlikowski and Gash (1994) discovered that frames originate from education, work experience and interactions with relevant social groups. Group members often develop shared meanings and attitudes because of social interactions and common experiences among members of the group (James, Joyce & Slocum 1988; Kozlowski & Hattrup, 1992). Weick (1995) agrees with this notion, adding to it that social interaction among group members leads to a collective sense-making. Therefore, the social process can either be a facilitator, or an obstruction to the development of a strong HR system. Following the above claims, it is likely to assume that perceptual differences between HR professionals, departmental supervisors and employees within organizations easily arise, as actors operating in different organizational levels of analysis -e.g. managerial and employee- have varying amounts of formal and informal positions and roles, education, experiences and interactions. Another contextual factor influencing the individual sense-making process is the direct supervisor. Several studies indicated that direct group supervisors influence subordinates' perceptions of, and reactions to, HR practices primarily through their role as implementers of organizational policies and practices (Offermann & Malamut, 2002; Zohar, 2000; Zohar & Luria, 2004). The line manager's involvement in the implementation and enactment of the HRM system may enhance or decrease employees' affective commitment (Gilbert et. al, 2011) and influence workers' perceptions of people management effectiveness (Kulik & Perry, 2008). Other studies found that the quality of one's relationship with his/her manager is positively related with climate perceptions (Tierney, 1999) and that supervisory management style is related to subordinates' psychological climate perceptions (Daniel, 1985).

When taking the above studies into account, a conclusion can be drawn similarly to that of Hodgkinson and Johnson (1994), that there is a continual play between the individual, the context in which he/she operates, the frames of references related to these contexts and the political and social processes at work. Thus, individual as well as contextual factors influence the way in which individuals perceive and react to (HR) initiatives. As a result, frames and behaviors regarding a particular HR practice can vary significantly between actors of distinct levels of analysis, leading to differences between intended, actual and perceived practices (Nishii & Wright, 2007). The conceptual model describing this organizational perception and framing process is shown below.

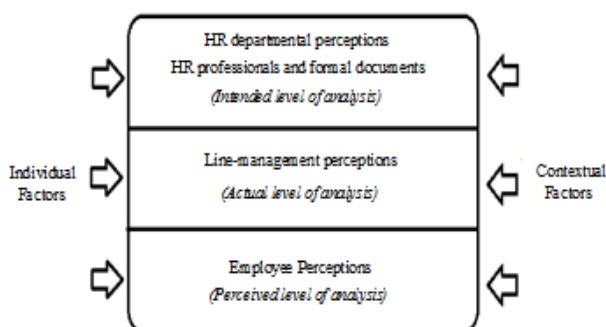


Figure 1: influences on organizational perceptions.

The HR department creates practices with a particular intention and reports on them in official, formal documents. These practices are implemented by line-managers according to their developed (HR) frames of these practices. These supervisory perceptions can vary between distinct line-managers within the organization as the extent of influence of certain individual and contextual factors vary between them. Therefore, the actual implementations of practices can differ between distinct organizational departments, leading to a variation of employee perceptions regarding these practices at the operational level. Taking this into account, the role of the line manager is often seen as crucial for determining employee's perceptions and HRM effectiveness (Guest, 1987; Story, 1992; Legge, 1995; Den Hartog, Boselie & Paauwe, 2004; Nehles, Riemsdijk, Kok, & Looise 2006; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Finally, even in the case in which the implementations of HR practices are relatively similar, employee perceptions regarding the practices can differ due to the varying individual and contextual factors. It is the challenging task of the HR department to develop HR initiatives which effectively create congruence and alignment among all organizational actors; between and within all levels of analysis.

2.1.3 Organizational and HR congruence

Several studies have examined the importance of organizational congruence as well as how to achieve alignment within organizations (Gibson, 2001; Rentsch & Klimoski, 2001; Okhuysen & Ehrenhard, 2002; Kase et al., 2009; De Church & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010). Congruence is referred to when certain elements are in agreement or harmony (The Oxford Dictionaries, nd.) Davidson (2006) described congruence as the alignment of frames across different social groups in ICT implementations. Applying this definition to HRM, congruence is present when employees have similar expectations about the role of HRM in organizations, ideas behind new HRM practices or the type of HRM support (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). Incongruence, then, can be described as a situation in which there are perceptual distances, or differences between several actors regarding these issues; i.e. between HR managers and line managers. It is important to distinguish between developing perceptual congruence between diverse employees regarding organizational practices and creating a congruent or homogeneous work force. Though perceptual congruence among employees is perceived to be positively related with collective efficacy (Gibson, 2001), organizational effectiveness (Kase, Paauwe & Zupan, 2009), and team process and performance (De Church & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010), a congruent and homogeneous work force results in risks of uniformity and pressures for conformity that occur in situations in which there are too many like-minded individuals (Janis, 1971). The importance of creating diversity among the work force is underlined by several studies (Cox & Blake, 1991; Mcleod & Lobel, 1992; Maznevski, 1994; Kirchmeyer, 1991). Thus, the goal to achieve for managers is not to recruit and manage a homogeneous workforce, but rather to create a high amount of perceptual congruence regarding HR practices among a diverse workforce which is characterized by having a variety of knowledge, abilities and perspectives. According to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), such congruence is fostered through the development and sustainment of strong HR systems.

Bowen and Ostroff (2004) concluded that, in order to create a strong HR system, HR managers should develop and implement HR practices which are characterized by distinctiveness, consistency and consensus. Distinctive practices are capable of capturing the attention of and developing interest by the employees. Distinctiveness is characterized by visibility, understandability, legitimacy and relevance. Consistency refers

to the extent to which practices are interpreted uniformly among employees. In order for a practice to be consistent, principles of causation must be present and unambiguous, whereby the effect occurs each time the entity is present. Consensus is the last characteristic of strong HR systems and deals with the question whether there is an overall agreement among employees in their view of the event-effect relationship (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Factors which are ought to help to develop consensus among employees and which can influence whether individuals perceive the same effect with respect to the entity, are agreement among the message senders (Fyske & Taylor, 1991) - the managers developing policies and practices, and the line managers implementing them- and the fairness of the HRM system. Fairness is perceived whenever employees understand the procedures by which they do, or do not receive what they feel they deserve for their efforts. (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). The model developed by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) claims that in strong HR systems- systems which have all the above characteristics- the employee sense-making process will be more likely to result in the intended organizational climate; or in a minimized amount of differences between intended, actual and perceived practices than in weak HR systems. In weak HR systems, the variability of individual responses may be large (Michel, 1973) and people will construct their own version of reality (House, Rousseau & Thomas-Hunt, 1995). A limitation of the model presented by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) is that it has not been tested empirically on a wide scale yet. However, due to its high suitability to be used as a guide as how to create HR practices, and its extensive theoretical foundation, it used as one of the central models in this study.

Thus, differences in perceptions between and within distinct organizational levels of analysis will always exist, as a natural consequence of the fact that individual cognitive frames originate from education, work experience and interactions with social groups (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). It is the challenging task of managers to construct HR initiatives which minimize these differences in perceptions and behaviors between all stakeholder groups in order to create strong HR systems which are able to influence organizational performance positively.

3. METHOD

The study into individual frames of HR initiatives was conducted in a Dutch national health care organization, Medisch Spectrum Twente; referred to in this paper as MST. MST is a non-academic hospital with a top-clinical profile. It has general facilities in Enschede and Oldenzaal, and subfacilities in Haaksbergen and Losser. It employs 3700 employees, among who 235 medical specialists (MST organization, n.d.). A case study was performed within the Enschede-facility of MST to determine perceptions at the intended, actual and perceived levels of analysis, the roots of the differences between these perceptions and the strength of the facility's HR system. In doing so, it has been determined which of the claims, described above, apply in this practical setting and what the implications of these findings are for the construction of sound HR initiatives.

3.1 Sector choice: The health care sector

The health care sector is characterized by consisting of professional organizations. Løwendahl, (2005) identified professional service organizations as knowledge intensive firms which offer services through the employment of highly educated individuals, or professionals. Examples of such organizations are consulting firms and hospitals. During the past decades, a management culture has arisen in the welfare sector, with an increase of managerial power and control, cost effectiveness and innovation (Evans, 2010). According to

Maister (1993), professional organizations differ from manufacturing organizations in the high degree of customization in their work, which reduces the possibility of introducing routines and their strong component of face-to-face interaction with the client. This implies that very special skills are required from professionals. According to Hasenfeld (1983) professional organizations are often characterized by ambiguous, vague and conflicting goals and tasks, turbulent environments, inconsistent technologies and multiple structures and hierarchies. Therefore, in this sector actual outcomes deviate more often from intended outcomes than in traditional manufacturing sectors due to the low clarity, predictability and efficiency of task perceptions (Hasenfeld, 1983). This insight leads to the conclusion that professional service organizations are very suitable settings to identify roots for differences in perceptions and behaviors between HR professionals, departmental supervisors and employees.

Despite this insight, studies examining the added value and implications of HRM in the healthcare sector are relatively scarce. Bach (2001) concluded that acquiring the right HR system is most important for long-term social performance in health service organizations. Veld, Paauwe and Boselie (2010) found differences between intended practices and perceptions regarding these practices among different departments in a large Dutch hospital. They concluded that within hospitals, perceptions regarding the HR system have a significant influence on strategic climate dimensions and suggested that the overall message of the HR system is important for reaching organizational goals. These studies both support the claim that the creation of strong HR systems is important for organizational performance. Boselie, Paauwe, and Richardson (2002) concluded that the impact of HR on performance is lower in highly institutionalized service firms such as hospitals and local governments, than in service firms that are less institutionalized, like hotels. This implies that it is more difficult for HR managers to make a difference in hospitals than in other service firms. The scarcity of studies examining the relation between HR initiatives and organizational performance and the relevance of the claim of Nishii and Wright (2007) in the health care sector calls for further research on the topic.

3.2 HR practice under study

The HR practice which is used for this study is MST's absenteeism and re-integration policy. This policy, which prescribes duties and responsibilities for line-managers and employees during their day-to-day activities as well during periods of absenteeism, is targeted at the reduction of absenteeism and long-term disability within MST. In the Netherlands, which is known for its high extend of institutionalization, HR policies within hospitals are often characterized by a high extend of formalization and standardization (Veld, Paauwe & Boselie, 2010). The HR practice under study is no exception of this fact, as its content is mainly based on the Dutch WVP (Wet Verbetering Poortwachter) and the Dutch Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) for hospitals. According to the policy, the line manager occupies a central position in the re-integration process, having joint responsibility with the employee (Verzuim en re-integratiebeleid, beleid- procedure- voorschriften MST, 2012). Due to the fact that the policy prescribes a minimum amount of actions to undertake within certain time frames, it leaves some room for discretion for line managers, as some supervisors choose to perform more activities than necessary, while others decide not to do so. It is likely to assume that the amount of activities undertaken by, as well as the attitude of the supervisor concerning the employee's situation can have a significant effect on employee's perceptions and reactions regarding the

situation, especially when taking into account the earlier described claims regarding the influence of the supervisor on employee's perceptions (Offerman & Malamut, 2002; Zohar, 2000; Zohar & Luria, 2004; Thierney, 1999; Daniel, 1985). This room for personal interpretation and ways of responding at the supervisory as well as the employee level makes this practice very suitable to be used for this study.

3.3 Data collection method

In order to identify perceptions at the intended, actual and perceived levels of analysis regarding MST's absenteeism and re-integration policy, the extent of differences between these perceptions and the reasons for these differences, two data collection methods have been used. A documentation analysis of the formal organizational document describing the contents of the policy was performed in order to develop understanding of the original perceptions and intentions at the intended level. Next, an in-depth interview was conducted with several actors to identify perceptions at the intended, actual and perceived levels of analysis. Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets (2012) describe the in-depth interview as "a formal, semi-structured and lengthy interview which tries to go more deeply into the subject as the interview proceeds" (p. 31). Semi-structured interviews are the best way to identify individual frames and perceptions due to the fact that the possibility to ask more questions if needed increases the likelihood to determine deeper perceptions and interpretations. The goal of the interviews was to identify perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of HR professionals (who, combined with the contents of the formal organizational document, represented the intended level of analysis), departmental supervisors (who represented the actual level of analysis) and subordinates of these line-managers (who represented the perceived level of analysis) and, in doing so, to identify the extent of differences between the distinct levels of analysis. Of all respondents, HRM frames regarding the practice under study have been determined and the congruence of these frames has been analyzed. Two interviews have been conducted with HR-advisors and one with an officer of the Occupational Health Department (OHD). Three interviews were conducted with line-managers from distinct departments. These interviews were not aimed solely to discover perceptions of the respondents and their roots, but also to discover variations in behavior between distinct line-managers. Finally, three interviews were conducted with subordinates of each line-manager. These interviews were made in such a way that results could be compared with those of the interviews with line managers, to determine whether variations at the actual level influence variations at the perceived level of analysis. The total number of interviews was 15 (n=15) and the interviews lasted around 50 minutes. A modified organogram showing all departments of MST and a departmental organogram showing the levels of analysis are displayed in Appendixes 1 and 2.

During the construction of the interviews, the advice of McCracken (1988) is followed by taking some distance from the subject a priori of the interviews in order to remain objective and to reduce the impact of assumptions. After receiving permission for it, the interviews have been recorded in order to exclude the possibility of missing important answers (Belk et al., 2012). Though the interviews were structured through the usage of a pre-determined set of questions, the order and content of these questions were not followed blindly at all times depending on the specific case of the interviewee. This way, the interview templates were seen as a list of topics rather than a to-do list in order to maintain flexibility and to treat the interview as a normal conversation as much as possible. In doing so, an environment of informality and openness was created and maintained, in which interviewees

could really speak out their opinions. Probing techniques- i.e. asking for explanations, examples and clarifications regarding certain statements or opinions- were used to stimulate respondents to tell as much as possible and to make the interviews both detailed and extended (Rapley, 2001; Emans, 2004; Belk et al., 2012). The 'mirroring' technique of Myers and Newman (2007) is used by constructing follow-up questions while listening carefully to answers given by respondents. This was made possible by conducting the interviews together with Jansink (2014).

3.3.1 Validity of the data

The interview frameworks have been constructed by a team of three researchers. During the development of the interview templates, discussions have been held to make the questions relevant to the organizational context and to increase the construct validity of the study. Each respondent has received the interview template in advance to allow for the development of well-thought and well-explained answers. The interview transcripts have been sent to the respondents afterwards to verify correct understanding. Interview transcripts have been corrected whenever respondents found misunderstandings. The interview templates and an example of an interview transcript are displayed in Appendixes 3 to 6.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts have been analyzed to determine HRM frames at the intended, actual and perceived levels of analysis. Each interviewee was given a code: The HR policy-makers and the line-managers were named HR 1-3 and LM 1-3 and the subordinates of each line-manager were named EM 1-3 (i.e. EM1LM1 and EM1LM2). The first step of the analysis of the interviews was to sort the answers of each individual interview into categories using open coding processes in order to make sense of the data (van Aken, Berends & van der Bij, 2012). This way, responses were categorized into perceptions regarding certain aspects of MST's absenteeism and re-integration policy. A display of this coding process is displayed in Appendix 7. The next step was to identify the reasons for the existence of these perceptions using the same coding process. The third step was to compare the identified frames of interviewees at the intended, actual and perceived levels, as well as within each level, to search for differences. The fourth step was to analyze certain aspects of the policy in which significant differences in perceptions were identified between the three levels, identifying what the roots for these differences are. During the final step, theoretical coding was used to search for relationships between perceptions (van Aken et al., 2012). An example of such a relation would be that differences between perceptions of line-managers lead to differences in perceptions between subordinates of those line-managers. The coding process, during which discussions were held to reach consensus and to check for validity, has been performed by two researchers. By performing these steps, individual frames and behaviors, the extent of differences between these frames and the reasons for these differences were identified within and between the HR departmental, line-managerial and employee levels at MST, leading to a comprehensive insight of how deviations of actual behavior from intended policy have arisen in this specific setting. Also, responses were analyzed to determine the HR system strength of the Enschede facility of MST. A description of this analysis is displayed in Appendix 8.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In the first section the identified perceptions and frames regarding MST's absenteeism and reintegration policy at the intended level of analysis are described. In the second and third sections the determined frames regarding the policy at the

actual and perceived levels of analysis are displayed. In the final two sections, differences between these frames are described. Each of the sections is divided into three parts, describing perceptions regarding the goal, implementations and communication of the policy.

4.1 Perceptions at the intended level

Firstly, the findings concerning the intentions and content of the policy, based on the documentation analysis are displayed. Second, the identified frames of HR professionals, based on the analysis of the interview transcripts are described.

4.1.1 Findings during the documentation analysis

The official goal of MST's absenteeism and reintegration policy is the prevention, controlling and reduction of employee absenteeism and long-term disability (Verzuim en re-integratiebeleid, beleid- procedure- voorschriften MST, 2012, p. 3), with the ultimate goal to reduce the total number of employee absenteeism to four percent (Bestuursverslag MST, 2012; Kaderbrief MST, 2014). In the official document, the management of MST underlines the fact that it values employees who are happy, healthy and enjoy their work. Employee absenteeism is physically harmful for the employee, financial harmful for the organization and especially harmful for patients (Verzuim en re-integratiebeleid, beleid- procedure-voorschriften MST, 2012). Therefore, it needs to be minimized.

In order for the goal of the policy to be achieved, several prescriptions and duties are determined for line-managers as well as employees (Verzuim en re-integratiebeleid, beleid-procedure- voorschriften MST, 2012). Examples of these duties of employees are to prevent absenteeism during their day-to-day activities through the following of the safety and health regulations of MST, the usage of resources made available to increase the safety and health of employees, the active discussion of identified problem issues with their supervisors and an active cooperation concerning the development of solutions and improvements regarding the working situation. The policy also describes specific prescriptions for employees concerning certain procedures, such as the calling in of sickness, which needs to be before nine o'clock or two hours before the starting time, the frequency of allowed absenteeism, which is three times after which a conversation must take place with the line-manager and the obligation of reachability of the employee between 10:00 and 15:00 during the first week of sickness. Furthermore, prescriptions as how to speed-up the process of reintegration have been determined, such as the obligation to follow the instructions of the company doctor and external doctors while in treatment, the prohibition to perform any working activity that is not allowed by the company doctor during the period of absenteeism as well as any activity that could be damaging for the reintegration process, and the duty of employees to maintain contact with the line-manager. MST can decide to stop the payment of wages during the full period of absenteeism whenever any of the prescriptions described by the policy are not followed by its employees (Verzuim en re-integratiebeleid, beleid- procedure- voorschriften MST, 2012).

Duties of line-managers within the policy are to create and maintain an open discussion with subordinates regarding the topics of the content of work activities, the working conditions, the scheduling of work and the working relations. This is to be achieved through the usage of a supportive leading style, by giving subordinates the opportunity to come up with ideas as how to reduce absenteeism and to speed-up the process of reintegration, by discussing absenteeism and its prevention in annual reviews and by keeping in touch with employees who cope with disability. The contact with disabled subordinates is not to be aimed to control for the legitimacy of the employees'

sickness but rather for supportive reasons. Also, the line-managers are obliged to create and maintain a reintegration file of subordinates coping with long-term sickness, describing the progress of the reintegration process (Verzuim en re-integratiebeleid, beleid- procedure- voorschriften MST, 2012).

Next to the line-manager and employee, there are three other actors ought to play a role in the reintegration process. The HR advisor proactively advises the line-manager and employee regarding the contents of the policy, with the goal of speeding-up the process of reintegration. The company doctor has an independent role and advises the line-manager and employee on medical issues. The last actor is the case manager, whose responsibility is to check whether the process runs in line with the WVP (Wet Verbetering Poortwachter), to monitor the progress of the reintegration process as a whole, to provide advice and to check for reintegration file completeness.

4.1.2 Findings during the interviews

4.1.2.1 Goal of the policy

Responses of HR professionals were focused on two goals: the reduction of absenteeism -and in doing so, the reduction of costs- and the bringing of clarity concerning absenteeism and reintegration within the organization. The OHD officer was very clear about the financial aims of the policy:

Next to introducing clarity, an important goal to achieve by the policy is cost reduction. 1% absenteeism equals 1.5 million euro in costs per year. Therefore, the reduction of absenteeism leads to a massive reduction of costs (HR3).

This attention to cost reduction was identified by all interviewees. Next to the bringing of clarity within the organization, an ideological goal was mentioned; the will to be a good employer. There was somewhat disagreement among the respondents concerning the achievement of these goals. Though it was underlined that the policy has indeed brought clarity within the organization, it was admitted that the policy has failed to achieve its financial target. The percentage of absenteeism over 2013 - which was 4.6%- exceeded the target of 4%. One HR advisor pointed that this is not caused by flaws in the policy itself, but by the fact that some departments of MST only have a few employees:

Due to the fact that most departments only have a few employees- i.e. five or six- the absenteeism averages of that departments become high easily (HR1).

4.1.2.2 Implementation

All respondents indicated to agree with the fact that the line-manager has joint responsibility with the employee during the reintegration process. Employee absenteeism is seen as a natural responsibility of the supervisor and a natural consequence of hierarchy. Though the official policy only prescribes the withholding of wages as a consequence of employee disobedience, this action is not used often. In general, less radical steps are undertaken, such as the making of new, stricter agreements. During the performing of activities concerning the policy, line-managers are allowed some room of personal interpretation. This is explained by the OHD officer:

As long as the supervisors move within the policy's boundaries, they are in charge of the process (HR3).

This discretion is argued to be a natural consequence of the circumstances of the policy, as every individual case of absenteeism and/or reintegration, as well as the personal attitude of employees differs. The HR professionals did underline the fact that line-managers are not to act outside the boundaries of the policy. The advising roles of the HR advisors

and the company doctor were underlined by the HR professionals:

The HR advisors and company doctors are to help the supervisor as good as possible in order to offer employees the best support. It is our job as HR advisors to be accessible, both for supervisors and employees (HR2).

Though the advising and controlling role of the case manager seemed to be quite clear among HR professionals, discussions have been held regarding who are ought to be designated as case manager. During the first period of the implementation of the policy, HR advisors were the designated actors, but after an evaluation of this process, more actors have been designated as case-managers.

4.1.2.3 Communication

According to the HR professionals, the initial policy –which was implemented in 2012-, has been communicated extensively to supervisors and employees. Several initiatives have been developed and implemented to communicate the practice throughout the organization. Examples of such initiatives are training days for line-managers, presentations for line managers and employees and information card systems. Newly appointed supervisors are to be informed about the policy and whenever substantial differences are made to the policy, messages are sent to the line-managers to inform them. Also, a HR help desk has been installed in a central hallway, making it possible for employees to ask questions concerning things that are unclear at all times. Finally, all employees of MST have full access to the organization's intranet, on which official documents are to be found. The range of these efforts is described by a respondent:

Much work has been done to communicate the policy and its contents to all employees as extensively as possible (HR1).

All respondents were convinced that enough has been done to communicate the contents and implications of the policy. They also had the opinion that all necessary information is accessible, either through DBS- the company's intranet- or through consultation with the HR department.

It was interesting to note that few differences have been found between perceptions of HR professionals and the contents of the official document. Though the official document mentions hard consequences for disobedience, these consequences are less evidently mentioned by the HR professionals. Also, the official document does not explicitly identify any room for discretion of line-managers while the HR professionals mention it explicitly. Finally, the policy does not explicitly describe which actors are designated as case managers, which could be the source of the disagreements and discussions on the topic.

4.2 Perceptions at the actual level

Perceptions at the actual level of analysis have been identified after the analysis of the interview transcripts.

4.2.1 Goal of the policy

Overall, the line-managers were convinced that one of the main goals of the policy is to reduce the total costs of MST. The average daily cost of absenteeism was \$660 -€522.07- per employee in 2005 (Navarro & Bass, 2006). This focus on cost reduction is explained by a line-manager:

Naturally you want to be a good employer, but I sincerely believe that the main purpose of the policy is to reduce the costs of employee absenteeism (LM1)

Other frequently mentioned goals of the policy were to bring clarity and consistency within the organization. All respondents had the opinion that the policy did bring structure and clarity to the organization and that the total number of absenteeism has

been reduced within their departments. Overall, the respondents value the policy as being very useful, for their departmental teams as well as for their individual needs, due to the fact that it brings clearness to the organization. One line-manager was particularly happy with the effects of the policy:

One of the most significant effects of the policy is the fact that currently, we determine what people can do, instead of what they can't do. This really is the best option (LM2).

4.2.2 Implementation

All respondents experienced ambiguities of some sort concerning their responsibilities and duties within the policy. These ambiguities were regarding a wide range of aspects of the policy and are indicated to be caused by a lack of communication regarding those specific aspects. As explained by two respondents:

I have an internal disagreement about my responsibility for flex workers. There are no official agreements on whether the department that employs them is responsible or whether we -as the HR department- are responsible for them (LM1).

There are multiple aspects of the policy which are not clear to me yet. (LM2).

All interviewees indicated to value the extent of responsibility placed on them. Though they also experienced it as a burden, they underlined the fact that human capital is the most important asset of MST and that it is essential to keep the employees healthy and able to execute their work. Some inconsistencies have been found concerning the amount of discretion for line-managers. Though one line-manager indicated not to have any discretion at all:

The policy has very clear prescriptions which always tell me what to do and when to do it. I just have to follow these prescriptions" (LM1)

, another respondent stated to have significant discretion:

In order to act in the best interest of my subordinates, I have made several judgments and decisions which were not in line with the formal policy. After all, I know my subordinates best and I've never failed to reintegrate one of them (LM3).

The answer of this respondent underlines the importance of leader-member exchange (LMX) for the implementation of the policy under study. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991) concluded that effective leadership processes are present when leaders and followers are able to develop two-way partnerships, based on trust, and gain access to the many benefits these relationships bring. Deluga (1998) argued that the quality of LMX relationships influences subordinates responsibility, decision influence and performance. Though not explicitly, the importance of LMX for the effectiveness of the policy under study seems to be indicated by most respondents. In general, attention is given to the prevention of absenteeism during the execution of day-to-day activities. Examples of such attention are listening to signals of employees concerning daylight, ergonomics, and working pressure or the taking into account of the planning of shifts. Also, most line-managers indicated to offer their subordinates the opportunity to come up with ideas as how to prevent absenteeism. However, they also underlined the fact that not every employee values to take that responsibility. Furthermore, all line-managers indicated to discuss the topic of absenteeism -if relevant- as well as the topics of the physical and mental workload, the planning of shifts and the working conditions during annual meetings. The frequency of contact with disabled subordinates of distinct line-managers differs slightly. All line-managers indicated to take into account the individual employee and his/her circumstances

and preferences while determining how often and how to keep in touch. However, while one line-manager decides that a decision between a low- and high frequency of contact means deciding between once per week or once per two weeks, another line-manager decides that this means a choice between once per week or once per four weeks. Overall, the aim of contact with long-term as well as short-term absent employees is aimed at concern and support and not at controlling the legitimacy of sickness. However, all line-managers admitted that, in the case in which there are well-grounded doubts concerning the legitimacy of the employees' sickness, the aim is at control. This is explained by one respondent:

There is a very popular club nearby which is opened at Sunday evening. When young flex workers call in their sickness at Monday morning with an exhausted voice, I often call them back in the evening to check that voice again (LM1).

The first step line managers undertake against subordinates who don't follow the prescriptions of the reintegration plan, is to arrange a meeting with the employee, making new and tighter agreements. The next step is to arrange a meeting between the employee and the company doctor. Some respondents indicated to have been forced to use more radical measures, i.e. sending the employee to unpaid leave. However, not all line-managers followed this approach. It was remarkable to find that, despite the fact that all line-managers indicated to strive for a fair treatment, two of them admitted that it could be possible that they fail to do so. The reason for this lays in human nature and the personality of the supervisors. One line-manager explains:

Sometimes I catch myself with the thought: Do I treat everyone the same? You can't hide from the fact that you like some people more than others. LM2)

Another reason for this potential inconsistent treatment of employees is the fact that all individuals differ and need to be treated at ways that fits them. As explained by one supervisor:

Everyone needs a different treatment. Some people are definitely more committed than others and some stay home sick easier than others. Some people just need more attention and pressure than others to perform, that is just the way it is (LM1)

These indications lead to the possibility that employees experience not to be treated similarly and fairly at all times.

4.2.3 Communication

None of the line-managers recalled that they have been explicitly informed about the contents of the policy. One supervisor visited the presentations introducing and explaining the policy and indicated that the presentations did not give a comprehensive insight into the contents and purpose of the policy. He explains:

These presentations were more like sales advertisements than informative presentations. The emphasis really laid on how good the policy was, instead of giving a detailed representation of what the contents of the policy were (LM3).

The other two respondents both occupied their positions after the initial implementation of the policy. According to the contents of the official policy, they should have been informed about the contents of the policy shortly after their appointment. However, they both declared not to have received any information at all. One respondent explains:

I cannot remember receiving any message, formal document, or other means of communication concerning the policy (LM2).

Also, despite the fact that the HR professionals stressed the importance of the intranet as a means of communication, not all respondents seemed to use it. One line-manager explains:

I don't know whether the official document can be found on DBS; to be honest, looking up such documents on the intranet is not in my system yet (LM1).

The overall thought was that the communication through the company's intranet does not reach all employees due to the fact that most employees don't look at it and don't open the files which are uploaded to it. Therefore, employees are often not informed as extensive as they should be. Frictions also exist concerning the launch of the new absenteeism reporting system, AFAS. This launch was accompanied with presentations for all line-managers, explaining how to use the system. However, the efforts made to make it clear for everyone were not successful. One respondent comment on these presentations:

I have received an information session of 45 minutes after which I was expected to be able to work with the system. There are still many things which are not clear to me yet (LM2).

Despite the identified frustrations of the respondents concerning the communication of the policy, all supervisors seemed to manage themselves well. The reason, given for this, is the excellent collaboration with the HR department, which is seen by all respondents as an important provider of advice and support. However, this form of cooperation is not capable of solving all problems, as described by one line-manager:

Even in collaboration with my case manager and HR advisor, I sometimes am incapable of filling in the correct forms in AFAS (LM3).

The respondents suggested several improvements for the policy. The most mentioned aspect which could be improved was the supply of data within MST. Most supervisors indicated that the new absenteeism reporting system –AFAS- lacks the supply of data such as averages of absenteeism or numbers of absenteeism per employee and their reasons. According to the respondents, this lack of information hinders their ability to coach and support their subordinates. Also, it was suggested to remove the ambiguities concerning this new system, with which two respondents still experience major issues.

4.3 Perceptions at the perceived level

Perceptions at the perceived level of analysis have been identified after the analysis of the interview transcripts.

4.3.1 Goal of the policy

The two central goals of the policy, mentioned by the respondents, are to reduce the amount of absenteeism and the spreading of clarity throughout the organization. The opinions regarding the achievement of these goals are somewhat divided: though all respondents had the opinion that the policy did bring clarity concerning absenteeism and reintegration within MST, not all employees were sure about the fact that the average percentage of absenteeism has been reduced.

4.3.2 Implementation

Overall, the employees seemed to know little about the policy and its implications for their day-to-day activities. None of the employees without personal experience with the policy -a few former line-managers excluded- had extensive knowledge about the policy, nor did they show any interest to have such knowledge. This is explained by one employee:

I don't know much about the policy due to the fact that, fortunately, I've never had any experience with it (EM3LM1).

All respondents stressed the importance of the role of their direct supervisor in cases of absenteeism and/or reintegration. Also, most respondents indicated that their supervisors offer them the opportunity to come up with ideas as how to reduce absenteeism and that their supervisors discuss the topics which

are prescribed for them to discuss during annual conversations. Respondents with personal experience with reintegration indicated that the aim of the contact with their supervisor was at support, instead of control and that they were satisfied with the frequency of contact. Some of these respondents- mostly those working in relatively large departments- underlined that they would like to have received more attention during their reintegration process, indicating that their supervisors often were too occupied with other workings. This relatively low amount of attention was seen as being very disappointing. Furthermore, most respondents had the opinion that the obligations of employees regarding the calling in of sickness, the obligation of reachability and the improvement of recovery are obvious and fair. The responses regarding the frequent absenteeism meeting were somewhat divided, with some employees thought of it as being logical, and some as being ridiculous. One respondent explains:

“Though I personally think that it is a logical step, not all of my colleagues agree. Some of them think it is a very inconvenient and even ridiculous measure” (EM1LM2)

Most employees indicated that disobedience during the reintegration process is punished and almost all valued it as a good thing. Some employees admitted to have seen or heard some indications of inequalities regarding these punishments, as explained by one employee:

Though I never experienced it myself, I sometimes hear colleagues arguing that not everyone is treated the same at all times. Personally I would really disapprove this (EM1LM2).

Not all respondents could formulate an overall opinion of the policy due to the fact that they did not have enough knowledge to do so. However, indications have been found that groups of employees influence each other’s opinions regarding the policy, as explained by one employee:

I often see colleagues talking gossip with each other about my supervisor or about the policy. Often this gossip is based on misunderstandings and mostly it is not true at all (EM3LM2).

4.3.3 Communication

Responses concerning the communication of the policy were very divided, with some employees indicating to have been informed by their direct supervisor, some indicating that the content of the policy has been looked up on the intranet, and most of the respondents indicating that the policy has not been communicated to them at all. One employee explains:

No policy has been communicated to me at all. They told me that I should meet the company doctor, so I did (EM2LM3)

Not one of the respondents remembered to have been offered presentations or informative meetings explaining the policy. Overall, it seems to be expected of employees that they look up the contents of the policy themselves. However, most respondents indicated not to do so. Therefore, knowledge about the contents of the policy was very much divided between and within employees of distinct departments, with the overall opinion that knowing the contents of the policy is only relevant whenever one has to cope with it.

4.4 Differences in perceptions

4.4.1 Between units of analysis

Differences in frames between HR professionals and line-managers have mostly been identified in the area of perceptions regarding the correct ways of implementing and communicating the policy. Where HR professionals stressed the fact that the policy brings clarity throughout the organization and that line-managers are not to act outside the boundaries of the policy, all

supervisors indicated to experience ambiguities concerning certain aspects of the policy and some supervisors explicitly stated to act outside the boundaries of the policy if needed. Furthermore, while HR professionals underlined that the aim of contact with absent subordinates is to be at support instead of control and that all employees are to be treated fairly and similarly at all times, some line-managers indicated that, depending on individual cases, their aim of contact is at control and that it could be possible that not all subordinates are treated the same way. Also, differences in perceptions concerning the communication of the policy have been found. Despite the claim of HR professionals that significant and enough efforts have been made to communicate the policy throughout the organization, all respondents indicated that the communication of the policy has been flawed, leading to ambiguities concerning a wide array of aspects of the policy.

It has been found that the overall knowledge of employees regarding the policy is low, with most of the respondents not having an extensive insight into the contents of the policy nor into their duties within the policy. This lack of knowledge, which is found to be caused by the fact that most supervisors don’t seem to inform their subordinates of the contents of the policy directly, sometimes leads to dissatisfaction and misunderstandings of employees. While the line-managers and HR professionals underlined the fact that all information can be looked up on the company’s intranet, most employees have been found not to do so. A significant difference in perceptions between HR professionals and employees is the judgment on whether the line-manager is capable of implementing the policy adequately. While the HR professionals indicated that the supervisors are well capable of implementing the policy, it has been found that some employees underlined the fact that the line-managers are incapable of giving them the attention they need due to their overload of work.

4.4.2 Within units of analysis

The frames of HR professionals have found to be remarkably congruent. The only difference which was found was concerning the goal-achievement ability of the policy.

Differences in the frames of line-managers were mostly to be found within the area of the implementation of the policy. Perceptions of supervisors regarding the amount of discretion within the policy, the coping with ambiguities and the amount and ways of contact with absent employees have shown to differ. Also, some supervisors have shown to be stricter than others regarding issues such as the calling in of sickness and the equal treatment of all subordinates. Finally, the steps undertaken by line-managers in order to correct the disobedience of subordinates differ, with some supervisors taking more radical measures than others.

Differences in frames of employees were mostly to be found concerning the knowledge of the policy. These differences in knowledge lead to different opinions and behaviors regarding the policy between distinct employees, and have shown to be present between departments- with the overall knowledge of employees being higher in some departments than in others- as well as within departments. Also differences in perceptions have been found between distinct departments as how capable the line-manager is of implementing the policy, with employees of relatively large departments indicating that the work overload of their supervisor is too large for them to cope with it.

5. DISCUSSION

Several studies described the influence of HR systems and practices on employee attitudes and behavior, as well as organizational outcomes, through employee interpretations of

the work climate (Ferris, Arthur, Berkson, Kaplan, Harrel-Cook & Frink, 1998; Koperlman, Brief & Guzzo, 1990). However, these interpretations are not always shared, nor are they necessarily aligned with the intentions management has while constructing organizational practices, sometimes leading to deviations of employee behavior from intended policy and the weakening of this HRM-performance relationship (Schneider, 1994). This research has found no significant differences in employee attributions concerning the main goals and value of MST's absenteeism and reintegration policy between the intended, actual and perceived levels-, nor within these levels of analysis. The study did find that line-managers experience a number of ambiguities concerning certain aspects of the policy, leading to differences in the implementations between these supervisors. Also, it has been found that, in general, employees lack knowledge of the policy and that the extent of knowledge differs significantly between employees, leading to a variation of expectations and opinions regarding the policy. These deviations of supervisory- and employee perceptions from intended policy are found to be caused by flaws in the top-down communication of the policy. These flaws, and the lack of clarity that is caused by them, force individuals to consult their individual cognitive (HRM) frames to interpret and react to the messages, sent by the policy under study, leading to different interpretations and behaviors, as cognitive frames of individuals differ (Fyske & Taylor, 1991). Furthermore, this study has found that, for certain aspects of the policy, line-managers choose to act according to their personal judgment, and that this judgment and the behaviors which are driven by it, are determined by the line-manager's personal values, personality, attitude and past experiences. In doing so, the claims of claims of Rousseau (2001), Judge & Bretz (1992), Meglino & Ravlin (1998), Hough & Schneider (1996) and Brief (1998) are confirmed. Findings concerning the fact that employees influence each other during the forming of opinions regarding certain aspects of the policy confirms the claim made by James, Joyce and Slocum (1988), Kozlowski and Hatstrup (1992) and Weick (1995), that group members' social interaction and common experiences leads to a collective sense-making. Furthermore, the differences in knowledge, assumptions and expectations regarding the policy between employees of distinct departments, caused by the fact that some line-managers directly inform their subordinates about aspects of the policy and some do not, confirms the claim made by Guest (1987), Story (1992), Legge (1995), Zohar (2000), Offermann and Malamut (2002), Den Hartog, Boselie and Paauwe (2004), Zohar and Luria (2004), Nehles et al., (2006), Purcell and Hutchinson (2007), Kulik and Perry (2008) and Gilbert et al., (2012) that the role of the line manager is crucial for determining employee's perceptions and therefore, for HRM effectiveness. This study did not confirm the claim of Yoshika et al., (2002), that nationalities, languages and times influence individual perceptions, nor that of Dabos and Rousseau (2004) and Nishii and Wright (2004), that people's positions in informal networks influences individual perceptions regarding the employment relationship and HR practices.

5.1.1 Strength of MST's HR system

According to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), the constructing of HR initiatives which help to foster distinctiveness, consistency and consensus leads to the creation of a strong HR system, which is perceived close-to uniformly among employees and is capable to affect firm performance positively. The fact that most respondents within MST seemed to be well aware of the aims and importance of the policy under study, as well as the importance of the HR function as a whole, leads to the conclusion that the HR department and its initiatives can be

characterized as having a high extend of legitimacy, a moderate amount of visibility and a moderate to high amount of relevance (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). The amount of ambiguities for line-managers, leading to differences in the implementations of the policy, is a direct consequence of the fact that, due to flaws in the top-down communication of the policy, the HR department did not succeed to make the content and implications of the policy completely clear throughout the organization. The main instruments of communication- the company's intranet and the HR helpdesk- are incapable of reaching and informing all necessary actors within the organization. This leads to a low amount of understandability and a low to moderate amount of consistency concerning certain aspects of the policy (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). The consensus regarding the policy can be described as moderate, as the agreement among the message senders (Fyske & Taylor, 1991) is found to be moderate and the perceived fairness of the system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) is found to be moderate to high. Taking the above results into account, it can be concluded that, based on the analysis of its absenteeism and reintegration policy, the HR system strength of the Enschede facility of MST can be defined as moderate. This implies that within this facility, a collective, organizational climate (Schneider, 1990) has not yet arisen out of the individual, psychological climates (Brown & Leigh, 1996) of employees, leading to the described variations in interpretations and behaviors. Therefore, this study confirms the claim of Michel (1973), that in relatively weak systems, the variability of individual responses will be large. A detailed description of this analysis of the HR system strength is displayed in Appendix 8.

5.1.2 Recommendations for MST

For MST, it is important to improve the internal communication between and within all social groups. The intranet and the HR help desk are to be replaced with more direct instruments as the main means of communication. Examples of such instruments are direct, personal emails, periodical meetings or structural conversations. Apparently, most employees don't look up information such as messages regarding the policy under study, if not necessary. During presentations and informative meetings, the emphasis is to be laid on giving a comprehensive and clear explanation of the subject, instead on explaining its value. The provision of more information regarding the new absenteeism reporting system is needed to remove the identified ambiguities of line-managers. Despite the fact that the policy prescribed that newly installed line-managers are to be informed about the policy directly, it has been found that this has not happened with most of the respondents. It is essential that all line-managers- current ones and new ones- get informed properly and extensively about the contents of the policy to prevent differences in the implementations between supervisors, and in doing so, to improve the feelings of consistency, consensus and understandability of employees. Also, it is vital for line-managers to discuss important aspects of the policy with their subordinates to prevent misunderstandings and undesirable social interaction. Furthermore, newly recruited employees are to be informed of the contents of the policy to improve the general understandability of the policy. These measures may lead to an increase in the overall knowledge of the policy under study within the Enschede facility of MST and to the achievement of its formal target. Finally, it is recommended to study the capability of line-managers of large departments of implementing the policy sufficiently, as indications have been found that these supervisors are incapable to do so.

5.1.3 Constructing strong HR systems

This study has found that it is important to acknowledge that not all forms of communication are effective in spreading and

maintaining clearness throughout the organization. Direct communication between and within all social groups is found to be essential for the creation of strong HR systems, as instruments of indirect communication have been found to fail to do so. A second important lesson of this study is that direct communication needs to be maintained at an adequate level. Giving extensive attention to communication in the initial phase of the implementation of HR initiatives is found to be ineffective in the long-term when this flow of communication is not maintained, not informing new employees and line-managers of the policy. Thus, it has been found that two things are important for the creation and sustainment of strong HR systems. Firstly, HR managers take into account the characteristics of such systems, described by Bowen and Ostroff (2004), while constructing HR initiatives. Second, the usage of direct instruments of communication is essential during the initial phase, as well as during later phases of the implementation of HR initiatives. When the quality and flow of communication is not maintained after the initial phase, the likelihood of incongruence within the organization is large due to the fact that ambiguities arise, leading to differences in interpretations and varying amounts of knowledge between and within each organizational level of analysis.

5.2 Future Lessons

For future research it is important to acknowledge that differences in perceptions between distinct organizational levels of analysis will always persevere as a natural occurring consequence of the fact that individual frames originate from education, work experience and interactions with social groups (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). However, one method to reduce these differences is by introducing clarity, consistency and consensus within the organization through the constructing of strong HR systems. More research is needed studying this hypothesis, as well as the question whether the offered recommendations for the construction and sustainment of strong HR system are sufficient and comprehensive. Also, research is needed concerning the benefits of the usage of leader-member exchange (LMX) for the construction of strong HR systems. Furthermore, research is needed concerning the question whether the offered framework gives a comprehensive insight into the organizational perception and framing process. Also, research studying the viability and implications of the tool, used for the determination of HR system strength, is needed. Finally, more research is needed concerning the generalizability of claims made in the healthcare sector for other sectors as well as the relation between HR initiatives and organizational performance in the health care sector

5.2.1 Limitations

The number of interviews used for this study is relatively low. Though this could damage the generalizability of this study, at some levels of analysis- i.e. the intended level- the last interview did not bring any new information. Thus, it can be argued that the amount of interviews has been adequate for developing a comprehensive insight into perceptions within the departments under study. Another threat to the generalizability of this study is the fact that it was conducted in one sector only. However, due to the fact that the theoretical framework of this study is not sector-bound, it is possible to generalize to other sectors. Finally, it is to be acknowledged that the gathering and analysis of data through the in-depth interview (Belk, 2012) is of a relatively subjective nature and we acknowledge our flaws as novice interviewers (Roulston et al., 2003). However, techniques to increase the trustworthiness of this study allow for generalizability and reliability of the data and interpretations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study has found that two things are important for the construction of strong HR systems and sound HR initiatives. Firstly, managers have to take into account the characteristics of strong HR systems while constructing HR initiatives. Secondly, the importance of the maintaining of direct communication between all social actors -during the initial phase as well as during later phases of the implementation of HR initiatives- within the organization is to be acknowledged. It has been found that flaws in the communication of the policy under study, caused by the usage of indirect instruments as the main form of communication, has led to the fact that the strength of the HR system of the organization under study can be characterized as being moderate. As a consequence, ambiguities have arisen, which force individuals to consult their individual (HRM) frames while interpreting the policy under study, leading to some amount of differences between intended, actual and perceived HR practices. A company's intranet and a HR help desk are found to be inadequate as the main instruments of communication of HR initiatives, as they fail to reach all relevant individuals. Therefore, direct instruments of communication, such as direct emails, periodical meetings, or structural conversations are found to be essential for the development and sustainment of strong HR systems and the implementation of effective HR initiatives.

This study delivers practical value by offering specific recommendations to the Enschede facility of MST as how to create more congruence within the organization regarding the practice under study. These recommendations may increase the HR department's goal-achievement ability and its value for MST. Academic value is delivered by the offering of specific recommendations as how to create and sustain strong HR systems and by confirming and disconfirming certain general claims for the development of individual frames. Also, new value is created through the development of a conceptual framework describing the organizational perception and framing process and by offering an instrument to measure the HR system strength. More research is needed studying the reliability and completeness of these instruments.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks goes out to Annelies Leussink and especially Ellen de Vogel for arranging the interviews at MST, sharing important documents with us and offering assistance during the contacting process. Also, my gratitude goes to Jansink (2014) for the great cooperation during our work. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Anna Bos-Nehles, for the outstanding assistance and useful feedback that led to the improvement of this paper. Finally, I would like to thank Dustin Schilling and Tanya Bondarouk for giving a critical look at my report and the provision of useful feedback.

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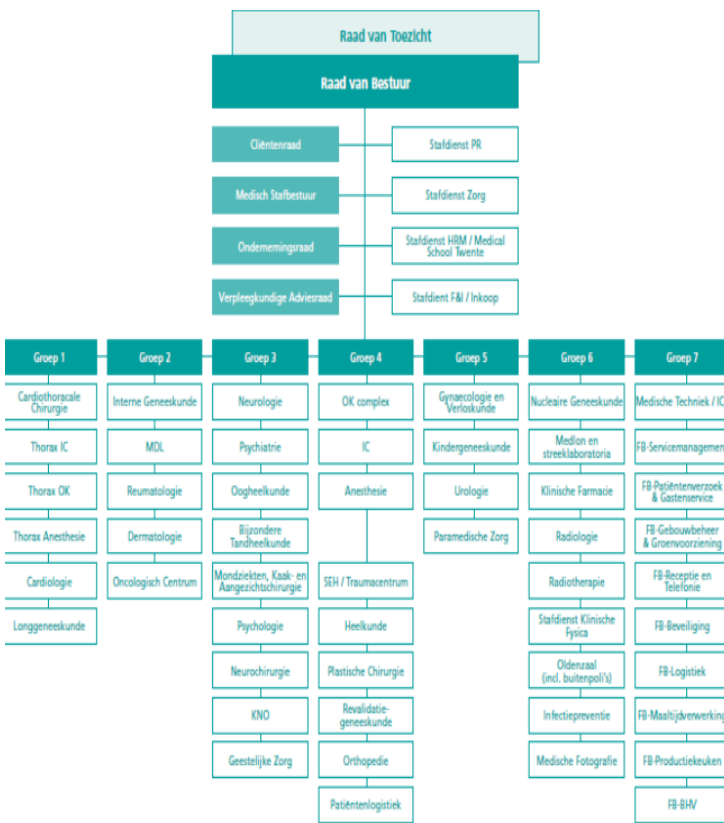
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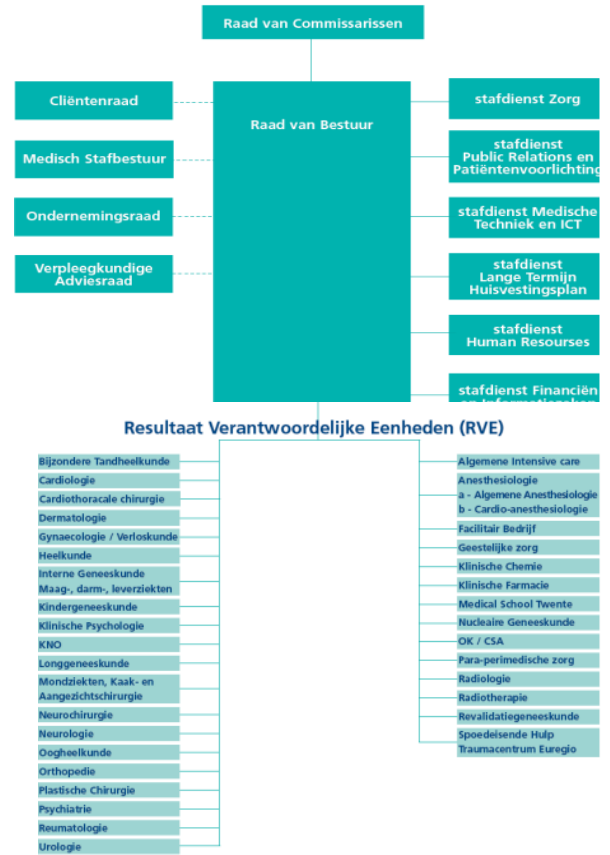
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APPENDIX

1. Organization chart MST

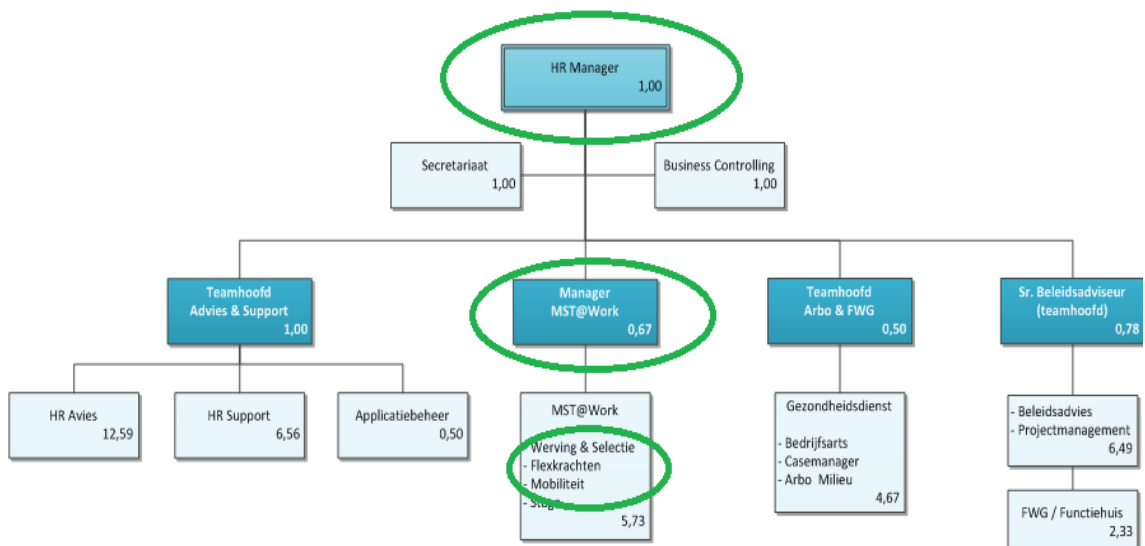


Source: Annual Report MST (2010)



Source: Bestuursverslag MST (2012)

2. Departmental chart HRM department, 2012



Source: Confidential document MST. Names have been removed for privacy concerns

3. Interview template for the intended level of analysis

1. Personal Details
 - *What is your function within MST?*
 - *How long do you have this function?*
 - *Can you tell us something about your day to day activities?*
2. Questions concerning the HR department of MST
 - *How does the HR department get involved with the strategic decision making process of MST?*
 - *To what extend do you think that the line-managers of MST find HR initiatives usefull and that they think of HR managers as adequate providers of support?*
 - *To what extend do you think that the other employees of MST find HR initiatives usefull and that they think of HR managers as adequate providers of support?*
3. General questions concerning the absenteeism and re-integration policy
 - *What was the direct motivation for the development of this policy?*
 - *To what extend was the HR department free to develop the policy according to their own wishes (bounded to CBA and laws or not)?*
 - *Which parties were involved in the development process of the policy?*
 - *Which goals is MST trying to achieve with the policy?*
 - *What is the relation between the policy and the organization-wide strategy of MST?*
 - *To what extend does the policy help to achieve the goals of MST?*
 - *How have the goals of the policy been communicated to the line-managers and employees?*
 - *How has the policy itself been communicated to the line-managers and employees?*
 - *To what extend are the goals of the policy achieved art this moment?*
 - *What do you think hinders the goal achievement-ability of the policy?*
 - *What is your role within the policy?*
 - *What are your tasks concerning the policy?*
 - *To what extend does the policy allow for discretion for line-managers?*
4. Specific questions concerning the absenteeism and re-integration policy
 - *According to the policy, the line-manager has the responsibility to implement the policy. Can you explain this choice?*
 - *To what extend are you personally involved in the implementation of this policy?*
 - *How is the line-manager supported during the execution of his tasks concerning the absenteeism and re-integration policy?*
 - *Have line-managers been involved with the development of the policy?*
 - *How are employees and line-managers motivated to act according to the policy?*
 - *What are the consequenses for line-managers who don't act in accordance of what is prescribed to them?*
 - *What are the consequences for employees who don't act in accordance of what is prescribed for them?*

4. Interview template for the actual level of analysis

1. Introduction
 - *Wat is your function within MST?*
 - *How long do you have this function?*
 - *What is your span of control?*
2. Questions concerning the role of the HR department
 - *To what extend do you think that the HR department is important for the performance of MST?*
 - *How often do you deal with someone from the HR department (and with who)?*
 - *To what extend do you think that HR initiatives are usefull and that the HR managers of MST are adequate providers of support?*
3. General questions concerning MST's absenteeism and re-integration policy
 - *What is your opinion of the absenteeism and re-integration policy of MST?*
 - *How and when, do you, as a line-manager, have to deal with this policy?*
 - *How was this policy communicated to you?*
 - *What are your duties and obligations concerning this policy?*
 - *Are your duties and obligations concerning this policy completely clear to you?*
 - *To what extend do you have discretion concerning implementation of the absenteeism and re-integration policy?*
 - *Which goal, or what goals do you think the policymakers had while developing the policy?*
 - *To what extend do you think these goals are achieved by the implemantations of the policy?*
 - *To what extend do you think the policy is favourable for your team or department?*

- *What are your goals concerning the policy for your team or department?*
 - *To what extent does the policy help to achieve these goals?*
 - *To what extent do you experience differences in the behavior of your subordinates concerning the behaviors regarding this policy?*
 - *What are the consequences of a case of absenteeism for the rest of your team?*
 - *To what extent are employees who do stress their efforts for an rapid recovery rewarded?*
 - *What happens with employees who don't stress their efforts for an rapid recovery?*
 - *Is everyone treated the same concerning this topic?*
 - *Do you have any suggestions for improvements for this policy?*
4. Specific questions concerning MST's absenteeism and reintegration policy
- *Do you recall any example of a case dealing with the absenteeism and re-integration policy?*
 - *Can you explain your actions concerning this case as detailed as possible?*
 - *What is your opinion about the extend of responsibility the line-manager has concerning the implementation of the policy?*
 - *How do you stimulate your subordinates to work at an safe and healthy way?*
 - *How do you give attention to the prevention of absenteeism within your department?*
 - *To what extent do your subordinates get the chance to come up with ideas as how to prevent absenteeism?*
 - *To what extent do your subordinates get the chance to come up with ideas as how to accelerate the process of re-integration?*
 - *To what extent do you discuss the topic of absenteeism during the annual performance appraisal meetings?*
 - *To what extent do you communicate with your subordinates during annual meetings about:*
 - o *The physical and mental load of their work?*
 - o *The topic of absenteeism?*
 - o *Scheduling?*
 - o *Working conditions?*
 - *How often do you have contact with a subordinate who has a long-term sickness?*
 - *How do you keep contact with such a subordinate?*
 - *To what extent do you control the legitimacy of the subordinates' sickness?*

5. Interview template for the perceived level of analysis

1. Introduction
 - *What is your function within MST?*
 - *How long do you have this function?*
 - *Who is your supervisor within MST?*
2. Question concerning the role of the HR department
 - *To what extent do you think that the HR department is important for the performance of MST?*
 - *To what extent do you think that HR initiatives are useful and that the HR managers of MST are adequate providers of support?*
3. Specific questions concerning MST's absenteeism and re-integration policy
 - *What are the implications of this policy for your day-to-day activities?*
 - *Can you describe the implications of this policy in the case that you suffer from a long-term sickness as detailed as possible?*
 - *What is the role of you supervisor in this process?*
 - *How, and by who was this policy and its implications communicated to you?*
 - *To what extent do you think that your duties and responsibilities concerning this policy are clear to you?*
 - *Which goal, or what goals do you think the policymakers had while developing the policy?*
 - *To what extent do you think these goals are achieved by the policy?*
 - *What are your goals concerning the absenteeism and re-integration policy?*
 - *To what extent do you experience that perceptions and behaviors regarding the policy are the same within your team/department?*
 - *What are the consequences of a case of absenteeism within your department or team for you?*

- *To what extent do you think that the policy is favorable/useful for employees of MST?*
 - *To what extent are you rewarded when you stress your efforts for an rapid recovery?*
 - *What happens with employees who don't stress their efforts for an rapid recovery?*
 - *Does everybody get treated the same concerning the above topic?*
 - *What is your overall judgement of the policy?*
 - *Do you have any suggestions for improvements?*
 - *To what extent do you, or your colleagues, notice that there are differences between behaviors of line-managers of distinct departments concerning the implementation of the policy?*
 - *To what extent is there inconsistency in messages concerning the policy between distinct line-managers?*
4. Specific questions concerning MST's absenteeism and re-integration policy
- Concerning the supervisor
- *To what extent do you have participation in the development of ideas as how to prevent absenteeism as well as how to accelerate the process of re-integration?*
 - *Is the topic of absenteeism being discussed during the annual performance appraisal meetings?*
 - *To what extent are you satisfied with the way this topic is discussed?*
 - *Do you have any experience with the policy (have you had a long-term sickness)?*
 - *How did your supervisor contact you during your period of absenteeism?*
 - *How often did your supervisor contact you during your period of absenteeism?*
 - *To what extent did the emphasis of this contact lay on the control of the legitimacy of your sickness?*
 - *To what extent do you have open communication with your supervisory concerning the topics of:*
 - o *The physical and mental load of your work?*
 - o *Your working conditions?*
 - o *Your work scheduling?*
 - o *The total number of absence and its reasons?*
 - *Do you have any comments concerning your supervisor?*
- Concerning the employee
- *To what extent do you think that the guidelines and prescriptions concerning the calling in of sickness are logical and/or fair?*
 - *To what extent do you think that the frequency absenteeism interview is logical and/or fair?*
 - *To what extent do you think the obligation of availability is logical and/or fair?*
 - *Are you aware of the prescriptions concerning the furtherance of recovery?*
 - *What is your opinion of these prescriptions?*
 - *To what extent do the prescriptions and guidelines for employees of the absenteeism and re-integration policy are to be followed by everyone, at a fair way (without exceptions)?*

6. Example of an interview transcript

- *What is your function within MST?*
I'm responsible for the internal OHD.
- *How do you have this function?*
I have this function for 2 Years now.
- *How does the HR department get involved with the strategic decision making process of MST?*
We have an important, advising role. The OHD is a department of expertise and the Management Board is dependent on our advice.
- *To what extent do you think that the line-managers of MST find HR initiatives useful and that they think of HR managers as adequate providers of support?*
This is always relies on a number of factors. How capable are people? Do they take the subject seriously? Do they have to deal with us often? People are not always happy with our choices. For example, not all line-managers like the extent of responsibility they have in the absenteeism and reintegration policy.
- *To what extent do you think that the other employees of MST find HR initiatives useful and that they think of HR managers as adequate providers of support?*
In my opinion, employees often see us as good facilitators of support. The employee does not have to cope with the policy and implementations as much as the supervisor, but they do notice and appreciate our support and role as an advisor.
- *What was the direct motivation for the development of this policy?*

- That was the high number of absenteeism which MST had a few years ago. Back then, MST hired an external agency to deal with absenteeism. In 2012, they decided to develop and implement an own, internal policy
- *To what extend was the HR department free to develop the policy according to their own wishes (bounded to CBA and laws or not)?*
There is always some amount of discretion while developing a policy. I don't know the details due to the fact that I wasn't directly involved with the development of the policy. During the implementation of the policy I have had significant discretion. Whenever you explain your actions well, you always have some amount of discretion, within the boundaries of the law off course.
 - *Which goals is MST trying to achieve with the policy?*
The goal is the policy is to maintain a good HR policy with attention to absenteeism. A leading goal of the policy is cost reduction: 1% of absenteeism equals around 1.5 million euro per year. Every tenth of a percentage in improvements means a significant reduction in costs. Another important goal is to create clarity within the organization concerning absenteeism and reintegration. It is important that all our employees know what their responsibilities and duties are, so that you can point them at their responsibility.
 - *What is the relation between the policy and the organization-wide strategy of MST?*
Cost reduction and improvement of efficiency are some important strategic goals which are pursued by this policy. When your workforce is more healthy and less absent, your efficiency rises.
 - *How have the goals of the policy been communicated to the line-managers and employees?*
Due to the fact that it wasn't clear to everyone when I came to the organization, we have given a lot of attention to the communication of the policy. Presentations have been given to all RVE's concerning the goals and implications of the policy. Also, presentations to employees and the Management Board were given. After the initial launch, most of the communication is through the intranet. Everyone within the organization has full access to all official documents. After the introduction of the new absenteeism reporting system- AFAS- presentations and training have been given to line-managers.
 - *To what extend are the goals of the policy achieved at this moment?*
All goals have been achieved over 2013.
 - *What do you think hinders the goal achievement-ability of the policy?*
Should we not achieve our target over 2014, it must be due to the fact that people don't perform their roles well. If this is the case, we will point them at their responsibility. However, this is not done often yet. The percentage of absenteeism of this year is higher than that of last year, but I think that is due to the fact that we installed a new system which still has its flaws.
 - *What is your role within the policy?*
Together with the company doctor, I am responsible for the policy. It is my job to keep it up-to-date concerning the law and regulations. I advise Frank ten Oever -the administrative HR manager- about certain actions.
 - *To what extend does the policy allow for discretion for line-managers?*
The principle of the absenteeism and reintegration policy is the control model of line-managers. Supervisors have the responsibility to implement it and have control, whenever they operate within the boundaries of the policy. Thus, they have a great extent of personal responsibility.
 - *According to the policy, the line-manager has the responsibility to implement the policy. Can you explain this choice?*
That is a naturally occurring consequence of the hierarchy. If one has to implement the policy, it should be the line-manager, who knows his subordinates best. It was a conscious choice to return this responsibility to the working floor again.
 - *How is the line-manager supported during the execution of his tasks concerning the absenteeism and re-integration policy?*
We offer advice both proactively as well as reactively. The HR advisor is the personal assistant of the supervisor whenever he has questions or needs help. In the case in which there is problematic or long-term absenteeism, the OHD takes over the functional responsibility, in which the official responsibility remains with the line-manager. The escort is taken over by the OHD due to the fact that other expertises are needed. Also, within certain time frames, the files are being analyzed to see which targets are being achieved, and which are not. The new system is ought to assist during this process.
 - *How are employees and line-managers motivated to act according to the policy?*
Not at all; it is their duty to act according to the policy. If they do so, the numbers of absenteeism will fall as well as the length of reintegration processes. People have a natural will to recover from their illness as soon as possible, therefore there is no need to reward this kind of behavior. Before, the implementation did not work smoothly due to the fact that things just were not clear. Officially, the line-manager had full responsibility, but in practice the OHD had it. Therefore, line-managers did not take their responsibility and implementations failed to achieve their goals.
 - *What are the consequences for employees who don't act in accordance of what is prescribed to them?*
 - For such cases there is a policy of sanctions, ending in dismissal.
 - *What are the consequences for line-managers who don't act in accordance of what is prescribed for them?*

The line-manager gets in trouble when he/she doesn't act according to the policy. If we notice that this is the fact, I arrange a meeting with him/her and discuss the issues. Should my orders not be followed, I arrange a meeting with their administrative manager. However, this has not occurred yet. Mostly, asking for their reasons and explaining why they need to do something is enough. It often has to do with ignorance, instead of reluctance.

7. Display of the coding process

Interview Phrases	Assigned (Perceptual) Codes
<i>"The policy has very clear prescriptions which always tell me what to do and when to do it. I just have to follow these prescriptions"</i> (LM1)	The policy allows for little discretion for line-managers
<i>"There have been many situations- for example within the area of the calling in of sickness and the allowing of special leave- in which I chose not to act according to the policy. Some cases ask for a personal approach and this has always been allowed as long as I discuss it with the company doctor and the HR advisor."</i> (LM2)	The policy allows for a significant amount of discretion for line-managers
<i>"The HR department of MST is like a spider in a web. The HR-manager is directly involved with bilateral meetings with the Board of Directors and the HR department is definitely being involved with, and informed of, important strategic decision-making"</i> . (HR1)	High involvement of HR with strategic decision making- high legitimacy of the HR department and HR initiatives.
<i>"I know that I can find the content of the policy at the intranet of MST. I am aware of the fact that the policy exists and that certain issues are handled well, but I haven't received any information about it yet. Certainly I will look it up at the intranet when I need it, but right now it is just not that relevant for me."</i> (EM1LM1)	The content of the policy and its implications have not been explicitly and directly been communicated to this employee.
<i>"I don't think that all line-managers implement the policy similarly. At our department, employees who want to have some more rest have to hand in some of their benefits. After all, if you want to work less and have some time off, you have to earn less; I can't give you leave for that. I don't think that all line-managers think and act this way. I think I know it for sure"</i> (LM2)	Differences in line-manager's implementations. Some follow the prescriptions more strictly than others.
<i>"I think the goal of the policy is to bring clarity and congruence within the organization"</i> (LM2)	Goal: clarity and congruence within the organization
<i>"I think the goal of the policy is to reduce the total percentage of absenteeism within MST, ultimately with the aim to reduce the huge costs which are incurred by absenteeism"</i> (LM1)	Goal: Cost reduction
<i>"The goal of the policy is to prevent, control and reduce absenteeism and long term disability. Also, the policy is meant to make rules and prescriptions concerning absenteeism and reintegration clear"</i> (HR2)	Goal: prevent, control and reduce absenteeism and introducing clarity .

8 Display of the analysis of the strength of MST's HRM system.

Aspect of System Strength (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004)	Examples of Responses/ way of measuring the aspect	Percentage of likewise answers/ measurement	Conclusion
Distinctiveness: Visibility	"I deal with someone from the HR department or with one of their initiatives at least once a week".	7/12 (Only line-managers and employees included) 58,3%	Moderate
Distinctiveness: Understandability	"I don't experience ambiguities within the policy"	4/12 (Only line-managers and employees included) 33,33%	Low
Distinctiveness: Legitimacy	"In my opinion, the HR function is involved with the strategic decision making process" (HR professionals). "In my opinion, the HR function is of significant value for MST" (line-managers and employees).	13/15 (All actors included) 86.6	High
Distinctiveness: Relevance	" the HR function and this particular policy is valuable/useful for me personally"	11/15 (All actors included) 73,3%	Moderate to high
Distinctiveness: Overall	Average conclusion		Moderate
Consistency	"I always appreciate good behavior- and always punish disobedience of subordinates" (line-managers). My supervisor always appreciates good behavior and always punishes disobedience" (employees).	5/12 (Only line-managers and employees included) 41,7%	Low to moderate
Consensus: Agreement among message senders	Extend of similarities between frames at the intended and actual level, and within the actual level.	Not totally similar due to different perceptions concerning implementations and not totally different due to congruence of perceptions regarding the goal and value of the policy	Moderate
Consensus: Perceived Fairness of the system	"In my opinion, the prescriptions regarding the calling in of sickness, the frequent-absenteeism meeting, the obligation of reachability and the improvement of recovery, as well as the obligation to make an effort for an rapid reintegration are relevant for all employees, at a fair way. Everyone have to take them into account evenly".	7/9 (Only employees included) 77,7%	Moderate-high
Consensus: Overall	Average conclusion		Moderate to High

* Based on the analysis of the absenteeism and reintegration policy