RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

'Real-Time' Human Resource Management Instruction: Using Current Events to Improve Relevance

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ABSTRACT

Although human resource management (HRM) is integral to organisational success and the media frequently report related events, no studies have measured such coverage. The literature also does not reflect the use of HRM current events as a pedagogical tool in university HRM classes. This study explored the breadth and depth of HRM issues reported by a local newspaper for one month. Breadth was determined by the range of news coverage of HRM content areas: analysis and design of work, human resource planning, recruiting, selection, training and development, compensation, performance management, and employee relations. Thirty one days of newspaper editions revealed 975 articles related to HRM and covered all HRM content areas. Depth of news coverage was determined by the number of articles that represented each content area. In addition, over 200 (24 per cent) of the articles analysed had an international focus, which suggests increased globalisation of human resource management. This study reveals the broad availability of current events to conceptually support HRM instruction and to enhance HRM practice. Implications of the study and directions for future research are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst current events are captured in many ways via mass media, those articles reflecting HRM practices and policies are often not reported as such. Yet articles range from best to worst HRM practices and include topics such as organisational restructuring, downsizing, violence in the workplace, high level terminations and hires, deployments, and global outsourcing. Recently, economic issues as well as the global influenza (referred to as swine flu) outbreak have created challenges within HRM and have been reported widely in the media. Since human resource issues are commonly present in the headlines, regardless of geographic location, and are readily available, there is an opportunity as well as a need to include current events in the HRM curricula.

Human resource management (HRM) is one of the most challenging areas of management, yet academic preparation within business administration programmes does not typically emphasise this area. At a minimum, most undergraduate business administration programmes require at least one human resource management class. This also holds true at the graduate level, but some master's level business administration programmes may not require a human resource management class at all. The curriculum development trend has generally been to improve the quantitative skills of business students, while deemphasising the softer or qualitative skills (Gentile 2008, Schoemaker 2008). Bennis and O'Toole (2005) promoted not only rebalancing of hard and soft skills in management education, but also increasing the relevance of studies and developing the integrative skills of students.

A similar critique by Pfeffer and Fong (2004) suggested that management education could be improved by stimulating critical thought and inquiry. The authors stated that educators should focus on actively engaging students intellectually with critical consideration of business practices as well as the impact of businesses on people and society. In addition, Schoemaker (2008) reported that business educators should teach students to scan the periphery of their organisation as an early warning system to alert managers to changes in their external environment that might have a profound effect on business. He advocated using a problem based learning approach in the classroom to better prepare business students. Similarly, Mintzberg and Gosling (2002) advocated

improving business education by the facilitation of inquiry. As educators strive to improve business education in general, and HRM education specifically, current events provide a linkage between the conceptual areas taught and the environment in which businesses practice.

The following five sections of this paper will reveal the potential of using current events to enhance HRM instruction. The first section provides background for the study, presenting literature that supports the need for organisational attention to current events and literature that describes the use of current events in education. The second section of the paper details the methodology used to determine depth and breadth of media coverage related to HRM. The measures, procedure, and analysis are also discussed in this section. Results are discussed in the third section, followed by a discussion section and conclusions in the fourth and fifth sections, respectively. The discussion section details practical applications of the research. The conclusions section describes the relevance of the research to HRM practice as well as HRM education. Suggestions for future research are also discussed in this section.

BACKGROUND

There is a lack of literature that examines the use of current events as a pedagogical tool for business education, and more specifically, HRM education. Yet related literature clearly reflects the need of environmental scanning in business as well as in business education. Additionally, the literature provides studies reporting the importance of using current events in education. These aspects are explored in the following sections.

Current Events and Environmental Scanning

Wei and Lee (2004: 385) defined environmental scanning as "... the acquisition and use of information about events, trends, and relationships in the organisation's external environment that permits an organisation to adapt to its environment and to develop effective responses to secure or improve the organisation's position in the future". Wei and Lee also suggested the use of event detection (the identification of relevant news events in newspapers) to facilitate environmental scanning. Similarly, general management and HRM textbooks advocate that managers constantly scan their environment for emerging issues and events that may impact their organisation (Bateman & Snell 2007, Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright 2008). Dilevko and Dolan (1999) stated that the process of environmental scanning anticipates user needs by tracking relevant current events through newspapers and periodicals. Numerous companies have developed scanning teams to analyse printed materials for information that might be useful in their work. Earlier, Cove and Walsh (1988: 33) referred to environmental scanning as "... browsing..." and identified it as "... the art of not knowing what one wants until one finds it". However, browsing is essential as gathered information can answer immediate questions and can also provide the "... starting point for a process that eventually leads to a required answer" (Dilevko & Dolan 1999: 73).

Newsome and McInerney (1990) identify three levels of scanning. The first, passive scanning, is the general reading to keep abreast of current events. The second level involves scanning the environment and sorting the information to better categorise the plethora of information. The third level searches in a more focused manner to find specific topical information. According to Dilevko and Dolan (1999), no specific request is made for the information in the first two, non directed levels. However, this information frequently becomes the most important for the organisation. The authors also noted that the most successful scanning programmes concentrate on newspapers and periodicals. Among readings they recommend are American Demographics, The New York Times, Seventeen, and Utne Reader. Electronic databases are connected with the third level, where a specific piece of information is requested.

An example of how environmental scanning might shape organisational strategy was provided by Fleming (2002). This research suggested that as a result of media reports of terrorism, organisations have changed their perceptions of vulnerability to attack and have adjusted their strategy accordingly. Albright (2004) similarly recognised the need for environmental scanning as a mechanism to identify emerging issues that may affect an organisation's future. Newspaper articles were mentioned among the various potential sources of external information. Tseng and McLean (2008) specifically linked environmental scanning activities to human resource development and organisational learning. They suggested that if competitive environmental trends are not addressed early, organisational success could be negatively impacted, thereby potentially reducing available funds for needed employee training efforts.

It is important to note that environmental scanning can also be accomplished in many different ways. These approaches include actively participating in professional organisations, attending professional conferences, reading professional journals, conversing with other professionals, accessing commercial databases, and other activities. However, newspapers are clearly among the most cost effective and accessible options, and search engines have enhanced the ability to scan for items of interest on the Internet. Rajaniemi (2007) noted that advanced search engines can minimise the time needed for gathering the information needed for environmental scanning thus, increasing the time available to analyse information that is pertinent to the organisation.

Current Events and Newspapers in General Education

In addition to the value of current events for environmental scanning, educators have used current events and newspapers as pedagogical tools. The following section will explore the general use of current events and newspapers in education. Although no literature was found suggesting the use of current events in HRM instruction, the following paragraphs suggest the need to explore this approach.

Newspapers have long been a ready source of general information within the United States. Yet, there is a dearth of literature that explores the use of newspapers in higher education in general, with no apparent studies that specifically target the use of newspapers in university human resource management classes. However, the importance and practicality of using the news to develop student awareness of current events has been recognised. The pedagogical usefulness of current news has been touted as a means to help all students understand the significance of current events and to pay attention to and/or question what and how news is reported (Wall Street Journal 2006). The following examples illustrate such use in education.

Supporting Cases

In DeRoche's (1991) review of using newspapers in classrooms, he found that students supported the use of newspapers in the classroom. This support was underpinned by an increased awareness and interest in current events, and students who were exposed to educational use of newspapers tended to continue reading newspapers as adults. Murdochowicz (1991) used seven city newspapers with differing political biases with elementary students who were challenged to identify the bias of each paper. During the assignments, students not only learned about social and community affairs, but they were also able to link course content with current events.

Goodwyn (1993: 61) suggested that educators use news to facilitate the underlying goal of education, articulated as "... having a sufficient grasp of concepts, principles, or skills so that you can bring them to bear on new problems and situations". In exploring how to best educate for understanding, he suggested that students should be able to successfully explain a current news article while incorporating course material. Mosborg's (2002) study required students from two high schools to use their historical knowledge to interpret current affairs in newspaper articles. Students thought aloud as they read articles about school prayer and about Starbucks' treatment of its Guatemalan coffee workers. In a similar study by McInelly (2003), students investigated newspapers to facilitate understanding of the historical and cultural context of novels that students read.

Segall and Schmidt (2006) also used news content for class assignments to support learning goals. Specifically, students were asked to explore the newspaper in a social construction whilst presenting the newspaper as a definer of public discourse. As students explored and understood the social construction of the newspaper, they connected the facts to larger issues. The researchers also stated that developing critical reading skills can facilitate the evaluation of news reports critically, rather than to blindly accept the story as written. The desired outcome is the ability to critically read and comprehend newspapers as educated citizens.

Case (1999) identified a growing minority youth population and the problems that newspapers were facing in seeking how to serve them better in order to reach them and to retain them, hopefully until they could reach their own grandchildren. Minority youth were also incorporated into work by Stephen and Varble (1993) whose investigation of the importance of using newspapers within instructional strategies. They examined the unique problems that minority youth face as well as the common instructional practices that are counterproductive and impede their growth and development. Instead of teacher centred methodologies such as lectures, worksheets, drills, and practice, the authors suggested that teachers fill their classrooms with current, real life examples. Newspapers were among print materials suggested to use for dealing with current real world events to which minority students find interesting and can more readily internalise.

More recently, Lehrman's (2007) study also discussed the increasing diversity of higher education students. She found that while the reading proficiency of Black and Hispanic students is improving, it still lags behind the skill level of White students. And, for all ethnicities, reading proficiency has been shown to be highest among those who say that people within their household read daily, which was consistent with Selsky's (1990) earlier research where regular reading of newspapers, books, and magazines was correlated with the highest reading proficiency scores among students. Hinshaw, Jackson, and Chen (2007) found that print media ads as well as direct mail have been shown to effectively reach minority populations.

Additionally, there is some evidence of collaboration between newspapers and educators. The Wall Street Journal's (2006) Faculty Resource Guide offers a programme to facilitate the use of its publications in the classroom. Similarly, the Newspapers in Education (NIE) initiative has shown a positive impact at the elementary and secondary levels, with the greatest impact among minority and low income students (Sullivan 2007). These are the same group of students that often struggle with university studies and are at the greatest risk of non completion of their degree.

Current Events and Newspapers in Universities

As early as 1981 it was recognised that an overwhelming majority of university students have an inadequate knowledge of world issues. Thus, researchers challenged educators to incorporate international current events in their existing courses (Science News 1981). Koch (1994) examined the impact of incorporating daily newspaper reading to enhance university students' political opinions, behaviours, and beliefs. Students were given weekly, unannounced quizzes from the New York Times. The results showed enhanced political interest and political communication. More recently, researchers at the Carnegie Foundation reported that only a third of students think that keeping up with political issues and current events is important (Lipka 2007). That is similar to the findings of Prince (2006), who noted a lack of critical thinking skills, poor use of grammar, and ignorance of current events, especially among minority university students. However, Lord and Wildavsky (2001) found that, since the terrorist event of 9/11, student interest in related current events has spiked, causing educators to reevaluate course offerings and specific curricula that include current events. And a four year longitudinal study of university students found that engaging in civic talk with peers causes an individual to participate in civic activities. In addition, the impact of the positive effect was found to last throughout university years (Kolfstad 2007).

Newspapers are an important resource to bring current events to the university classroom, even though the newspaper industry has experienced great change, consolidation, and general decline (AP Briefs 2007, Goldberger 2007, Kogan 2007). Readership has steadily decreased, especially among those aged 18 to 34 years (Solberg 2007). Generally, university students are less likely than older adults to read newspapers and watch television newscasts. They are also more likely to rely on the Internet and news magazines than are youth with no history of university studies. In spite of increased Internet and news source access, current university students have been found to continue to use traditional news media sources, perhaps as a complement to Internet usage. Diddi and LaRose (2006) studied 303 undergraduate students who were enrolled in an introductory communications course and completed an online, 10 item current events knowledge survey. The survey results revealed that current events knowledge was dependent upon newspaper readership. Chen's (2007) work also reported the importance of newspapers to this group and found that even though over half of an university student sample spent less than one hour a week on extracurricular reading newspapers were among the most preferred sources for extracurricular reading.

University educators also use newspapers in less publicised ways. Using newspaper cartoons as a vehicle to study current events has also been recommended, since content mirrors contemporary concerns (Curriculum Review 1990). Roever (1998) used the Wall Street Journal within university business communication classes to develop critical thinking and analytical skills. Students were asked to develop portfolios of articles that illustrated class concepts and were evaluated by their explanations of how the articles were related to class concepts. And online access is becoming more popular as the newspaper industry is experiencing a decrease in printed news. Brownstein (2007) found that as the circulation declines, and the access to Internet and digital forms of media increases, newspapers have responded by finding new ways to distribute the news, including online access, which is consistent with digitally oriented students.

The use of current events in the classroom has been detailed. However, no studies were identified that showed the potential of using current events for HRM instruction. This suggests the need to explore the depth and breadth of news coverage related to HRM. The next section describes the methodology used for that purpose.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to determine the degree to which human resource issues were reported in the local newspaper and the nature of HRM content areas represented. Specifically, the research questions included the following: (a) What is the breath of HRM coverage in the newspaper? (b) What is the depth of HRM coverage in the newspaper?

Site

The study location was Fayetteville State University, located in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The University has approximately 6,000 students, most of whom live within a 60 mile radius. The newspaper used was The Fayetteville Observer, which is the only local general newspaper thus, well matched to the targeted student population. It is also the oldest general newspaper in North Carolina that is still being published. Established in 1816, it has about 70,000 daily readers and, in 2005, was selected as number one in general excellence by the North Carolina Press Association. It is a definitive source of local, regional and national news (The Fayetteville Observer 2007) thus, representative of current events, locally as well as nationally and internationally. Although other regional newspapers could have been used for the study, Beam's research (2008) supported the use of one local newspaper and suggested that news content is likely to be consistent across local newspapers, both public and private. Local newspapers reflect content produced by their own staff in addition to supplemental national and international news reported by wire services such as The Associated Press (AP).

Procedure

The sampling period was for one random complete month, or 31 consecutive days in January, which is consistent with the approach of Riffe, Aust and Lacy (1993), who found that sampling two consecutive weeks of local news allowed reliable content estimates of a year's worth of local stories in newspaper editions. Newspaper content was read by the investigators, university educators responsible for teaching HRM classes. Articles that included HRM content were categorised by content areas, as defined by sixteen chapters within the HRM textbook (Noe, et al 2008) currently adopted for use within HRM classes in Fayetteville State University's School of Business and Economics.

The article review process was subjective in nature. Thus, the assignment of content to the broad categories (represented by chapters in the chosen text) offers a superficial analysis of HRM related news coverage. The methodology required knowledge of textbook chapter content so that articles could be categorised appropriately. Hence, a reviewer of news content who did not teach human resources from the chosen text would have to review the text extensively in order to classify the articles. Additionally, some chapters represented in the textbook contained news that is reported extensively by the media, thereby impacting the total number of items found for those 'popular' chapter content areas. An example is the inclusion of both workplace safety issues and legal issues in the same chapter of the textbook. Articles with workplace violence content, environmental safety issues in the workplace, and all legally focused workplace issues were assigned categorically to this chapter.

Measures

Although there are mechanisms to frame or analyse newspaper content digitally (Janssen 2006), none were adequate to achieve the depth of analysis needed for this study. To measure the breadth and depth of human resource related articles in press, the entire newspaper content was analysed, an approach supported by the research of Althaus, Edy and Phalen (2001). They found that indices and proxies for entire articles (such as headlines or lead paragraphs) were sufficient to determine news article content, but the entire article should be used for content analysis.

Analysis

In addition to an analysis of HRM content, the range of interest (local, state, national, or international focus) for each of the articles was identified. When articles could be of local interest as well as regional, state, national, and international interest, the broadest category was chosen for categorical assignment. All articles with HRM content were entered into a chart that noted the complete citation, topical category, and range of interest. A sample excerpt from a data entry is shown as Table 1.

Table 1 Partial page sample of 47 pages

	Focus	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
RollCallReport. Ref 1. Illegal alien hiring. Ref 2. p. A17.	N			x												x	
RollCallReport. Ref 1. Minimum wage, tax breaks. Ref 2. p. A17.	N			x								x	x				
RollCallReport. Ref 1. State wage sovereignty. Ref 2. p. A17.	N			x								x	x				
Rooney, A. (2007, January 13). Days on, Ref 2. p. A8.	N													x			
Rucker, B. (2007, January 27). Ballad of jail escapee goes on. Ref 2. p. D1, D4.	N			x				x									

Notes: a. Article citation; focus (L = local, R = regional, S = state, N = national, or I = international) and content by chapter number. b. Ref 1 = Senate (2007) p. 28. c. Ref 2 = The Fayetteville Observer.

Table 1 shows the manner in which articles were categorised, with an excerpt from the 47 page analysis table. The complete article citation is found in the first column. Column two (Focus) is labelled either L for local, S for state, R for regional, N for national, or I for international, representing the range of interest. Of note, in the excerpt shown, all articles are categorised N, since they were all of national relevance. Refer to Table 3 for the distribution of all articles categorised by range of interest. The remaining columns, numbered 1 through 16, correspond to the number

of the chapter in the HRM text that best matched article content. For instance, the first article was about hiring illegal aliens, and the corresponding content in the HRM text was found in Chapter 3.

RESULTS

For the 31 days of newspaper analysis, 975 articles related to HRM were identified and represented all topical areas in the 16 chapters of the text that was used as a content standard. The table created to record all data was 47 pages long.

Table 2 shows the distribution of HRM content and total article count by chapter. Each of the 16 chapters represents a major content area for HRM, as detailed in the table. When article content contained material relevant to more than one chapter, it was counted in every relevant chapter.

Table 2 Chapter number, number of news items related to chapter content, and the titles of chapters

Chapter	# Items	Chapter title
1	181	Human Resource Management: Gaining a Competitive Advantage
		Part 1: The Human Resource Environment
2	90	Strategic Human Resource Management
3	507	The Legal Environment: Equal Employment Opportunity and Safety
4	186	The Analysis and Design of Work
		Part 2: Acquisition and Preparation of Human Resources
5	161	Human Resource Planning and Recruitment
6	125	Selection and Placement
7	57	Training
		Part 3: Assessment and Development of HRM
8	92	Performance Management
9	24	Employee Development
10	124	Employee Separation and Retention
		Part 4: Compensation of Human Resources
11	34	Pay Structure Decisions
12	30	Recognising Employee Contributions with Pay
13	67	Employee Benefits
		Part 5: Special Topics in Human Resource Management
14	30	Collective Bargaining and Labour Relations
15	229	Managing Human Resources Globally

Chapter	# Items	Chapter title
16	208	Strategically Managing the HRM Function

Chapters and chapter titles from Noe, R. A., Hollenbeck, J. R., Gerhart, B., & Wright, P. M. (2008). Strategically managing the HRM function. Human Resource Management: Gaining a Competitive Advantage. (6th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, Irwin.

Figure 1 shows the number of articles per range of interest (focus). The analysis not only demonstrated that the local newspaper is a very rich source of content related to HRM, but it also revealed great breadth and depth of such coverage.

Figure 1 Focus by number of articles per range of Interest
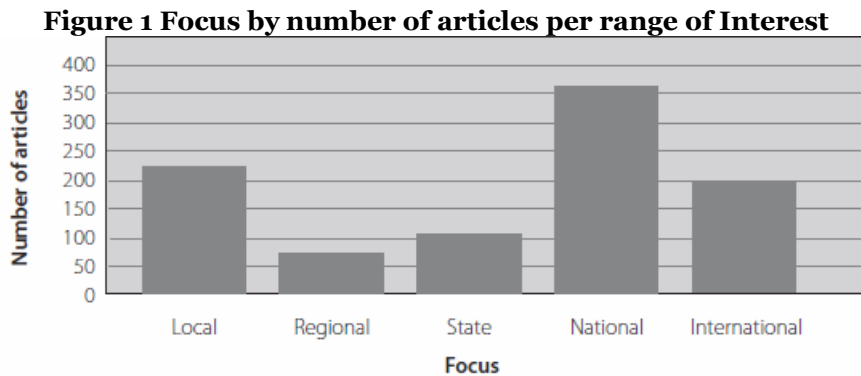
DISCUSSION

This study showed ready availability of a preponderance of material related to HRM that can bring current events to life in a way that enhances both HRM practice and HRM education. The distribution of article content across all chapters of the HRM text standard reflects the breadth of coverage of human resource related content within the local newspaper in a specific targeted geographic location.

In this location, the distribution of article content in the study sample appears to be impacted by predominant industries in the area. For instance, unionisation concerns within North Carolina's poultry and pork processing plants resulted in a number of articles about labour relations and collective bargaining. Similarly, because the study location hosts a large military installation, Fort Bragg, numerous articles were related to global human resource management issues that are inherent with large deployments to Iraq. Since the local student body includes not only military employees, but also many veterans and spouses of military personnel, students can readily relate to the HRM material often presented in print or online versions of the local newspaper. Conversely, the global HRM issues reflected in the sample articles pinpointed both differences as well as similarities between various countries. For instance, terrorism and economic crises are global concerns. Yet safety issues, legal considerations, and exchange rates differ from country to country.

Classroom discussion of these issues, coupled with current examples from newspapers, engages students at a different level, integrating international business concerns in the classroom. Since business schools generally are increasing the degree of global business content in curricula (DeLacey 1993), international HRM current events might provide a needed linkage between global HRM practices and classroom discussion. International HRM content is readily available via the Internet. An example is a recent news item about numerous suicides among employees of France Telecom. The story reportedly dominated newspaper headlines in France, but also was reported on the Internet by both BBC News in Great Britain (Kirby 2009) and NPR in the United States (Beardsley 2009). Another international source is Fairfax Digital (http://www.fairfax.com.au/localnews.ac) that provides links to many newspapers in Australia and beyond to provide immediate access to news and current events. Similarly, Brisbane Times (http://business.brisbanetimes.com.au/) offers a search option for business articles that provides ready access to current HRM content. And the Sydney Morning Herald reports HRM issues such as workplace violence, compensation conflicts, and labour disputes (Coorey 2009, Robinson 2009, Rochfort 2009, Schneiders & Murphy 2009, Walsh 2009), topics that are consistent with those reported locally, by the Fayetteville Observer.

In addition to using international examples to explore HRM events, other approaches could be instrumental for using current events in the HRM curricula. Educators could build an archive of news events related to major topical areas and build assignments related to specific news articles. In particular, inquiry guided learning could be based on the information in a current events article. Inquiry based learning involves active investigation of a problem or issue that results in a high level of engagement and learning. This approach promotes student learning through guided investigation of complex problems like those presented in the news media (Lee 2004). For instance, the notion of workplace safety and related laws can be conveyed in a more relevant way if introduced by means of a

current event news article describing a worker whose arm was lost in machinery at a local manufacturing plant. The situation itself raises the level of curiosity and invites further inquiry. A problem statement (as a student assignment) built around this issue provides a logical segue to the introduction of workplace safety as well as legal and ethical aspects of worker health and safety. It also might provide stimulus to explore national workplace safety statistics. This approach also strengthens student understanding of the practical relevance of HRM concepts. For example, using the scenario above, asking students how an employer could best prevent workplace accidents strengthens critical thinking skills as students explore the relationship of safety standards, training, employer liability for accidents, and other crucial aspects of HRM. Student involvement via this type of assignment supports individual learning as well as course outcomes. Using international news online sources, students might also be asked to explore safety regulations in other countries, thereby strengthening the global aspects of business education. Assessment of such inquiry based learning can be accomplished by the development of a grading rubric to quantify learning objectives.

A broader approach to the use of HRM related current events involves an assignment that requires students to use search engines to identify specific HRM articles locally, nationally, or internationally. An assignment that requires finding a news article related to HRM, summarising the article, and determining the relevance to HRM course content would be instrumental in improving both reading and writing skills. Environmental scanning competency might also be enhanced. However, students who are not yet fully familiar with HRM content are likely to overlook or fail to identify many articles that are related to HRM, which suggests that educators need to scan newspapers themselves to identify and archive articles that would serve to supplement and enhance HRM class materials.

CONCLUSION

There is a great volume of current newspaper articles related to HRM practice that span all HRM content areas. Thus, managers are encouraged to scan newspapers as a means of understanding contemporary HRM issues. This practice can facilitate the integration of current events into decision making processes within organisations, potentially strengthening competitiveness and viability. The potential benefit of collaboration between local news media and university educators is implicit in this study. Greater involvement in newspaper reading initiatives by both entities would be mutually beneficial and would support both newspaper readership and educational objectives. Additional research is needed to explore how to best structure such collaboration.

In terms of the educational use of current events, it is likely that many professors use news reports to reinforce course content, but no evidence was found in the literature that indicated use of current events to teach HRM. This study reinforces the need and opportunity to expand this pedagogical approach; it also provides evidence of the depth and breadth of available material for this purpose. Further study is needed to determine how to optimise the use of current events for HRM instruction. Research is also needed to determine whether or not a different article categorisation method would be practical and/or more useful for academic purposes. For instance, measuring column inches (length of the article) might be used as a proxy for depth of specific content coverage. And, since student readership of newspapers is declining (as mentioned in the literature review), the findings of this study should stimulate the use of course related news in business classes. This approach could increase readership whilst also supporting curricular goals. In addition to HRM, this approach could be used for other disciplines. For instance, a similar process might be used to identify health care management issues that appear within media.

Although this study focused on a local newspaper in the United States, this approach could be used in other locales to identify current events to support HRM practice and education. And, although any source of current events might be used, newspapers (either print or online) are particularly accessible and inexpensive. This study should provide an impetus for both practitioners and educators to consider or revisit the use of current events to support HRM.

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