

## Article

# Human Resources Management Practices Perception and Extra-Role Behaviors: The Role of Employability and Learning at Work

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**Abstract:** Human Resource Management (HRM) processes are considered the beating heart of any successful organization. Recently, several studies have highlighted how organizations can use commitment-oriented HR practices to generate organizational and individual effectiveness. The aim of this study was to verify whether the perception of HRM practices could be able to elicit extra-role behaviors and, at the same time, whether this relationship could be mediated by employability and learning conditions. The analyses were carried out on a sample of 1219 Italian workers using Structural Equation Models. The structural model yielded good fit indices and the results showed a significant and positive effect of the perception of HRM practices on both employability and learning. However, the perception of HRM practices is not directly associated with extra-role behaviors, but only through the effect of both mediators (full mediation). Practical implications about the importance of creating working conditions that are adequately oriented to the development of individual skills in order to produce indirect beneficial effects on the organization are discussed.

**Keywords:** HRM; extra-role behavior; employability; learning; SEM; flourishing



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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, human resources management (hereafter HRM) processes are considered to be the beating heart of any successful organization. The recent transformations due to the pandemic, particularly in a turbulent period of change, showed the importance of cohesion and organizational flexibility for the survival (and in some cases for the flourishing) of a company. All organizations must face heterogeneous scenarios which characterize the “new normality”. To achieve this goal they must be able to develop highly motivated workers, maintaining good performance, in order to increase the ability to cope with unexpected situations, to reduce employee turnover and absenteeism and to improve individual attitudes related to performance and work [1,2]. Recently, both scholars and practitioners identified the value of human capital management for organizational performance [3], and highlighted how Human Resources (hereafter HR) practices influence them. In particular, strategic HRM scholars have suggested that organizations can use performance and commitment-oriented HR practices to drive organizational effectiveness [4–6]—a claim that is now supported by a large body of research [7–11].

Generally, HRM practices have been classified as hard and soft [12]. The hard approach focuses on increasing efficiency and reducing costs, through the implementation of rules and procedures that are based on worker control [13]. Human resource would be only a factor in production, rather than the only resource able to turn the objects of production into profit. On the contrary, the soft or “high-commitment” approach is concerned with

improving workers' performance, giving them more confidence and power to achieve organizational goals through mutual interest. According to this model, employees have a proactive and non-passive role in productivity processes, and they are encouraged to engage through communication, motivation and leadership. High-commitment human resources management practices are those where the management trusts its employees and includes more accountability and employee involvement in decision-making processes, training programs that give employees the opportunity to develop task-related skills and to grow on a personal level, teamwork activities where creative ideas and solutions are shared, reward packages commensurate with the worker's commitments, reduction of the status gap between management and staff [10,14,15]. Perhaps even more important than the practical implementation of HRM strategies is employees' perception of them. The way that employees perceive organizational decisions emerged as one of the main variables influencing the relationship between HRM practices and employees' performance and commitment [16]. Employees' perception that the company is concerned for their wellbeing and that it recognizes their efforts may have an influence on satisfaction, involvement, and commitment levels, thus significantly affecting employees' attitude, behaviors and results [17,18]. In fact, some studies have shown that the acquisition of positive attitudes and discretionary behavior of employees at work are important factors in influencing organizational performance [19]. Understanding the basis for such work attitudes and behaviors is the main aspect of research programs related to managerial practice [20].

Human behavior within organizations increasingly requires a high level of flexibility, making the working roles, duties or responsibilities less rigid than they used to be. The extensive literature on expected worker behaviors, led several researchers [21,22] to introduce the differentiation between behaviors linked to people's specific job (in-role behaviors) and behaviors that went beyond people's formal roles (extra-role behaviors). As an example of extra-role behaviors, [23] called "contextual performance" those work behaviors that are not necessarily related to work tasks but contribute to the social and psychological aspects of the organization including "volunteering to carry out task activities that are not formally part of the job and helping and cooperating with others in the organization to get tasks accomplished" [24] (p. 100). The presence of extra-role behaviors, when voluntary and not forced, are a sign of organizations in which individuals shows responsiveness and adaptability, where people are "engaging in task-related behaviors at a level that is beyond minimally required or generally expected levels" [25]. According to the cited literature, and in relation to the prospects of roles and tasks fluidity due to constant changes [26,27], we found it useful to evaluate the impact of HRM practices on the willingness of workers to perform activities that are less related to the role.

In sum, this study aims to explore how the perception of HRM practices can stimulate constructive behaviors, as well as how the perception of learning and growing professionally and the perception of being able to possess adequate skills can impact the extra role behaviors.

### *1.1. Employability as a Mediator of the Relationship from HRM Practices to Extra-Role Behavior*

In recent years, technological changes, the aging population and the increasingly competitive organizational environment have led to a growth in employability studies at an international cultural level [28]. Employability concerns the individual's chances of finding employment inside or outside the labor market [29,30]. It represents a resource that is useful to cope with unpredictable situations, due to the development of a competence linked to the concept of resilience. Therefore, the individual's personal resources that are useful for occupational integration and the environmental sphere that allows the potential of the individual within the organization to develop and grow must be considered at the same time [31]. Perceived employability is related to the perceptions that employees create for themselves chances of employment in the labor market inside and outside of the organization [32]. The construct refers to the constant realization and creation of work through the optimal use of one's skills and seems to have a positive influence on creativity

and, in particular, innovative work behaviors [32]. The concept of employability is used on a micro, meso and macro level of the labor market and in different ways [33]. First, it is used in relation to government policies, which aim to achieve full employment. Next, its managerial aspect is considered in order to match demand with supply, through the ability of the company to acquire a fair number of employees with the appropriate skills at a given time. Finally, it is used on the basis of the individual's perception of his or her job prospects [33]. Employability can be divided into three different stages. The first concerns the moment when the individual is looking for a job and enters the labor market. This phase focuses on how people without a job establish themselves within the world of work [34–36]. The second stage is characterized by the way in which people who already have a job try to maintain their employment. Finally, the third phase concerns the possibilities of seeking a new job, analysing all possible reasons that could lead to a job change, such as career, income, family situation, etc., [37]. It has been shown that both individual characteristics (skill, aptitudes and adaptability) and contextual characteristics (the local labor market) could be important determinants of employability [33,38]. It is useful to consider the relationship between human resource management and employability, as the latter is considered essential for job security in this increasingly uncertain modern employment environment [39,40]. Employees should consider employability as a goal to be pursued in achieving job security, optimal well-being and professional success [41]. Employability for employers, especially within an organization, could instead be seen as the basis for competitive advantage, as they would benefit from increasing the employability of workers through human resources management policies and practices. The risk is that some organizations may fear that the use of human management practices to improve employability could boost the external mobility of better workers and therefore, they may refuse to make employability-related investments. In addition, it should be considered that national economic circumstances such as unemployment levels could influence the role of human resource management policies.

In this study, the construct of perceived employability was considered as a mediator of the relationship between the perception of HRM and extra-role behavior. The mediating role of employability has already been considered in relation to the antecedent variable HR practices in a recent study that confirmed the influence of perceived employability on the relationship between HR practices and engagement. The study found that both internal and external employability positively mediate the relationship between HRM practices and workplace engagement [42]. Relational perspectives focus on how jobs, roles, and tasks are more socially embedded than ever before, based on increases in interdependence and interactions with coworkers and service recipients. Proactive perspectives capture the growing importance of employees taking initiative to anticipate and create changes in how work is performed, based on increases in uncertainty and dynamism.

Hence, we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesize 1.** *Employability will mediate the relationship between human resources management (HRM) and extra-role behavior.*

### *1.2. Learning in the Workplace as a Mediator of the Relationship from HR Practices to Extra-Role Behavior*

Thriving at work has been described as a positive psychological state, based on two different subdimensions, in which a sense of vitality and a sense of learning are experienced at the same time [43]. The first subdimension of prosperity, vitality, is defined as the positive perception of available energy and feeling alive, while the second subdimension, learning, implies that employees perceive themselves to be acquiring more and more knowledge and skills. To obtain the benefits of thriving, managers need to be able to find effective ways to promote it in their employees. Recent research argues that organizations can facilitate prosperity through discretionary decision-making, information sharing, and building positive relationships with colleagues/supervisors, establishing a climate of civilization [44]. Monitoring the thriving of employees and ensuring they have learning and development

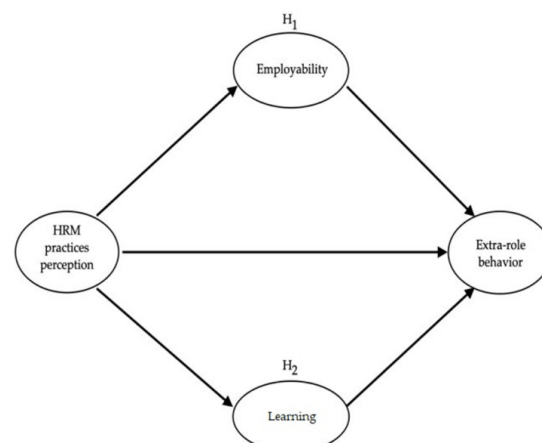
opportunities will benefit the organization [45]. Previous studies have shown that thriving at work enables positive outcomes which could lead to improved performance [43,45,46], greater involvement and commitment [43,47], better stress management, innovative work behaviors, improved life satisfaction [48] and job satisfaction [49,50].

HRM practices are predictive of certain organizational citizenship behaviors and employee turnover by demonstrating a positive correlation between HR practices and extra-role behaviors [51]. Several studies have shown that employees who perceive benevolence from the organization and supervisors, in return respond to these favorable actions by offering better work outcomes, such as thriving at work, role performance, and extra-role performance [52]. Prosperity at work has a significant influence on this relationship [53]. Thriving at work has been explored in its mediating role, in the relationship between prosocial motivation and work engagement [46,54] and in its impact on the civility and work engagement in the service sector [49]. Other research has confirmed the role of thriving at work as a mediating variable by considering the construct's two subscales (learning and vitality) and testing their influence on the relationship between managerial coaching and individual and organizational citizenship behaviors [53]. According to [53], managerial coaching mediated by the variable of thriving at work has a positive and significant influence on organizational citizenship behaviors.

To address the aims of our study, we selected one of two components of thriving at work, the sense of learning, which refers to the growth in and improvement of one's work. The sense of learning, considered to be the cognitive element in thriving, allows for the acquisition and the application of knowledge and skills to develop confidence and abilities [45], and contributes to the perception of personal efficacy, reducing burnout levels. It also contributes positively to physical health, mental well-being, and positivity [55]. Employees who feel that they are learning at work, are more likely to perceive the positive influence of work on their mental and physical health [45]. Learning at work is a useful means of achieving personal development and growth, leading to greater organizational identification with and commitment to the organization and one's work [47]. Employee learning enables the achievement of individual and organizational goals. The learning process also has an influence in terms of improving employees' intellectual capabilities and the possibility of achieving better results [56]. Several studies have highlighted the positive relationship between learning at work and performance [57]. In this framework, employees with enough knowledge and skills perceived themselves as ready to help others at work, thus engaging in organizational citizenship behaviors [56].

In light of the literature considered, and in relation to the prospects of role and tasks fluidity due to constant changes [26,27], we hypothesize that (see Figure 1):

**Hypothesize 2.** *The sense of learning at work will mediate the relationship between human resources management (HRM) and extra-role behavior.*



**Figure 1.** The hypothesized model.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Sample

The sample used in the study was a convenience sample, consisting of 1219 workers from Italy. Subjects gave informed consent and completed an online questionnaire in which they answered to questions about their psychological work context. Participation was absolutely voluntary, and the subsequent elaboration of data was performed in an aggregated manner, according to General Data Protection Regulation and the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2013) guidelines. Overall, 45.7% of the subjects were male, while 54.3% were female. Mean age was 36.7 years old (SD = 13.0), in a range between 17 and 67 years. The most frequent age of the respondents was 26 years old (5.8%). In terms of education, 50.6% had a high school diploma, 32.8% had graduated, 10.7% had a postgraduate degree and 5.9% had an elementary license. Most of the sample worked for a private organization (64.2%), 33% came from a public company and 2.8% from a non-profit organization. Furthermore, 62.1% of subjects had a permanent contract and 24.4% had a fixed-term contract. Finally, the average seniority for workers was 6.8 years, in an interval between 0 and 40 years.

### 2.2. Measures

The sample answered a questionnaire composed by different psychological constructs, whose items were adapted in Italian language and identified from the validated scales. Reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's Omega) confirmed the goodness of variables. All the adopted scales ranged from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree on a Likert Scale.

HRM practices perception was investigated through 8 items from the Perception of HRM Practices Scale [13] Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's Omega were both 0.91. An example of a scale item was: "I am provided with sufficient opportunities for training or development".

Learning was quantified through 4 items of the Thriving at work Scale [45], in particular by considering only the learning subdimension. Cronbach's alpha was 0.87 and McDonald's Omega was 0.88. An example of an item was: "At work I see myself continually improving".

Perceived employability was measured through 5 items of Berntson and Marklund Scale [37]. Reliability was confirmed as Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's Omega were both 0.88. An example of an item was: "My competence is sought-after in the labor market".

Extra-role behavior was explored through 4 items of the Extra-role Behavior's Scale [58]. Cronbach's alpha was 0.91 and McDonald's Omega was 0.92. An example of an item was: "I help others at this organization with their responsibilities".

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using Mplus 8 (Muthén and Muthén, Los Angeles, CA, USA). Reliability was assessed by using Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Accepted values are above 0.50 for AVE and around or greater than 0.70 for both Cronbach's alpha and CR [59]. The structural equation modeling (SEM) technique was used to carry out a parallel multiple mediation analysis and the method of estimation was maximum likelihood (ML). The indirect effects were tested through the bootstrap method with 2,000 bootstrap samples. A significant mediation is confirmed when the 95% confidence interval does not include zero [60]. The following criteria were employed to evaluate the goodness of fit:  $\chi^2$  likelihood ratio statistic, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with associated confidence intervals, and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). We accepted TLI and CFI values around or greater than 0.90, and RMSEA and SRMR values lower than 0.08 [61]. The item parceling technique was applied to the variable with the highest number of items for reasons of parsimony, creating two parcels for the HRM practices perception variable.

### 3. Results

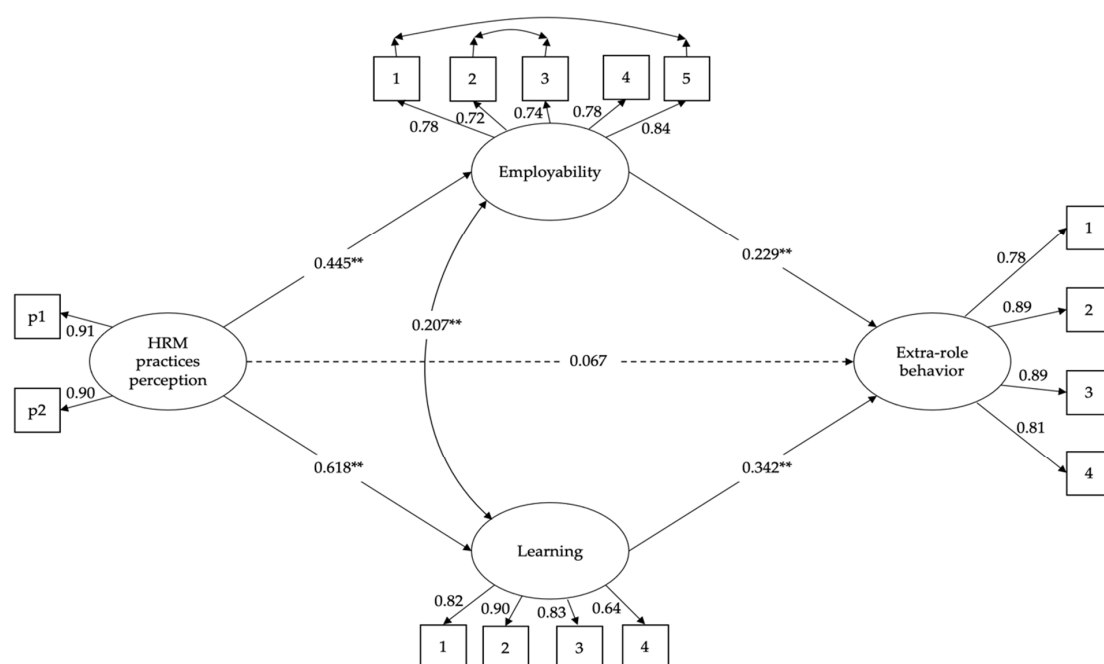
Principal descriptive analyses, such as reliability indices and correlations between variables, means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. All constructs highlight-ed good KMO index and a significant Bartlett's Test of sphericity. In particular,  $KMO_{HRM} = 0.91$ ,  $KMO_{LEARNING} = 0.69$ ,  $KMO_{EMPLOYABILITY} = 0.83$  and  $KMO_{EXTRA-ROLE\ BEHAVIOUR} = 0.82$ . Bartlett's Test resulted as significant for all of the hypothesized factors. Furthermore, skewness and kurtosis for the research variables resulted comprised in the range of  $\pm 1.96$ , thus we considered a normal distribution for our data (even due to the sample size) and parametric approach of modeling.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, correlations between study variables, and reliability indices. \*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Variable	Descriptive		Correlations				Reliability	
	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	CR	AVE
1. HRM practices perception	3.05	1.31	1				0.91	0.53
2. Learning	3.45	1.10	0.530 **	1			0.87	0.64
3. Employability	3.18	1.24	0.400 **	0.318 **	1		0.88	0.59
4. Extra-role behavior	3.79	1.16	0.361 **	0.428 **	0.365 **	1	0.90	0.71

The hypothesized model (Figure 2) yielded a good fit:  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 82$ ) = 535.125,  $p < 0.01$ ; RMSEA = 0.06 (0.062–0.073); CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.95; SRMR = 0.04. It explained 20% of the variance in employability, 38% in learning and 29% in extra-role behavior. Results of the mediation analysis show a significant effect of HRM practices perception on both employability ( $\beta = 0.449$ ,  $se = 0.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and learning ( $\beta = 0.618$ ,  $se = 0.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, HRM practices perception does not predict extra-role behaviors directly ( $\beta = 0.072$ ,  $se = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.077$ , bootstrap 95% C.I. =  $-0.032$ – $0.171$ ), but only indirectly through the effect of employability and learning. Both indirect effects, the one of the HRM practices perception on extra-role behavior through employability ( $\beta = 0.103$ , bootstrap 95% C.I. =  $0.062$ – $0.147$ ) and the one of the HRM practices perception on extra-role behavior through learning ( $\beta = 0.211$ , bootstrap 95% C.I. =  $0.139$ – $0.286$ ) are significant.

Both hypotheses have been confirmed.



**Figure 2.** The structural model. Discontinuous line indicates non-significant relationship. \*\*  $p < 0.001$  for all factor loadings.

#### 4. Discussion

In this study we argued that individuals' personal resources and the environmental sphere that allows the potential of the individual within the organization to develop and grow must be considered at the same time. As personal resources, we considered individuals' perceptions of their employability, whereas we considered learning conditions as tangible sign of the organizations' willingness to invest in the development of their employees.

As summarized in Figure 1, we hypothesized that the employees who perceive their company to be concerned about their well-being and able to recognize their efforts might engage in extra-role behaviors, through the influence of their perceived employability and the perception of learn adequately. We develop this hypothesis by considering employability as the implementation of work through the optimal use of one's skills, which appears to have a positive influence on creativity and innovative work behaviors. In our study, the desired outcome of this employees' perception is the implementation of extra-role behaviors, i.e., the set of behaviors that go beyond formal roles and that are not necessarily related to work tasks but, nevertheless, contribute to the social and psychological aspects of the organizations [24].

The aims of the study were achieved and both hypotheses were supported. All the scales used showed excellent levels of reliability and internal consistency, and the hypothesized model yielded a very good fit. The results showed that a good perception of HRM practices is positively related to employees' perception of their employability and to the satisfaction of their learning needs, both of which are positively related to the execution of extra-role behaviors. This result is in line with previous studies that have highlighted the association between employability and the tendency of employees to be more creative, flexible and engaged [32,42].

Consistent with the hypotheses, but also surprisingly, the results confirmed the mediating role of employability and learning; however, the direct relationship between HRM practices perception and extra-role behaviors was found to be completely mediated, as shown in Figure 2. Employees engage in extra-role behaviors if, in addition to perceiving HRM practices as adequate, they perceive themselves as more employable and in suitable conditions to learn.

Based on the observation that the direct relationship between HRM practices and extra-role behaviors loses significance and power with the introduction of the two mediators, it can be deduced that both personal resources (in this case, the perception of being able to create opportunities of employment inside and outside the organization), and contextual factors (in this case, the possibility of adequate learning), are essential for the commitment of the employee, that feels more inclined to engage in behaviors that go beyond the tasks specifically required by the job.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study highlighted essential results for the literature in this domain. Nevertheless, there are some limitations which should be considered. First of all is the cross-sectional nature of the study, which precludes the possibility to infer causal relationships between latent variables. The study considered a collection of data in Time 2, thus a further aim is to explore these statistical connections using a longitudinal design. Secondly, we used self-reported data, thus there is the risk of common method-bias. Future studies should also consider objective data from superiors and colleagues' to evaluate the psychological constructs we adopted. Furthermore, the convenience and homogeneous characteristics of the sample limits the generalization of findings. In fact, the sample in our study comprised only Italian employees, although they were from different part of the country (the North and South of Italy). Future studies could explore the outcomes of using a cross-cultural design, in order to extend the applicability of the obtained results. Finally, the sample size did not permit a complete generalization of outcomes: this limit could be overcome by using non-parametrical causal methodologies.

## 5. Conclusions

Changes in work and society highlight the importance of cohesion and organizational flexibility for the survival (and in some cases for the flourishing) of a company. Nowadays, employees are expected to be more flexible and less rigid about their working roles, duties and responsibilities. On the other hand, organizations must be able to develop highly motivated workers, who in turn need to be able to increase their ability to cope with unexpected situations and improve their individual job attitudes [1–3]. Organizations that strive to improve their employees' performance by giving them more confidence and power to achieve organizational goals and to grow on a personal level, will create employees with a proactive role in productivity processes, i.e., employees that are more willing to engage in extra efforts to further improve the performance of the organization [17,18]. In fact, extra-role behaviors, when voluntary and not forced, are the sign of organizations in which individuals show responsiveness and adaptability [25].

This article provides several contributions to research and practice. First of all, the direct relationship between the perception of HRM practices and the implementation of extra-role behaviors has been downsized, underlining how this relationship can no longer be taken for granted. In fact, we demonstrated that the weight of perceived employability and learning in predicting extra-role behaviors is even more influential than the perception of good HRM practices. Secondly, the importance of employees' perceptions was highlighted, both in terms of their employability and in terms of their learning opportunities. Assessing the employees' perception of having the opportunity to learn gives organizations the chance to focus on workers in a more accurate and personal way, compared to only evaluating learning opportunities quantitatively. This shift in vision reflects the difference between a company that simply provides its employees with training practices, and a company that nurtures and develops its employees with constant growth and development opportunities, which go beyond training as a mere obligation to be fulfilled. Thirdly, new emphasis has been placed on employability, a variable that is still quite controversial. An employee who is sure of his or her worth in the job market can more easily assume the risk of changing jobs. Therefore, organizations may think that it makes little sense to invest in it. This study, on the other hand, has shown how employability can bring benefits to the company, as employees who perceive themselves as employable may also be committed employees, who care about their work so much that they put into practice behaviors that go beyond their working duties. In conclusion, the results suggest that intervening in employability and learning can lead to the creation of workers who are more confident in themselves and in their possibilities, which may not necessarily be outside the company. Instead, it can be the basis for a competitive advantage, as employees who perceive themselves as employable are also more flexible and creative in their work [32].

The practical implication of this study is that it could be used to design HRM strategies that aim to increase corporate efficiency through empowerment and employee growth. For example, by implementing job enlargement and job enrichment practices, and putting an effort in ongoing learning processes.

Extra-role behaviors could certainly be a strong advantage for companies, both because they may be tangible proof of employees' engagement, and because they can lead to better corporate performance. It follows that investing in employability practices and learning conditions could be a wise and far-sighted choice, as it would have beneficial effects both for individuals—triggering a virtuous circle that leads to well-being in the workplace —, and for the company itself.

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