An Investigation into E-participation

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ABSTRACT

Research into the topic of e-participation (e-democracy in political research), defined as ICT-enhanced participation, has been strikingly scarce despite the growing support for the importance of technological advances in HRM (e-HRM). The purpose of this research paper is thus to investigate the current state of e-participation in a business context. This will be done through analyzing the types of applications that are observable in companies today, the situations where they are used as well as identifying the conditions that influence the implementation of the given applications. The paper will include a thorough literature review calling on both classic HRM as well as e-HRM literature to define a research framework that uses the "Harvard" model of HRM initially defined by Beer et al. (1984), but with a distinct focus on e-participation. Due to the lack of literature dealing with the topic, especially from a business perspective, the research is designed to favor both qualitative as well as quantitative research. Due to unforeseen complications, the intended research was stalled and thus effort was switched to further definitions of the research framework. The end result is a research framework that is supported by both literature as well as expert opinions that is ready for empirical testing of e-participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, researchers have argued that the technological advances seen in the world today will give rise to "e-business" (Amit & Zott, 2001), which will also lead to the development of "e-HRM" (electronic Human Resource Management). E-business can be defined as business that is conducted over the Internet (Amit & Zott, 2001, Kalakota & Robinson, 2001). With this definition in mind, e-HRM can be based on the same form of reasoning: HRM that is conducted over the Internet. As Ruël, Bondarouk and Looise (2004) suggest through their book; *E-HRM: Innovation or Irritation*, e-HRM like e-business in general should be regarded as a method of carrying out HRM rather than as a completely separate concept. This means that e-HRM should be considered as HRM with internet-based support. Before proceeding, it is also important to define the goals of e-HRM. As e-HRM is argued to be a perspective or approach rather than a separate entity from HRM, the goal of e-HRM should be to complement the HRM practices, strategies and policies, therefore leading to the assumption that in the end, e-HRM goals coincide with those of traditional HRM.

E-HRM has been a central focus of HRM research in the 21st century and attempts have been made to model further analysis relating to this new 'branch' of HRM literature (see Rüel et al., 2004 or Strohmeier, 2007 for more examples and in-depth analysis of some of these frameworks). These models have highlighted the importance of mapping the new HRM process according to the changes implied by the digitalization or the "e" in e-HRM (Strohmeier, 2007). A strong example of this development is the emergence of such practices as 'e-participation', also known as e-democracy in politics (Chadwick, 2008). Derived from political processes initially, e-participation in short regards the participation offered through online platforms for individuals to be more involved with decision-making (Chadwick, 2008; Phang & Kankanhalli, 2008). The main goal of the concept, according to literature, is to encourage two-way communication, educating individuals about the rationale and complexity involved with decision-making, legitimizing decisions and providing a platform for mutual learning (Phang & Kankanhalli, 2008; Macintosh, 2004). This correlates with the traditional definition of participation, as both essentially deal with the amount of influence that employees have on decision-making processes in organizations (Dickson, 1981). Within the scope of this paper, literature dealing with participation will thus be considered relevant to e-participation and vice versa.
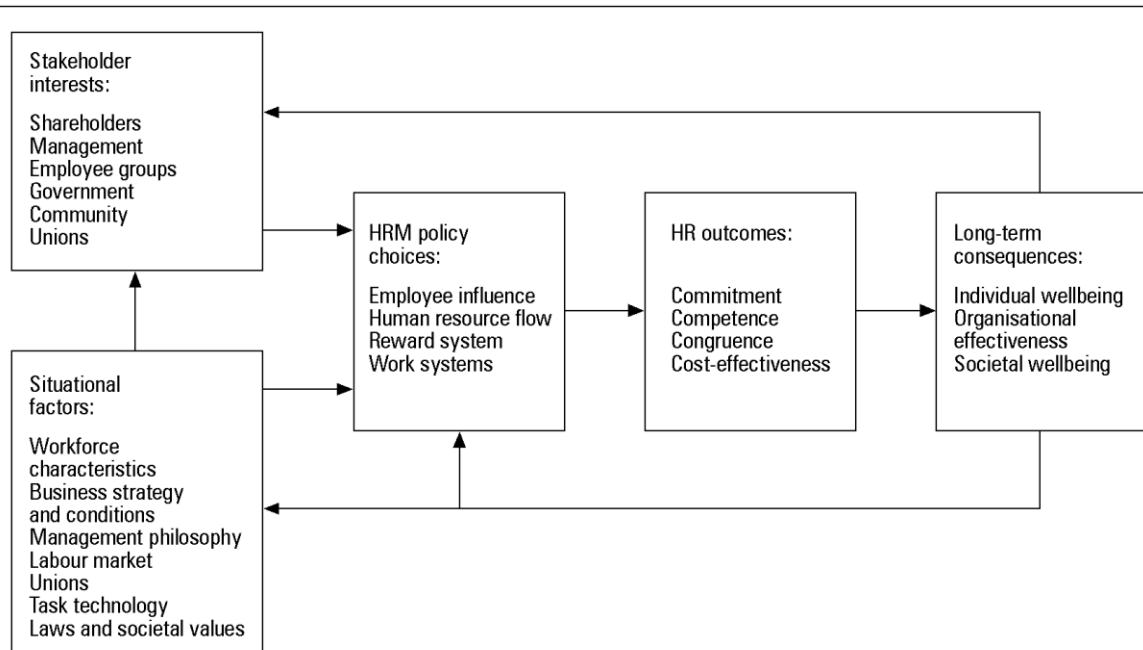
E-participation has opened the world of politics to the potential influence of individuals and has taken countries where the online presence of the population is significant to whole new levels of political activism (Chadwick, 2008). With this in mind, it is very surprising that e-participation does not appear more often in literature within the business context. E-participation is a concept where individuals are enabled to contribute to the decision making of (political) organizations; therefore, there is little reason why the same or similar concepts would not be applicable in business-oriented organizations, which are often also considered political systems (Morgan, 1997).

This highlights a significant research gap in human resource management literature, as employee participation, and similar concepts, are accepted to be basic HRM principles (for example: Lawler & Hall, 1970, Wright & McMahan, 1992). With this motivation as a foundation for research, a sensible initial goal for research into the linking of e-participation to HRM in businesses would be to investigate whether e-participation has been applied in a business context and if so, how these applications should be approached.

After initial consideration, two methods for approaching the aforementioned research gap can be proposed: direct and indirect e-participation (for example in Marchington & Wilkinson, 2005). Direct participation can be defined as the two-way communication between individuals and the organization at hand while indirect participation can be seen as the interaction between the organization and representative groups on individuals, which in a business context mostly comprise themselves of works councils and labor unions (Dickson, 1981). Because prior empirical research linking e-participation to business is practically non-existent, it makes sense to initially limit the scope of the research to one of these methods. Because direct e-participation is seen to have a potential to empower individuals (within an organization) to a greater degree (Dickson, 1981) and because extensive research has been carried out regarding the individual involvement in political decision-making (Chadwick, 2008), this will be the approach that will be analyzed through this research. The academic relevance of this paper is significant due to the current gap in literature. Defining how e-participation could be utilized by businesses could potentially allow for businesses to understand and achieve the modern potential of interaction between their employees and management. The research question can thus be developed into the following combination of questions: **what types of e-participation exist in companies, what conditions does the implementation of these depend on and what influence can they have on the outcomes of a business?**

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the most cited and influential theoretical frameworks that has made an attempt to define the nature of HRM has been the "Harvard model" (Figure 1), also known as the "Harvard map of HRM" developed by Beer, Walton and Spector (1984). The model shows a broad definition of the determinants and consequences of HRM policies, with the latter including "employee influence" which is substitutable by participation. As depicted in the figure below, the HRM policy choices are argued to be influenced directly by stakeholder interests and situational factors, which in turn lead to HR outcomes and long-term consequences. According to Beer et al. (1984), the framework and suggested HR outcomes do not provide with tools necessary for the measurement and assessment of the effects of HRM on organizational outcomes, which is why the model must be adapted to fit this paper's focus of e-participation. For the purpose of simplicity and in order to stay within the scope of this paper, the relationship between HR outcomes and long-term consequences will be assumed to be true as argued by Beer et al. (1984) and multiple others who they have cited within their original research. It is based upon these long-term results that

Stakeholder interests:

Shareholders
Management
Employee groups
Government
Community
Unions

Situational factors:

Workforce characteristics
Business strategy and conditions
Management philosophy
Labour market
Unions
Task technology
Laws and societal values

HRM policy choices:

Employee influence
Human resource flow
Reward system
Work systems

HR outcomes:

Commitment
Competence
Congruence
Cost-effectiveness

Long-term consequences:

Individual wellbeing
Organisational effectiveness
Societal wellbeing

Source: Beer *et al.*, 1984, p.16

Figure 1. Harvard Map of HRM

companies then can learn and adapt their practices according to the perspectives of the stakeholders and conditions within the organizations. Thus, in order to fully understand this model and specifically these lastly mentioned relationships, the combination of the other relationships within the model should be discussed and understood first.

2.1 Harvard model of HRM

2.1.1 Stakeholder interests:

Stakeholder interests according to Beer et al. (1984) involve the expectations and desires of stakeholders involved in the decision-making of a given company. Stakeholders can be divided into internal and external ones depending on whether the individuals in questions have roles within the company operations or outside them. In the model depicted in Figure 1, internal stakeholders consist of shareholders, management and employee groups, while external ones can be compiled from the governments, communities and unions. The authors center their arguments on the idea that the HRM policy choices should be derived from analyzing all the stakeholders, otherwise "the enterprise will fail to meet the needs of these stakeholders in the long run and it will fail as an institution" (Beer et al., 1984). As the stakeholders can be considered a constant regardless of the choice of HRM policies, there should be no difference between e-HRM and traditional HRM, or in the context of this theoretical background, e-participation and traditional participation regarding stakeholder interests. The view of Beer et al. (1984) is shared by O'Shannassy (2003) as well as several influential academics including Mintzberg (1994) and Liedtka (1998).

Situational factors:

The situational factors according to Beer et al. (1984) can, similarly to stakeholders, be divided into internal and external factors. Internal factors are shown in the model through workforce characteristics, business strategy and conditions and the management philosophy. On the other hand, external factors can be seen as the labor market, unions, task technology and the laws and societal values. Situational factors according to the authors may affect the choosing and forming of HRM policies by potentially constraining them or steering them towards a specific direction, much like stakeholder interests steer these choices towards a level of maximal stakeholder satisfaction (Price, 2007). Again, situational factors do not necessarily change according to participation, or e-participation policies, however Beer et al. (1984) do stress the idea that HRM policies or modifications in them can also have a reverse-effect on situational factors. Although the effect is argued to vary in strength and these effects were merely hypothesized in the original article, it is important to keep in mind the possibility and analyze any potential changes in- or constraints of situational factors with regards to e-participation.

HRM policy choices:

Because in the original work of Beer et al. (1984), HRM was considered in its entirety, the policy choices section of the model cannot be considered in the same context. Since the focus of this research paper is solely on participation and specifically e-participation, the HRM policy choice dimension of the model will be adapted to be solely focused on e-participation. As mentioned previously in the introduction to the model of Beer et al. (1984), this paper assumes that the HRM policy choice of employee influence is interchangeable with the concept of participation and e-participation in the model. This is because as defined, participation (as well as e-participation) deals specifically with the amount of influence that employees have on decision-making within organizations. This aspect of e-participation required more

specific definitions and thus will be thoroughly discussed in a later part of the paper.

HR outcomes:

The model suggests that the four main areas of desirable HR outcomes can be placed under commitment, competence, congruence and cost-effectiveness (Beer et al, 1984). Commitment refers to the extent to which the HRM policy enhances the commitment of people to their work and organization, competence to the effectiveness of the HRM policy in attracting, retaining and developing employees with knowledge and skills needed by the organization and society, congruence regards the level of agreement between management and employees that is supported by the HRM practice and cost-effectiveness is rather self-explanatory: it is defined as the reduction of administrative or operational costs (making HR more efficient in terms of wages, turnover, absenteeism, etc.). The model suggests that the aforementioned four outcomes could and should be used to analyze the effectiveness of HRM and as participation is considered a practice that influences these outcomes, the model's suggestions will be taken into account regarding the operationalization within this paper. Because e-participation essentially aims to improve existing participation, it should strive for the same outcomes or improve the processes that lead to them. With this in mind, the outcomes suggested by Beer et al. (1984) are also applicable to e-participation.

Long-term consequences:

The long-term consequences of the model deal with the vision of the company in regards to its HRM policies. This means that this dimension involves the overall consequences of achieving the HR outcomes that have been in focus. The authors argue that HRM policies may not have significant effects in the short-term, thus HRM policy formulation "must incorporate this long-term perspective" (Beer et al., 1984). In essence, the long-term consequences or vision related to HRM practices does not depend on the specific practice that is applied and thus remains the same whether e-participation or any other form of HRM is applied.

The framework developed by Beer et al. (1984) is seen as highly applicable despite its age and has been adopted, in some cases with minor modifications, and discussed by an array of researchers (Poole, 1999; Rüel et al., 2004; Price, 2007; etc.). Not all authors have agreed with the seeming "simplicity" (Hendry & Pettigrew, 1990) of some parts the model. The Harvard HRM model is seen as a "soft" (Guest, 1997 and Storey, 1992) HRM model, which as explained by Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, McGovern and Stiles (1997) has a distinct focus on "the human relations movement, the utilization of individual talents and McGregor's Theory Y perspective on individuals (McGregor, 1960). This contrasts to "hard" HRM (Truss et al., 1997), which focuses on an ultimate aim of competitive advantage through HRM (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 1990; Guest, 1997). The two perspectives are seen as counterparts since soft HRM tends to deal more with human nature, while hard HRM focuses on managerial control. As such, the model proposed by Beer et al. (1984) is often seen as a one-dimensional one, which may be overlooking some important aspects of HRM, such as control through performance management rather than commitment (Truss et al., 1997). However as the authors

mention in their analysis of prior literature referring to soft and hard HRM models, it is highly problematic to incorporate both soft and hard elements into one theory, as they both "rest on a different set of assumptions" (Truss et al., 1997). These considerations mean that any conclusions should consider that the concept of e-participation is dynamic. For the scope of this paper, a soft view of HRM is adopted over a hard one; however some emphasis will be made on the implications for management regarding e-participation.

2.2 Participation

According to an extensive literature review by Cotton, Vollrath, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings (1988), there are four main categories of the types of decisions that participation can be involved in. These types of decisions are divided into routine functions, work itself, working conditions and company policies (Locke & Schweiger, 1979).

Routine functions involve decisions and participation in issues dealing with hiring, training, discipline and appraisal.

The participation involved in decisions linked to "*work itself*" can be defined as participating in job design, task assignments and the decisions regarding the speed of work.

Decisions regarding *working conditions* suggest involvement in defining rest times, working hours, placement and access to equipment as well as general conditions such as lighting, noise, etc.

Company policies regard such issues as layoffs, profit sharing, capital investments and definitions of general policies adopted by the company.

The categories are often tied to a considered level of democracy or empowerment provided for employees ranging from limited power and democracy at the routine level to significant power and democracy at the company policy level of participation. What is meant by this, is that routine functions may suggest according to Locke & Schweiger (1979) that a lower level of democracy is apparent, however it could be argued (as is mentioned within the work of Cotton et al., 1988) that in some cases employees can make decisions to greater or lesser degrees even within their routine functions. This highlights a specific area of improvement that could be elaborated on within this theory as it is still vital to identify the actual levels, or "forms" (Huselid, 1995) of participation that are relevant given certain contexts.

Instead of focusing on one level of participation that is considered to hold the most value for a firm, the focus of this research will be in identifying a range of e-participation forms that satisfy different levels of desired participation to further stress that participation should not be considered a static human resource practice, but a dynamic practice that requires adapting (Colbert, 2004). These types of discussions have been touched upon by such authors as Cotton et al (1988 and 1990) and their critics; Leana, Lock and Schweiger (1990), however they deal mostly with participation in general, or traditional participation (participation without the explicit use of ICT (Information Communication Technology) as a supporting tool) and thus it is relevant to investigate whether these ideas translate into e-participation. The research of Cotton et al. (1988) involves a detailed literature review of

participation literature, which leads the authors to conclude that the categories defined by Locke & Schweiger (1979) alone are not enough the define the level of participation since they only deal with the types of decisions that are being made. According to Cotton et al. (1988), it is necessary to also define the amount of influence that employees can have on decisions regarding different categories.

2.2.1 The participation categories of Cotton et al. (1988)

Cotton et al. (1988) highlight different levels of decision-making mostly formed from the employees' perspectives. This means that the authors discuss the involvement of employees in different types of decisions and namely how they are taken aboard the decision-making systems of a given company.

1. Participation in work decisions

Cotton et al. (1988) define this method of participation as a "formal, direct and long-term" method. Although the authors claim that there is only little evidence of a positive relationship between this category and positive outcomes, it is a logical level of participation as it deals with operational decision-making. E-participation strives to enhance the path on the way to achieving the goals set for participation. Thus, a formal, long term method (which an application of ICT methods could enhance) where employees participate in decisions regarding their "work itself" for example, should not be cancelled out as a potential area for application of e-participation.

2. Consultative participation

This method of participation is largely similar to participation in work decisions; however the employees do not have the delegated power to formalize the decisions. Consultative e-participation methods can be seen in use especially through such mediums as political discussion forums (Chadwick, 2008). These discussion forums allow for the sharing of opinions and ideas through an online forum setting. Because discussions and input are exactly what consultative participation is defined to entail (Cotton et al., 1988), this proposes an opportunity for the application of ICT. Keeping this in mind, consultative participation can definitely be seen as a potential form of e-participation and should be considered further.

3. Short-term participation

The authors define short-term participation as a method where the participation in decision-making is limited to single- or a limited amount of sessions. This suggests that short-term participation would generally be used to resolve specific issues or problems, which poses a difficulty in forming longitudinal implications. Also, to date there is no support for significant correlation between short term participation and positive outcomes, as discussed by Cotton et al. (1988) and Leana et al. (1990) in their extensive analysis of research regarding this relationship. Keeping this in mind, the possibility of enhancing short-term participation through e-participation tools and methods may be a possibility; however the lack of supporting primary research complicates the forming of justifiable conclusions (this will be discussed in more detail at a later time).

4. Informal participation

Informal participation is defined as participation that is coherent in organizations without "formally established participatory systems or groups" (Cotton et al., 1988). One major area of this type of participation involves indirect and informal relationships between employees and decision-makers. Both Cotton et al. (1988) as well as Leana et al. (1990), who criticized the methodology and results of the priors' research, claimed that this type of participation has positive influences on performance. Although one could argue that some e-participation mediums, such as e-mails, could be involved in informal participation, this paper makes an attempt to translate systematic and formalized forms of e-participation into business context due to difficulties in operationalization. This means that informal participation plays an insignificant role in within the context of this paper; however the relationship could be analyzed further in the future.

5. Employee ownership and Representative participation

These two forms of participation are formal, yet indirect ones. Cotton et al. (1988) define employee ownership as providing employees with the right to participate as any other stockholder does. This can be done through either allowing direct participation by employees (employee ownership), or in more common cases, involves electing representatives to meet in formal settings with decision-makers of a given company (representative participation). Employee ownership is a structural form of participation in the sense that it is essentially based upon the organization of the company in question; therefore a discussion regarding the direct influence of e-participation on the outcome of the participation would be significantly limited without further primary research. As such, employee ownership and representative participation will not be considered from this point onwards.

Cotton et al. (1988) as well as Leana et al. (1990) and a majority of the authors discussed in previous sections all developed their research and conclusions based on observations of traditional participation. This research paper strives to develop a framework that aids and inspires further research into the field of e-participation, thus because not all of the research is directly translatable, adapting the discussed forms and levels of participation is necessary. Overall, the categories and levels discussed can be connected via certain dimensions, however there are some aspects that overlap and thus allow for misinterpretations. For example, the participation in work decisions can be interpreted as more of a category than a level of e-participation. The justification of the levels of the authors' research thus allows for flexibility, which means that when a detailed framework is developed, these levels should be elaborated on further.

3 DEVELOPMENT OF A FRAMEWORK

3.1 E-participation

Most models and frameworks that have been discussed in existing literature deals with general participation (Akhtar et al., 2008; Cotton, et al., 1988; indirectly by Wright & McMahan, 1992; etc.), however the aim of this paper is to

identify methods through which e-participation can be used to enhance or attain the goals set by general participation. With this in mind, the implementation of e-participation should look to improve the methods in which the different levels of participation can be achieved. Instead of focusing on one level of participation that is considered to hold the most value for a firm, the focus of this paper will be in identifying a range of e-participation forms that satisfy different levels of desired participation to further stress that participation should not be considered a static human resource practice, but a practice that requires adapting. Although Cotton et al. (1988) do provide argumentation for their separate levels, as discussed; some of the levels are more applicable to e-participation than others. Keeping this in mind while considering the levels defined by Cotton et al. (1988) the levels of participation that e-participation methods can enable are derived to:

1. Informing
2. Reacting
3. Influencing
4. Co-Deciding

The *informing* stage involves one-way communication from the top management (or the delegated decision-maker) to the employees. In this method of participation, employees are informed of decisions, but are not consulted upon for ideas or opinions prior to the actual decision. More often than not, this minimal form of participation is used when a highly strategic decision or activity is implemented where the opinions of individual employees are seen as secondary in contrast to the organizational goals and/or objectives.

Reacting regards participation through being informed as well as allowing employees to react to decisions or proposals. This suggests an increasing amount of two-way communication. This form of participation is often defined as consultative participation, where employees' opinions are valued, but not necessarily acted upon as the centralized decision-makers will always have the final say. This form of participation is often used when there are limited amounts of options available or desirable regarding the decision and employee opinions are wanted to aid the company in choosing an option that would cause the least amount of organizational friction.

The next stage of *influencing*, as the name suggests, regards allowing for limited empowerment to employees in the sense that they are given a chance to influence the outcomes of decisions and proposals. This stage is similar to the reacting stage, apart from the important fact that employee reactions can directly influence the decisions. This means that there is a significantly more decentralized approach to problem solving. This method of participation is often used when dealing with decisions that affect employees directly and where their opinions are required to ensure that the right decision can be made.

Co-Deciding is the natural progression after potential influencing by employees. In this form of participation, employees are able to make decisions autonomously i.e. as a group rather than involve top-management or involve specifically delegated decision-makers. In this sense, the communication is horizontally oriented. This form of participation is most commonly witnessed in context where decisions that are made are on a tactical or operational level and regard non-strategic day-to-day decisions or ones

that aid in the reduction of bureaucracy and other administrative costs.

3.2 Effects and outcomes

HRM outcomes have been thoroughly discussed in literature through the likes of Guest, (1997), Paauwe, (2009) and Rüel et al. (2004). The works of these authors bring new and original insights to the table and an attribute that they all share is the citation of Beer, et al. (1984) as a major influence on the development of their models and frameworks. These four types of HR outcomes are often considered to be to general and relatively basic (Hendry & Pettigrew, 1990), however many authors do sum up the model developed by Beer and his colleagues to be the "best analytical framework that we currently possess" (Poole, 1999) with regards to HRM.

As argued, there is a sense of equifinality between traditional and e-participation and so the aim of this paper is to identify whether the use of e-participation can and should make the process of reaching the goals more effective. With this in mind, it is still possible to argue methods and forms of e-participation that can result in the improvement of the four HRM outcomes:

Commitment

E-participation allows for platforms of engagement for employees. By using an online medium, employees are able to access the sharing of information within an organization through different tools, in practice allowing for easier and faster transfer of knowledge and an opportunity for easier and thus more efficient participation. As is clear through motivational theories, employees are generally more satisfied when given an opportunity to take more responsibility and participate in decision-making (The two most cited works being that of Maslow, Frager & Cox, 1970; and Herzberg, 1966). This means that if e-participation truly does allow for an increased amount of opportunities, it will also result in the increase of commitment by employees. This means that the more empowerment that is presented through levels of e-participation, the more commitment should be witnessed. In other words, if only an "informing" level is applied, the influence on the commitment of employees will be far less significant than if they are allowed to co-decide.

Competence

Because the competence HRM outcome relies largely on the effectiveness of practices in reaching their intended outcomes, e-participation should be able to improve this. E-participation as mentioned strives to allow for an increased level of job enrichment and enlargement, which in turn should lead to improvements in turnover levels, as well as employee development. Tools exist today that allow for the rapid sharing of information, which also allows for opportunities to learn skills and gain knowledge at a higher pace. E-participation can thus be argued to potentially provide with means to learn as well as increased retention. Again, the levels of e-participation can have a great effect on the types of observable outcomes related to competence. If employees are only informed on decisions, it makes sense that there will be no visible learning done by anyone involved. However, if employees are taken into the decision process through co-deciding, they are given an opportunity to make decisions as well as potentially influencing efficiency through their decisions.

Congruence

E-participation tools aim to provide a method for rapid transfer of information and efficient discussions (Chadwick, 2008). This suggests that congruence can be achieved at a faster rate as employees and managers alike can potentially converse with each other and share information, effectively minimizing dissonance due to disagreements. The method of measurement for the impact on congruence that e-participation can have should regard the willingness of employees to use e-participation means to discuss ideas and decisions as whether these methods are useful and desired. Logically, in relation to the levels defined, the more empowerment (the higher the level of e-participation), the less congruence will be visible.

Cost-effectiveness

As the primary goal of e-participation is to reach the same desired outcomes as traditional participation in a more efficient manner, cost-effectiveness should be one of the major focuses of measurement regarding its success. The measurement of this outcome should be executed through two main perspectives; one being whether e-participation tools are deemed necessary in the different levels of participation and secondly, whether e-participation would actually result in cost-effectiveness in the given situation. All levels can potentially have a positive relationship with cost-effectiveness. If employees for example would only make the decision-making process less effective, it is possible that adopting an informing level of participation would lead to higher outcomes in this regard than co-deciding would. However, employees can also have valuable ideas that allow for the development of cost-effectiveness in multiple ways and thus co-deciding can potentially also have significant positive effects.

3.3 Stakeholder expectations and what is expected of them

External Stakeholders

As far as stakeholders go, a clear distinction can be made between internal and external stakeholders (O'Shannassy, 2003). As accepted widely throughout the human resource academic discipline, external stakeholder expectations and desires influence the direction of human resource practices (Armstrong, 2006; O'Shannassy, 2003; Colbert, 2004). For e-participation to reach its complete potential, stakeholder expectations should revolve around increasing efficiency and effectiveness and should be open to change and technological development (Macintosh, 2004). This means that if influential external stakeholders are not interested in improving efficiency and effectiveness in the processes of the company, it is unlikely that e-participation will be able to provide a large impact on the organizational outcomes.

Employees

Because of the lack of literature including e-participation in business discussions, it is difficult to highlight the role of employees within e-participation. However, because the overall objectives that e-participation as a HRM practice strives for, correlate almost completely with traditional participation, it can be argued that in order for e-participation to work as intended employees must be willing to be involved (Armstrong, 2006;). This highlights the need for a certain level of willingness towards adapting

to change and adopting new tools to modify routines. As e-participation ideally will result in the heightened efficiency of information sharing and other forms of participation, there must be a source for this information. Unless only one-way information sharing is pursued, every other level of participation requires input from the employees and so in order to successfully pursue e-participation, employees must be willing, preferably wanting to be involved and share ideas and knowledge with each other and the organization (Colbert, 2004; Komito, 2005).

Managers

For employees to reach the above desire to participate, managers should work as support systems (Eisenberger, Hutington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). If managers encourage employee involvement and strive to support employee input, they are more likely to continue and potentially increase their participation (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Lepak, Taylor, Tekleab, Marrone & Cohen, 2007). In order to reach efficiency in the HRM practice, managers must also be willing to share ideas and knowledge as well as receive it. The tools of e-participation allow for rapid sharing, which managers should act as mediators of. In a sense, they can steer conversations, propose topics, etc. to improve and allow for successful e-participation. Overall this means that managers should be willing to take an active role in the communications networks of the company and be willing to receive suggestions as well as provide them to their peers. In this sense, as Eisenberger et al., (1986) and Lepak et al., (2007) state, the manager should develop their jobs further into providing a supporting role for employees to be able to increase commitment and thus enable e-participation to reach its potential.

Work environment

The work environment also has an important role in e-participation (Eisenberg et al., 1986). If employees are not given recognition, either through financial or social rewards, for their thoughts, they are unlikely to continue participating (McGregor, 1960). The work environment can also aid in the adoption of e-participation tools in the ways discussed previously: by being open to change and technological advances. A supportive work environment should result in higher willingness to participate (Lepak et al., 2007), which means that the work environment can be considered an important situational factor with regards to the success of e-participation.

Because the focus of this research is on e-participation specifically, rather than the overall HRM policy of companies, the external situational factors, such as legislation and economic issues, are not of central importance. These external factors do have an effect on e-participation, but the effects resonate through all HRM practices in companies (Beer et al., 1984). Since the goal of this paper is to provide with a framework for future research into the topics discussed, it will only focus on factors that specifically influence the outcomes of e-participation. This means that although the relationship is very much apparent, it will not be analyzed further due to the scope and aim of the research. Therefore, the dimension of situational factors can be translated into conditions that are required (or suggested) for the success of e-participation. The influence of the stakeholder expectations in combination with the attitudes and roles of

employees, managers and the work environment thus create the conditions available for the implementation of e-participation.

3.4 Research Model:

In order to translate the findings into a conceptual framework, e-participation levels and categories are plotted in as a part of the Harvard map of HRM (Beer et al. 1984).

Dimensions of previous models as well as adaptations that make them applicable to e-participation have been discussed in the previous sections of this paper. When compiled, the relationships between the dimensions are what serve as potential foundations for future research.

The conditions discussed coupled with the categories identified form the basis of the framework. The conditions themselves have a profound influence on the success of e-participation, but the specific conditions that are required, or perhaps support e-participation are defined mostly by the category of the participation. In practice this suggests that the type of decision(s) that is being made define the conditions that are required to support it, which makes sense logically.

The conditions and categories combined then serve to define the level of e-participation that is adopted. In other words, the amount of democracy that is chosen along with the role that both management and employees take is defined by a combination of the type of participation and the conditions that support or constrain it. Based on these choices, certain outcomes are chosen as the goals of the e-participation.

The final model that is created when compiling all the dimensions discussed is the shown in figure 2. The model closely resembles the model based on the research of Beer et al. (1984) with a number of distinct differences. As discussed, the relevance of stakeholder expectations and situational factors is questionable when considering the research goals of this research, and thus these dimensions are replaced with the discussed conditions and categories. The categories of participation define what conditions are necessary for success. The combination of what is required for successful e-participation and what type of participation is being pursued logically defines the form of e-participation, i.e. the level of it. The main idea of the model revolves around the relationships between the different dimensions. It is important to notice that these relationships that are represented by the arrows in the diagram are not always one-dimensional and thus the definitions of specific dimensions may depend on more than one other dimension. Similarly to the original model by Beer et al. (1984), the long-term consequences, could be added to the model, however because they are not a central part of the research within this paper, the dimension will not be added to the framework.

One of the strengths of this new model for future research into e-participation is the familiarity of it. The dimensions may seem relatively simplified and basic, but as there is currently an obvious lack in literature regarding this topic, it makes sense to start from simple models and build on a framework that has served HRM literature in so many ways in the past. An important assumption that the model makes which should be taken into account with regards to future research however is the issue discussed in the beginning of the paper with "hard" and "soft" HRM. Although attempts have been made within the argumentation and justification of the dimensions of the model, it should be considered that most of the literature it was based on regarded soft HRM over its hard counterpart. This means that the model should be adapted according to modern literature as seen fit and potential discrepancies between results may be observed based on certain definitions of core concepts. That being said, the model still has potential to serve as a framework for future research into a growing field of e-HRM as it focuses on previously discovered relationships with relatively modernized concepts. In theory, the model could allow for the mapping of companies' e-HRM policies, especially e-participation and thus help both academics as well as businesses understand how they could and should apply the concept of e-participation.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Methods

As defined in the introduction to the paper, the primary research will set out to answer the question of **what types of e-participation exist in companies, what conditions does the implementation of these depend on and what influence can they have on the outcomes of a business?** Because empirical research regarding e-participation is scarce, especially within the business context, the topic must be approached in a meticulous manner. The goal of the research is to gain a representative view of attitudes
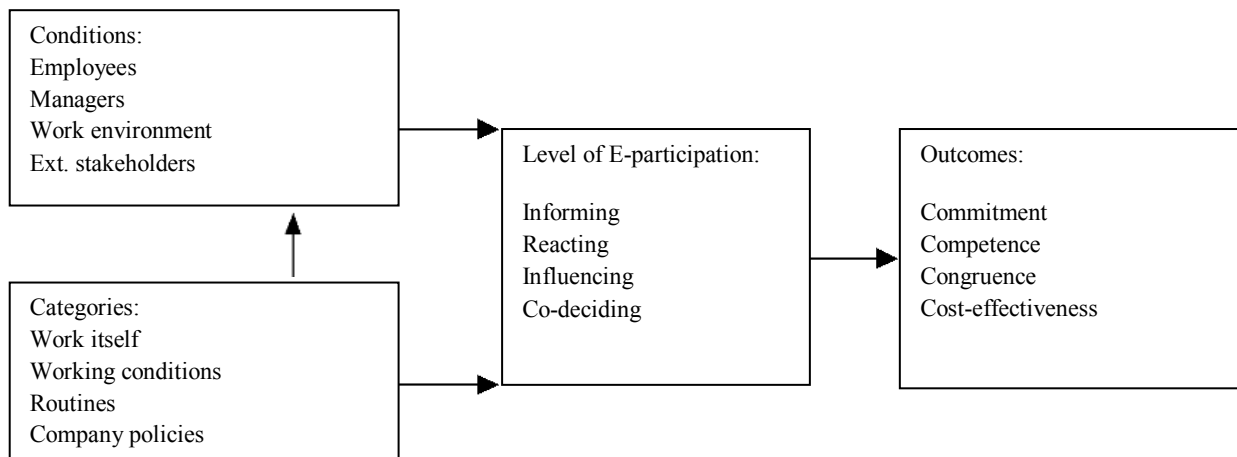

Figure 2. Developed research framework

and applications related to e-participation from the view of the business as a whole. This means that the sample should involve individuals from all possible levels of an organization. Quantitative research seems logical in this case, because the goal is to involve as many employees and managers as possible. This type of research allows for large test populations, which in turn means that the representativeness can benefit. The results of quantitative can greatly aid in the further definition of the dimensions defined in the framework. In addition, this can help obtain knowledge about general attitudes relating to the topic at hand. Quantitative research alone however will provide with relatively one-dimensional data due to the fact that the depths of questions that can be asked are limited, thus an addition of a qualitative method is also appropriate. With regards to the research question, to truly understand for example how e-participation has been integrated in a business, it is necessary to ask more specific and qualitative questions. Qualitative research can allow for a deeper understanding of the accuracy and applicability of the developed framework. This will be done through being able to investigate more detailed questions related to how e-participation works in practice and potentially uncovering practical experiences related to this concept.

4.2 Selection and sampling

It makes sense to test the practical implications that the different dimensions have through interviews with people from the different levels within a single business. The reason for limiting focus to a single company is to limit the amount of confounding and environmental variables involved. Also, this makes it easier to justify and compare the results since the qualitative research can be used to elaborate on conclusions based on its quantitative counterpart.

The original plan was to complete both the quantitative and qualitative research within one large company. Due to unfortunate events however, the company which was approached as the focus of the research could not provide with the required information within the required time-frame. Although the intended research could not be completed, the research methodology and framework can be tested through an interview with someone with industry experience and knowledge of e-participation. The results of this interview can aid in highlighting potential issues with the planned methods and model and thus improve future research. The interview was carried out with a systems engineer with significant experience using and implementing e-participation tools in his work and thus can provide valuable feedback regarding this research.

The questions that should be asked to test the validity of the research framework and overall approach suggested by this paper should be focused on the dimensions defined in the model. Because the ultimate research questions is a combination of three sub questions, The interview will be structured by asking the three questions implied, with a more specific question in each section to identify an opinion about the strength of the model with regards to that section. Thus the questions are divided into:

1. What types of e-participation exists in businesses in your experience?
   1.1 Do you think the categories and levels used are adequate to study these different types of e-participation?

2. What conditions do you believe the implementation of these e-participation types depend on?
   2.1 Do you think it is logical to divide the conditions into: managers, employees, the working conditions and external stakeholders?
3. What influence does e-participation have on the outcomes of businesses?
   3.1 Do you believe that e-participation outcomes can be defined by the dimension of the model?

5. Interview

What types of e-participation exists in businesses in your experience?

E-participation is starting to exist in almost all modern companies today. It has become so "normal" these days that individual employees may not even realize that they are using a form of it and thus measuring the concept can be tough. It is likely that you will receive relatively one-sided answers based on your questions from certain levels of the business that you should take into account when interviewing the individuals. I mean this in the way that some individuals may see different forms of e-participation than others and thus their answers may have discrepancies. The types of e-participation that exist I believe have quite the range and it should be considered that sometimes the same tools can be used for different types.

Do you think the categories and levels used are adequate to study these different types of e-participation?

Regarding the framework, I believe that another category could be applicable in some contexts: the strategic level of e-participation. Currently in my business we use e-participation through of course the use of simple tools such as e-mails and portals, but we do have a system of an online idea-box. Anyone in the company can place an idea in this system and receive compensation if the idea is adopted to the slightest. In general though, depending on whom in the organization you are asking, in most cases the categories of e-participation can be limited to the first, or the first couple of categories [work itself and working conditions]. However, in cases where the general employees are highly trained and able to take part in a range of decisions, they could also be allowed to participate on the strategic level decisions of a business.

With regards to the levels identified, I have always thought of the levels of e-participation to range from simply high to low involvement, but I assume that the identified levels serve the same purpose.

What conditions do you believe the implementation of these e-participation types depend on?

When dealing with conditions, in my opinion, you will receive relatively one-sided responses as I don't see anyone disagreeing with any of the conditions that you could mention. In other words, you are likely to not do much with the information you can gather from these answers. Hence, it would make sense for you to ask the individuals to rank the options and gain more valuable results.

Do you think it is logical to divide the conditions into: managers, employees, the working conditions and external stakeholders?

I believe that the conditions identified are all relevant; however a condition that you have not identified in the framework is having the correct tools and knowledge. Some companies may have e-participation options available, but employees may either find them poor options or lack the knowledge and skills to use them and thus the implementation fails. Although this could be considered as a sub-category of a combination of the other identified ones, I believe it is important enough to merit a separate mention in the framework.

What influence does e-participation have on the outcomes of businesses?

I believe that as with many HRM functions, e-participation outcomes are incredibly difficult to measure. It would require a very static organization and a controlled implementation of e-participation to truly measure what effect specifically it has on the outcomes of the organization. I believe that e-participation does have an effect on the outcomes of businesses, however it is difficult to actually say what is directly attributable to e-participation. That being said, I believe that e-participation is quite clearly a more effective form of participation and thus should have similar effects to that, but with a larger magnitude.

Do you believe that e-participation outcomes can be defined according to the dimension of the model?

Again, I think that this is a tough call. I believe that employee participation and thus e-participation can have effects on all of the identified dimensions, with some more than others of course: I believe that the most important focus of e-participation should be to aim for a combination of increasing employee commitment and cost-effectiveness. Without increases in these two, it will be difficult to justify the practice for management. The other outcomes are also relevant however, as e-participation can indeed have effects on these, and I just believe they may not be quite as important. In the light of this, perhaps it would be worth it to consider defining weights and details for the different outcomes. This could allow for better definitions and make it clearer to measure in the future.

6. DISCUSSION

The opinions that resonated from the interview will be considered and discussed in the following section and any relevant changes to the operationalization of the research will be taken into account. It makes sense to consider that in organizations where the employees are skilled and have enough knowledge they could also be involved in higher degrees of decision-making. It could be necessary then for different types of investigations to be considered for lower level employees and managers since both their capabilities and roles regarding e-participation can greatly vary. This argument suggests that more investigation should be done regarding the types of questions that are relevant for different roles within an organization. However, for the scope of this paper, the changes will be limited to the modification of the research framework.

Overall, the framework received relatively strong backing through the answers within the interview; however there are some modifications that were suggested that may improve the practical applicability of the model. The first suggestion dealt with the idea of modifying the category dimension of the model. It is logical to add the suggested fifth category of strategic influence to the framework as it will enable for a more holistic view on the matter as the model would then incorporate a wider range of categories ranging from day-to-day or operational decisions to corporate level strategic ones. All of the categories together may not be applicable in all cases, as is mentioned in the interview, but it adds more depth to the existing dimension.

The other modification to the model that should be considered according to the interview proceedings would be the addition of a choice to the 'conditions' category. The argument can be considered a valid one, as without proper knowledge or tools it is impossible to fully implement e-participation. Whether this criterion would overlap too much with the existing four conditions however is up for discussion. If the knowledge and tools would be adopted as a part of the dimension, it makes sense to also define the existing options further so that they are mutually exclusive and do not overlap. An option would be to adapt the dimensions to include more specified versions. These should define further what the actual roles of the different individuals that are mentioned have. Managers have the responsibility of actually supporting the implementation of e-participation, thus this condition could be defined as: managerial support. The role of the employees could be considered through the skills that they possess and the support that they give to the implementation of e-participation; if however knowledge and tools is implemented as a part of this dimension, the determinant specifically dealing with employees could be considered their attitude, as this would encompass the support and stance towards e-participation. The working conditions would remain the same, as it does not overlap with knowledge and tools. The same goes with the attitude of external stakeholders as. Although these two criteria may be slightly dependent on knowledge and tools, they do not overlap when defining the type of participation as for example, the ideas of the external stakeholders have a completely different influence than the knowledge available. These minor changes allow for the creation of the new criteria of knowledge and tools. This would allow for clearer distinctions between the variables as well as ensuring that no major gaps develop.

The outcomes dimension received some scrutiny from the interviewee. A major issue that was raised through the interview answers was that of the operationalization of this dimension. As the interview suggests, in order for proper definition of this dimension, it would be necessary to enlarge the scope of the research to investigate external factors and the outcomes of businesses to add relevant detail to this dimension. Because the focus of this paper has been steered towards the left side of the model (the relationships up to the different levels of participation), it is satisfactory to limit the scope of the outcomes to simply test the relevance of the suggested theory. For future research however, more specific forms of outcomes could be investigated through for example an adaptation of a company's satisfaction survey. By adding sections to a survey that is required from employees in a company, one is guaranteed to get answers and thus this could aid in the

increase of representativeness. Also, in a satisfaction survey, the influences to different outcomes could all be weighed and special focus needn't be attributed to e-participation. Thus on more neutral grounds, it could be observed whether employees and managers in a company deem e-participation as an important practice. The weights of the criteria that were suggested may also be of interest for future e-participation research, however as the aim of this paper is the development of a framework that encourage further research, there would be no empirical backing for the further definition of this dimension and thus the outcomes defined will be kept the same.

This discussion has led to modifications within the original framework. The final result would be what can be seen in the appendix section.

7. CONCLUSION

The research set out to identify the **types of existing e-participation practices, the conditions that the implementation of these would depend on and the influence of them on business outcomes.** Although the wanted empirical research was not conducted, a research framework was designed that is ready to be applied in an empirical setting to answer these questions. The suggestions that the literature review and conceptualization of this paper make with regards to the research question are the following: the types of e-participation can be categorized depending on the types of decisions being made (the category dimension) and the level of participation desired (the level of e-participation dimension). The conditions can be divided into different roles for different stakeholders in the firm as depicted in the conditions dimension. The outcomes of e-participation are dependent on the previous dimensions and can be categorized as they appear in the model. Overall, the model depicted in the appendix does include possible answers to the research question.

The model also includes strong potential for future e-participation research. This is because a working model similar to the one defined could greatly aid in understanding the processes involved in e-participation. This understanding could then be translated into aiding businesses with their evaluation processes as well as preparation operations with regards to e-participation.

Because much of the literature review involved in this paper has been based on HRM and e-HRM in general, the model also has potential to be adapted into different HRM practices. It was mentioned in the theoretical framework section (2.2) through a reference to Colbert (2004): "participation should not be considered a static human resource practice, but a dynamic practice that requires adapting". This argument gives further grounds to the model developed in this paper as it is important to develop separate participation- and e-participation specific models to truly understand the methodologies and implications that these HRM practices entail. Therefore, due to the scarcity of empirical research in this specific field, it is necessary to test hypotheses empirically rather than rely on a combination of literature from different disciplines.

The potential validity of the research model and methodology has both been supported through the backing of research as well as the conducted interview with an industry expert. Although some issues still remain with requirements for further definitions, it would make sense to revisit this model through empirical tests. As a majority of e-participation literature is not empirical in nature or lacks a sound framework, the one defined in this paper could serve as a foundation for future investigation. As suggested in the methodology section, the framework could be tested both through quantitative and qualitative research, the combination of which could reduce the amount of discrepancies with possible conclusions made. It was suggested in the discussion that satisfaction surveys would be used as a potential medium for research; however it is likely that specific questions regarding e-participation would require a more refined approach. This would suggest using a questionnaire as a quantitative method and surveys as a qualitative one. Both of these should be targeted at a combination of management and employees and should include questions that would allow for further definitions or corrections to be made regarding the framework. The methodology should be revisited depending on the aims of future research regarding the model, but as an initial recommendation, a combination of these three methods: satisfaction surveys, questionnaires and interviews should be considered.

Issues could arise with the model through further testing as a majority of its justification was based on a combination of deduction and literature review from sources that are either not empirical in nature or arguably out-dated for the topic. For example, it may be illogical to base the model off the model of Beer et al. (1984) since the concept of e-participation and even e-HRM were not significant concepts in the academic literature at that time. Perhaps this means that it would be time to develop new frameworks that future e-HRM literature would be based upon. Although the aforementioned issues should be considered when developing further research in the field of e-HRM it should also be kept in mind that the defined model did resonate with one industry expert and the e-HRM and e-participation literature used.

In conclusion, the end result: a research framework intended to ease the future study of e-participation as a concept, was developed leading to potential enhancement of current knowledge. The model as well as methodology discussed in this research warrants further investigation due to the reasons discussed. As business-oriented e-participation literature is scarce, this framework could prove valuable for the development of this dimension of HRM literature.

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9. APPENDIX

9.1 Modified research model

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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Conditions:                 │
│ Managerial support          │
│ Attitude of co-workers      │
│ Working conditions          │────┐
│ External stakeholders       │    │      ┌──────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐
│ Knowledge & tools           │    └────> │ Level of E-participation:│        │ Outcomes:                │
│                             │           │                          │        │                          │
└─────────────────────────────┘           │ Informing                │        │ Commitment               │
              ▲                            │ Reacting                 │───────>│ Competence               │
              │                            │ Influencing              │        │ Congruence               │
┌─────────────────────────────┐           │ Co-deciding              │        │ Cost-effectiveness       │
│ Categories:                 │           │                          │        │                          │
│ Work itself                 │           └──────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────┘
│ Working conditions          │────┐
│ Routines                    │    └────>
│ Company policies            │
│ Strategic influence         │
└─────────────────────────────┘
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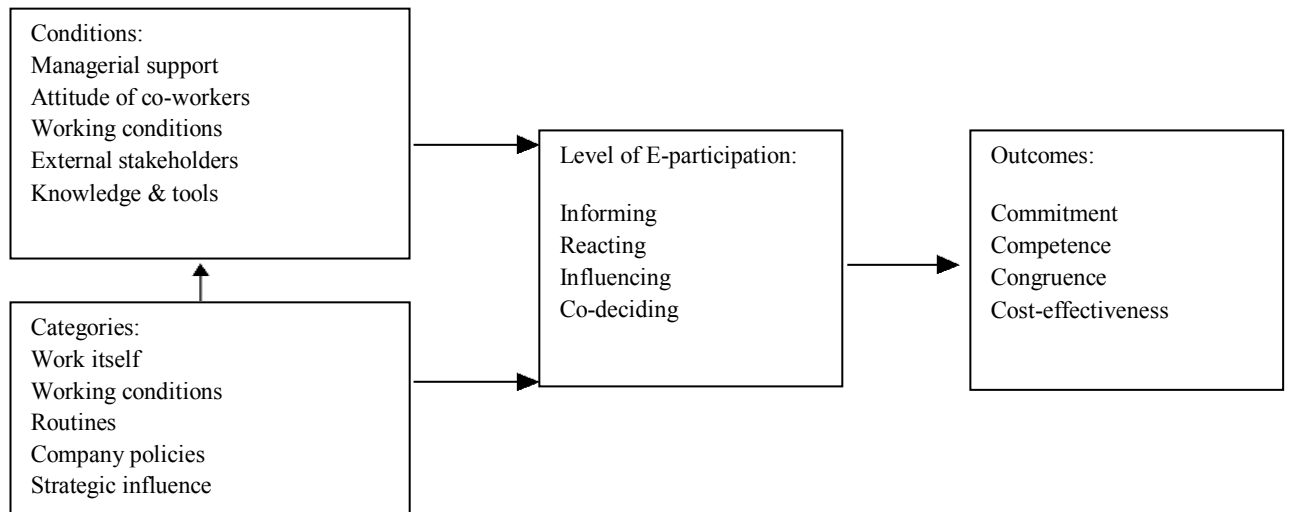
Figure 3. Modified research framework