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Pay-for-Performance and Other Practices

Alternative Paths for Human Resource Management Effectiveness in Public Social Care Organizations

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Abstract

Pay-for-performance has been widely adopted in the public sector to improve effectiveness and efficiency in service provision, which in turn positively affects employees' satisfaction and commitment. Despite the presence of these initiatives in nearly every reform effort, limited concrete evidence of success has been highlighted. Through a fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis on 17 social care organizations in Italy, the aim of this work is to contribute to the debate on human resources management practices in the public sector. Results suggest that pay-for-performance is effective when supported by other empowering practices. Furthermore, alternative combinations can produce the same positive effect on satisfaction and commitment.

Keywords

pay-for-performance, employees' satisfaction and commitment, qualitative comparative analysis, configurational approach

Introduction

Research on the relationship between human resource management (HRM) and employees' satisfaction, commitment, engagement, and motivation is gaining growing attention in the field of public management and public administration (Gould-Williams, 2003; Mostafa, Gould-Williams, & Bottomley, 2015). In particular, in the light of robust evidence that relates HRM effectiveness to the improvement of organizational outcomes (Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006), the assessment of employees' reactions to human resource (HR) practices is perceived as crucial (Paauwe, Wright, & Guest, 2013). More recently, such activities have been referred to as high-performance HRM practices: sets of coherent and interrelated HR practices designed to promote both organizational and employees' performance (Huselid, 1995; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, & Gould-Williams, 2011). Among these practices, pay-for-performance (PFP) initiatives have often been

included in public sector reforms in the last 20 years, with the aim to increase productivity by reconsidering and redesigning the overall compensation system of public bureaucracies (Katula & Perry, 2003). In particular, the expectation is that, if employees are provided the chance to gain additional benefits, this would increase their perception of being part of a work environment that is supportive. Consequently, employees would respond accordingly, behaving in such a way that would benefit their organization in a positive way (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). With reference to health care organizations, specifically publicly operated health care organizations, the limited flexibility with regard to pay issues that previously characterized the sector has been progressively overtaken. More recently, HRM trends seem to indicate a process of change toward models of performance-based compensation, aimed at accelerating improvements in the quality of care. In particular, many providers have started to offer financial incentives to caregivers based on their performance on clinical measures (Petersen, Woodard, Urech, Daw, & Sookanan, 2006; Rondeau & Wagar, 2001).

Despite the presence of such initiatives in nearly every reform effort, PFP initiatives have limited concrete confirmation of success (Ingraham, 1993a, 1993b; Perry, 1986; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Weibel, Rost, & Osterloh, 2009). In health care management research, in particular, there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of paying for quality and some authors highlight the potential risks from introducing PFP in health care, including the increase in dysfunctional competitive behavior among employees (Rondeau & Wagar, 2001). Furthermore, recent literature on leadership in the public sector tends to highlight how PFP is based on a transactional leadership assumption of rewards and punishment, which is not particularly coherent with the expectations of public sector employees engaged in care services provision, whose motivations are rather intrinsic and social value-driven (Hargis, Watt, & Piotrowski, 2011; Jacobsen & Andersen, 2017). Compared to other public services, in fact, their effectiveness is primarily affected by the interaction between the employee and the user who co-produces the service (Normann, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985).

However, while the role of HRM within the health care sector has attracted much research interest (i.e., Bartram & Dowling, 2013; Bartram, Stanton, Leggat, Casimir, & Fraser, 2007), HRM issues in other sub-sectors of care—elderly and disability care in particular—have yet to gain sufficient research attention (Cooke & Bartram, 2015) despite their peculiarities. In particular, compared to health care processes where the role of technology and clinical practice is prominent, the delivery of other care services to the elder and disabled people involves a stronger and more direct relationship between users and caregivers.

Starting from these criticisms, this work aims to contribute to the literature on PFP, with a specific focus on public social care organizations, through the identification of alternative paths of practices that can increase HRM effectiveness in terms of reduction of employees' voluntary turnover and employees' absenteeism. In particular, we

consider PFP initiatives together with other motivational programs—namely, performance appraisal, career opportunities, and participation policies (Herzberg, 1964)—so as to answer the following research question: Which are the combinations of HRM practices that are able to support or substitute PFP rewards and compensation for the improvement of HRM outcomes in public social care organizations?

In answering this question, it is important to be clear about the approach to HRM adopted in this study. There are different approaches to understanding HRM effectiveness, with some scholars arguing for a set of best practices that all organizations should adopt and others exploring factors or contingencies that should influence how particular HRM policies and processes are tailored to specific organizational contexts and needs (Balkin & Gomez-Mejia, 1987; Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992; Huselid, 1993, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994; Terpstra & Rozell, 1993). The latter approach, defined as “configurational” (Delery & Doty, 1996), is rarely adopted in the context of public sector research. However, it gives us the opportunity to consider the synergic integration of differentiated elements of the HRM system that can be combined in different ways to obtain the same positive outcomes.

This article is organized as follows: after presenting the theoretical framework in which the configurational approach is presented and different HR practices are described, an empirical analysis based on the case of public social care organizations in Emilia Romagna (Italy) is conducted. Thanks to the adoption of a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) approach, two alternative paths for the promotion of HR practices’ effectiveness are presented and discussed. In the light of the results, the concluding section describes implication for theory and practice, as well as some suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Background

As stated, in this article, we adopt a configurational perspective by taking into account how different combinations of HR practices can offer the same positive outcome, in terms of HRM effectiveness for a public organization. The theoretical framework, therefore, is organized into three subsections aimed at introducing: (a) the concept of HRM effectiveness, (b) the characteristics of the configurational approach in the context of the HR literature, and (c) the main HR practices that can be combined so as to gain a positive outcome.

HRM Effectiveness

Scholars are in agreement that effective HRM practices and architectures can significantly contribute to the organizational performance (i.e., Huselid, 1993, 1995). However, debate remains on how to achieve this effectiveness and, in particular, which practices facilitate this process. HRM is effective when it increases the quality of organizational human capital by promoting employees’ skills, attitudes, and competencies that are strategic to achieve organizational aims. According to Huselid, Jackson, and Schuler (1997), in particular, HRM is successful when it allows the

“delivery of high-quality technical and strategic HRM activities” (Huselid et al., 1997, p. 173). To measure the effectiveness of HR practices, research has generally focused on both the organizational and individual levels. Studies focusing on the first level consider as effective those practices that allow the improvement of organizational unit measured in a number of different ways (Delery & Doty, 1996; Guthrie, 2001; Huselid, 1995). In contrast, the individual perspective considers as effective the practices implemented that allow, first, the improvement of organizational outcomes and, consequently, the reduction of turnover and absenteeism rates.

Different authors, in fact, highlighted the existence of a significant relationship between job absenteeism, voluntary turnover, and work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment (Blau & Boal, 1987; Bloom, 1999; Hurley & Estelami, 2007; Scott & Taylor, 1985; Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004; Wright & Boswell, 2002). The underlying assumption is that employees that present these attitudes feel positively about their organization, identifying themselves with it and wishing to maintain membership in it (Porter, Crampon, & Smith, 1976). At the same time, the reduction of turnover and absenteeism has positive effect on the improvement of efficiency and, consequently, on cost reduction (Blau & Boal, 1987).

In social care organizations, in particular, these relationships are of critical importance: voluntary turnover and absenteeism are especially significant in the context of elderly and disability care services where the lack of personnel or its continuous turnover may compromise the quality of care. In fact, the perceived quality of service is strongly related to the relations established between operator and users (Normann, 1991), consequently, frequent staff turnover may compromise the quality of service and the results of the entire organization (Cooke & Bartram, 2015; Estryn-Béhar et al., 2007; Jourdain & Chênevert, 2010; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Poghosyan, Clarke, Finlayson, & Aiken, 2010). In this vain, HRM effectiveness depends on both organizational and individual factors, and the latter are particularly significant in the context of social care organizations. The competences and behaviors of caregivers, in fact, affect the overall quality of services and, consequently, the organizational performance.

The Configurational Approach

After the introduction on the concept of HRM effectiveness, in the following subsection we explore the HR practices that can be implemented to improve organizational performance, with a specific attention to the configurational approach. Together with the universalistic approach and the contingency perspective, the configurational approach is one of the three dominant modes of theorizing the relationship between HR practices and organizational performance. Scholars who adopt the universalistic perspective argue for a “best practices” approach to HRM (Huselid, 1993, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994; Terpstra & Rozell, 1993). These researchers posit that certain HR practices are always better than others. Consequently, all organizations should adopt these practices to obtain the best organizational performance.

Contingency theorists, in contrast, argue that, to be effective, an organization's HR practices need to be consistent with other dimensions of the organization (Balkin & Gomez-Mejia, 1987; Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992). According to this approach, the study of HRM effectiveness conditions has often focused on the moderating and mediating variables that can affect the relationship between the implementation of a specific HR practice and the results in terms of modified employee behaviors. In particular, different HR practices can facilitate specific behavioral outcomes, but they are affected by mediating factors that intervene to affect the impact of motivational tools on behaviors (i.e., fairness, effort, trust), and moderating factors that affect the impact of the mediation on the final outcome (i.e., task complexity, hierarchical level) (Durant, Kramer, Perry, Mesch, & Paarlberg, 2006).

Rejecting the universalistic approach of best practices, the theorists of the configurational approach argue that the HR system must be not only consistent with the contingency but also internally coherent (Delery & Doty, 1996; Martín-Alcázar, Romero-Fernandez, & Sánchez-Gardey, 2005). In fact, Wright and McMahan (1992) state that an organization needs to develop an HR system that achieves both a horizontal and a vertical fit. While the vertical fit refers to the congruence of the HR system with the mediating and moderating factors of the contingency approach, horizontal fit refers to the internal consistency of the organization's HR policies or practices. Configurational theory, with the aim to reach the highest degree of horizontal fit, is guided by holistic principle of inquiry. At the same time, in general, configurations are based on typologies of ideal types and explicitly adopt the system's assumption of equifinality (Doty, Glick, & Huber, 1993). These conditions allow the analysis of the synergic integration of elements, constituting an HRM system that can be combined in different ways to obtain different possible configurations that may be equally effective for the organization (Delery & Doty, 1996; Martín-Alcázar et al., 2005). In this vein, HR practices should be examined as systems or bundles rather than in isolation because they can reinforce each other by supporting sustainable performance outcomes (Kehoe & Wright, 2013).

HR Practices in Social Care Public Organizations

Although there is no definite list of high-performance HR practices (Giauque, Anderfuhren-Biget, & Varone, 2013), Delery and Doty (1996) identify seven general activities that cover the most important, namely: performance-based compensation, internal career ladders, formal training systems, results-oriented performance appraisal, employment security, employee voice and participation, and broadly defined jobs. Also adopted in the context of social care services research (Daley, Vasu, & Weinstein, 2002), these practices are presented here.

Performance-based compensation

Performance-based compensation—or PFP—includes the practices aimed at using extrinsic monetary incentives to enhance employee efforts and, consequently, to improve individual and organizational performance (Shafritz, 1998). Derived from

private sector managerial practices (Berry & Wechsler, 1995; Bryson, 2010; Ingraham, 1993), PFP is based on the scientific management approach (Fry & Raadschelders, 2008), as well as on two major human behavioral theories (Heneman, 1984) namely: expectancy theory (Pearce & Perry, 1983; Vroom, 1964) and reinforcement theory (Daft & Steers, 1986; Skinner, 1953). The former postulates that if employees expect to receive rewards for better performance, they will be more motivated to increase their effort to improve their results. The latter asserts that employees' behaviors can change thanks to positive reinforcements that can be provided by an attractive outcome based on a desired behavior. In the case of PFP, employees are motivated by financial incentives. In the context of New Public Management (NPM) reforms, PFP frameworks have been widely adopted as a means to improve effectiveness and efficiency in service provision; the assumption is that financial incentives based on merit can increase public employees' satisfaction and commitment (Shafritz, 1998).

Following increasing diffusion of NPM reforms across countries, different scholars have assessed their actual effectiveness as well as the conditions that can affect them (Alonso & Lewis, 2001). However, the results of such studies are contradictory; while some scholars have shown the advantages of PFP, others have stressed its weaknesses (Ingraham, 1993; Kellough & Lu, 1993; Perry, Engbers, & Jun, 2009). Many empirical studies, in particular, have raised doubts about the capability of PFP schemes to motivate employees to obtain higher performance in the public sector (Bowman, 2010; Kellough & Nigro, 2005; Perry et al., 2009; Weibel et al., 2009). More specifically, these works tend to highlight that motivational programs based on rewards are difficult to implement because of the difficulties in applying accurate measures of employees' performance by service providers, the generally inadequate budget for performance-based rewards, the characteristics of public employees' motivation that is primarily intrinsic, as well as the little-perceived relationship between performance and compensation (Heinrich, 2007; Ingraham, 2005; Jacobsen & Andersen, 2017; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007).

Internal career ladders

Career and promotional opportunities are included among high-performance HRM practices that can improve organizational performance (Guthrie, Flood, Liu, & MacCurtain, 2009; Huselid, 1995; Wood & de Menzenes, 1998). Representing a chance for personal growth, these policies can affect employees' behaviors by increasing both individual levels of responsibility and social standing. The importance of career opportunities for job satisfaction and organizational commitment is often recognized in the hiring process; it has been demonstrated that high-caliber job applicants tend to prefer job roles that include opportunities for challenge and growth (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). In the private sector, in particular, career promotions that are closely related to the evaluation system are perceived as fair and are considered as real incentives to individual motivation. More specifically, according to the *equity sensitive theory* (Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, & Schminke, 2001), the context is deemed as motivating when the system is perceived as fair and organizational justice

is respected (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2008). With specific reference to the public sector, the path of employees' promotions tends to reflect the traditional model of career development, defined as a sequence of "related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy prestige through which persons move in an ordered, predictable sequence" (Wilensky, 1960, p. 554). In this vein, progressions are mainly based on seniority and length of service (Reitman & Schneer, 2003).

Formal training

The increasing and international recognition of the importance of cultivating human capital in organizations has led scholars to study the relationship between training practices and organizational performance (Tharenou, Saks, & Moore, 2007), with various studies identifying a structured training system among high-performance HRM practices (Guthrie et al., 2009; Huselid, 1995; Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000; Wood & de Menzenes, 1998). In fact, employee training programs (Beugelsdijk, 2008; Chen & Huang, 2009) and the degree to which they are offered within an organization (Aragón-Sánchez, Barba-Aragón, & Sanz-Valle, 2003; Glaveli & Karassavidou, 2011) are positively related to organizational performance in terms of productivity (Barrett & O'Connell, 2001), financial performance (Glaveli & Karassavidou, 2011), and employee motivation (Muñoz Castellanos & Salinero Martín, 2011). Interestingly, the training of competent and highly motivated employees is a precursor of organizational innovation (Collins & Smith, 2006). In particular, studies have shown that investments in employee training and skill development are effective when employees are, among other things, given the chance to use their newly acquired skills through independent job design, both in the private and public sector (Mostafa et al., 2015).

Results-oriented performance appraisal

Through a performance appraisal system, employees' performance on the job are mapped, so as to collect useful information to support decision-making processes at different organizational levels. Performance appraisal is recognized as one of the most important components of high-performance HRM (Guthrie et al., 2009; Huselid, 1995; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Ramsay et al., 2000), as it creates an explicit link between individual performance and the organization's strategic goals (DeNisi & Sonesh, 2011). Considered as a precondition for both PFP and career development based on merit, a performance appraisal system aims to steer the employees toward clear institutional goals aligning their contributions toward the organizational objectives. In this way, employees are encouraged to recognize their learning needs and determine a framework for setting development goals (Elicker, Levy, & Hall, 2006). The effective implementation of a performance appraisal system requires—together with coherence between managers' span of responsibility and span of control (Simon, 1997), and managers' responsibility for the results (Angiola & Bianchi, 2013)—the employees' acceptance. Central to a performance appraisal system, in fact,

is the perception that the established system provides employees with the appearance of fairness, clarity, justice, and validity (Greenberg, 1990; Kim & Park, 2017).

Employment security

Employment security refers to the extent to which an organization provides stability to its employees. By ensuring employment security, organizations can improve their performance (Pfeffer, 1994). Proponents of high-performance HRM practices frequently argue that employment security is an essential element of the implicit contract between the organization and its personnel (Ramsay et al., 2000; Zacharatos, Barling, & Iverson, 2005). Employment security represents an investment of time and resources in employees and supports a long-term perspective. This in turn often translates into a reciprocal behavior of loyalty demonstrated by the employee toward the organization (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). At the same time, the garnering of trust in management also results from employment security, which is advantageous to the point that trust in management is associated with organizational performance (McAllister, 1995).

Employee voice and participation

Participation is fulfilled through the engagement of employees, which refers to all the initiatives aimed to involve employees in the decision-making process, promote a participative style of management, and elevate employees' empowerment. Through participation, the organizational apex provides role-expanding opportunities for personnel—individual or groups—belonging to lower organizational levels, so they can have a greater voice in selected areas of organizational decisions (Glew, O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Van Fleet, 1995), which plays an instrumental part in creating positive effects on employees' satisfaction. In particular, the participation of employees in setting performance objectives favors the alignment of individuals to organizational goals (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), and the increase of employees' participation in decision-making allows them to accept and contribute to organizational missions (Kim & Park, 2017). Such coherency helps reinforce employees' identification with the organization's culture, increasing individual motivation which therefore negatively affects one's will to quit (Mostafa, 2016).

Broadly defined jobs

The importance of job design derives from the effect it may have on employees' motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Lawler, Hackman, & Kaufman, 1973). Job design is a fundamental HRM practice that refers to decisions about the actual job structure; well-designed jobs can have a positive impact on both employee satisfaction and the quality of performance (Garg & Rastogi, 2006; Huselid, 1995). According to Hackman and Oldham (1976), a broadly defined job should include some level of individual autonomy that contributes to the experienced responsibility on the job, as well as feedback loops favoring individual knowledge of the actual result of work activities, and should be meaningful for the employees. Job experience that is

meaningful depends, in particular, on the variety of individual skills and talents involved, the perception of completeness of the performed tasks, and on the task significance that is of primary importance in the field of social care organizations. Task significance, in fact, refers to the degree to which the job has a positive impact on the well-being of other people (Hackman & Oldham 1976) whose fulfillment is the primary mission of welfare service organizations.

The configurational approach considers the effect of different combinations of these practices on the organizational performance. Alternative career ladders, performance-based compensation, training, performance appraisal systems, employees' participation, and job definition, in fact, can be combined so as to identify solutions able to reduce voluntary turnover and absenteeism. Through the following empirical analysis, we aim to identify such configurations in the specific context of public social care organizations.

Empirical Setting and Method

A sample of public organizations providing care services in the Emilia Romagna Region was used as the empirical setting for our study. The Emilia Romagna Region is considered one of the Italian regions with the highest coverage of welfare services and one of the most advanced policy environments (Costa-Font, 2011). In 2011, the Region initiated the process of creating public organizations for personal services (ASP), as part of the process of reorganizing social services, based on Regional Law 2/2004. Prior to the reform, elderly and disability care services were run directly by ad hoc structures within individual municipalities or a network of municipalities or local Welfare and Benevolent Public Institutions (IPAB¹). This presented many difficulties, mainly limited care service coverage, high coordination costs, and lack of general managerial expertise of senior staff. Under these conditions, any initiatives attempting to introduce HRM practices to address the specific needs of caregivers were difficult to implement.

After the reform was implemented, the result was the constitution of 33 ASPs diffused throughout the regional territory, arranged as independent organizations, subject to public laws, with relatively high flexibility in the management of human resources. ASPs provide primary services for elderly and disabled people. Aimed at the well-being of the users and their families, services for the elderly consist of an integrated system of social interventions and services provided in ad hoc structures or in home care services that are able to guarantee their quality of life, promote self-sufficiency, as well as prevent and reduce individual and family discomfort. This line of services may also include nursing homes. The services for the disabled are aimed at overcoming states of marginalization and social exclusion deriving from economic difficulties, personal and/or social limitations, and conditions of non-self-sufficiency. In addition, ASPs provide other services focused on child welfare. In this case, they promote the rights of minors, focusing in particular on children who live in difficult family situations, encouraging the socialization of the minor and their family, and assisting in school dropout prevention.

As stated, these ASPs had flexibility associated with HRM practices, leading to the diffusion of various combinations of HR practices across the ASPs. This diffusion with variable results in terms of organizational performance and such a diversified context represents a proper empirical setting for the assessment of the configurational theory assumptions. In particular, given both the exploratory nature of this study and the need to unwrap the underlying complexity of HRM effectiveness, we adopted the QCA approach. This method permits an empirical application of the configurational approach by focusing on the combination of factors as a means to detect variable configurations of conditions and their joint effect on any given outcome. QCA uses variables that derive from in-depth case study analyses, with the aim to observe common patterns across cases. Each factor represents a condition within that specific path and, through QCA, researchers are able to categorize and distinguish it as necessary and/or sufficient and make conclusions founded on assessments of the sufficiency of conditions.

Another advantage of QCA is its aptitude to combine qualitative and quantitative research. In social science, in fact, two dominant research traditions can be detected: the case-oriented and the variable-oriented research strategies and both present some limitations. In particular, on one hand, the assumption of isolated effects of individual factors that is typical of variable-oriented research does not allow the description of the complexity of specific social phenomenon that always occurs together with other social phenomena. On the other hand, the in-depth understanding of a particular case is not fruitful if no conclusion for other cases can be drawn. Starting from these observations, Ragin (1987) developed the QCA method to fill the methodological gap between analyses of very small numbers of cases and very large studies, trying to address the shortcomings of qualitative and quantitative social research (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). QCA, in fact, combines the strengths of both approaches; it permits the identification of common trends among different case studies, while still maintaining context-sensitivity (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). Therefore, the main strength of QCA lies in its attention to in-depth cases, combined with an ability to draw out patterns across many different cases, allowing us to account for different contexts and overcome the limitations of quantitative research, and, at the same time, to improve the systematization and the presentation of qualitative findings. Although QCA is widely adopted in macrolevel applications to reanalyze secondary data (Emmenegger, 2011), its application to “micro-sociological, non-causal, hermeneutically oriented analysis of interview data” (Rantala & Hellström, 2001, p. 88) is gaining attention in the field of public administration and public management (Van Thiel, 2014).

Under the label of QCA, three specific techniques have been developed, namely, crisp-set QCA, multi-value QCA, and fuzzy-set QCA. In this contribution, we adopted a fuzzy set QCA (fsQCA) that allowed us to scale membership scores and thus detect partial membership in a set (Ragin, 1999). Membership scores range from 0 to 1. Membership scores close to 1 indicate strong membership, while membership scores between 0 and 0.5 indicate that objects or attributes are still weak members of the set.

The opportunity to scale membership is particularly significant in the context of research in HRM where there is not a clear dichotomy between “adopted practice” and “non-adopted practice”; instead, different graduations in the implementation of such practices can be highlighted. Membership scores are assigned by the researcher on the basis of the theoretical and substantive knowledge gained in the qualitative process of data gathering. A fsQCA software is then used to transform the assigned membership scores into dichotomized values displayed in the *truth table*. Using the fsQCA software that includes algorithms of Boolean algebra, more general patterns are obtained through the reduction of conditions with no effect on the outcome. The goal is to condense the distinctive configurations of conditions observed in each case to the minimum combinations of factors, which are necessary for the outcome to occur (Kitchener, Beynon, & Harrington, 2002). The result of this reduction is defined as the “minimal formula” in which different combinations of necessary and sufficient conditions leading to a certain outcome are displayed.

Data Collection and the Selection of Conditions

The directors of the 33 ASPs in Emilia-Romagna were contacted for this research, of those, 17 chose to participate in the study. Table 1 includes a description of the sample.

Table 1.

The Sample.			
Id	Foundation	Revenues (th)	Services' receivers
Asp1	2008	7,148	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp2	2008	8,182	Elderly
Asp3	2008	5,012	Elderly; Other
Asp4	2008	1,847	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp5	2008	3,066	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp6	2008	5,571	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp7	2008	15,196	Elderly; Disabled
Asp8	2008	31,479	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp9	2008	19,396	Elderly; Other
Asp10	2008	20,419	Elderly
Asp11	2008	20,821	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp12	2008	8,243	Other

Id	Foundation	Revenues (th)	Services' receivers
Asp13	2009	5,045	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp14	2008	8,460	Elderly
Asp15	2007	11,124	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp16	2007	35,834	Elderly; Disabled; Other
Asp17	2008	15,791	Elderly; Disabled; Other

Case studies were constructed through blind-scored semi-structured interviews, as proposed by Bloom and Van Reenen (2007). The responders were ASPs' managers, who are typically senior enough to have an overview of management practices, but not so senior to be detached from day-to-day operations. According to this blind-scored approach, as the respondent's answers to the interview questions is typically biased by the scoring grid and anchored toward those answers that they expect the interviewer thinks is "correct" (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2001a, 2001b), the interview was conducted without notifying the managers they were being scored (Bloom & Van Reenen 2007). This enabled the calibration process to be based on the interviewer's evaluation of the actual HRM practices, rather than the organizational aspirations or the manager's perceptions. To run this blind scoring, we used an initial question aimed at introducing the overall topic to the responder, followed by other questions used to obtain the overall picture of each selected practice. The result was a description of the performed practice that we scored according to a predefined range of five ideal types for each practice, ranging from the full nonadoption of the practice to the full adoption.

Given the small number of cases, a selection of a reduced number of the conditions to be included in the QCA was needed (Berg-Schlosser, de Meur, Rihoux, & Ragin, 2008). The criteria used for the selection were both varieties in the implementation of the practice and actual adoption within the ASP's specific institutional context.

With reference to the criteria of the variety in implementation, the configurations of the selected variables in the case studies include different levels of actual application of the practice, from membership close to zero to full membership. This criterion determined the exclusion of the practice of formal training, which presented a limited variation across the case studies around the ideal types n. 1 (Not implemented) and 2 (Scarcely implemented).

Indeed, the criterion of context specificity refers to the exclusion of HRM practices that the responders tend to recognize as impossible or difficult to adopt into their organizations because of institutional or legal factors. This was the case of exclusion of both employment security and broadly defined jobs. In the first case, strong worker protection offered by the relevant law in the Italian public sector implied a diffused high level of employment security among the ASPs. In the second case, both the

national contracts and the specialization of care workers' professions determined a homogeneous and standardized process of job description definitions among the ASPs, allowing a substantial correspondence between the formal job description and the actual job duties.

The final set of conditions, therefore, included, together with "PFP," the "internal career ladders," the "results-oriented performance appraisal," and the "employee voice and participation." Table 2 includes the interview's introductive question, some examples of the other questions of the semi-structured interview and the description of the ideal types for the four conditions included in the QCA analysis. The set of questions and related ideal type concerning the practices of PFP, performance appraisal, and employees' promotion have been drafted from the original frame of Bloom and Van Reenen (2007), while for the practices of employees' participation we elaborated a set of ad hoc questions and ideal type on the base of the findings of high-performance HRM practices' literature (Daley & Vasu, 1998; Huselid, 1995).

Table 2.

Operationalization of Conditions.							
Practice	Semi-structured interview's questions		Practice's ideal types				
	Introductive question	Other (examples)	Not implemented (1)	Scarcely implemented (2)	Partially implemented (3)	Largely implemented (4)	Fully implemented (5)
Pay-for-performance PFP	How does your appraisal/review system work?	Can you tell me about your most recent round? How does your staff's pay relate to the results of this review? How does the bonus system work?	Staff members are rewarded in the same way irrespective of their level of performance	Combination of features of Model 1 and Model 3	There is an evaluation system for the awarding of performance-related rewards that are nonfinancial at the individual level; rewards are always or never achieved	Combination of features of Model 3 and Model 5	There is an evaluation system that rewards individuals based on performance; rewards are awarded as a consequence of well-defined and monitored individual achievements

Practice	Semi-structured interview's questions		Practice's ideal types				
	Introductory question	Other (examples)	Not implemented (1)	Scarcely implemented (2)	Partially implemented (3)	Largely implemented (4)	Fully implemented (5)
Promotion performance based PRO	Can you tell me about your career progression system?	If two people both joined the company 5 years ago and one was much better than the other would she or her be promoted faster?	People are promoted primarily on the basis of tenure (years of service)	Combination of features of Model 1 and Model 3	People are promoted on the basis of performance	Combination of features of Model 3 and Model 5	We actively identify, develop, and promote our top performers
Performance appraisal APP	Do you have a system to track the relevant key performance indicators?	What kind of indicators would you use for performance tracking? How do you review your main performance indicators? What feedback is given to employees?	Only government targets are tracked. Performance is reviewed infrequently or in an insignificant way, and the right information for a constructive discussion is often not present or the quality is too low	Combination of features of Model 1 and Model 3	Goals are balanced set of targets; goals form part of the appraisal for senior staff only or do not extend to all staff groups; real interdependency is not well understood	Combination of features of Model 3 and Model 5	Performance is continuously reviewed, tracked, and communicated against most critical measures. Regular review conversations focus on problem solving and addressing root causes. Meetings are an opportunity

Practice	Semi-structured interview's questions		Practice's ideal types				
	Introductory question	Other (examples)	Not implemented (1)	Scarcely implemented (2)	Partially implemented (3)	Largely implemented (4)	Fully implemented (5)
							for constructive feedback
Participation PAR	Are employees involved in decision-making processes?	Who typically gets involved in changing or improving ? How can different staff groups get involved in this process? Who is involved in the performance review?	Process improvements involve one staff group. Performance is reviewed with little employee involvement	Combination of features of Model 1 and Model 3	Results are communicated to the staff and regularly disputed. Employees' opinions are regularly collected and analyzed	Combination of features of Model 3 and Model 5	Exposing problems in a structured way is integral to an individual's responsibilities and resolution involves all staff groups. Results are always communicated

To assess and calibrate the outcome of the combination of different HRM practices, we collected data from official reports; this separate source of information has been adopted to control for common method biases. The selected measures for the outcome are employees' voluntary turnover and job absenteeism.

Information concerning these dimensions has been weighted separately, using the same scale of the interviews. The overall outcome has been calculated as the arithmetic mean of these measures. In particular, we consider, as the best performer, the organization with a turnover lower than 2% and job absenteeism lower than 12% (minimum observed among the ASPs), and the worst performer is the organization with a turnover higher than 15%, and job absenteeism higher than 24% (maximum observed among the ASPs).

Findings

The configurations sufficient for effective HRM and the assessment of the necessary conditions are described in the following subsections.

Configurations Sufficient for Effective HRM

According to the fsQCA approach, the focal outcome and each of the other casually relevant conditions are reduced to a dichotomous variable of membership scores ranging from 0 (full non-membership) to 1 (full membership) through a process of calibration. The calibrated variables are used to prepare the *truth table* (Table 3) that helps to identify sets of conditions and the multiple paths to a certain outcome. Prepared using the “fs/QCA” software, this table includes the cases corresponding to the 17 ASPs that are classified into four different combinations of conditions and related outcomes.

Table 3.

				Truth Table.			
PAR	APPP	FPP	PRO	Cases	Number of ASP	SAT (threshold 0.80 PRI)	SAT consistency PRI
1	1	1	1	ASP3; ASP5; ASP6; ASP8; ASP9; ASP15	6	1	0.820513
1	1	1	0	ASP1; ASP7; ASP10; ASP11; ASP13; ASP16	6	1	0.787234
1	1	0	0	ASP4; ASP12; ASP14; ASP17	4	1	0.563910
0	0	0	0	ASP2	1	0	0.428571
0	1	1	1		0	R	
1	0	1	1		0	R	
0	0	1	1		0	R	
1	1	0	1		0	R	
0	1	0	1		0	R	
1	0	0	1		0	R	
0	0	0	1		0	R	
0	1	1	0		0	R	
1	0	1	0		0	R	

PARAPPPFPPRO	Cases	Number of ASP	SAT (threshold 0.80 PRI)	SAT consistency PRI
0 0 1 0		0	R	
0 1 0 0		0	R	
1 0 0 0		0	R	

Three configurations show a consistent combination of specified conditions and a positive outcome (OUT), while one configuration shows an inconsistent combination of specified conditions.

In accordance with Rihoux and Ragin (2009), the consistency threshold has to be set at 0.75, at least. We chose to set a consistency threshold at 0.80. Configurations displaying higher consistency were coded 1, indicating a consistent combination of indicated conditions and a present outcome (high OUT). In contrast, configurations displaying lower consistency were coded 0, indicating an inconsistent combination and the absence of a positive outcome. Finally, logical remainders (R) are theoretically possible configurations, but not observed within the 17 ASPs.

By assessing the *truth table*, it is possible to get an idea of the different paths leading to high OUT in the ASPs. In particular, following the application of Boolean algebra, the configuration of conditions leading to high OUT can become clearer through minimization and the extraction of the “minimal formula.” After a series of paired comparisons between configurations that only differ in one respect—in the presence/absence of one condition, *ceteris paribus*—a simpler equation for the conditions leading to high OUT can be derived. Table 4 includes the results of the minimization by the application of the intermediate solution.

Table 4.

Minimization Results.			
Solution	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
PAR × APP × PFP+	0.808547	0.196581	0.889098
PAR × APP × pro	0.663248	0.051282	0.869955
Solution coverage: 0.859829	Solution consistency: 0.86724	Frequency cutoff: 1	Consistency cutoff: 0.811688

The consistency and coverage scores from the analysis revealed consistent approximations of relationships and broad empirical relevance of the subsets found. Conditions written in capital letters highlight the presence of a condition, while conditions written in lower letters indicate its absence. The multiplication symbol represents the logical operator “AND” and the plus sign serves as the logical operator “OR.” After Boolean minimization, two alternative paths for high OUT can be derived. Solutions for high outcome can be expressed as follows:

$$\text{PAR} \times \text{APP} \times \text{PFP} + \text{PAR} \times \text{APP} \times \text{pro} \rightarrow \text{OUT}$$

Therefore, PFP can be implemented to improve HRM effectiveness, but this requires the presence of both a strong system of performance appraisal and the involvement of employees in decision-making at different levels (Path 1). As a means to gain the same positive outcome, the second alternative path involves a strong system of performance appraisal and the involvement of employees in decision-making at different levels, supported by a promotion and career development based on seniority and tenure in terms of years of service (Path 2).

To investigate the reasons that can justify these paths, we observed, more deeply, the organizational context of the ASP12 (Path 2) and of ASP1 and ASP7 (Path 1). During the description of the steps that brought them to the foundation of ASP12, the Director suggested a possible interpretation to the preference for seniority career-based approaches:

Our organization was born from the transformation of a pre-existing IPAB [Welfare and Benevolent Public Institutions] into ASP. Although the institutional change included the introduction of NPM's inspired managerial practices, the traditional bureaucratic approach was still prevalent in our organization.

In this case, in fact, the transformation occurred under the banner of continuity: the buildings, the people, the activities, and the hierarchical structure—including the general manager—did not change in the transition. The boundaries of the new organizational structure tend to coincide with the previous ones, and although the reform introduced a performance-based reward approach, both for compensation and career development, ASP12 remained anchored to its previous model.

In contrast, ASP1 and ASP7 have a very different history. They do not come from a preexistent IPAB, rather they were founded by aggregating under a common organizational structure all the services provided, at the local level, by different municipalities. In this vein, new directors were appointed to manage these organizations. The director was, therefore, someone especially trained to play that role, and he already had appropriate managerial training, consistent with the NPM model. As a result, the new organizational structure was almost naturally shaped by different logics, where space can be given to results-oriented HRM rewards. In this context, lacking a previously shared cultural context, the concept of justice is given not to the respect of seniority, but rather to people's abilities; here the presence of a PFP system makes HRM effective.

Analysis of Necessary Conditions

The identification of both PAR and APP within both the QCA's solutions suggests to perform an analysis of the necessary conditions ([Ragin, 1999](#)) ([Table 5](#)). The analysis highlights that PAR and APP, independently, meet the consistency threshold of 0.9; this means that a strong system of performance appraisal and the involvement of

employees in decision-making at different levels are both—and separately—necessary conditions leading to the application of effective HR practices.

Table 5.

Necessity Conditions.		
Conditions	Consistency	Coverage
PAR	0.923077	0.805970
par	0.324786	0.826087
APP	0.909402	0.823529
App	0.362393	0.834646
PFP	0.837607	0.859649
pfp	0.461538	0.818182
PRO	0.623932	0.912500
pro	0.717949	0.840000

The presence of PAR in both Path 1 and Path 2 highlights the importance of employees' involvement and participation in decision-making processes. With specific attention to these organizations, in particular, employees' participation is fundamental in all the phases of the service delivery process. As the Director of ASP15 suggests,

Caregivers have to be involved from the very beginning: from the definition of the service standards. After all, the employees perform the tasks and provide the services that fulfil the ASP's mission.

The composition of Path 1 confirms that the development of a clear and an adequate performance appraisal system is the essential condition for an effective PFP implementation, as a means to reduce voluntary turnover and absenteeism. However, the presence of APP as a necessary condition in both the solutions suggests that performance appraisal and PFP are conceptually related but are not synchronous. The identification of APP as a necessary condition, in fact, demonstrated that a good performance appraisal system does not necessarily require the introduction of PFP to obtain a positive outcome.

The Director of ASP8 clearly argued this point: "We have a pay-for-performance system, but the financial incentive is low and it is not relevant itself. What is important for our employees is that their coordinators give them punctual feedback on their job"; and he furtherly added: "they are caregivers, and the primary feedback is from their users: a positive response from the patient is always the first source of employees' satisfaction."

Discussion

Before assessing the paths identified thorough the QCA, we discuss some implications emerging from the necessary conditions analysis, namely, the relationship between performance appraisal and PFP, and employee participation as a precondition for HRM effectiveness.

First off, performance appraisal and PFP, even though conceptually related, are not simultaneously present within effective combinations of HR practices. The effectiveness of PFP systems, in fact, is directly related to the quality of the performance appraisal system whose effectiveness depends on the ability of managers to clarify and communicate performance objectives, as well as to communicate effectively with employees about their success or failure in meeting objectives, moving toward appropriate feedback loops (DeNisi & Sonesh, 2011; Huselid, 1995). In contrast, in the absence of a well-developed and trusted performance appraisal system, PFP can be viewed as an exercise in favoritism, with small connections with actual organizational practices (Ingraham, 2005).

However, a good performance appraisal system does not necessarily require the introduction of PFP. Performance appraisal systems, in fact, provide the opportunity for employees to obtain important feedback on what areas of the job they are performing well in and those that need improvement (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2008). If deficiencies are identified during the appraisal, the reviewer and employee can work together to establish new goals as well as develop a plan to reach them. By speaking openly about job performance and issues that may be affecting it, a sense of trust and goal sharing within the organization can be developed, as a means to improve the overall work environment, without the direct use of financial incentives.

Second, the importance of employees' involvement and participation emerging as a necessary element for HR effectiveness stresses the core fallacy of PFP that money is the sole motivator. Both paths highlight, in particular, that employees' participation is an effective practice in motivating improved performance in terms of both turnover and absenteeism reduction. Strong professional interest and theoretical support for participative systems, supported by empirical analysis, highlight the importance of personnel involvement to produce positive effects on affective attachments of the employees (Kim & Park, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Here, we reinforced this evidence by suggesting that this practice is an essential condition to reduce both the rate of voluntary turnover and the rate of absenteeism in social care.

After these specific focuses, we discuss a possible interpretation of each path. As already mentioned, Path 1 stresses the use of PFP initiatives supported by both an appropriate performance appraisal system and the involvement of employees in decision-making, while Path 2 identifies the use of a seniority/tenure career development programs, again supported by performance appraisal and personnel involvement. The presence of the use of the PFP framework in the first one, and the occurrence of the implementation of career development programs based on seniority and tenure, in the second one, suggests that the fulfillment of HRM effectiveness in

social care organizations can be supported by two contrasting typologies of organizational culture.

In fact, while the first path includes some elements of an NPM approach, the second path seems more coherent to the traditional bureaucratic culture of public administration. In particular, the presence of PFP initiatives as a condition for a positive outcome indicates the preference of the public employees, in a selected number of cases, to be in a context in which merit is rewarded. This suggests that the organizational culture may embed some elements of the NPM culture that promote the increase of productivity, effectiveness, and efficiency.

In contrast, the presence of career development based on seniority as a condition for effectiveness suggests that in different circumstances public administration employees prefer a non-competitive organizational context. This can be the sign of the existence of a traditional bureaucratic culture.

Although both academics and practitioners tend to suggest that moving toward career development programs with an increased emphasis on merit and skills would be particularly useful to increase employees' satisfaction and productivity (Collings & Mellahi, 2009), this study highlights how effective HRM may include the opposite approach of promotions based on tenure and seniority. This can be explained by the Italian institutional and social context which is traditionally characterized by a culture of seniority of service, combined with difficulties in the introduction of concrete development possibilities because of regulatory limitations. Seniority is a crucial promotion principle in the civil service systems; it assumes that those employed for a longer time in the public organization have a superior organizational insight and loyalty because of their history of employment. Even in this path, such a practice has to be supported by both a good performance appraisal system and employees' involvement in decision-making, as well as a professional development system in a wider sense, like growth in autonomy, the possibility to achieve meaningful work results, and legitimacy to do so by superiors.

The use of PFP, on one hand, and the occurrence of advancements based on seniority, on the other hand, indicates two contrasting approaches to HRM that can both accomplish the same positive outcome. The common condition to obtain the same positive outcome, however, is the presence of both a strong involvement of employees in the decision-making process and the development of an effective performance appraisal system. This implies that effective HRM in social care organization is not a prerogative of practices related to the bureaucratic model, nor a prerogative of NPM approach; rather, it seems more directly related to empowerment programs for caregivers. Both the design of an effective performance appraisal system and the implementation of employees' involvement initiatives, in fact, are associated with employees' empowerment practices that reinforce individual position and information sharing within the organization.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify alternative paths of practices able to increase HRM effectiveness with specific attention to the public organizations that provide social care services. The results of the analysis suggest a few considerations from a theoretical, methodological, and managerial point of view.

From a theoretical perspective, the contribution of this work is twofold. On one hand, it is one of the first studies that considers—within the personal services sector—the specific subset of social care organizations (Bartram & Dowling, 2013). On the other hand, within the literature that approaches HRM effectiveness using a contingency perspective (Durant et al., 2006), this work contributes by applying the configurational approach to assess HRM in social care organizations and identify different paths that are simultaneously able to ensure positive outcomes. However, the qualitative analysis adopted to understand the organizational background of each path suggests the combination of both perspectives: each solution, identified through the configurational approach, in fact, seems to be more appropriate under specific contingencies. In particular, while the path that emphasizes the role of career development based on seniority has been observed within well-established organizational structures, the path that emphasizes the role of performance-based rewards has been observed within newest organizational structures that adopt a managerial approach.

Second, from the methodological point of view, this is one of the first applications of QCA that focuses on individual organizations in public sector settings. In public administration and public management, we observed a wide application of this method to compare public network effectiveness (i.e., Cristofoli & Markovic, 2016; Raab, Mannak, & Cambré, 2013), meaning that a first step from the macro- to the meso-level analysis has been done. We have provided, with this article, further development in the adoption of QCA for the assessment of the lower level of individual organizations.

Finally, from a practitioner point of view, this article provides some managerial implications concerning the practices that can be adopted to improve the effectiveness of HRM in social care organizations. Management is called, in fact, to implement HRM practices that facilitate both the participation of employees in the decision-making process and the development of a consistent performance appraisal system. At the same time, the results of this study provide two alternative paths that can allow the same good results, also taking into account the organizational context (traditional vs. managerial). In particular, these two paths suggest that, as long as a good performance appraisal system and employees' participation in decision-making are ensured, different paths may be pursued to ensure a positive outcome in terms of low turnover and absenteeism (Hurley & Estelami, 2007; Scott & Taylor, 1985). This may be of critical importance when managerial strategies in relation to remuneration or, conversely, to career prospects are constrained for various reasons. In the case of Path 1, PFP may be adopted to reward employees' commitment and focus on results in those cases where a longer term and career-based rewarding approach is limited by the legislation or by long-term financial constraints. This may be the case, for instance,

when shifts from temporary to permanent contracts, or career progressions, are constrained by public sector hiring and career policies or regulations. Path 2, on the other hand, suggests that in those contexts where PFP systems may be difficult to implement—as it may be the case for instance in education, because of regulatory limitations or strong opposition by powerful unions—the implementation of a promotion system based on tenure plays a critical role in ensuring a positive outcome, as long as it is combined with an inclusive approach to decision-making and a structured system of performance appraisal. In this case, the choice or inability by the management to provide short-term and performance-based rewards may be compensated by the adoption of a long-term approach that rewards loyalty to the organization.

Although we believe that our configurational approach and results can provide a better understanding of the combined effects of the most significant HRM practices for the prediction of employees' turnover and absenteeism, and also show potential paths toward high employees' performance in social care organizations, our research has its limitations and requires further elaboration. One limitation is related to the measure of HR practices' effectiveness. Due to the data gathering method based on interviews with the ASPs managers, in fact, we were not able to measure HR practices' effectiveness directly through employee satisfaction surveys. Consequently, we adopted turnover and absenteeism, which are demonstrated to be positively related to employees' satisfaction. Another limitation is the rather low number of conditions. To conduct a QCA it was necessary to focus the analysis on a small number of core conditions for a twofold reason. The first reason is methodological and depends on the impossibility to treat a high number of possible configurations that would increase exponentially with the number of conditions. Therefore, other predictors mentioned by the literature were not integrated into the model. The second reason concerns the substantial impossibility to observe the implementation of other HRM practices whose application is not encompassed in the Italian regulation of public sector personnel. We refer, in particular, to the limitation to hiring procedures that are regulated by public competition. Such an approach limits, on one hand, the discretionary of managers in employees' initial selection and, on the other hand, the possibility to hire personnel when needed.

To increase HRM effectiveness in the context of public social care services organizations, this research suggests to adopt a combination of different human resource practices, focusing, in particular, on PFP, performance appraisal, career paths, and employees' involvement. The literature on high-performance work system, however, identifies several other practices that can lead to effective HRM. More comprehensive investigation of the effects of these practices mentioned in the literature was not feasible in this study, but it will be the focus of future research. Furthermore, it would be interesting to extend this study to include further research, conducted in other multilateral contexts that could include a more comprehensive investigation of the effects among various predictors mentioned in the literature and actually employed in other countries. Finally, this study highlights the importance of employees'

empowerment practices such as performance appraisal, and employees' involvement that are both necessary conditions for effective HRM. A specific focus on other initiatives and organizational conditions able to reinforce individual position and information sharing within the organization (i.e., role of leadership, job enrichment, job rotation) can be the object of future research.

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Note

I.IPAB were Italian institutions in charge of social care service provisions subject to public control; over the years, IPABs have been managed as branches of local authorities, in particular with respect to the legal and administrative aspects . They were founded through a process of nationalization of Italian charities in 1890.

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