

Unlocking the “black box” between employee perceptions of HRM and service quality for customers

Comparing engagement theory, social exchange theory, and climate theory to predict service quality for front-line employees at an HR SSC

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Inleiding

Ondanks het feit dat er in de afgelopen decennia veel wetenschappelijk bewijs is geleverd over de relatie tussen *human resource management* (HRM) systemen en bedrijfsprestaties, zijn de mechanismen die daarbij spelen op het individuele werknemersniveau nog niet geheel duidelijk. Men kan daarbij het algehele proces als volgt beschouwen:



Figuur A: Proces van 'HRM zoals bedoeld door de organisatie' tot bedrijfsprestatie (Edgar & Geare, 2014)

Dit onderzoek richt zich op het deel van het proces van 'HRM zoals de werknemer die ervaart' tot 'prestaties van de werknemer'. Verschillende theoriën worden in de literatuur gebruikt om dit deel van het proces te verklaren. Zo verklaart *engagement theory* en het daaraan gerelateerde *Job Demands-Resources model* deze link met het concept *work engagement*, oftewel werk bevologenheid. Werknemers met een hoog niveau aan werk bevologenheid hebben veel energie om hun werk uit te voeren, zijn trots op hun werk en gaan helemaal op in hun werk. HRM praktijken kunnen door werknemers gebruikt worden om hun werkomstandigheden te verbeteren. Hierdoor stijgt hun werk bevologenheid. En op zijn beurt leidt een hogere werk bevologenheid tot hogere prestaties.

Een tweede veel gebruikte theorie is *social exchange theory*. Deze theorie draait compleet om het concept *norm of reciprocity*, oftewel de norm van wederzijdsheid. In het kort: ontvangt men iets, dan geeft men ook iets terug. Zo kunnen werknemers HRM praktijken zien als gaven van de organisatie. Hierdoor kunnen ze gehecht raken aan de organisatie en zodoende graag bij de organisatie werkzaam blijven. Dit wordt aangeduid met het concept *affective organizational commitment*. Werknemers met een hoog niveau aan *affective organizational commitment* willen graag bij de organisatie blijven en zullen zodoende adequaat proberen te presteren. Op deze manier wordt er voldaan aan de norm van wederzijdsheid: de organisatie geeft HRM praktijken aan de werknemer, die dat terugbetaalt met prestaties omdat hij graag bij de organisatie werkzaam wilt blijven.

Een derde theorie die gebruikt wordt om de link tussen 'HRM zoals de werknemer die ervaart' en 'prestaties van de werknemer' te verklaren is *climate theory*. Deze theorie beschouwt het HRM systeem als een *signaling system*, oftewel een systeem dat continu signalen zendt naar de werknemers. De organisatie kan bijvoorbeeld instellen dat een deel van het salaris afhangt van de klanttevredenheid of het kan trainingsmogelijkheden richten op het verbeteren van servicekwaliteit. Zodoende kan een organisatie een bepaald klimaat creëren onder de werknemers waarin het voor alle werknemers duidelijk is welk gedrag er van hen verwacht wordt. De vorige twee voorbeelden zullen bijvoorbeeld een *climate for service* kunnen creëren, waarin het voor werknemers duidelijk is dat servicekwaliteit erg belangrijk is. Aangezien werknemers het belang van servicekwaliteit dan zullen erkennen, zal dit de prestaties (betreffende servicekwaliteit) van de werknemers verbeteren.

Deze drie theoriën worden alle drie gebruikt om de link tussen 'HRM zoals de werknemer die ervaart' en 'prestaties van de werknemer' te verklaren. Welke theorie nu daadwerkelijk het beste te gebruiken valt is echter onduidelijk. Het zou wetenschappers helpen om dit te weten zodat ze hun inspanningen kunnen

concentreren om de link tussen HRM en prestatie op een effectieve manier te ontrafelen. Daarnaast is het ook nuttig voor bedrijven, zodat deze weten op welk gedrag zij hun HRM systeem moeten richten om de beoogde prestaties van de werknemers te realiseren.

Methodiek

Om de drie theoriën te vergelijken is ervoor gekozen om onderzoek te doen naar de link tussen 'HRM zoals die ervaren wordt door werknemers' en servicekwaliteit voor klanten als prestatie-maatstaf. Het *HR shared service center* (HR SSC) van PostNL is daarbij gekozen als onderzoeksplaats. Op deze afdeling verrichten circa 90 werknemers allerlei administratieve HR-gerelateerde taken voor alle overige medewerkers van PostNL. Dit zijn zodoende de klanten van de werknemers van het HR SSC. Enquêtes zijn verstuurd naar de werknemers van het HR SSC waarin hen gevraagd werd naar de mate waarin zij ervaren dat bepaalde HRM praktijken aanwezig waren op het HR SSC. Daarna werd hen gevraagd naar hun werk bevlogenheid, hun *affective organizational commitment*, en hun percepties van een serviceklimaat op het HR SSC. Daarnaast zijn er enquêtes verstuurd naar de klanten van het HR SSC waarin hen gevraagd werd naar de servicekwaliteit van de HR SSC werknemer met wie zij onlangs contact hebben gehad. Vervolgens werd elke klantenquête gelinkt aan de juiste HR SSC werknemer middels een unieke code, zodat beide datasets aan elkaar verbonden konden worden en alle hypotheses getest konden worden.

Resultaten

Na analyse van alle data bleek dat de cijfers die klanten gaven voor de servicekwaliteit totaal willekeurig verspreid waren onder de HR SSC werknemers. Dat wil zeggen, elke werknemer bleek bijna alle mogelijke scores voor servicekwaliteit te hebben gekregen. De werknemers bleken zodoende geen invloed te hebben op de servicekwaliteit, aangezien ze allemaal een vergelijkbare spreiding aan cijfers voor servicekwaliteit hadden ontvangen. Hieruit volgt ook dat alle variantie van servicekwaliteit te verklaren is door verschillen tussen de klanten zelf. Er bleek bijvoorbeeld dat klanten met betere HR-gerelateerde kennis (bijvoorbeeld dat ze weten hoe ze een verlofaanvraag in moeten dienen) een hoger cijfer voor servicekwaliteit gaven.

Aangezien servicekwaliteit voor klanten geen bruikbare prestatie-maatstaf bleek te zijn voor de HR SSC werknemers, is er vervolgens gekeken naar de link tussen 'HRM zoals die ervaren wordt door werknemers', de instelling van de werknemers (werk bevlogenheid, *affective organizational commitment* en serviceklimaat) en het gedrag van de werknemers. De prestatie van de werknemers werd nu dus buiten beschouwing gelaten. Het gedrag van de werknemers werd gemeten door hen te vragen naar hun *task performance* (hoe goed ze voldoen aan de eisen die aan hen worden gesteld) en naar hun *organizational citizenship behavior* (hoe goed ze hun collega's helpen op het werk). *Task performance* bleek alleen te zijn gerelateerd aan werk bevlogenheid, terwijl *organizational citizenship behavior* alleen aan *affective organizational commitment* gerelateerd bleek te zijn. Daarnaast bleken alleen werk bevlogenheid en serviceklimaat aan 'HRM zoals die ervaren wordt door werknemers' te zijn gerelateerd.

Conclusies en aanbevelingen

Allereerst kan geconcludeerd worden dat servicekwaliteit voor klanten geen bruikbare prestatie-maatstaf bleek te zijn voor werknemers in het onderzochte HR SSC. Nader onderzoek moet uitwijzen of dit ook het geval is in andere HR SSCs en andere service-bedrijven. Mocht dit het geval zijn, dan kunnen onderzoekers hun focus beter verleggen op andere prestatie-maatstaven om de link tussen HRM en werknemersprestaties te ontrafelen (bijvoorbeeld een maatstaf die niet beïnvloed wordt door externe partijen, zoals servicekwaliteit werd beïnvloed door de klanten zelf in plaats van de werknemers). Of zij verleggen hun focus op werknemersgedrag in plaats van werknemersprestatie.

Wat betreft de link tussen werknemersinstelling en werknemersgedrag kan er geconcludeerd worden dat hierbij gelet moet worden op het theoretische verband tussen beide concepten. Mocht men bijvoorbeeld onderzoek willen doen naar *task performance*, dan ligt werk bevologenheid als werknemersinstelling hier theoretisch het dichtst bij van alle onderzochte werknemersinstellingen (werk bevologenheid, *affective organizational commitment*, en serviceklimaat). Mocht men onderzoek willen doen naar *organizational citizenship behavior* (collega's helpen), dan kunnen onderzoekers zich het best richten op *affective organizational commitment* (o.a. het gevoel hebben dat het HR SSC een 'tweede familie' is) als werknemersinstelling, aangezien het logisch lijkt om aan te nemen dat een werknemer zijn collega's helpt als hij deze als tweede familie ziet. En mocht men onderzoek doen naar service-georiënteerd gedrag van werknemers, dan lijkt een serviceklimaat een geschikte werknemersinstelling. Dit laatste moet echter blijken uit nader onderzoek, aangezien service-georiënteerd gedrag van werknemers niet is onderzocht in dit onderzoek.

Wat betreft de link tussen 'HRM zoals die ervaren wordt door werknemers' en werknemersinstelling (dus één chronologische stap voor hetgene beschreven is in de vorige alinea), kan men concluderen dat men niet alleen moet kijken naar de mate waarin werknemers bepaalde HRM praktijken als aanwezig beschouwen (wat veel wordt gedaan in de literatuur) maar dat men daarnaast ook werknemers moet vragen naar het nut van die HRM praktijken om een specifieke werknemersinstelling te bereiken. Onderzoekers die bijvoorbeeld geïnteresseerd zijn in de werk bevologenheid van werknemers (omdat ze bijvoorbeeld geïnteresseerd zijn in de *task performance* van werknemers, zoals in de vorige alinea werd uitgelegd) zouden werknemers zowel moeten vragen naar de mate waarin bepaalde HRM praktijken aanwezig zijn, alsmede naar het nut van deze HRM praktijken om hun werk bevologenheid te verhogen. Op deze manier kunnen onderzoekers hopelijk een duidelijkere link vinden tussen 'HRM zoals die ervaren wordt door werknemers', werknemersinstelling en werknemersgedrag.

Een laatste conclusie richt zich op het nut van dit onderzoek voor bedrijven. Uit dit onderzoek blijkt dat bedrijven een duidelijke strategie moeten bepalen om zo veel mogelijk uit hun HRM systeem te halen. Mocht een bedrijf bijvoorbeeld *task performance* als gewenst werknemersgedrag zien, dan is het belangrijk dat het bedrijf zijn HRM-activiteiten richt op werk bevologenheid (aangezien dat het meest met *task performance* gerelateerd was) en de werk bevologenheid onder de werknemers zodoende regelmatig blijft testen. Het HRM systeem van het bedrijf moet daarnaast zo zijn ingericht dat dit het maximale niveau aan werk bevologenheid kan behalen. Dit kan het bedrijf doen door regelmatig onder de werknemers te vragen of zij bepaalde HRM praktijken missen die hun werk bevologenheid zouden vergroten, of dat er verbeteringen moeten komen in bepaalde HRM praktijken om meer nut te hebben of meer aanwezig te zijn. Zodoende kan het bedrijf zijn HRM systeem optimaliseren en volledig richten op het behalen van werk bevologenheid onder de werknemers, aangezien dit een meetbaar concept is onder de werknemers en het meest gerelateerd is aan de gewenste *task performance* van de werknemers. Uiteraard kan het bedrijf haar HRM systeem weer anders inrichten mocht het niet geïnteresseerd zijn in *task performance* maar in een ander werknemersgedrag. Mocht het bijvoorbeeld *organizational citizenship behavior* willen benadrukken, dan kan het bedrijf zich het best richten op *affective organizational commitment* en het HRM systeem juist daarop focussen.

Daarnaast zouden HR SSCs in het specifiek hun aandacht moeten richten op hun klanten omdat uit dit onderzoek bleek dat de klanten zelf volledig verantwoordelijk waren voor de verschillen in ervaren servicekwaliteit. Meer HR-gerelateerde kennis van de klant bleek bijvoorbeeld te leiden tot een hoger cijfer voor servicekwaliteit. Mocht dit ook zo blijken te zijn bij andere HR SSCs, dan zouden HR SSCs zich dus kunnen focussen op het verbeteren van de HR-gerelateerde kennis van klanten om hun cijfer voor servicekwaliteit te verhogen. Dit is bijvoorbeeld mogelijk door de klanten (de overige werknemers van het bedrijf, die niet op het HR SSC werken) betere informatie en cursussen te geven bij indiensttreding.

Abstract

This study contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms through which human resource management (HRM) systems are linked with behavioral outcomes and service quality for customers. Drawing on self-determination theory and motivation quality, a comparison was made between the explanatory power of three theories frequently used in literature to explain the HRM-performance link at the employee level: engagement theory, social exchange theory, and climate theory. For each of these theories, the most important employee attitude was selected and argued to be a mediator in the relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and behavioral outcomes (self-reported task performance and organizational citizenship behavior) and service quality for customers. As such, work engagement, affective organizational commitment, and a climate for service were selected, respectively. Data from 415 customers of a human resource shared service center (HR SSC) in the Netherlands proved that service quality for customers at the HR SSC was not influenced by the employees at the HR SSC. Rather, all variance in service quality for customers could be attributed to sources of variability on the customer level. HRM functional competences and interaction competences of customers proved to be two of these sources of variability on the customer level. Data from 68 HR SSC employees showed work engagement to be the only mediating employee attitude between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and general task performance. Focusing on organizational citizenship behavior, only affective organizational commitment had an effect on this type of employee behavior. This suggests that it is not per se the motivation quality of an employee attitude that drives employee behaviors, but it is rather the theoretical fit between an employee attitude and an employee behavior that is important to understand the mechanisms through which perceived HRM and employee behaviors are linked. As such, scholars should focus on different theories when trying to unlock the “black box” between HRM and behavioral outcomes at the employee level, depending on the behavioral outcome they are interested in. For organizational citizenship behavior, the most suited employee attitude is affective organizational commitment and scholars should then focus on social exchange theory. For general task performance, it is work engagement and engagement theory. Other implications for research and implications for practice are discussed.

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1 Introduction

Although a growing body of research has demonstrated a link between human resource management (HRM) systems and organizational outcomes (Meyer et al., 2002; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Albrecht, 2012; Alfes et al., 2012; Shantz et al., 2013), the mechanisms through which this occurs are still debated on the micro-level of HRM interventions. Researchers have argued that individual perceptions of HRM practices play a critical role in the HRM-performance link (Piening et al., 2014), as “it is the way employees perceive [HRM] practices that ultimately exerts the most influence over how they feel and behave at work” (Alfes et al., 2012, p410). However, several theories have been used to unlock the “black box” between individual HRM perceptions and individual performance outcomes, each yielding its own conclusions and emphasizing the importance of its intermediate outcomes (Truss et al., 2013). This lack of consensus and clarity can cause the reluctance of practitioners to adopt certain HRM systems, as it is unclear whether focusing an HRM system on a specific intermediate outcome will actually increase performance outcomes (Tranfield et al., 2003; Posthuma et al., 2013). This paper aims to address the lack of consensus by comparing the explanatory power of three major theories used in the HRM-performance link at the employee level: engagement theory, social exchange theory, and climate theory (Blau, 1964; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Engagement theory has increasingly been used in the last decade to link job outcomes, such as in-role task performance and organizational citizenship behavior, to job characteristics such as HRM practices (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Albrecht, 2012; Kim et al., 2012). The central construct in this theory, work engagement, is defined as a ‘positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption’ (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). The theoretical framework that is used, the Job Demands-Resources model, assumes that every occupation has its own specific risk factors, which can be classified in job demands and job resources. The former lead to job-related stress, while the latter lead to work engagement, and subsequently to performance (Trembley & Messervey, 2011; Lee & Ok, 2015). The Job Demands-Resources model can be considered an extension of the Demand-Control model (Karasek, 1998) in that *different* types of job resources can lead to work engagement (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). As such, HRM systems can be considered job resources, and engagement theory can explain the link between HRM systems and performance.

Another theory that has frequently been used to explain job performance is social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Luchak & Gellatly, 2007; Wikhamn & Hall, 2012). Drawing from this theory, researchers have argued that HRM systems can be seen as a social exchange from the organization to the employees, which through the norm of reciprocity can lead to affective organizational commitment (AOC) (Morrow, 2011; Pierro et al., 2013). Affective organizational commitment emphasizes an employee's identification with and involvement in an organization (Morrow, 2011). It is the strongest form of organizational commitment as it symbolizes the ‘want to remain’, compared to continuance commitment (‘need to remain’) and normative commitment (‘ought to remain’) (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Smeenk et al., 2006). Affective organizational commitment has a strong link with performance outcomes (Meyer et al., 2002), and as such, social exchange theory can explain the link between HRM systems and performance via the mediating effects of affective organizational commitment.

A third theory that is used to link HRM to performance is climate theory (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ehrnrooth & Björkman, 2012; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Gomes, 2012). In this theory, the HRM system is conceptualized as a signaling system that constantly sends messages to employees in order to stress the attitudes and behaviors that are desired within the firm. For example, making pay contingent on customers’ perceptions of service quality signals the employees that service quality for customers is important. As such, the firm aims to design its HRM system to foster a strong climate for a specific goal

within its departments (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). In such climate, the central construct in this theory, the employees have shared perceptions about what behaviors are expected, supported, and rewarded in the firm. As such, HRM practices can be regarded as messages that are constantly communicated to the employees, ideally creating a strong climate among those employees, and subsequently leading to the achievement of the organizational goals.

These three theories have each been used to explain the link between HRM and performance. However, using self-determination theory, this paper argues that these theories and their central intermediate outcomes represent different types of motivation to perform. Self-determination theory posits that multiple forms of motivation exist along a continuum from low to high levels of self-determination, referring to the level at which an activity is “autonomously internalized [...] within the self” (Lavigne et al., 2009, p148). Higher qualities of motivation (i.e. with a higher level of self-determination) have been shown to relate with higher performance (Vallerand et al., 2008; Van den Broeck et al., 2009; Cerasoli et al., 2014). As such, this paper argues that the three major theories used in the HRM-performance link represent different qualities of motivation, and thus differ in their explanatory power in the HRM-performance link. However, no published study to date has tested this proposition. By doing so, this paper aims at bringing further clarity in the mechanisms through which HRM leads to performance outcomes at the employee level (see Figure 1). This will help scholars focusing their efforts on the most promising theory in order to unlock the “black box” of the HRM-performance link at the employee level. Furthermore, it will help practitioners to concentrate their HR-resources on the most promising intermediate outcome, so as to improve the performance of their firm in the most efficient way.

Besides comparing the explanatory power of the three abovementioned theories in the HRM-performance link, this paper also makes a theoretical contribution by focusing on service quality for customers as performance outcome. Recent literature has called to study more proximal outcome indicators of HRM, as organizational outcome variables used in the extant literature, such as organizational effectiveness and financial performance, have been argued to be too distal from the micro-level of HRM interventions (Alfes et al., 2013b). However, this call has mainly been answered by studying manager-rated or employee-rated outcomes, such as task performance or organizational citizenship behavior. Although these outcomes are proximal to the micro-level of HRM interventions, they do not have the practical relevance of operational outcomes, and are therefore of limited use for practitioners (Jiang et al., 2012). Studying service quality for customers as individual performance outcome therefore combines the proximity to the micro-level of HRM interventions with the practical relevance of an operational outcome. Moreover, manager-rated and employee-rated performance outcomes have risks of being biased, which is less straightforward with customer-rated performance as customers do not have any incentive to rate employees’ performance in a biased way.

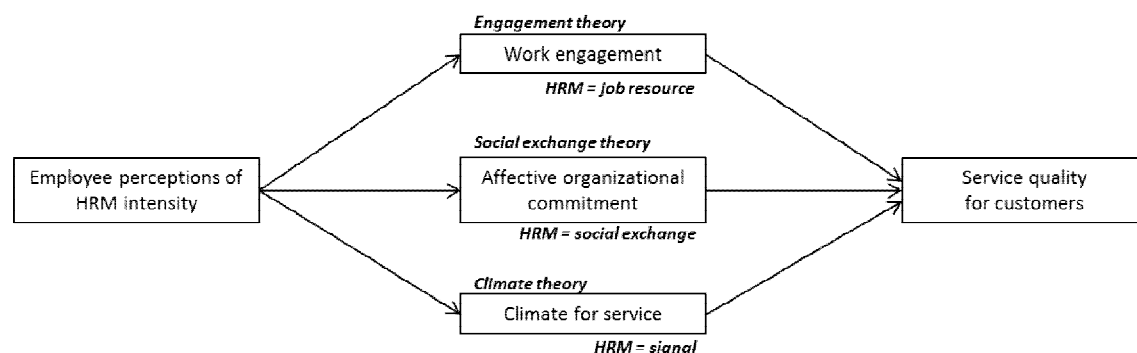


Figure 1: Theoretical model for the relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers

Summarizing, the following research question is central to this paper:

"To what extent do engagement theory, social exchange theory, and climate theory explain the relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers?"

To compare the explanatory power of the three theories in the HRM-performance link, the most important intermediate outcome of each theory is selected and argued to be a mediator in this relationship. As such, the research question will be answered by answering the following sub-research question:

"To what extent do work engagement, affective organizational commitment, and service climate explain the relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers?"

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 HRM systems, employee perceptions, and service quality for customers

2.1.1 HRM systems

HRM systems can be represented using a multilevel architecture that comprises four interrelated hierarchical elements: HRM principles, HRM policies, HRM practices, and HRM processes (Kepes & Delery, 2007; Posthuma et al., 2013; Banks & Kepes, 2015). At the highest level, HRM principles represent broad statements that function as guiding values and beliefs for the HRM system (Arthur & Boyles, 2007; Posthuma et al., 2013). A firm in the service industry may for example have a HRM principle to foster service quality. The HRM principle of a firm guides the establishment of HRM policies, which are more specific statements that describe how the organization intends to achieve the HRM principle (Samnani & Singh, 2013; Banks & Kepes, 2015). Examples include staffing policies (e.g. external recruiting) and compensation policies (e.g. incentives) that emphasize service quality and client satisfaction. In turn, HRM practices are the specific methods and procedures that the organization adopts to implement the organization's policies (Lepak et al., 2006; Jiang et al. 2012). An example of a HRM practice within the compensation policy that emphasizes service climate is pay-for-performance, where performance is determined by client satisfaction. At the lowest level, HRM processes are detailed explanations of how HRM practices are to be executed by various actors. It is on the HRM process level that "the actual implementation of HRM practices takes place" (Kepes & Delery, 2007, p. 290) and employees experience and perceive the HRM practices (Banks & Kepes, 2015). HRM policies and practices can be ineffective without the appropriate implementation through HRM processes, as gaps often exist between intended HRM policies and perceived HRM processes. Because it is the way employees perceive HRM processes that ultimately exerts the most influence on how they feel and behave at work, the implementation of HRM systems is best considered at the level of HRM processes (Alfes et al., 2012; Banks & Kepes, 2015).

In addition to the hierarchical levels within HRM systems, several researchers have argued to group HRM policies, practices and processes in three domains (Lepak et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2012; Alfes et al., 2013b). The underlying thought is that "all HR systems share a common make-up in their basic composition, such that HR systems operate through influencing employees' abilities to perform, motivation to perform, and opportunities to perform" (Jiang et al., 2012, p. 75). Employee performance is typically defined as a function of an employee's ability, motivation and opportunity to perform, the so-called AMO-framework, and grouping HRM policies and practices into these three domains thus helps in clarifying how each of them can be linked to employee performance (Banks & Kepes, 2015).

As such, the ability-enhancing HRM policies, practices and processes focus on the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees. Two general HR policies fall into this domain: staffing and training. Motivation-enhancing HRM policies, practices and processes improve the motivation and effort of employees during their work. This domain consists of performance management and compensation. The third domain, opportunity-enhancing HRM, enlarges the opportunities employees get to exert their abilities and motivation. The policies that fall into this domain are job design and participation. (Lepak et al., 2006; Jiang et al. 2012)

It must be noted that each HRM policy can be classified into more than one category. Delery and Shaw (2001) for example argued staffing, training and compensation to be associated with both employees' abilities and motivation, while they associated job design policies to the domains of motivation and opportunity (Lepak et al., 2006). The ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing HRM policies, practices and processes are thus highly related. As such, the AMO-framework can conceptually be used

to explain the link between a certain HRM process and the performance of an employee, but due to the high relatedness between the three domains, HRM processes altogether are measured more adequately as one overarching HRM system (Jiang et al., 2012; Alfes et al., 2013b).

In line with this overarching HRM system is the notion that it is bundles of HRM practices (aligned to reach a specific goal) rather than individual HRM practices that foster employee performance (Arthur & Boyles, 2007; Chow et al., 2013; Samnani & Singh, 2013). As opposed to the universalistic and contingent approach in strategic HRM, in which the effect of each individual HRM practice is linked to performance, the configurational approach emphasizes the synergistic effects within bundles of HRM practices to reach a specific goal, such as service quality (Delery & Doty, 1996). Given that all employment relationships rely on some minimal level of bundling of HR practices and that “bundling of HR practices is not optional but is actually a sine qua non of an employment relationship” (Boxall et al., 2011, p. 1507), internal fit among the HRM practices and policies is critical to their effectiveness to reach one specific objective (Banks & Kepes, 2015). Literature for example consistently reports that high performance work systems (HPWS) for service quality, defined as a system consisting of a set of complementary HR practices to foster service quality, lead to superior performance (Liao et al., 2009; Chow et al., 2013; Hong et al., 2013). Thus strategic HRM research has focused on combinations of HRM policies, practices and processes to reach a specific objective, and aimed at demonstrating the relationship between these overarching HRM systems and performance outcomes (Arthur & Boyles, 2007; Alfes et al., 2012; Chow et al., 2013).

2.1.2 Employee perceptions of HRM systems

HRM research has increasingly been focused on the views of employees about HRM systems, instead of asking HR directors or managers of their views of which HRM practices are employed. This shift has occurred as researchers have found significant differences between employers' and employees' perceptions of HRM practices (Kuvaas, 2008; Liao et al., 2009; Boxall et al., 2011; Alfes et al., 2013b; Edgar & Geare, 2014). Wright and Nishii (2006) have proposed a model to explain this difference. Their model starts with ‘intended HRM practices’, which represent the outcome of the development of an HRM principle. The next concept is ‘actual HRM practices’, referring to the HRM practices as they are actually implemented, and which are often different from the initial intention. Line managers can for example reinterpret HRM policies to make them more workable in their specific context (Boxall et al., 2011). Whereas the actual HRM practices are still objective, ‘perceived HRM practices’ are the subjective perceptions and interpretations of the employees regarding these practices. At this level considerable variance can occur due to employees' subjective cognitions, stemming from a range of factors such as past experience, values and beliefs, or individual expectations (Alfes et al., 2012; Ehrnrooth & Björkman, 2012). The HRM practices as perceived by the employees lead to employee reactions, in turn leading to employee performance and ultimately to organizational performance (Wright & Nishii, 2006).

Employee perceptions of the HRM system are thus temporally closer to employee performance than are HRM system ratings as provided by managers or HR directors, and they can thus better explain the link between HRM systems and employee performance (Alfes et al., 2013a; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Edgar & Geare, 2014).

Employee perceptions of HRM systems can be measured in different ways. Researchers can for example study the perceived importance of HRM practices, the employees' satisfaction with HRM practices, or the extent to which the HRM practices are adopted in their firm (Boon et al., 2011; Edgar & Geare, 2014). Edgar and Geare (2014) opted to measure employee perceptions using two different approaches: firstly by measuring the intensity of HRM practices, as perceived by the employees, and secondly by asking the employees about the perceived importance of the HRM practices. Their results showed that the

perceived intensity of HRM practices had a stronger effect and was more significantly correlated with employee attitudes ($\beta = .561$, $p < .001$ for perceived *intensity* of *active* HRM practices, and $\beta = .377$, $p < .001$ for perceived *intensity* of *latent* HRM practices, while $\beta = .230$, $p < .01$ for perceived *utility* of HRM practices). The majority of other researchers has also opted to measure the intensity of HRM to evaluate employee perceptions of HRM (Liao et al., 2009; Boon et al., 2011; Boxall et al., 2011; Alfes et al., 2012; Alfes et al., 2013a; Kehoe & Wright, 2013). For both reasons, this paper conceptualizes employee perceptions of HRM systems by studying their perceived intensity.

2.1.3 Employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers

The current paper examines performance in the context of service quality for customers. Perceptions of HRM intensity have previously been linked to various employee outcomes, such as task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, intention to leave, and absenteeism (Kuvaas, 2008; Boon et al., 2011; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2014). However, to date no paper has studied the link between perceived HRM systems and service quality for customers. This paper aims to do so. A frequently used scale to measure service quality for customers is SERVQUAL (Tsaor & Lin, 2004; Chand, 2010). This multi-item scale measures five dimensions of service quality that together form an overall score of service quality as perceived by customers. The five dimensions are (Parasumaran et al., 1985; Parasumaran et al., 1988):

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| 1. Tangibles: | physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel; |
| 2. Reliability: | ability to perform the promised service dependable and accurately; |
| 3. Assurance: | knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence; |
| 4. Responsiveness: | willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; |
| 5. Empathy: | caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers. |

As such, customers rate the service quality of a firm on each of these five dimensions. When applied on a single employee, the SERVQUAL can be used to measure the service quality of a particular employee.

Because service delivery occurs during the interactions between employees and customers, attitudes and behaviors of the employees can influence customers' perceptions of service quality (Ramseook-Munhurrin et al., 2010). As HRM practices affect employee attitudes and behaviors (Alfes et al., 2013a; Kehoe & Wright, 2013), employee perceptions of HRM can influence customers' perceptions of service quality. The 'assurance' dimension for example refers to an adequate level of knowledge of an employee to be able to deliver proper service. Ability-enhancing HRM practices and processes focus on improving the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees. Providing training sessions to employees increases their knowledge, and can as such improve customers' perceptions of the 'assurance' dimension of service quality. Furthermore, training sessions focusing on proper interactions with customers can theoretically increase the courtesy of employees and their individualized attention for customers. This is directly related to the 'assurance' and 'empathy' dimensions of service quality.

Motivation-enhancing practices and processes (i.e. related to performance management and compensation) focus on enhancing employee motivation to deliver adequate performance. In a service-oriented firm, this partially translates to delivering proper service quality to customers. If employees are compensated for delivering proper service quality, employees will be driven to make customers satisfied. They can for example do so by increasing the 'reliability' dimension of service quality, for example by actually doing everything they promised to do. Or they can focus on prompt service, hence increasing the 'responsiveness' dimension of service quality.

Lastly, opportunity-enhancing HRM practices and processes, referring to job design and participation, aim at enlarging the opportunities employees get to exert their abilities and motivation. Such practices and processes can for example increase the 'responsiveness' dimension of service quality, as employees are given the freedom to design their jobs in a way they think is most efficient. As such, they can design their job to eliminate time-consuming problems at work, so they have more time to help customers, hence increasing the 'responsiveness' and 'reliability' dimensions of service quality. As such, perceived HRM practices and processes can theoretically improve customers' perceptions of service quality.

Moreover, previous research has demonstrated significant positive relationships between perceptions of HPWS and supervisor-rated service performance (Liao et al., 2009), and HRM systems (as intended) have been found to positively correlate with customer evaluations of service quality (Lepak et al., 2006). Taking in mind that supervisor-rated service performance has been shown to positively predict service quality (Liao & Chuang, 2004), and that employee perceptions of HRM systems are a temporal mediator between intended HRM systems and performance, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are positively related with service quality for customers.

2.2 Relating work engagement to HRM intensity and service quality

2.2.1 Work engagement

Work engagement was first conceptualized by Kahn (1990) as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances" (p. 700). Engaged employees were thus physically involved in their tasks, cognitively alert and attentive, and emotionally connected to their work (Ferrer, 2005; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). According to Kahn (1990), three psychological conditions were to be met in order for an employee to become engaged: psychological meaningfulness (the positive "sense of return on investments of self in role performance", p. 705), psychological safety (the confidence to show one's self "without fear or negative consequences to self image, status, or career", p. 705), and psychological availability (the "sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary" for the completion of work, p. 705) (Lee & Ok, 2015).

Since Kahn (1990), numerous perspectives of engagement have evolved. In a recent literature review, Shuck (2011) identified four approaches used to study engagement: need-satisfying (Kahn, 1990); burnout-antithesis (Schaufeli et al., 2002); satisfaction engagement (Harter et al., 2002); and multidimensional approach (Saks, 2006). The most accepted and widely used academic approach is the burnout-antithesis approach of Schaufeli et al. (2002) (Kim et al., 2012; White et al., 2014).

This approach asserts that job engagement and burnout are independent states of mind inversely related to each other. Engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind. In contrast to burnout (characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and sense of inefficacy), work engagement is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Lee & Ok, 2015). Vigor thereby refers to the feeling of physical energy, emotional strength, willingness to invest effort, and endurance of difficulties. Dedication is characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Finally, absorption refers to the state of being so completely concentrated and highly engrossed in work that an employee feels time passes quickly and has difficulties detaching from work (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Lee & Ok, 2015).

2.2.2 The Job Demands-Resources model and HRM systems

The theoretical framework used to explain work engagement in the approach of Schaufeli et al. (2002) is termed the Job Demands-Resources model. This model integrates two fairly independent research fields: the stress research field and the motivation research field (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). As such, the model identifies two types of job characteristics: job demands and job resources. Job demands represent the physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and psychological effort. Examples include high work pressure, irregular working hours, and role ambiguity. These job characteristics are initiators of a health impairment process, and thus lead to job-related stress and possibly burnout (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Karatepe et al., 2014; Lee & Ok, 2015). In contrast, job resources refer to those aspects of the job that help dealing with job demands and/or stimulate personal growth and development. Examples include autonomy, performance feedback, pay, and job security. These job characteristics are initiators of a motivational process, increasing an employee's vigor, dedication, and absorption. Job autonomy can for example increase vigor as employees get some freedom in designing their job in an efficient way, by getting rid of problematic conditions. These problematic conditions will hence cease to require physical and psychological effort, giving the employees more physical and emotional energy to perform their work, thus increasing their vigor. Job autonomy can also increase an employee's dedication, as giving an employee responsibility for his or her job can give him or her a sense of significance and pride. As such, job autonomy is a job resource that increases work engagement (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Trembley & Messervey, 2011).

Job-stress and work engagement in turn are proximate determinants of employee outcomes, such as individual performance or intention to quit, and organizational outcomes, such as firm performance (see Figure 2). Job-stress and burnout for example reduce individual performance, while engaged employees enjoy their work and thus perform better (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Zablah et al., 2012).

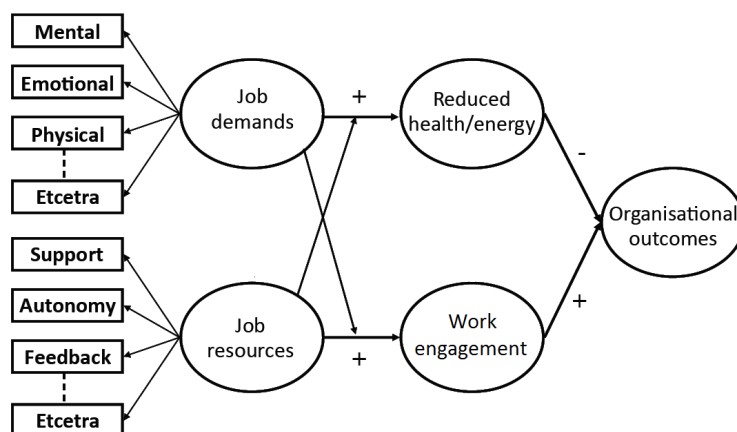


Figure 2: The Job Demands-Resources model (adapted from Demerouti & Bakker, 2011)

The Job Demands-Resources model can be considered an extension of the Demand-Control model of Karasek (1998). The latter model states that task autonomy buffers the impact of work overload on job stress. However, the Job Demands-Resources model states that "different types of job demands and job resources may interact in predicting job strain" (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011, p. 3). Using this flexibility, this paper proposes HRM systems to be a collection of job resources, as HRM systems comprise a range of ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing practices. Ability-enhancing HRM practices, increasing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees, can theoretically increase an employee's endurance of difficulties and emotional strength. Training sessions can for example improve an employee's ability to work with the IT-systems present at work. Personalized training sessions, for example to increase one's

ability to prioritize or manage one's time, can give employees tools to endure difficulties at work. Training sessions and other ability-enhancing HRM practices and processes can hence increase an employee's vigor.

Opportunity-enhancing HRM practices and processes, such as job design and participation, increase employees' responsibility for their work and for the firm as they get some power in designing their own work and have a voice in improving their department or firm. This can give employees an increased sense of significance and inspiration, which would theoretically increase their dedication. Lastly, motivation-enhancing HRM practices (i.e. performance management and compensation) improve the motivation of employees during their work. Receiving proper feedback can for example help employees to optimize their performance and give them the tools to excel in their work. This can in turn lead to more positive feedback, both from managers and customers. This positive feedback can again increase an employee's motivation for his work, and lead to the employee being engrossed in his work and having difficulties detaching from it. Motivation-enhancing HRM practices and processes can thus theoretically increase an employee's absorption for work.

As such, perceived HRM systems, consisting of ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing practices, can increase an employee's vigor, dedication, and absorption for work, hence increasing an employee's work engagement. The link between perceived HRM practices and work engagement has also been demonstrated in previous research (Alfes et al., 2013a; Alfes et al., 2013b).

Following the Job Demands-Resources model, higher work engagement will lead to increased employee performance. This can be explained by recalling that work engagement is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption into one's work. It thus refers to an employee's feeling of physical energy and willingness to invest effort in his or her work. It also refers to enthusiasm and inspiration in the work itself, as well as referring to the state of being so completely concentrated and highly engrossed in work that an employee feels time passes quickly and has difficulties detaching from work (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Lee & Ok, 2015). As such, employees with high levels of work engagement are more motivated for their work and will spend more time and effort in their work. This will increase their performance, as has been shown in literature (Shuck, 2011; Alfes et al., 2013a; Alfes, 2013b). Focusing on service quality for customers as performance outcome, work engagement can also theoretically be linked to the different dimensions of service quality for customers. Employees who are engaged in their work and thus spend more time and effort in their work can for example deliver more prompt service. This increases the 'responsiveness' dimension of service quality. Furthermore, employees who enjoy their work of giving service to customers will also score higher on the 'assurance' and 'empathy' dimensions, as being thoughtful and courteous towards customers is a significant part of the service they enjoy giving to customers. As such, employees with high levels of work engagement can theoretically deliver higher service quality for customers.

As such, employee perceptions of HRM intensity lead to increased performance via the mediating effect of work engagement. The mediating effect will be partial, as this paper argues that affective organizational commitment and service climate are two other mediators in the HRM-performance link. As this paper uses service quality for customers as individual performance outcome, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Work engagement partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers.

2.3 Relating affective organizational commitment to HRM intensity and service quality

2.3.1 Social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity

Blau (1964, p. 93) defined a social exchange relationship as one in which there are “favors that create diffuse future obligations, not precisely defined ones, and the nature of the return cannot be bargained about but must be left to the discretion of the one who makes it” (Wikhamn & Hall, 2012). An exchange starts with one party giving a benefit to another. If the recipient reciprocates, and consequently a series of beneficial exchanges occurs, feelings of mutual obligation between the parties are created (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007). A social exchange relationship thus rests on the norm of reciprocity, broadly defined as a feeling of obligation to repay favorable treatment (Gouldner, 1960; Wikhamn & Hall, 2012).

Social exchange theory is frequently used to explain the link between HRM practices and employee or firm performance (Tremblay et al., 2010; Takeuchi & Takeuchi, 2013). Affective organizational commitment and perceived organizational support play important roles in this relationship (Rhoades et al., 2001; Tremblay et al., 2010). The former construct, affective organizational commitment (AOC), reflects the desire of an employee to stay at an organization. It refers to the “employee’s emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67). It differs from work engagement in that work engagement relates employees to the work activities itself, while AOC relates employees to their organization (Karatepe et al., 2014; Zecca et al., 2015).

AOC is the strongest component of organizational commitment, next to continuance commitment (reflecting the need of an employee to stay at an organization because the costs of leaving the firm are higher than the related profits), and normative commitment (employees staying at an organization because they feel obliged to) (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Meyer et al. (2004) proposed that employees having more AOC experience greater motivation, more autonomous forms of external regulation, and stronger promotion focus in the pursuit of goals. Moreover, employees can be expected to set or accept more difficult goals and achieve the maximum level of accomplishment (Meyer et al., 2004; Luchak & Gellatly, 2007). Because AOC deals with an “employee’s emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67), employees with high levels of AOC will demonstrate high performance in order to stay within the organization. Indeed, AOC has consistently been linked to lower absenteeism and turnover, and higher in-role and extra-role performance (Rhoades et al., 2001; Luchak & Gellatly, 2007; Tremblay et al., 2010; Wikhamn & Hall, 2012).

The second construct, perceived organizational support, has the strongest positive correlation with AOC according to the meta-analysis of Meyer et al. (2002). Perceived organizational support concerns “the extent to which employees perceive that their contributions are valued by their organization and that the firm cares about their well-being” (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, p. 698). The link with AOC can be explained using social exchange theory, as employees pay back what they perceive as supportive treatment from the firm through stronger attachments to the organization (Meyer et al., 2002; Luchak & Gellatly, 2007; Morrow, 2011). As such, organizations wanting affectively committed employees must demonstrate their own commitment by providing a supportive work environment (Meyer et al., 2002).

2.3.2 HRM systems and the norm of reciprocity

HRM systems, consisting of ability-enhancing, motivation-enhancing, and opportunity-enhancing practices, can provide a supportive work environment as delineated by Meyer et al. (2002). Indeed, opportunity-enhancing HRM policies, such as job design and participation, give employees the opportunity to actively optimize their work environment to their own preferences and be heard by the

organization. These practices give some freedom and responsibility to the employees and can thus be perceived as supportive acts from the firm towards the employees. Motivation-enhancing HRM practices, such as feedback and compensation, can be supportive for employees as they get financial support and the tools to improve their knowledge, skills and abilities. By showing that it wants to improve the abilities of its employees, the firm can induce a feeling of support amongst its employees. In a similar way, ability-enhancing HRM policies, such as training, can be seen as supportive acts from the firm as the firm actively shows it wants to offer its employees ways to increase their knowledge and skills. All HRM practices and processes can thus be regarded as potential supportive acts of the organization, increasing employees' perceptions of organizational support (Liao et al., 2009; Morrow, 2011).

The perceived organizational support drives employees to stay within the organization, that is, it leads to affective organizational commitment (Meyer et al., 2002; Wikhamn & Hall, 2012). In turn, to be able to stay within the organization, employees are obliged to meet the goals of the organization, and thus deliver good performance. Previous research supports this (e.g. a meta-analytic study of Meyer et al. (2002) showed perceived organizational support to be an antecedent of AOC, and job performance to be a consequence of AOC). As such, using the norm of reciprocity, employees who perceive a supportive HRM system pay back their organization with performance via the mediating effect of perceived organizational support and affective organizational commitment. In case performance is determined by customers' perceptions of service quality (e.g. in a service-oriented firm), employees will try to score high on each dimension of service quality. They can for example be courteous and thoughtful towards the customers, hence increasing their 'empathy' and 'assurance'. In order to stay within the organization, they can try to deliver proper services by offering customers prompt service and by doing what they had promised to customers. This increases their 'reliability' and 'responsiveness' dimensions of service quality. As such, using the norm of reciprocity, employees pay back the supportive HRM practices with high performance levels in a service-oriented firm by improving each dimension of customers' perceptions of service quality.

As in the previous section, the mediating effect of AOC in this relationship is proposed to be partial, as this paper argues that work engagement and service climate are two other mediators in the HRM-performance link. Using a social exchange perspective, the following hypothesis is thus proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Affective organizational commitment partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers.

2.4 Relating service climate to HRM intensity and service quality

2.4.1 Climate theory

The previous two theories argue that the content of an HRM system (i.e. the combination of all HRM policies, practices and processes at a firm) leads to higher employee performance. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) on the other hand argued that it is both the HRM *content* as the HRM *process* that leads to increased performance:

Two interrelated features of an HRM system can be distinguished: content and process. By content, we mean the individual practices and policies intended to achieve a particular objective (e.g., practices to promote innovation or autonomy). [...] We propose that HRM content and process must be integrated effectively in order for prescriptive models of strategic HRM actually to link to firm performance. By process, we refer to how the HRM system can be designed and administered

effectively [...] [to create a] shared meaning [among the employees] about the content that might ultimately lead to organizational performance. (Bown & Ostroff., 2004, p. 206)

As such, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) conceptualized the HRM system as a signaling system that constantly sends messages to employees to emphasize appropriate attitudes and behaviors at a firm (Ehnröoth & Björkman, 2012). The messages are thereby the HRM practices and processes, that is, the HRM *content*, while the way these messages are communicated to the employees is referred to as the HRM *process*.

Bowen and Ostroff (2004) thus suggested that the HRM system be a signaling system to steer employee attitudes and behaviors for a specific organizational goal (e.g. innovation or service quality). For example, if a firm wants to increase service quality, it can use motivation-enhancing HRM practices as messages to clarify that service quality is important. An example would be pay contingent on customer satisfaction. This gives the employee a signal that service quality and customer satisfaction is important. Likewise, the firm can send messages emphasizing service quality through ability-enhancing HRM practices, such as training sessions to enhance prompt service or which emphasize proper interaction with customers. Or the firm can send messages to stress service quality through opportunity-enhancing HRM practices, for example by inviting employees to design action plans to increase service quality. As such, HRM practices (i.e. the HRM *content*) are considered signals or messages from the organization to the employees in order to reach a specific organizational goal.

However, given the desired content of an HRM system, the appropriate collective attitudes and behaviors may still not be evoked, for individuals can interpret the HRM content idiosyncratically (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Therefore, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) accentuated the HRM *process*. They referred to it as “how the HRM system can be designed and administered effectively [to create a] shared meaning [among the employees] about the content that might ultimately lead to organizational performance” (p. 206). As such, the HRM *process* focuses on the way the HRM *content* (i.e. the messages) is transmitted to the employees. They argued that the right messages should be sent with a high degree of distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus, in order to create a strong psychological and organizational *climate* for a specific goal. Psychological climate is thereby defined as the perceptions an individual employee has regarding the practices, procedures, and kinds of behaviors that get rewarded and supported in the firm, in order to reach a certain strategic goal, for example service quality. Combining the psychological climates of all employees leads to an overall organizational climate. Thereby, if all employees share the same perceptions about the practices, procedures, and kinds of behaviors that get rewarded and supported in the firm, it is said that a *strong* organizational climate is present (Schneider et al., 1998; Liao & Chuang, 2004). Such strong organizational climates have empirically been linked to higher-level performance, including customer satisfaction, customer service quality, safety and financial performance (Schneider et al., 1998; Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Salanova et al., 2005; Zacharatos et al., 2005). This can be explained from the fact that strong psychological and organizational climates for a specific goal means that employees know what is expected from them in the firm. Knowing which behaviors and attitudes are expected will enhance the employee’s effectiveness and drive in realizing the targeted goal.

Climate theory thus posits that an HRM system (i.e. the HRM *content*) is a signaling system that leads to a strong psychological climate for a specific goal amongst the employees, if the messages (i.e. the HRM policies, practices, and processes) are sent with high distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. The psychological climates of all employees combine to give the overall organizational climate for that specific goal. If all employees have shared perceptions of the practices, procedures, and kinds of behaviors that get rewarded and supported in the firm, it is said that a strong organizational climate is present. This leads to increased performance, as the employees understand which behaviors and attitudes are

expected from them and are thus better able and more driven to realize the targeted goal (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). This is supported by previous research; Zacharatos et al. (2005) for example demonstrated the mediating effect of perceived safety climate between an HPWS and personal-safety orientation and the number of safety incidents.

2.4.2 HRM systems and service climate

This paper examines performance in the context of service quality for customers, which is fostered by a climate for service. Service climate is defined as employees' shared perceptions of the policies, practices, and procedures that are rewarded, supported, and expected concerning customer services (Schneider et al., 1998). When there is a strong climate for service, employees have come to understand that superior customer service is expected, desired, and rewarded (Liao & Chuang, 2004).

Building on Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) conceptualization of the HRM system as a signaling system that constantly sends messages to the employees, it is proposed that the HRM system as perceived by the employees can induce a strong service climate. Motivation-enhancing HRM practices (as intended by the organization) can be regarded as messages, for example by establishing pay contingent on customer satisfaction of service quality. This will signal the employee that service quality and customer satisfaction are important to the firm. Ability-enhancing HRM practices can emphasize the importance of service quality by focusing training sessions on prompt service and friendly response. Finally, opportunity-enhancing HRM practices can signal the importance of service quality by inviting employees in designing action plans to increase overall service quality. As such, the HRM practices as intended by the organization are the messages that the organization sends to the employees to foster a climate of excellent service quality for customers.

Studying the employee perceptions of these messages encapsulates the distinctiveness, consistency and consensus with which these messages are sent to the employees. If distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus are high, each employee will perceive the messages as the organization intended them to be, and this will result in strong psychological service climates. Hence, employee perceptions of HRM intensity are argued to contain both the HRM content and the HRM process as defined by Bowen and Ostroff (2004).

As such, this paper proposes perceived HRM intensity to lead to a strong climate for service, as the perceived HRM practices and processes are messages from the firm to make the employees understand what behaviors and attitudes are expected from them. This will in turn lead to increased service quality for customers, as the employees understand which behaviors and attitudes are expected from them and are thus better able and more driven to realize the targeted goal. When a climate for service is present, employees will for example understand the importance of being courteous and thoughtful towards the customers (increasing the 'assurance' and 'empathy' dimensions of service quality for customers), and the importance of delivering prompt service and doing what one has promised to do (increasing the 'reliability' and 'responsiveness' dimensions of service quality). As such, a service for climate can increase customers' perceptions of service quality.

The mediating effect of service climate in the relationship between perceived HRM and service quality for customers is proposed to be partial, as work engagement and AOC were also argued to be mediators in the HRM-performance link.

Hypothesis 4: Service climate partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers.

2.5 The explanatory power of the three theories in the HRM-service quality link

In the previous paragraphs, perceived HRM systems have been linked to service quality for customers via the mediating effects of work engagement, affective organizational commitment, and service climate. These mediators represent intermediate constructs of three major theories that are used in parallel to explain the “black box” between individual HRM perceptions and individual performance outcomes: engagement theory, social exchange theory, and climate theory (Blau, 1964; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). As each theory emphasizes the importance of its intermediate outcomes, practitioners can get reluctant to adopt a specific HRM system (Tranfield et al., 2003; Posthuma et al., 2013). Indeed, the lack of consensus in literature regarding the critical mechanisms of the HRM-performance link at the individual level makes it unclear whether focusing an HRM system on a specific intermediate outcome will actually increase performance outcomes in an efficient way (Tranfield et al., 2003; Posthuma et al., 2013). To address this lack of consensus, this paper aims at comparing the explanatory power of the three theories used in the HRM-performance link. It does so by comparing the explanatory power of the three respective intermediate outcomes in the link between perceived HRM intensity and service quality for customers. As such, in Paragraph 2.5.1 the effect of perceived HRM intensity on the three intermediate outcomes is discussed. Next, in Paragraphs 2.5.2 and 2.5.3, it is argued that based on the concept of motivation quality the three intermediate outcomes differ in their explanatory power in explaining service quality for customers.

2.5.1 The effect of perceived HRM intensity on work engagement, AOC, and service climate

Recalling Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) conceptualization of the HRM system as a signaling system, it was proposed that the organization constantly sends messages to the employees through the HRM practices it has in place. The importance of excellent service quality for customers can be communicated to the employees through motivation-enhancing HRM practices (e.g., establishing pay contingent on customer satisfaction or service quality), ability-enhancing HRM practices (e.g. training sessions focusing on prompt service and friendly response), and opportunity-enhancing HRM practices (e.g. inviting employees to help designing action plans for higher service quality). When communicated with high distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus, the employees perceive the HRM practices as they were intended by the organization. This leads to the employees understanding what attitudes and behaviors are expected from them regarding service quality, which characterizes a strong psychological climate for service (Schneider et al., 1998; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Hong et al., 2013). As all HRM practices and policies are regarded as messages from the firm to the employees, they can all lead to a climate for service.

Building on social exchange theory, it was argued that perceived HRM practices and processes can be regarded as supportive acts of the organization, increasing employee perceptions of organizational support. For example, opportunity-enhancing HRM practices, such as job design and participation, give the employees the opportunity to actively optimize their work environment to their own preferences and be heard by the organization. Motivation-enhancing HRM practices, such as feedback and compensation, can be supportive for the employees as they give financial support and the tools to improve their knowledge, skills and abilities. Finally, ability-enhancing HRM policies, such as training, can be supportive as the organization actively offers the employees ways to increase their knowledge and skills. The perceived HRM practices and processes can thus foster perceived organizational support. In turn, perceived organizational support drives employees to stay within the organization, that is, it leads to affective organizational commitment (Meyer et al., 2002; Wikhamn & Hall, 2012). Perceived HRM practices and processes can thus lead to affective organizational commitment. However, not all HRM

practices and processes will have this effect. It depends on the value each employee associates with a certain HRM practice that affects the degree of perceived organizational support, and thus also the degree of AOC. For example, an employee might not see a certain training session as a supportive act from the organization because the employee does not believe the training to be useful, and merely sees it as a waste of time. Or the employee might not see contingent pay as supportive because he believes it to be a controlling tool from the organization, instead of seeing it as a tool to improve one's performance. As these HRM practices are not seen as supportive acts from the firm, they will not lead to AOC for that employee. As such, only those HRM practices and processes the employees perceive as supportive acts of the firm will be related to their affective organizational commitment.

Finally, work engagement was characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption into one's work. It thus refers to the employees' willingness to invest effort in his or her work, as well as to his or her enthusiasm in the work itself, and to the state of being so completely engrossed in work that the employee feels time passes quickly (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Lee & Ok, 2015). This all characterizes an individual's motivation to the work itself. It was proposed that perceived HRM practices and processes can increase the vigor, dedication, and absorption of employees. Ability-enhancing HRM practices can for example increase an employee's endurance of difficulties and emotional strength (e.g. a time-management training so the employee learns how to prioritize and efficiently use his time), hence increasing an employee's vigor. Opportunity-enhancing HRM practices enhance the opportunities employees get to exert their abilities (e.g. getting the responsibility to design part of their work to their own preferences), and can thus give employees an increased sense of significance and inspiration. This increases their dedication. Lastly, motivation-enhancing HRM practices improve the motivation and effort of employees during their work (e.g. getting useful feedback to be able to improve one's performance), thus increasing their absorption. As such, it was proposed that perceived HRM systems can increase an employee's work engagement. However, an individual's motivation for the work itself is largely determined by the work characteristics themselves, as it is a form of intrinsic motivation (see Paragraphs 2.5.2 and 2.5.3). HRM practices and processes can only facilitate the optimization of these work characteristics (e.g. job design), but do not change the work characteristics in a radical way. This is because the work characteristics of a particular job are to a large extent set by the firm, and can only vary within a certain range. As such, it is proposed that perceived HRM practices and processes can only influence work characteristics within a certain range, and can thus only improve work engagement to some extent.

Summarizing, it is proposed that perceived HRM intensity influences service climate to the largest extent as *all* perceived HRM practices and processes are regarded as signals from the firm to the employees, and can thus foster a climate for service. Affective organizational commitment is influenced by perceived HRM intensity to a smaller extent, as it is only those HRM practices and processes that are perceived as supportive acts of the firm that are related to affective organizational commitment. Finally, work engagement is proposed to be the least influenced by perceived HRM intensity, as only part of HRM practices play a role in improving work characteristics, and thus work engagement. Moreover, HRM practices can only influence work characteristics within a certain range, as the work characteristics of a particular job are set by the firm to a large extent. HRM practices can thus only optimize work characteristics to some extent, thereby leading to work engagement. This gives the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 11: Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are related to service climate to the largest extent, followed by affective organizational commitment, and finally by work engagement.

2.5.2 Self-determination theory

Driving on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), this paper proposes that work engagement, affective organizational commitment, and service climate each represent a different type of motivation. One of the key postulates of self-determination theory is that there exist multiple forms of motivation which can be distributed along a continuum from low to high levels of self-determination (Lavigne et al., 2009). Self-determination is thereby defined as the level at which an activity is “autonomously internalized [...] within the self” (Lavigne et al., 2009, p148). It is thus important not to merely focus on the quantity of motivation (i.e. low or high levels of motivation), but to also take the quality of motivation into consideration (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van den Broeck, 2013). Findings have repeatedly been found that the most self-determined types of motivation lead to the most adaptive outcomes (Vallerand et al., 2008; Van den Broeck et al., 2009; Cerasoli & Ford, 2014; Cerasoli et al., 2014).

The different types of motivation can be categorized in three categories (Figure 3) (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Lavigne et al., 2009; Chen & Kao, 2014):

- intrinsic motivation, referring to doing something because the activity itself is inherently interesting or enjoyable,
- extrinsic motivation, referring to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome such as tangible or verbal rewards, and
- amotivation, referring to a complete lack of intention to act.

Extrinsic motivation can in turn be categorized in four different types, ranging from low to high degree of self-determination or internalization (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2009). The first type of extrinsic motivation, having the lowest degree of self-determination, is labelled external regulation. It consists of those behaviors that are performed to satisfy an external demand in order to obtain an externally imposed reward (e.g. a bonus or positive feedback) or avoid an externally imposed sanction (e.g. discharge or criticism). The second type of extrinsic motivation is called introjected regulation, referring to behaviors that are in part internalized by the person. Individuals can for example act to rid themselves of a feeling of guilt or to maintain self-esteem and pride. Although the regulation is internal to the person, introjected behaviors are not accepted as fully part of the self, but rather as a response to external forces. As the first two types of extrinsic motivation both encompass feelings of obligations, these types are categorized as ‘controlled motivation’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Guay et al., 2003; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2009; Van den Broeck, 2013).

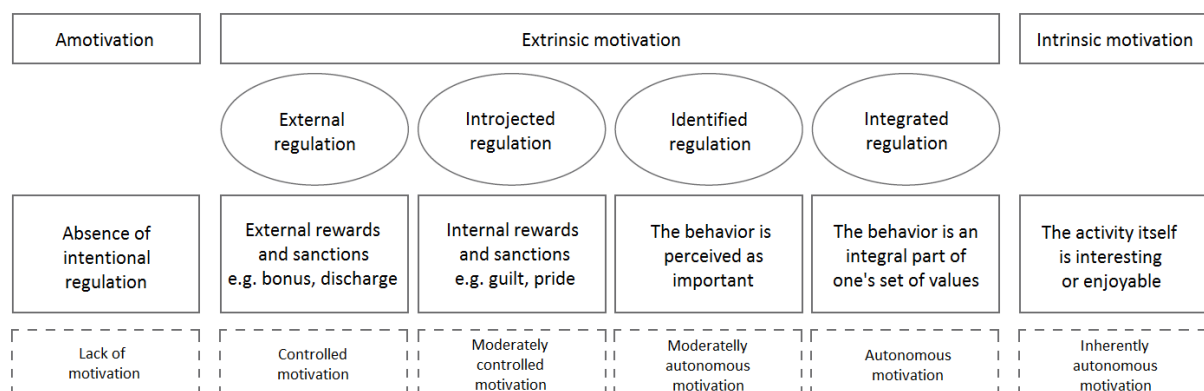


Figure 3: The self-determination continuum. Also shown are the nature of the regulation for each type of motivation, and the degree to which each represents autonomous motivation (based on Gagne & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2009)

The third and fourth types of extrinsic motivation encompass 'autonomous motivation'. Identified regulation, being the third type, refers to behaviors that are performed by choice because the individual can identify with the personal importance of a behavior. For example, if nurses value their patients' comfort and health, and understand the importance of doing their share of the unpleasant tasks for the patients' well-being (e.g. bathing patients), the nurses would feel relatively autonomous while performing such tasks. The most self-determined form of extrinsic motivation is integrated regulation. This occurs when individuals have the sense that the behavior is an integral part of who they are. Using the example of the nurses, it means that they would not only identify with the importance of the activities to maintain the patients' comfort and well-being, but they would take care of the patients because taking care for people more generally is part of their identity. Integrated regulation can be argued to have a comparable degree of self-determination as intrinsic motivation, but they are not equal. Intrinsic motivation is characterized by the person being interested in the activity itself because he or she enjoys the activity for the sake of it. Meanwhile, integrated regulation is characterized by the task being "instrumentally important for personal goals" (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Again using the example of the nurses bathing the patients, they would be intrinsically motivated if they really liked bathing patients just for the sake of it, while having integrated extrinsic motivation would mean they do not like to bath the patients by itself, but they will do it autonomously as they fully identify with taking care of patients and people in general (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Guay et al., 2003; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2009; Van den Broeck, 2013).

2.5.3 The effect of work engagement, AOC, and service climate on service quality

Using the concept of motivation quality, this paper proposes that work engagement, affective organizational commitment, and service climate represent three different types of motivation. Work engagement is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption into one's work. It thus refers to an employee's feeling of physical energy and willingness to invest effort in his or her work. It also refers to enthusiasm and inspiration in the work itself, as well as referring to the state of being so completely concentrated and engrossed in work that the employee feels time passes quickly and has difficulties detaching from work (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Lee & Ok, 2015). This all reflects an individual's motivation to the work itself, for the sake of it. This matches the definition of intrinsic motivation (see Figure 4).

Affective organizational commitment was explained to be an exchange employees reciprocate as they get organizational support from the firm. It was argued that HRM practices are a way for a firm to create organizational support. Employees with high levels of AOC want to remain within the organization, because they desire to keep the rewards they get. This can be in the form of monetary rewards, such as fair pay, or non-monetary rewards, such as opportunities for participation or training. This matches the definition of externally regulated motivation, the least internalized variant of extrinsic motivation. It can also be in the form of pride of belonging to a group. To illustrate this: one item to measure AOC is "I feel like 'part of the family' at my organization" (Allen & Meyer, 1990, p6). This matches with the definition of introjected regulated motivation. This is the second variant of controlled motivation, besides externally regulated motivation. As such, this paper argues that affective organizational commitment belongs to the category of controlled extrinsic motivation (Figure 4).

Finally, a service for climate is proposed to lie between work engagement and affective organizational commitment in terms of motivation quality. Constantly sending messages to employees that emphasize service quality will foster the internalization of these values, so that "the external regulation of a behavior is transformed into an internal regulation and thus no longer requires the presence of an external contingency" (Gagne & Deci, 2005, p. 334). The employees will thus give superior services by choice,

because they can identify with the personal importance of service quality and customer satisfaction. This matches to the category of autonomous extrinsic motivation (see Figure 4).

Findings have repeatedly shown that the most self-determined types of motivation lead to the most adaptive outcomes (Vallerand et al., 2008; Van den Broeck et al., 2009; Cerasoli & Ford, 2014, Cerasoli et al., 2014). This was explained by Vallerand et al. (2008) as follows:

More than 10 years ago, Vallerand (1997) posited that when the task is interesting, intrinsic motivation should lead to the most positive outcomes. However, when the task is less interesting (or even dull), intrinsic motivation becomes less relevant and the most self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation (i.e., integrated and identified regulation) should then be more pertinent and lead to the most positive outcomes.
(Vallerand et al., 2008, p259)

In other words, the most important parameter for motivation and performance is whether the activity itself is interesting. This leads to intrinsic motivation (i.e. doing an activity for the sake of it). If this is not the case, external regulation becomes important, whereby the variants with the highest level of internalized regulation give the highest motivation and performance, as the individual will have the feeling that he or she is doing the 'dull' activity because he or she wants to (i.e. autonomous extrinsic motivation), instead of being forced to (i.e. controlled extrinsic motivation).

When focusing on giving services to customers, employees who enjoy giving services to customers for the sake of it (i.e. high work engagement) will have intrinsic motivation and thus the highest service quality for customers. Employees who believe excellent service quality for customers is important (i.e. high service climate) will have autonomous extrinsic motivation to deliver service quality. They will thus give high service quality, be it lower compared to employees having a high level of work engagement and intrinsic motivation. Finally, employees who give services to customers because they want to stay within the firm to keep the associated rewards (i.e. high AOC) will give the lowest service quality for customers, as they have controlled extrinsic motivation.

As such, the following hypothesis is proposed when focusing on employees and their service quality for customers:

Hypothesis 6: Work engagement is related to service quality for customers to the largest extent, followed by a climate for service, and finally by affective organizational commitment.

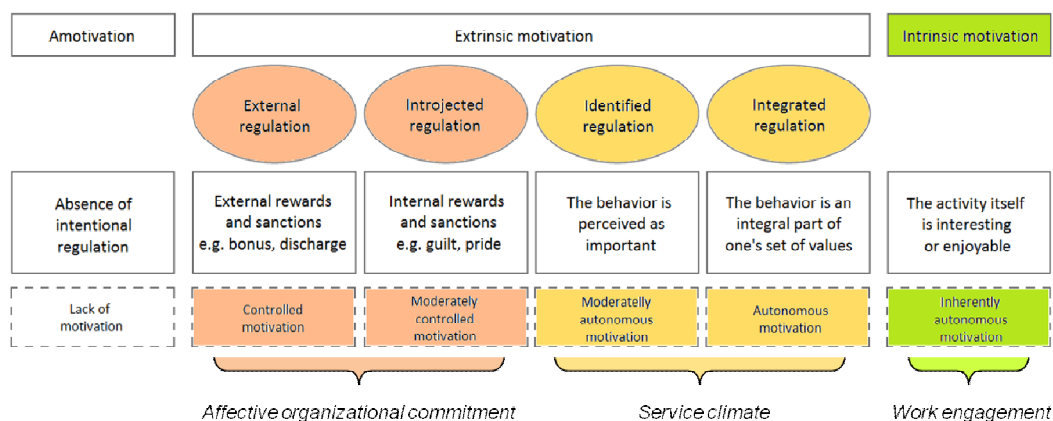


Figure 4: The self-determination continuum of Figure 3 (based on Gagne & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2009), with hypothesized positions of affective organizational commitment, service climate, and work engagement along this continuum

3 Methodology

To test the formulated hypotheses, research was conducted at the Human Resources Shared Service Center (HR SSC) of PostNL. This department is briefly described in Paragraph 3.1, after which the research design, sample, and procedure are outlined in Paragraph 3.2. Paragraph 3.3 describes the constructs measured, while the data analysis procedure is discussed in Paragraph 3.4.

3.1 PostNL and its HR SSC

The research was conducted within the HR SSC department of PostNL, the Netherlands. PostNL is a company that deals in letters, parcels, and everything related to letters and parcels. It is the largest post delivery company in the Benelux and the number two in the post markets of the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy. It employed around 56 000 employees in 2014 (PostNL, 2015).

The HR SSC department of PostNL (93 employees) deals with the administrative HRM tasks of the firm. As such, it manages the payroll, the salary administration, and the personnel administration. It also monitors all digital HR-portals of PostNL, in which PostNL employees can change or verify their personal information such as their address, their sick leave, or their working hours. Finally, the HR SSC has a helpdesk which front-line employees of PostNL can call or e-mail if they have a problem or question regarding HR. As such, the HR SSC handles around 1 500 calls and e-mails each week.

In recent years, PostNL has adapted a cost-efficiency strategy in its mailing branch due to a large decline in mail volume in the Netherlands (PostNL, 2015). As part of this cost-efficiency program, the HR SSC has faced several reorganizations. To illustrate this: in 2006, the HR SSC employed around 150 employees. This has been reduced to 93 employees in 2015, meaning a decrease of around 40%.

To test the hypotheses formulated in this study, the employees of the HR SSC were chosen as unit of analysis. This was chosen because they deliver services and because focusing on employees in a single department to minimize sources of variability regarding the three intermediate outcomes and service quality. For example, Meyer et al. (2002) found links between transformational leadership and AOC, as well as between organizational justice (i.e. distributive, procedural, and interactional) and AOC. Testing the hypotheses for employees at a single department reduces these sources of variability. As such, the relationships found in this study will be influenced to a smaller extent by non-hypothesized variables. Furthermore, the number of employees at the HR SSC ($n = 93$) and the number of customers (i.e. the front-line employees of PostNL that call the HR SSC to solve their HR-related problem or question, $n = 1500$ per week) is large enough to be able to draw significant correlations.

As such, the HR SSC employees will be asked for their perceptions of the HRM practices and processes that apply to them, as well as their work engagement, their AOC, and their perceptions of a service for climate at the HR SSC. The customers of the HR SSC (the front-line employees of PostNL that had contact with the HR SSC because they had an HR-related question or problem) will be asked to rate the service quality of the HR SSC employee that helped them solving their problem or question.

3.2 Research design, sample, and procedure

The present study includes hypotheses that aim at comparing several mature theories in the HRM-performance link at the employee level. Each of these theories has well-developed constructs that have been studied over time by a variety of scholars. To test the hypotheses regarding these constructs, quantitative data is required (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). To obtain the required data, a survey research design was adopted. Two surveys were sent to the HR SSC employees, while one survey was distributed among the customers of the HR SSC. All customers of the HR SSC could be linked to the right HR SSC employees via a unique code in each survey, making it possible to match both data-sets.

The data collection among the employees working at the HR SSC involved two rounds to reduce common method bias possibilities. Only internal employees of the HR SSC were invited to participate, as external employees do not receive part of the HRM practices internal employees get, and would therefore not be able to adequately respond the items about HRM intensity. At Time 1, the employees were asked about their perceptions of the HRM intensity. At Time 2, the employees were asked about their work engagement, their affective organizational commitment, their perceptions of the service climate at the HR SSC, and their self-reported task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and self-efficacy. The surveys were discussed first with an employee and the manager of the HR SSC in order to customize the questionnaires to the terminology used by the employees at the HR SSC. The manager of the HR SSC then sent a mail to all employees working at the HR SSC, in which the research goal was briefly explained and the employees were kindly asked to participate. A week later, the respondents were approached by e-mail using a list of all employees working at the HR SSC. The e-mail contained information about the research goal and the research itself, it explained that anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and it contained the link to the first online survey. The response period was 2 weeks, with one interim reminder sent to the respondents in which they were kindly asked to fill out the questionnaire if they had not responded yet. Two weeks after sending the first survey, the second survey was distributed among the respondents. The response period for the second survey was 3 weeks, with two interim reminders sent. In total, 88 HR SSC employees were invited to participate. After Time 1, 73 employees had responded (response rate: 83 %), and after Time 2, 67 employees had filled in the surveys; a response rate of 76 %. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the employees amongst the control variables.

Table 1: Distribution of employees amongst the control variables

		Employees (n=67)
Gender	Male	50
	Female	17
Age (in years)	<41	4
	41-50	11
	51-60	45
	>60	7
Educational level	Secondary education (as preparation for intermediate vocational education)	8
	Secondary education (as preparation for higher vocational education or university degree)	12
	Intermediate vocational education	34
	Higher vocational education or university degree	13
Tenure (in years)	1-10	9
	11-20	19
	21-30	15
	31-40	22
	>40	2
Contract type (in working hours per week)	<22 (<60% of full-time)	5
	22-29 (60% - 79% of full-time)	7
	30-36 (80% - 99% of full-time)	10
	>36 (full-time)	45

Among the customers of the HR SSC, data was collected during a period of 5 weeks. After each week, a list of all handled problems and questions was obtained from the HR SSC. For each handled problem or question, the list contained the name and e-mail address (if present) of the customer, and the name of the HR SSC employee that had answered the problem or question. All problems and questions were grouped by HR SSC employee, after which only the customers were contacted that had a valid e-mail address and that only had a single problem or question handled that week. The former criterion was chosen as the customers were contacted by e-mail, and the latter criterion was because each customer had to be linked to a specific HR SSC employee to answer the hypotheses. If, for example, a customer had contact with several HR SSC employees during one week and he/she would be asked to rate the service quality of the HR SSC during that week, it would have been impossible to link this service quality rating to a specific HR SSC employee, making it redundant for this research. During the data collection period of 5 weeks, 1376 customers were invited to fill in the survey, of which 415 did (response rate: 30%).

3.3 Measures

To test the variables included in the research model, existing scales were used that have been reported to be valid and reliable. These scales were adapted to the context of the HR SSC whenever necessary, and translated into Dutch. All scales, unless reported otherwise, used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) as answer options. The final items of the surveys can be found in Appendix A and B.

Employee perceptions of HRM intensity. The scales of Bos-Nehles & Meijerink (2014) were used to measure the employee perceptions of the intensity of HRM practices regarding staffing (6 items, e.g. "The selection of new personnel emphasizes their ability to collaborate and work in teams"), training and development (6 items, e.g. "The training programs I went through at PostNL effectively prepared me to provide high quality services"), performance management and appraisal (3 items, e.g. "I get feedback to improve my performance"), compensation and benefits (7 items, e.g. "My pay is tied to the quality of service I deliver"), job and work design (5 items, e.g. "I have many possibilities to decide for myself how to do my work"), and participation (5 items, e.g. "My suggestions for improving customer service are usually implemented in full or in part within the company"). An additional scale from Boon et al. (2011) was used to measure employment security (2 items, e.g. "The company gives me the certainty of keeping my job"). This was done in order to cover the entire taxonomy of High Performance Work Practices of Posthuma et al. (2013), who analyzed 193 peer-reviewed articles about High Performance Work Systems published between 1992 and 2011 and developed a comprehensive taxonomy from these articles.

Amongst the abovementioned scales, Cronbach's alpha was acceptably reliable for staffing, training and development, performance management and appraisal, and employment security (α ranging from .755 to .839). The items for compensation and benefits had a Cronbach's alpha lower than .65, and an exploratory factor analysis revealed that the 7 items loaded on 3 different factors. Only one of these 3 factors, measuring pay contingent on individual performance (3 items), had a Cronbach's alpha higher than .65 ($\alpha = .789$) and was therefore included in the subsequent analysis steps. The items for job and work design also had a Cronbach's alpha lower than .65. An exploratory factor analysis showed that the 5 items loaded on 2 different factors. Only one factor, measuring job autonomy (3 items) had a Cronbach's alpha higher than .65 ($\alpha = .667$), and was therefore included in the subsequent analysis steps. For the participation construct, an exploratory factor analysis revealed that 1 of the 5 items loaded on a separate factor, being job control. The other 4 items measured participation. The job control item was removed from the participation construct, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of .680.

Once all abovementioned scales showed a reliable Cronbach's alpha, it was tested whether these 7 separate scales could be combined to yield one overarching measure of employee perceptions of HRM

intensity. This was done by loading the separate factors on one overarching construct. For this overarching construct, Cronbach's alpha was equal to .704, making it an acceptably reliable construct. The factor loadings of each scale on the overarching construct is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Factor loadings of the separate scales of employee perceptions of HRM intensity

	Factor loading on 'employee perceptions of HRM intensity'
Staffing	.772
Training and development	.618
Performance management and appraisal	.621
Compensation and benefits: contingent pay	.542
Job and work design: job autonomy	.589
Participation	.851
Employment security	.574

Work engagement. Work engagement was measured using the shortened version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), as the UWES-scale is predominantly used to measure work engagement (Crawford et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2012). The scale consists of 9 items, with 3 items measuring vigor (e.g. "At my work, I feel bursting with energy"), 3 items measuring dedication (e.g. "My job inspires me"), and 3 items measuring absorption (e.g. "I get carried away when I'm working"). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (every day). Cronbach's alpha was equal to .883, making it a reliable construct.

Affective organizational commitment. To measure affective organizational commitment, the scale of Allen & Meyer (1990) was used. This scale consists of 8 items, a typical item being "I feel like part of the family at the HR SSC". Cronbach's alpha was .781, making it acceptably reliable.

Service climate. The global service scale of Schneider et al. (1998) was used to measure service climate. It consists of 7 items, which were reformulated into direct statements (e.g. "How would you rate the recognition and rewards employees receive for the delivery of superior work and service?" became "The employees of this company are recognized and rewarded for the delivery of superior service"). Cronbach's alpha was equal to .827, making it a reliable construct.

Service quality for customers. Service quality for customers was measured using the scale of Hossain et al. (2012), which is a 5-item scale based on SERVQUAL, but without the "tangibles" dimension. This scale was chosen because it is based on SERVQUAL, because it is short (so response rates can be expected to be higher than for the 22-item SERVQUAL), and because the "tangibles" dimension is not present, which matches the situation of the HR SSC in which there is only remote contact between employees and customers. The items were reformulated to have a single employee of the HR SSC as unit of analysis (e.g. "Employees in the IS department provide individual attention" became "The employee of the HR SSC provided individual attention"). Cronbach's alpha was equal to .879, making it a reliable construct.

Employee self-reported performance. Employee performance was measured in terms of their self-reported task performance and organizational citizenship behavior directed at individuals using the scales of Kluemper et al. (2013). Task performance was measured with 5 items (e.g. "I complete all tasks that are expected from me"), and OCB was also measured with 5 items (e.g. "I assist others with their duties"). Cronbach's alphas were equal to .871 and .821, respectively, making both constructs acceptably reliable.

Control variables. In order to rule out the influence of other factors, several control variables were included.

- Age and tenure of the HR SSC employees were controlled for using data obtained from the database of the company. These control variables were included as older employees and employees with longer tenures may have accumulated higher levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities, hence affecting their job performance.
- For the same reason, educational level of the employees was also controlled for. Educational level was measured in the questionnaire using an ordinal scale, with employees asked to indicate the highest educational level they had completed.
- A fourth control variable, contract type of the HR SSC employees, was measured by the number of working hours to assess the degree to which the employee work full-time. This control variable was included as those who have a part-time contract are less often on the work floor, which could affect their perception of the HRM intensity.
- The HR SSC employees were asked for their self-efficacy, defined as “an individual’s belief in his or her capability to perform activities with skill” (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1443). This was done as self-efficacy has been proved to be directly related to job performance (Pimpakorn & Patterson, 2010). The scale of Spreitzer (1995), consisting of 3 items, was used to measure self-efficacy. A typical item was “I am confident about my ability to do my job”. Cronbach’s alpha was .897, making it a reliable construct.
- Finally, HR functional competences of customers and interaction competences of customers were included as control variables. This was done as Meijerink et al. (2015) showed a positive link between these two variables and service quality. HR functional competences, defined as “the knowledge, skills, and abilities that allow [...] to operate HRM processes” (Meijerink et al., 2015, p. 6), were measured among the customers using the 5-item construct of Meijerink et al. (2015). A typical item was “I know precisely whom to turn to when I have a problem with my personnel services”. Interaction competences, referring to the “knowledge and skills [...] to communicate, interact, and collaborate with HR service providers in face-to-face settings or through remote call-center facilities” (Meijerink et al., 2015, p. 6), were measured among the customers using the 2-item construct of Meijerink et al. (2015). A typical item was “I am always able to clearly explain my HR-related problems to an HR SSC employee”. Cronbach’s alphas were equal to .838 and .728, respectively, making both constructs acceptably reliable.

3.4 Data analysis

The survey data was analyzed using SPSS. Missing survey data was substituted with mean values. Validity checks were first performed to ensure validity of the used scales. This was done by performing a reliability analysis of each scale to get the Cronbach’s alpha, and an explanatory factor analysis of each scale to check whether there was just a single eigenvalue higher than 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations between the different scales were subsequently calculated, both on the employee level and the customer level. If correlations were higher than .5, a Harman’s single factor test was performed to check for multicollinearity.

In this study, the customers were nested within the corresponding HR SSC employees that handled their question or problem. Given this nested and hierarchical structure, the data of the customers is not independent if they share the same HR SSC employee. As such, a multilevel analysis was performed using the linear mixed model procedure in SPSS.

Regression analyses were performed using the linear regression procedure in SPSS.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of the different variables are presented in Table 3 and Table 4. Table 3 thereby represents the variables measured on the employee level (the higher level), while Table 4 represents the variables measured on the customer level (the lower level). A Harman's single factor test was done for the correlations greater than .50, but no issues of multicollinearity were found on either level.

Studying the significant correlations in Table 3, it is not surprising that age and tenure of employees are highly correlated ($r = .47, p < .01$). The only significant correlation between a control variable and a non-control variable is the negative correlation between educational level and work engagement ($r = -.38, p < .01$), suggesting that employees with lower educational levels have higher work engagement. Other significant correlations are a positive correlation between perceived HRM intensity and work engagement ($r = .45, p < .01$) and service climate ($r = .55, p < .01$), but not with affective organizational commitment. This suggests that hypothesis 3 will not hold, but this is further tested in the subsequent regression models.

Table 4 shows significant correlations between service quality for customers and HR functional competences of customers ($r = .22, p < .01$), and between service quality for customers and interaction competences of customers ($r = .36, p < .01$), providing support for the findings of Meijerink et al. (2015). HR functional competences and interaction competences of customers are also strongly correlated ($r = .49, p < .01$). This might be caused by a third variable, for example the extent of past HRM usage, which was also found in the paper of Meijerink et al. (2015).

4.2 Examining the variability in service quality for customers

This paper aims at examining the relationship between service quality for customers and work engagement, affective organizational commitment, service climate of employees, and their perceived HRM intensity. For this reason, customers are nested within the corresponding HR SSC employees that handled their question or problem. This hierarchical structure is tested first, as it is necessary that the variation of service quality for customers is significantly different between each HR SSC employee.

A null model was estimated, in which independent variables were not specified, and the significance level of the employee level variance (τ_0^2) and the customer level (or residual) variance (σ^2) of the intercept were determined. The customer level variance of the intercept was found to be significant ($\sigma^2 = .50, p < .001$), but the employee level variance of the intercept was not significant ($\tau_0^2 = .00, p = .875$). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC(1)) was close to zero, indicating that all variance in service quality for customers is linked to the heterogeneity among customers, while no variance results from differences between the different HR SSC employees. As there is no significant difference in service quality for customers between the HR SSC employees, further multilevel modeling is made redundant, and all hypotheses are rejected.

Table 3: Means, standard deviations and correlations among the study variables (at the employee level)

	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.	Age	53,72	6,52								
2.	Tenure	24,36	11,84	.47**							
3.	Contract type	33,84	5,96	.22	.06						
4.	Educational level	3,83	,98	-.04	-.01	.17					
5.	Perceived HRM intensity	3,21	,38	.03	-.10	.11	-.17				
6.	Work engagement	5,97	,93	.08	.02	.16	-.38**	.45**			
7.	Affective organizational commitment	3,65	,59	.04	.22	.14	-.07	.17	.54**		
8.	Service climate	3,69	,52	.03	-.06	.12	-.18	.55**	.54**	.36**	
9.	Self-efficacy	4,31	,48	.03	-.02	.09	.01	-.04	.17	.17	.12

** p < .01, * p < .05

N = 67 employees

Table 4: Means, standard deviations and correlations among the study variables (at the customer level)

	Variable	M	SD	1	2
1.	HR- service quality	4,05	,71		
2.	HR functional competencies	3,73	,68	.22**	
3.	Interaction competencies	4,03	,65	.36**	.49**

** p < .01, * p < .05

N = 415 customers

Table 5: Means, standard deviations and correlations among the alternative study variables (at the employee level)

	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	Age	53,72	6,52									
2.	Tenure	24,36	11,84	.47**								
3.	Contract type	33,84	5,96	.22	.06							
4.	Educational level	3,83	,98	-.04	-.01	.17						
5.	Perceived HRM intensity	3,21	,38	.03	-.10	.11	-.17					
6.	Work engagement	5,97	,93	.08	.02	.16	-.38**	.45**				
7.	Affective organizational commitment	3,65	,59	.04	.22	.14	-.07	.17	.54**			
8.	Climate	3,69	,52	.03	-.06	.12	-.18	.55**	.54**	.36**		
9.	Task performance	4,28	,49	-.06	-.06	.11	-.08	.05	.39**	.16	.23	
10.	Organizational citizenship behavior	4,06	,46	.02	.05	.31*	.10	.02	.35**	.43**	.24*	.52**

** p < .01, * p < .05

N = 67 employees

4.3 Post hoc analysis: employee behaviors as dependent variable

As it turned out that service quality for customers did not significantly differ between HR SSC employees, this study shifted its focus to more proximal outcomes of HRM, as Alfes et al. (2013b) suggested. Previous research has demonstrated that the link between perceived HRM and performance is mediated by employee attitudes and employee behaviors:

Human resource systems are established; they influence workplace practice; employee attitudes change [...]; and there is a consequent effect on work behavior and this in turn feeds through to the performance of the work unit and eventually of the firm. (Takeuchi & Takeuchi, 2013, p. 2089)

Kehoe and Wright (2013) for example showed that perceived HRM affects affective organizational commitment (an employee attitude), which influences OCB (an employee behavior). Tsaur & Lin (2004) showed a link between HRM practices, employee service behaviors (service-oriented task performance and OCB), and customer perceptions of service quality (a performance outcome). The logic behind this is quite straightforward: perceived HRM practices can influence the opinions, beliefs, and feelings about aspects of one's environment, which define employee attitudes (Bauer & Erdogan, 2009). As such, affective organizational commitment refers to the feelings an employee has about the firm he or she is working for. Work engagement refers to feelings the employee has about the work activities themselves. Service climate refers to the feelings the employee has about the importance of service quality for customers. If an employee has positive attitudes, he or she will exert positive behaviors, as being positive about one's firm or work will increase one's behaviors towards that firm or work (Bauer & Erdogan, 2009). Employee attitudes can thus influence organizational citizenship behavior, general task performance, or service-oriented task performance (Tsaur & Lin, 2004). In turn, employees showing positive behaviors perform better (Tsaur & Lin, 2004).

This study initially focused on the link between perceived HRM, employee attitudes (work engagement, AOC, and service climate), and employee *performance* (service quality for customers). As all variance in service quality for customers could be attributed to the customers and could therefore not be used as performance outcome, this study altered its focus to the link between perceived HRM, employee attitudes (work engagement, AOC, and service climate), and employee *behaviors* (general task performance and organizational citizenship behavior).

In the surveys distributed amongst the HR SSC employees, the participants were asked to rate their task performance and organizational citizenship behavior. The hypotheses stated in this paper are hereafter tested with task performance and organizational citizenship behavior as dependent variables, instead of service quality for customers. The nature of the hypotheses stays the same, as task performance and organizational citizenship behavior have been linked to HRM systems (Alfes et al., 2012; Truss et al., 2013), work engagement (Alfes et al., 2013a; Alfes et al., 2013b), affective organizational commitment (Kuvaas, 2008; Kehoe & Wright, 2013), and service climate (Tsaur & Lin, 2004; Mathies & Ngo, 2014). As such, the new hypotheses are:

Hypothesis 7: Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are positively related with their task performance (H7a) and their organizational citizenship behavior (H7b).

Hypothesis 8: Work engagement partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their task performance (H8a) and organizational citizenship behavior (H8b).

Hypothesis 9: Affective organizational commitment partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their task performance (H9a) and organizational citizenship behavior (H9b).

Hypothesis 10: Service climate partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their task performance (H10a) and organizational citizenship behavior (H10b).

Hypothesis 11: Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are related to service climate to the largest extent, followed by affective organizational commitment, and finally by work engagement.

Hypothesis 12: Work engagement is related to task performance (H12a) and organizational citizenship behavior (H12b) to the largest extent, followed by a climate for service, and finally by affective organizational commitment.

The control variables self-efficacy of the employees, HR functional competences of the customers, and interaction competences of the customers were dropped as these were initially incorporated as control variables for the service quality for customers scale. The remaining control variables are age, tenure, educational level, and contract type of the HR SSC employees.

4.3.1 Post hoc analysis: descriptive statistics

Table 5 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables of interest in the post hoc analysis. In addition to the correlations described in Paragraph 4.1, task performance is only significantly correlated to work engagement ($r = .39, p < .01$). Organizational citizenship behavior is significantly related to contract type ($r = .31, p < .05$), indicating that employees with longer work weeks help their colleagues to a greater extent. OCB is also significantly related to work engagement ($r = .35, p < .01$), affective organizational commitment ($r = .43, p < .01$), and service climate ($r = .24, p < .05$). A Harman's single factor test was done for the correlations greater than .50, but no issues of multicollinearity were found.

4.3.2 Relating perceived HRM intensity to employee behaviors

Hypothesis 1 states that service quality for customers is positively affected by employee perceptions of HRM intensity. The alternative hypothesis (hypothesis 7) states that task performance and organizational citizenship behavior of employees are positively affected by their perceptions of HRM intensity. Model 1.2 and 2.2, shown in Table 6, test these relationships. Model 1.2 indicates that perceived HRM intensity does not have a significant effect on task performance after controlling for confounding effects. Similarly, Model 2.2 shows no significant effect of perceived HRM intensity on organizational citizenship behavior. Hypotheses 7a and 7b are thus rejected. Furthermore, contract type ($\beta = .32, p < .05$) is positively related to organizational citizenship behavior. This implies that employees show increasing organizational citizenship behavior as their contract gets full-time.

4.3.3 Testing the proposed mediators in the HRM-employee behavior link

Hypotheses 8, 9, and 10 state that work engagement, affective organizational commitment, and service climate are mediators in the HRM-employee behavior link. To confirm these hypotheses, two criteria have to be met (MacKinnon et al., 2002; Kenny, 2014):

- 1) The three mediators should be significantly related to task performance and organizational citizenship behavior; and
- 2) Perceived HRM intensity should be linked to the three mediators.

Model 1.3 and 2.3, shown in Table 6, test the first criteria. Model 1.3 indicates that work engagement is significantly related to task performance after testing for confounding effects ($\beta = .46, p < .01$), while affective organizational commitment and service climate do not have a significant relation with task performance. Model 2.3 shows that affective organizational commitment is significantly related to OCB ($\beta = .29, p < .05$), but work engagement and service climate are not. Furthermore, contract type is related to OCB, though with a significance just above the threshold of .05 ($\beta = .22, p = .06$).

Model 3.2, 4.2, and 5.2, shown in Table 7, test the second criteria. Model 3.2 shows that perceived HRM intensity is significantly related with work engagement after testing for confounding effects ($\beta = .38, p < .001$). Educational level is also significantly related with work engagement, be it in a negative direction ($\beta = -.34, p < .01$). Model 4.2 indicates that perceived HRM intensity is not significantly related to affective organizational commitment. Only tenure is related to AOC ($\beta = .30, p < .05$), indicating that employees with higher tenure want to remain within the organization to a larger extent. Lastly, Model 5.2 shows a significant relation between perceived HRM intensity and service climate after testing for confounding effects ($\beta = .52, p < .001$).

Summarizing:

- Perceived HRM intensity is significantly related with work engagement, which in turn is positively related with task performance. Hypothesis 8a is thus accepted. However, work engagement is not related with OCB, rejecting hypothesis 8b.
- Affective organizational commitment is significantly related with OCB, but not with task performance. Also, perceived HRM intensity is not significantly related with affective organizational commitment. Hypotheses 9a and 9b are thus rejected.
- Perceived HRM intensity is significantly related with service climate, but service climate is not significantly related with task performance or OCB. Hypotheses 10a and 10b are hence rejected.
- Perceived HRM intensity is most strongly related to service climate ($\beta = .52, p < .001$), followed by work engagement ($\beta = .38, p < .001$). Affective organizational commitment is not significantly related to perceived HRM intensity. Hypothesis 11 is thus only partially accepted.
- Task performance is only significantly related to work engagement, but not with service climate and AOC. Hypothesis 12a is hence only partially accepted. OCB is only significantly related to affective organizational commitment, and not with service climate and work engagement. As such, hypothesis 12b is rejected.

Table 6: Multiple regression analysis with task performance and organizational citizenship behavior as dependent variables

Variables	Task performance			Organizational citizenship behavior		
	Model 1.1	Model 1.2	Model 1.3	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3
Constant	4.46***	4.39***	3.19***	3.42***	3.40***	1.85**
Control variables						
Age	-.09	-.09	-.11	-.09	-.09	-.06
Tenure	-.03	-.03	.01	.08	.08	.00
Contract type	.15	.14	.06	.32*	.32*	.22 ^A
Educational level	-.11	-.10	.08	.04	.04	.16
Main effects						
Perceived HRM intensity		.02			.00	
Work engagement			.46**			.21
Affective organizational commitment			-.11			.29*
Service climate			.03			.03
Model F	.50	.40	1.78	1.84	1.45	3.46**
F change		-.10	1.32		-.39	1.62
R²	.03	.03	.18	.11	.11	.29
Δ R²		.00	.15		.00	.18

*** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, ^A p = .06

N = 67 employees. Standardized coefficients are shown.

Table 7: Multiple regression analysis with work engagement, AOC, and service climate as dependent variables

Variables	Work engagement		Affective organizational commitment		Service climate	
	Model 3.1	Model 3.2	Model 4.1	Model 4.2	Model 5.1	Model 5.2
Constant	6.18***	3.27*	3.63***	2.72**	3.62***	1.38 ^A
Control variables						
Age	.02	-.00	-.13	-.14	.03	.00
Tenure	-.01	.04	.27 ^B	.30*	-.08	-.01
Contract type	.23 ^A	.17	.17	.15	.15	.08
Educational level	-.42***	-.34**	-.10	-.06	-.20	-.10
Main effects						
Perceived HRM intensity		.38***		.18		.52***
Model F	3.70**	5.86***	1.47	1.61	.99	5.62***
F change		2.16		.14		4.63
R²	.19	.32	.09	.12	.06	.32
Δ R²		.13		.03		.26

*** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, ^B p = .05, ^A p = .06

N = 67 employees. Standardized coefficients are shown.

Table 8: Overview of hypotheses and results

	Description	Result
H1	Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are positively related with service quality for customers.	Rejected
H2	Work engagement partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers.	Rejected
H3	Affective organizational commitment partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers.	Rejected
H4	Service climate partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers.	Rejected
H5	Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are related to service climate to the largest extent, followed by affective organizational commitment, and finally by work engagement.	<i>Partially accepted</i>
H6	Work engagement is related to service quality for customers to the largest extent, followed by a climate for service, and finally by affective organizational commitment.	Rejected
H7a	Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are positively related with their task performance.	Rejected
H7b	Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are positively related with their organizational citizenship behavior.	Rejected
H8a	Work engagement partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their task performance.	<i>Accepted</i>
H8b	Work engagement partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their organizational citizenship behavior.	Rejected
H9a	Affective organizational commitment partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their task performance.	Rejected
H9b	Affective organizational commitment partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their organizational citizenship behavior.	Rejected
H10a	Service climate partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their task performance.	Rejected
H10b	Service climate partially mediates the positive relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their organizational citizenship behavior.	Rejected
H11	Employee perceptions of HRM intensity are related to service climate to the largest extent, followed by affective organizational commitment, and finally by work engagement.	<i>Partially accepted</i>
H12a	Work engagement is related to task performance to the largest extent, followed by a climate for service, and finally by affective organizational commitment.	<i>Partially accepted</i>
H12b	Work engagement is related to organizational citizenship behavior to the largest extent, followed by a climate for service, and finally by affective organizational commitment.	Rejected

5 Discussion

This study focused on the explanatory power of three major theories used to explain the HRM-performance relationship at the employee level: engagement theory, social exchange theory, and climate theory. Previous papers on each theory have emphasized the importance of their respective intermediate outcomes, but the resulting lack of consensus can cause reluctance amongst practitioners to adopt an HRM system focusing on a specific intermediate outcome (Tranfield et al., 2003; Posthuma et al., 2013; Truss et al., 2013). Indeed, knowing which intermediate outcome best explains the link between HRM and individual employee performance will help practitioners to focus their HRM resources. For scholars, being able to focus on a specific theory will help unlocking the “black box” of the HRM-performance link at the employee level to a greater extent.

To compare the explanatory power of the three theories in the HRM-performance link at the employee level, the central intermediate outcome of each theory was selected and argued to be a mediator in this relationship. Employee perceptions of HRM intensity was chosen as independent variable, while service quality for customers was chosen as individual performance outcome.

5.1 Discussion of results and implications for research

5.1.1 Variance in service quality for customers

A significant finding of this study concerns the variance in service quality for customers. In fact, the variance in service quality between different HR SSC employees proved to be insignificant. With an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC(1)) of close to zero, all variance in service quality for customers could be attributed to sources of variability on the customer level. The total lack of variance on the employee level might have been caused by several reasons.

Firstly, customers might see the service delivered by the HR SSC as a minor transaction in the overall process of getting their problem answered. They will probably have spent time trying to fix the problem on their own, by attempting several things on the online portals, or asking their direct supervisor or HR advisor for help. This process might have taken some time, before the customers sought their final refuge in the HR SSC. As such, the time and effort spent interacting with the HR SSC (which most often falls in the range of several minutes) can be a minor part of the whole process of getting an answer. Moreover, the contact that customers have with the HR SSC employees is only by phone or e-mail. The lack of personal face-to-face contact might also decrease the influence of the HR SSC employees on service quality, as face-to-face contact has been shown to increase customers' perceptions of service quality (Jayawardhena et al., 2007). This can be explained by the fact that there is a decreased sense of personal service and no possibly use of body language when the encounter between customer and employee is not face-to-face (Collison et al., 2000). Both the minimal contact time and the lack of face-to-face contact can cause the insignificant influence of the HR SSC employee on service quality as perceived by the customers.

Secondly, the rated service quality might be influenced by the random distribution of problems amongst the HR SSC employees. Some problems might be more complex to answer, taking more time and having higher risks of remaining unresolved. This will directly influence perceived service quality (e.g. lower perceived level of knowledge of the employee), but it can also indirectly influence service quality. Satisfied customers will probably give higher ratings than unsatisfied customers, even if the HR SSC employee interacted with them in the same way (e.g. perceived level of genuine interest of the HR SSC employee in solving the problem). Therefore, the fact that HR SSC employees get both simple and complex problems at random can explain the insignificant variance in service quality between HR SSC employees and the large variance of service quality on the customer level.

A third reason can exist for customers who had previous interactions with the HR SSC. These customers might rate the service quality of the HR SSC as an entity, combining their past experiences with several employees of the HR SSC. Their rated service quality, which was linked to a specific HR SSC employee, would then in fact measure the service quality of several HR SSC employees. This can be a reason for the non-significant variance in service quality between HR SSC employees.

As the HR SSC employees that participated in this study did not have any effect on service quality for customers, it is impossible to link the employee perceptions of HRM intensity to their performance when using service quality for customers as performance outcome. This paper focused on service quality for customers as this performance indicator could be measured for each individual HR SSC employee, making it more proximal to the micro-level of HRM interventions than organizational performance indicators, as was called for by Alfes et al (2013b). However, as all variance in service quality for customers could be attributed to sources of variability on the customer level, it turned out that this performance indicator was still too distal from the micro-level of HRM interventions to find a clear relationship with HRM in this study. Future research should therefore either focus on more proximal HRM outcomes, such as employee behaviors, or focus on performance indicators which at least partly depend on the employee and are not completely influenced by sources of variability of other stakeholders, such as customers. Furthermore, scholars should check whether the complete lack of variance at the employee level also occurs in different contexts and firms (e.g. in HR SSCs where there is more contact or face-to-face contact between employees and customers).

Additionally, as all variance in service quality for customers of the HR SSC occurred at the customer level in this study, scholars should try to explore these various sources of variability at the customer level. This paper already showed a strong and significant relation between service quality for customers and the HRM functional competences and interaction competences of customers of the HR SSC. As both types of competences increase a customer's rating of service quality, finding the mechanisms to explain these correlations is important. It is also important to find additional antecedents of service quality on the customer level in order to fully understand in what ways service quality for customers is influenced at an HR SSC.

5.1.2 The effect of perceived HRM intensity on work engagement, AOC, and service climate

A second finding of this paper is that perceived HRM intensity has the most effect on climate for service ($\beta = .52, p < .001$), followed by work engagement ($\beta = .38, p < .001$). Affective organizational commitment is not significantly related to perceived HRM intensity. As such, the hypothesized order (i.e. service climate being the most affected by perceived HRM intensity, then AOC, and finally work engagement) was only partially confirmed.

A reason why AOC might not be significantly related to perceived HRM intensity is the fact that HR SSC employees constantly deal with HRM during their work. Working at the HR SSC, they work on administrative HRM tasks all day long. This might evoke the feeling that HRM practices are merely transactions ("daily business") instead of a special attempt of the organization to create a supportive environment. Furthermore, HR SSC employees can encounter better HRM practices for other employees during their work. When subsequently putting their HRM practices into perspective, the HR SSC employees might not see the HRM practices they get as very supportive. For both reasons, the value of the exchange they get from the organization (i.e. the HRM practices and processes) might decrease. As such, it might be that HR SSC employees do not perceive the HRM practices and processes they get as organizational support. Feeling no perceived organizational support from the perceived HRM system, the

HR SSC employees will not develop affective organizational commitment. This would explain the non-significant effect of perceived HRM intensity on AOC.

In contrast, previous research has shown positive relationships between perceived HRM intensity and AOC for 'regular' employees (i.e. non-HR professionals) (e.g. Kehoe & Wright, 2013). Future research focusing on HR SSCs or other HR professionals should therefore validate the lacking link between perceived HRM intensity and AOC found in this study, so as to validate whether HR professionals actually differ from non-HR professionals in this matter.

Service climate proved to be the most influenced by perceived HRM intensity. This confirms the hypothesis that HRM practices can influence service climate to the greatest extent, which was argued to be because all HRM practices can be used as messages from the firm to stress the importance of service quality for customers amongst the HR SSC employees. Work engagement turned out to be the next employee attitude that could be fostered using HRM practices. This was argued to be because only part of HRM practices can be used to improve work characteristics, and hence work engagement. Staffing practices can for example stress the importance of service quality (e.g. only employing solicitants with excellent consumer-oriented skills), hence sending a signal to the employees that excellent service quality is important, and thus fostering a climate for service. Staffing practices however do not play a role in improving an employee's work characteristics, and will hence not affect work engagement. Some HRM practices can thus be argued not to be useful for employees to increase their work engagement, hence explaining the lower effect of perceived HRM intensity on work engagement compared to service climate. Finally, AOC was argued not to be influenced by HRM intensity as the HR SSC employees do not perceive the HRM practices as supportive acts from the firm.

As service climate proved to be the most influenced by perceived HRM practices and processes, followed by work engagement, and lastly AOC, it implies that is not only the perceived intensity of HRM practices that matters, but it is also their perceived utility to reach a certain attitude. For service climate, all HRM practices are regarded messages from the firm to the employee. As such, all these HRM practices are supposed to be effective in creating a climate for service. For work engagement, it was proposed that only those HRM practices that facilitate the optimization of work characteristics increase work engagement (e.g. job design practices). As such, the effect of perceived HRM intensity would be smaller than for service climate, as only part of the HRM practices is effective in enhancing work characteristics. Perceived HRM intensity was indeed related to a smaller extent with work engagement than with service climate. Finally, affective organizational commitment turned out not to be related with perceived HRM intensity. This was proposed to be caused because the HR SSC employees do not see the HRM practices they get as supportive acts from the firm. As such, none of the HRM practices is useful in creating perceived organizational support and thus AOC.

Recalling that employee perceptions of HRM can be measured in different ways (see Paragraph 2.1.2), this study suggests that scholars should not measure perceptions of HRM in a single way. In contrary, scholars should measure both the perceived intensity of HRM practices (i.e. to what extent is a certain HRM practice present), as well as their perceived utility for a certain attitude (i.e. to what extent is a certain HRM practice useful to reach a target attitude). This is because HRM practices need to be both present and useful in order to reach a targeted employee attitude, such as work engagement or AOC, as was found in this paper. For example, if scholars wish to study the link between employee perceptions of HRM and work engagement, they should study both the perceived intensity of different HRM practices and the perceived utility of each HRM practice to reach work engagement (i.e. asking employees to what extent each HRM practice is present and to what extent it plays an important role in impacting their work engagement).

In the ideal case, these two measures would be combined to give an overall score of perceived HRM, for example by using the score for perceived utility as weighing factor for the perceived intensity score for each HRM practice. HRM practices that are present to a large extent but do not contribute to the target attitude (e.g. work engagement or AOC) will hence score low, just as useful HRM practices that are only present to a minimal extent will do. Meanwhile, HRM practices that are perceived as being present to a large extent and useful for the targeted attitude will show a high score. By developing such a new tool for measuring employee perceptions of HRM, scholars will hopefully create a measure that is able to relate perceived HRM to every employee attitude possible. This new way of measuring employee perceptions of HRM could hence ideally be used in every study, as such decreasing the “ambiguity around the interpretation of what is meant by ‘practices as experienced’” (Edgar & Geare, 2014, p. 676).

5.1.3 The effect of work engagement, AOC, and service climate on employee behaviors: task performance

With service quality for customers being unsuited as performance outcome, this study shifted its focus on employees’ general task performance and organizational citizenship behavior as outcomes.

Regarding task performance, work engagement proved to be the only construct that was related to it. Neither service climate nor affective organizational commitment was significantly related to task performance. The hypothesized order (i.e. task performance being the most affected by work engagement, followed by service climate, and finally AOC) was hence only partially confirmed.

Building on self-determination theory, AOC was considered a controlled form of extrinsic motivation, in which one seeks to keep external rewards, such as monetary and non-monetary rewards (i.e. externally regulated motivation), or internal rewards, such as pride of belonging to a group (i.e. introjected regulated motivation). Employees with high levels of AOC were therefore expected to perform better because it increases their chance of staying within the organization, and thus keeping these external and internal rewards. However, this was not the case, as AOC was not related to task performance. A possible explanation might be that the HR SSC employees who want to stay at the firm do not think they would have to leave the organization if they do not belong to the top performers of the HR SSC. This can for example be triggered if they do not believe other suitable candidates are present to replace them. The insignificant relation between AOC and task performance might also be due to the frequent reorganizations the HR SSC has endured in the last couple of years. This might have triggered a feeling of being powerless in the storm of reorganizations. Having to leave the organization would then less likely be caused by lower performance, but more likely by the uncontrollable decision of top management to reorganize the HR SSC once more. This would explain the lacking link between AOC and task performance.

The lacking link between service climate and task performance can be explained by capturing which task characteristics are defined in an employee’s task performance. Although part of task performance will probably be set by service quality, another part will be defined by other targets. For different groups within the HR SSC, this ratio will differ. The helpdesk is for example more focused on service quality for customers, while for the paycheck-department this is less important. A climate for service might only enhance tasks related to service quality. It will thus have different effects on task performance for each employee, depending on the extent to which service quality is important for their task requirements. This would explain the non-significant link between service climate and task performance.

Following these arguments, it can be concluded that although self-determination theory can still be used to explain the difference in relational strength between the three intermediate outcomes and task

performance, scholars should also take in mind the effectiveness of each intermediate attitude on task performance. Work engagement was argued to be intrinsic motivation related to all aspects of one's job. This thus encompasses all work tasks and is hence theoretically completely related to task performance. Indeed, this study showed a significant link between work engagement and task performance. Service climate was proposed to have a non-significant effect with task performance as it depended on the extent to which service quality is important for an employee's task requirements. A climate for service might only enhance the task requirements relating to service quality, and as this is only a part of the task requirements, service climate is less related to task performance than work engagement. Additional research should validate this by studying the link between service climate and task performance while controlling for the extent service quality is important for an employee's task performance. Regarding AOC, the non-significant effect on task performance was proposed to be caused by a missing link between wanting to stay at a firm and the necessity to perform. Besides motivation quality, scholars should thus also take in mind the theoretical fit between employee attitudes and the desired employee behavior.

For example, if scholars were to study the link between employee perceptions of HRM and service-oriented behavior, then a climate for service might be the most suited employee attitude to test as mediator, as there is a clear theoretical fit between this attitude and behavior (although this should be validated in future research). Similarly, when studying the link between perceived HRM and general task performance, work engagement is the most suited mediating attitude, as work engagement refers to enjoying the majority of task requirements and is thus theoretically closely related to task performance, which encompasses all task requirements an employee has. As such, scholars should take in mind the theoretical fit between employee attitudes and the desired employee behavior if they wish to unlock the "black box" between employee perceptions of HRM and a certain employee behavior.

5.1.4 The effect of work engagement, AOC, and service climate on employee behaviors: OCB

Regarding organizational citizenship behavior, only affective organizational commitment was related to it. This indicates that employees who are committed to stay within the organization and feel 'part of the family' at the firm help colleagues who need so. This seems intuitive, if one considers colleagues as family. However, neither work engagement nor service climate was significantly related to organizational citizenship behavior. The hypothesized order (i.e. OCB being the most affected by work engagement, followed by service climate, and finally AOC) was thus rejected, and self-determination theory was hence not applicable.

Higher levels of work engagement did not lead to higher levels of organizational citizenship behavior. This can be due to the fact that task performance and OCB are theoretically unrelated. The former relates to the work itself, while the latter refers to helping colleagues at work. Increasing an employee's motivation for work (by increasing work engagement) will increase task performance because this increases their motivation to spend more time and effort in their work. But having a higher motivation for the work itself does not mean the employees will automatically help colleagues to a larger extent, as these are theoretically independent constructs. It is possible that some employees do show higher OCB, as they have more time available because of their higher task performance. But other employees might not show higher OCB, as they will prefer to dedicate their time on doing more work or improving their work performance because of their higher motivation to the work itself. Work engagement is thus not related to organizational citizenship behavior.

Service climate did also not lead to increased OCB. This can be explained when recalling that a climate for service focuses on delivering excellent services to customers. This does not imply that employees need to help their colleagues when needed. Some employees might do so, as they believe this will increase the overall service quality of the HR SSC, but others might not, as they do not see the direct benefit for the customers. A climate for service does thus not lead to higher levels of organizational citizenship behavior.

As such, here again scholars should take in mind the fit of an employee attitude with the targeted employee behavior. If OCB is the desired employee behavior, service climate and work engagement do not prove to be effective employee attitudes, as they are theoretically not directly related to OCB. In contrast, affective organizational commitment is a suited intermediate outcome, as taking care of colleagues (OCB) is theoretically related to AOC as one feels part of a 'family' at work. So here again, scholars should take in mind the theoretical fit between employee attitudes and the desired employee behavior if they wish to unlock the "black box" between employee perceptions of HRM and a specific employee behavior.

5.1.5 Mediators in the link between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and employee behaviors

Work engagement was the only intermediate outcome that was both related to perceived HRM intensity and general task performance. As such, when focusing on general task performance as desired employee behavior, engagement theory is best studied when trying to unlock the "black box" between HRM and task performance.

None of the three proposed mediators had a mediating effect between perceived HRM intensity and OCB. Affective organizational commitment was closest to being a mediator, as it did show a significant relation with OCB. However, perceived HRM intensity did not lead to AOC amongst the HR SSC employees studied in this paper. It was discussed that this might be because HR SSC employees might not see the HRM practices they get as supportive acts of the firm. The value of the exchange they get from the organization might thus reduce, explaining the lacking relationship between HR SSC employees' perception of HRM intensity and AOC. However, previous research has shown positive relationships between perceived HRM intensity and AOC for 'regular' employees (i.e. non-HR professionals) (e.g. Kehoe & Wright, 2013). For 'regular' employees, affective organizational commitment might thus be a valid mediator between perceived HRM intensity and OCB. As such, when focusing on OCB as desired employee behavior, social exchange theory is best studied when trying to unlock the "black box" between HRM and OCB. Furthermore, future research should validate the lacking relation between perceived HRM intensity and AOC for other HR professionals such as the HR SSC employees, in order to check whether this is a genuine difference between HR professionals and 'regular' employees.

The fact that work engagement is the best mediating employee attitude between perceived HRM and general task performance, and that affective organizational commitment is the best mediating employee attitude between perceived HRM and OCB, stresses the finding that scholars should take in mind the theoretical fit between an employee attitude and an employee behavior when trying to uncover the mechanisms between perceived HRM and a specific employee behavior. If scholars wish to unlock the "black box" between employee perceptions of HRM and a specific employee behavior, they should focus on the employee attitude that is theoretically closest to that employee behavior (e.g. work engagement for general task performance, and affective organizational commitment for OCB).

Moreover, scholars should measure perceived HRM by asking the employees for the extent they perceive the HRM practices to be present (i.e. perceived HRM intensity) and to be useful for the selected

employee attitude (i.e. perceived HRM utility for the selected employee attitude). In doing so, they will hopefully create a measure that is able to link perceived HRM to every employee attitude possible. This new way of measuring employee perceptions of HRM could hence ideally be used in every study, as such decreasing the “ambiguity around the interpretation of what is meant by ‘practices as experienced’” (Edgar & Geare, 2014, p. 676).

5.2 Implications for practice

As stated in the previous paragraph, all variance in service quality for customers at the HR SSC could be attributed to sources of variability on the customer level in this study. As such, the HR SSC employees which participated in this study did not have any effect on service quality for customers. Furthermore, HRM functional competences and interaction competences of customers showed strong correlations with service quality for customers. For practitioners, this indicates that improving service quality of an HR SSC can only be accomplished by focusing on the customers (although this should be validated at other HR SSCs). HR shared service centers should increase the HRM functional competences of their customers (i.e. the front-line employees) in order to obtain higher service quality. This can be reached by organizing training sessions about the HRM online portals, or by making the HRM online portals more user-friendly. HR service centers should also increase the interaction competences of their customers. This can also be achieved by giving training sessions, but it can also be reached by finding ways to make communication between the customers and the HR service center more efficient, for instance by using different communication channels. Young customers might for example be more willing to communicate via social media to get an answer to their question. The HR service centers should play a proactive role in these developments in order to increase their service quality.

Furthermore, if firms wish to increase general task performance of their employees, they should concentrate their HR resources on increasing work engagement amongst the HR SSC employees. Monitoring this employee attitude and discovering how different HRM practices affect this attitude (by looking at employee perceptions of HRM intensity and HRM utility for work engagement) is the most efficient way to increase general task performance. When trying to improve task performance, firms should not focus on affective organizational commitment, as this is not related to task performance but only to organizational citizenship behavior. Establishing a climate for service is also not the most efficient way to increase task performance, at least if task performance encompasses more than service quality. A service climate might only improve service-oriented behavior of the HR SSC employees, but have no effect on other task requirements, although this should be proved in future research.

Finally, practitioners should design their HRM system to reach a specific employee attitude. For example, if general task performance is targeted (i.e. compliance to a large range of task requirements), work engagement is the most effective intermediate outcome. The HRM system should then be designed to maximize the usefulness of each HRM practice in reaching work engagement. Another example, if service quality is the only target for the firm, then it should focus on service climate as employee attitude, and design its HRM system so that every HRM practice is useful in creating a climate for service. This is in line with Hong et al. (2013). This study furthermore showed that HRM intensity had the greatest link with service climate, suggesting that a climate is most easily reached by intensifying HRM practices, compared to work engagement and affective organizational commitment.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with all research, the results of this study must be evaluated with some limitations in mind. First, the generalizability of the findings must be taken into account, as only one HR service center was examined in

this study. The conclusions regarding the variance of service quality for customers might for example be different for organizations where there is more extensive contact between employees and customers. This can potentially increase the importance of the employees, such that not all variance in service quality can be attributed to sources of variability on the customer level. As such, repeating this study at other firms will prove fruitful in finding out whether variance in service quality is indeed totally attributable to the customers themselves.

A related methodological limitation was the selection of the customers. During each week of the data collection period, only customers were selected who had established contact with the HR SSC once in that respective week. This was done to be able to link customers to HR SSC employees. However, this eliminates customers who have contact with the HR SSC on a more frequent basis. For these customers, the importance of the HR SSC employees for their perceived service quality might be higher as they have more extensive contact with the HR SSC employees. To solve this, customers should have been sent an online survey automatically once their question had been answered. All customers could then have been selected. Unfortunately, this possibility was not present in the used software.

Another limitation can be the self-rated performance items. HR SSC employees were asked to rate their own task performance and OCB. This can lead to bias, as participants might be triggered to give socially desirable answers. However, this threat of bias can be neglected, as all participants were assured prior to the surveys that their answers would be anonymous. Moreover, previous research has shown high agreement between manager-rated performance and self-rated performance ($r [n=274] = .61, p < .05$) (Fletcher et al, 2008).

Common method bias can be a second form of bias in this study, as all independent and dependent variables that were used to link perceived HRM intensity to task performance and OCB were measured from the same source, being the HR SSC employees. To minimize common method bias, two surveys were sent. As such, perceived HRM intensity was tested in the first survey. The second survey however tested all intermediate outcomes, as well as the behavioral outcomes. It would have been better to only test the intermediate outcomes in the second survey, and sending a third survey to all employees asking them about the behavioral outcomes. However, sending three surveys instead of two could have reduced response rates. Moreover, as task performance and OCB were the back-up outcomes (as service quality for customers was the initial performance outcome), it was deemed unnecessary to risk lower response rates for outcome variables that would probably not be used. However, as they were actually used in the end, it would have been better to send three surveys to the HR SSC employees in hindsight.

A final limitation of this study follows from the nature of the chosen research design. Being a cross-sectional study, it is not possible to confidently attribute causality in the observed relationships. However, the analyses showed empirical support for the hypothesized directions. Perceived HRM intensity was not directly related to task performance or OCB, while the hypothesized mediators did have links with at least one of these variables, confirming their possible mediating effect. Still, further research with longitudinal data is necessary to determine the causal direction between the different variables.

6 Conclusions

The research question of this paper was:

“To what extent do engagement theory, social exchange theory, and climate theory explain the relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and service quality for customers?”

With the limitations of this study in mind, this paper showed that service quality for customers was independent of the employees' contribution to service quality. All variance in service quality for customers could be attributed to sources of variability on the customer level. Indeed, two types of customer competences (i.e. HRM functional competences and interaction competences) were strongly related to service quality for customers. As service quality for customers was independent of the employees, the research question as stated above cannot be answered.

Focusing on two alternative outcome indicators that are more proximal to the micro-level of HRM interventions, an alternative research question can be answered. This alternative research question is:

“To what extent do engagement theory, social exchange theory, and climate theory explain the relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and their task performance and organizational citizenship behavior?”

This paper concludes that engagement theory best explains the relationship between employee perceptions of HRM intensity and general task performance, as work engagement was the only mediator in this relationship.

Regarding organizational citizenship behavior, none of the theories can be used, as none of the intermediate outcomes is related to both perceived HRM intensity and OCB for the HR SSC employees in this study. If one had to choose, social exchange theory would best be used to explain the relationship between perceptions of HRM intensity and OCB. This is because affective organizational commitment is the only intermediate construct that is related to OCB. Although perceived HRM intensity was not related with AOC for HR SSC employees, it was discussed that this link has been shown in previous research for 'regular' employees (i.e. non-HR-professionals). As such, if one assumes perceived HRM intensity to be linked with OCB for 'regular' employees, social exchange theory can be used to explain the relationship between perceived HRM intensity and OCB for 'regular' employees.

The fact that work engagement is the best mediating employee attitude between perceived HRM and general task performance, and that affective organizational commitment is the best mediating employee attitude between perceived HRM and OCB, stresses the finding that scholars should take in mind the theoretical fit between an employee attitude and an employee behavior when trying to uncover the mechanisms between perceived HRM and a specific employee behavior. If scholars wish to unlock the “black box” between employee perceptions of HRM and a specific employee behavior, they should focus on the employee attitude that is theoretically closest to that employee behavior, and focus on the appropriate theory (e.g. work engagement and engagement theory for general task performance, and affective organizational commitment and social exchange theory for OCB).

Furthermore, scholars should measure employee perceptions of HRM by asking employees both the perceived intensity of HRM practices, as well as the perceived utility of each HRM practice to reach the selected employee attitude. In doing so, they will hopefully create a measure that is able to link perceived HRM to every employee attitude possible. This new way of measuring employee perceptions of HRM could hence ideally be used in every study, as such decreasing the “ambiguity around the interpretation of what is meant by ‘practices as experienced’” (Edgar & Geare, 2014, p. 676), and as such giving scholars a universalistic tool to unlock the “black box” of the HRM-performance link at the employee level.

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In the fall of 2014 I knocked on the door of Jeroen for the very first time. A year earlier I had followed a course he gave, and that course had made me enthusiastic about HR shared service centers and how these centers fit in the HR organization of a firm. But the enthusiasm and joy Jeroen showed during his course had also convinced me to ask him as supervisor for my master assignment. And so, in the fall of 2014, I knocked on his door. He agreed, and after a short quest I also found a company where I could perform my master assignment. PostNL, with its headquarters in Den Haag, had an HR shared service center where I wanted to perform my assignment. After a brief introduction with the manager of the HR SSC, Ton de Bie, I started my master assignment on February, 16th, 2015.

Now, six months later, I am presenting my master thesis. The six months have been an interesting period, with its highs and its lows. This brings me to the first persons I would like to thank: the colleagues at the HR SSC at PostNL. We have laughed a lot during these six months, and therefore I would like to thank you, Patrick, Youssef, Mathieu, Fred, Marcel, Willem, Jack, Sjaan, Henk, Corrie, Adrie, and Ton. You all made it a joyful period for me. And Mathieu, I hope your wine business will become a great success, so you can devote all your time to your passion.

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Doing a master assignment for Business Administration proved to be a lot different than my master assignment for Chemical Engineering. Writing an elaborate theoretical piece and only having one measuring point (i.e. when the data from the surveys was collected) did not really suit me. Frequently doing experiments and discussing these every 2-3 weeks to find out which directions to head into, as was the case with my master assignment for Chemical Engineering, suited me much more. But on the other hand: I learned a lot about the ins and outs at the HR SSC, and it was very interesting to understand all the decisions that were taken in terms of strategy or process optimization. So while the nature of doing a master assignment for Business Administration did not really suit me, I did learn a lot about the daily business at a firm, and on top of that I learned quite some new theories for this assignment. So all in all, it have been six interesting months, with its ups and downs, but which I have enjoyed.

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9 Appendix A: Survey items sent to the HR SSC employees (in Dutch)

[R] = reverse-coded item.

[dropped] = item dropped during data analysis.

Employee perceptions of HRM intensity: training and development (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2014)

- PostNL ondersteunt mij om trainingen bij te wonen.
- De trainingen die ik bij PostNL heb doorlopen hebben mij goed voorbereid om kwaliteit te leveren.
- PostNL biedt mij voldoende opleiding om goed met de introductie van nieuwe producten of diensten om te kunnen gaan.
- Ik heb inspraak in hoeveel scholing ik krijg.
- Ik neem normaal gesproken om de paar jaar deel aan een trainingsprogramma om mijn vaardigheden te verbeteren.
- Als ik in mijn eigen tijd extra scholing volg, dan betaalt PostNL dit.

Employee perceptions of HRM intensity: PM and appraisal (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2014)

- Mijn beoordeling is gebaseerd op objectieve en meetbare resultaten.
- Mijn leidinggevende stelt samen met mij prestatiedoelstellingen op waarop ik word beoordeeld.
- Ik krijg feedback om mijn werkprestaties te verbeteren.

Employee perceptions of HRM intensity: compensation and benefits (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2014)

- Een deel van mijn salaris/beloning is gebaseerd op hoe goed ik mijn werk doe.
- Mijn salaris is volledig gebaseerd op hoe lang ik in dienst ben bij PostNL. [dropped]
- Een deel van mijn salaris/beloning is gebaseerd op hoe PostNL financieel gezien presteert. [dropped]
- Mijn salaris is hoger dan wat de concurrenten van PostNL bieden. [dropped]
- Ik geloof dat ik eerlijker betaald zou krijgen als ik bij een andere organisatie werkte. [R] [dropped]
- Mijn salaris hangt af van de kwaliteit van de diensten die ik lever.
- De hoogte van mijn salaris hangt af van mijn werkprestaties.

Employee perceptions of HRM intensity: staffing (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2014)

- De selectie van nieuw personeel bij PostNL legt de nadruk op de bevordering van huidige medewerkers (interne promotie).
- De selectie van nieuw personeel bij PostNL richt zich op het selecteren van de beste allround sollicitant.
- De selectie van nieuw personeel bij PostNL is uitgebreid/uitvoerig.
- De selectie van nieuw personeel bij PostNL legt de nadruk op het talent om samen te werken in een team.
- De selectie van nieuw personeel bij PostNL houdt in dat veel sollicitanten gescreend worden.
- De selectie van nieuw personeel bij PostNL geeft prioriteit aan het leervermogen van de sollicitant.

Employee perceptions of HRM intensity: employment security (Boon et al., 2011)

- PostNL biedt mij de zekerheid dat ik mijn baan kan behouden.
- PostNL biedt mij een contract dat mij werkzekerheid biedt.

Employee perceptions of HRM intensity: job and work design (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2014)

- Ik heb veel kansen om zelf te bepalen hoe ik mijn werk doe.
- Als er een probleem ontstaat in mijn werk, dan kan ik er zelf voor zorgen dat het wordt opgelost.
- Mijn werk is simpel en behoorlijk herhalend. [R] [dropped]
- Ik voel me vaak verveeld op het werk. [R] [dropped]
- Ik heb veel kansen om in mijn werk mijn eigen inzichten te gebruiken.

Employee perceptions of HRM intensity: participation (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2014)

- Als er een beslissing genomen moet worden binnen het HR SSC, dan is iedereen daarbij betrokken.
- Mijn leidinggevende vraagt mijn mening over hoe de kwaliteit van onze diensten verbeterd kan worden.
- Ik heb het gevoel dat ik echt onderdeel ben van mijn team.
- Als ik op het werk ben, heb ik het gevoel controle te hebben over zaken die om mij heen gebeuren.

[dropped]

- Mijn ideeën over hoe de kwaliteit van dienstverlening verbeterd kan worden, worden normaal gesproken volledig of gedeeltelijk uitgevoerd binnen het HRSSC.

Work engagement (shortened version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, UWES-9)

- Op mijn werk bruis ik van energie.
- Als ik werk voel ik me fit en sterk.
- Ik ben enthousiast over mijn baan.
- Mijn werk inspireert mij.
- Als ik 's morgens opsta heb ik zin om aan het werk te gaan.
- Wanneer ik heel intensief aan het werk ben, voel ik mij gelukkig.
- Ik ben trots op het werk dat ik doe.
- Ik ga helemaal op in mijn werk.
- Mijn werk brengt mij in vervoering.

Affective organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990)

- Ik zou heel blij zijn als ik de rest van mijn loopbaan bij het HR SSC kan doorbrengen.
- Ik geniet ervan om over het HR SSC te praten met mensen die er niet werken.
- Ik voel echt dat de problemen van het HR SSC ook de mijne zijn.
- Ik denk dat ik gemakkelijk gehecht kan raken aan een andere organisatie, zoals ik nu aan het HR SSC gehecht ben. **[R]**
- Ik voel me niet als een 'deel van de familie' bij het HR SSC. **[R]**
- Ik voel me niet 'emotioneel gehecht' aan het HR SSC. **[R]**
- Het HR SSC betekent veel voor mij.
- Ik voel me niet thuis bij het HR SSC. **[R]**

Service climate (Schneider et al., 1998)

- De medewerkers van het HR SSC worden erkend en beloond voor het leveren van hoogwaardige diensten.
- De medewerkers van het HR SSC hebben de kennis en vaardigheden om hoogwaardige diensten te kunnen bieden.
- Op het HR SSC krijgen de medewerkers de faciliteiten en hulpmiddelen die nodig zijn om hoogwaardige diensten te kunnen leveren.
- Het management team van het HR SSC legt veel nadruk op de kwaliteit van dienstverlening van het HR SSC.
- De kwaliteit van dienstverlening van het HR SSC wordt grondig gemeten en gevolgd door het HR SSC.
- De berichtgeving van het management team van het HR SSC (naar de medewerkers en klanten van het HR SSC) is duidelijk en effectief.
- De algehele kwaliteit van de diensten die het HR SSC levert, is uitmuntend.

Task performance (Kluemper et al., 2013)

- Alle aan mij toegewezen taken voer ik adequaat uit.
- Ik voldoe aan alle verantwoordelijkheden die in mijn taakomschrijving staan.
- Ik voer alle taken uit die van mij verwacht worden.
- Ik voldoe aan alle prestatie-eisen die bij mijn werk horen.
- Ik voer activiteiten uit die mijn prestatiebeoordeling direct beïnvloeden.

Organizational citizenship behavior (Kluemper et al., 2013)

- Ik help anderen die (lang) met verlof zijn geweest.
- Ik besteed graag tijd aan het helpen van anderen die werk-gerelateerde problemen hebben.
- Ik doe mijn best zodat nieuwe(re) medewerkers zich in mijn team welkom voelen.
- Ik maak tijd om anderen te helpen die werk- of privé-gerelateerde problemen hebben.
- Ik help anderen met het uitvoeren van hun taken.

Self-efficacy (Spreitzer et al., 1995)

- Ik ben er zeker van dat ik het vermogen heb om mijn werk op een goede manier uit te voeren.
- Ik heb de vaardigheden die nodig zijn voor mijn werk onder de knie.
- Ik ben ervan overtuigd dat ik de capaciteiten heb om mijn werk goed uit te voeren.

10 Appendix B: Survey items sent to the customers of the HR SSC (in Dutch)

[R] = reverse-coded item.

[dropped] = item dropped during data analysis.

Service quality for customers (Hossain et al., 2012)

- De medewerker van de Front Office HR reageerde snel op mijn vraag of probleem.
- De medewerker was oprecht geïnteresseerd om mijn probleem op te lossen.
- De medewerker had een goed kennisniveau.
- De medewerker gaf mij persoonlijke aandacht.
- Mocht de medewerker beloofd hebben om iets te doen binnen een bepaalde tijd, dan is hij/zij dat ook nagekomen.

HR functional competences of customers (Meijerink et al., 2015)

- Ik weet precies waar ik aanvragen m.b.t. personeelsadministratie kan doen (bijv. verlofaanvraag, declaraties, fietsplan of levensloop).
- Ik weet altijd welke stappen ik moet doorlopen om aanvragen m.b.t. personeelsadministratie te doen.
- Ik weet precies hoe mijn persoonsgegevens (bijv. woonadres of bankrekeningnummer) bijgewerkt kunnen worden als deze veranderen.
- Ik weet precies tot wie ik me moet wenden wanneer ik een probleem heb met mijn personeelsadministratie.
- Ik weet precies waar ik informatie over arbeidsvoorwaarden kan vinden of verkrijgen.

Interaction competences of customers (Meijerink et al., 2015)

- Ik ben altijd in staat om mijn problemen duidelijk uit te leggen aan een medewerker van de Front Office HR.
- Ikzelf ben volledig in staat om samen met een medewerker van de Front Office HR mijn problemen/vragen op te lossen.

