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THESIS SUMMARY

Dávid Losonci

Human resource management practices in lean production – the role of manufacturing goals

Supervisor:

Krisztina Demeter, Ph.D
associate professor

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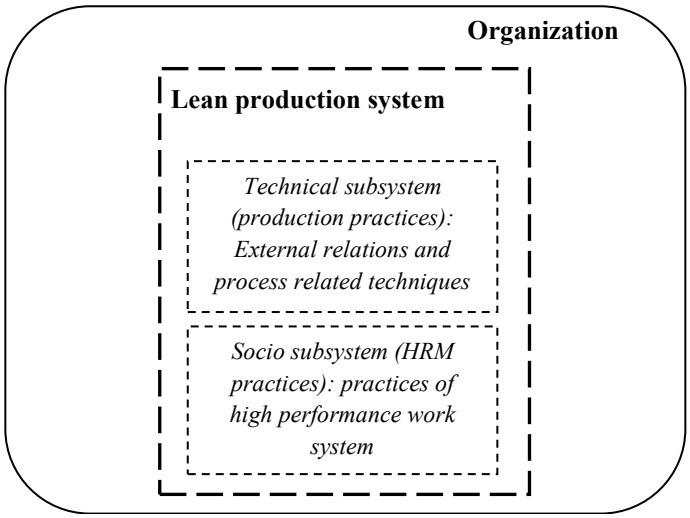
1. Previous researches and relevance of the topic

In spite of the persistent interest related to the role of human resource management (HRM) in lean production in the last decades (Forza 1996; Harrison és Storey 1996; MacDuffie 1995), there are still only a few survey-based researches integrating the practices of these two fields (Birdi et al. 2008; de Menezes, Wood, és Gelade 2010; Dabhilkar és Ahström 2013).

Conceptual works describing the structure of socio-technical lean production system emphasize that lean system integrates best practices of operations management (OM) and HRM (Figure 1). The production (technical) subsystem consists of well-known lean technical elements, eg. process-orientation, pull production, just-in-time, quality management, maintenance, practices related to customers and suppliers. HRM (socio) subsystem deploys practices of high performance work system, eg. involvement, rotation and multiskilled workers etc. Detailed description of socio-technical lean system and summary of related topics in OM were published earlier (Losonci 2013).

Figure 1 Technical and socio subsystems in lean production system



Findings are mixed: some results gave strong support for the integration of lean production techniques and HRM practices, others emphasize that this relationship is not evident and raise doubts regarding the use and effectiveness (ie. contribution to performance improvement) of HRM practices in lean environment. **The main aim of this research is to clarify the role of HRM practices in lean production environment**.

Growing number of papers in OM deals with internal and external contingency factors (Souza and Voss 2008; Matyusz 2012). The role and impact of contingency factors in relation to best practices (eg. lean production) is a relevant topic as well. This work highlights one internal contingeny factor, namely manufacturing strategy goal and studies its role and impact

in lean production environment. Manufacturing strategy goals are derived from the two most widespread competitive capabilities (costleader and differentiator). HRM practices of lean production are operationalized through high performance work system (HPWS) practices.

This work proposes that in lean production enviroment…

- **the use of HPWS practices and**
- **the contribution of HPWS practices to performance improvement**

differ by manufacturing strategy goals.

It is common in OM literature that it ignores the diversity of human resource management (Bakacsi et al. 2000). As a result, papers about HRM usually limit their focus to high performing work system and its work organization practices. This work follows the questionable OM way and uses these concepts (HRM practices, HPWS practices, work organization practices) interchangeably.

2. Research questions and methodologies

2.1. Manufacturing strategy goals

Costleader and differentiator manufacturing strategy goals are the most widespread and studied manufacturing strategy goals in OM literature (Roth and Miller 1994; Frohlich and Dixon 2001). There are three important reasons for the in-depth analysis of manufacturing strategy goals: (1) researchers apply a wide set of relevant variables to operationalize manufacturing strategy goals; (2) the content and priorities of particular manufacturing strategy goals and the dominant manufacturing strategy goals have changed many times in the last two decades; (3) the impact of the recession on manufacturing strategy choices (among them on priorities and goals) is not well documented in international literature. Based on these considerations the following question emerged:

Research question 1: What are the priorities of costleader and differentiator manufacturing strategy goals?

2.2. HPWS practices: use and effectiveness

The main findings of the literature review are the followings:

1. **Best practice approach dominates the academic literature dealing with socio-technical lean system**. Best practice approach emphasizes that lean production techniques and HPWS pracitces result in better performance in every context. Papers adapting this approach usually ignore contingency factors. However, there are some international lean expert urging studies on the relationship between lean production and manufacturing strategy choices (Batt 2007; Hines et al. 2004; Sakakibara et al. 1997; Shah and Ward 2003). Empirical studies failing to support extent use of HPWS practices (ie. they use HPWS practices to a greater extent than traditional producers) in lean production setting also raise the importance of contingency factors. Furthermore, better understanding of HPWS practices in performance improvments requires future works as well. Altogether, conceptual conciderations, shortcomings and scarcity of empirical results justify a wider scope of researches related to socio-technical lean system and underline the possible impact of contingency factors.

2. **Best fit approach highlights strategic fit and states that competitive capability defines the appropriate HRM policy and practices.** According to the best fit approach, HPWS practices are appropriate in organization with differentiator goal and traditional HRM (Taylorist way) fits to costleader goal (Arthur 1992; Schuler and Jackson 1987). Both, OM and HRM papers argue that this dichotomy is relevant even nowadays (Legge, 2006). Differentition is related to uniqueness, total quality management, quality management, flexible specialization, high mix, small batches, international competition, technologyintense processes, quality based competation, and high ratio of value added. Traditional way of work organization is typical in costleader firms characterized by low cost production, high volume, low mix, and massproduction. Anecdotical and empirical works support this approach. Sakakibara et al. (1997) propose a best fit approach of lean production system. Youndt et al. (1996) adapted best fit approach of HRM to modern production systems (TQM), and their assumptions can be used in studying other systems as well (eg. lean). Altogether, traditional work organization of costleader firms means that use and effectiveness of HPWS is less relevant in this settings.

3. Combined approach is a terminology emphasizing the possible impact of contingency factors on best practices. **Combined approach integrates best practice and best fit approaches. It assumes that organization adapts best practices in every context, however it**

acknowledges for example the impact of competitive capabilities. Combined approach proposes the use and effectiveness of HPWS practices for costleaders and differentiators as well. It underlines however that the differentiators will use HPWS practices to a greater extent and more effective compared to costleaders. Only a few studies support this approach in OM (Jayaram, Droge, and Vickery 1999). HRM papers testing this approach draw a mixed picture. Competitive capabilities have limited impact: differentiators seem to deploy training and development to a greater extent. Unfortunately, combined approach in HRM literature does not have a special focus on producers or on manufacturing strategy choices.

Altogether, best fit and combined approach relate HPWS practices to differentiation strategy. According to these approaches costleaders operate with a more traditional work organization, so they rely on HPWS to less extent. Table 1 summarizes the previously discussed considerations and findings in relation to each approach.

Table 1 HRM practices (use and effectiveness) and competitive capabilities

Approach / **Competitive capabilities (competitive priorities)**		**Best practice (based on lean production literature)**	**Best fit**	**Combined**
Assumptions	**Costleader**	**HPWS practices**	**Traditional workorganization** (linked to Taylorist way)	**lower level of use of HPWS practices**
	Differentiator		**HPWS practice**	**higher level of use of HPWS practices**
Literature review		- dominant approach in the literature - conceptual considerations propose the adoption of other approaches - findings of empirical studies are mixed, that highlight contingency factors	- supported by empirical findings (one emipirical study in OM) - conceptual considerations - study of quality management and production in HRM literature	- mixed results of empirical findings; differentiators are less advanced in HPWS than this approach proposes - one conceptual work in OM - production is not studied in HRM
Source		OM articles dealing with lean production system	OM and HRM papers	

Based on the literature review two RQs related to HRM in lean production were developed. Combined approach gave the conceptual background of RQs and expectations (Figure 2):

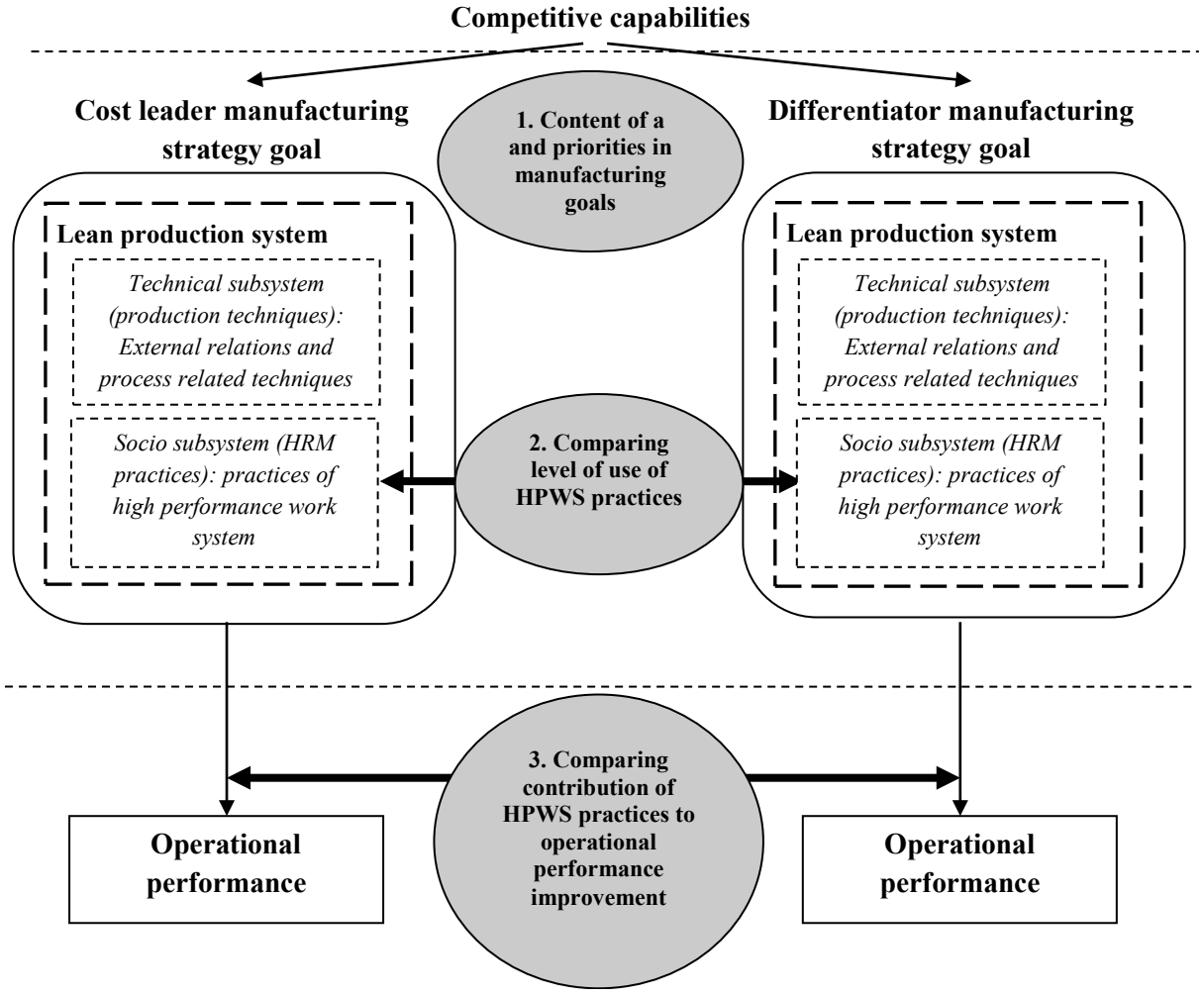
Research question 2: Do manufacturing strategy goals influence the level of use of HPWS practices in lean production?

Expectation: Lean producers with differentiator manufacturing strategy goals use HPWS practices to a greater extent than lean producers with costleader manufacturing strategy goals.

Research question 3: How do manufacturing strategy goals impact the contribution of HPWS practices to operational performance improvement in lean production?

Expectation: Lean producers with differentiator manufacturing strategy goals use HPWS practices more efficient than lean producers with costleader manufacturing strategy goals.

Figure 2 Research questions – level of use and effectiveness of HPWS practices by lean producers with different manufacturing goals



Altogerher, lean producers with differentiator manufacturing strategy goals use HPWS practices to a greater extent and use them more efficient than lean producers with costleader strategy goals.

Analyses were made using the database of the fifth round of International Manufacturing Strategy Survey (see details on the survey and database in Matyusz (2012) and Demeter (2000)). IMSS survey consitsts of production industries ISIC 28-35. 725 business units from 21 countries participated in the fifth round of the survey in 2009/2010. The final sample was reduced to 397 business units after selecting larger manufacturing firms (over 100 employees) and testing the quality of the database and variables. Since this survey serves more general purposes the inquiry of a narrow focus (HRM in lean productions) is limited and results require careful interpretations.

RQs (and derived hypotheses) were analyzed with statistical methods.

To answer RQ1 cluster analysis was used to define groups of production firms with different manufacturing goals.

In RQ2 levels of use of HPWS practices of costleader and differentiator lean producers were compared with ANOVA.

RQ3 tests the moderator effect of manufacturing goals. Moderation was tested using group comparision and interaction effect.

3. Results and findings

3.1. Manufacturing strategy goals

At the end of the first decade of 2000s manufacturing strategy goals of large production firms are bipolar: only cost leader and differentiator strategies can be identified. No other manufacturing strategy goal emerged. Especially innovation-related goals lost their importance. At that time the proportion of costleader producers has doubled up to about 40 percents from 20 percents. Differentiator producers highlight quality, variety, speed and services (Table 2).

Table 2 Manufacturing goals in two clusters

Competitive capabilities	**Manufacturing strategy goals**		Quality- and flexibility-oriented	Cost-oriented	**Difference**
			Cluster 1	Cluster 2	
	Variable	**N**	**224**	**173**	
Price	Lower selling prices		3.78 (7)	**3.99** (1)*	-0.21
Flexibility	Offer new products more frequently		**3.53** (9)	2.27 (9)	1.26
	Greater order size flexibility		**3.85** (6)	2.57 (8)	1.28
	Wider product range		**3.70** (8)	2.68 (7)	1.02
Quality	Superior conformance to customer specification		**4.40** (2)	3.70 (3)	0.70
	Superior product design and quality		**4.46** (1)	3.79 (2)	0.67
Time	Faster deliveries		**4.24** (4)	3.14 (6)	1.10
	Mode dependable deliveries		**4.36** (3)	3.59 (4)	0.77
Services	Superior customer service (after-sales and/or technical support)		**4.22** (5)	3.17 (5)	1.05
Number of lean producers			158	112	
Number of non-lean producers			66	61	

Note: **highest value in the two clusters** (realitve importance in a particular cluster)
Significant (p=0,000) in all varialbes, *p=0,045

Costleader strategy is called cost-oriented manufacturing strategy goal and differentiation is called quality- and flexibility-oriented manufacturing strategy goal.

Based on the answer to RQ1 I could refine RQ2 and RQ3 and transferred them into hypotheses:

RQ2s: Do manufacturing strategy goals influence the level of use of HPWS practices in lean production?

Expectation: Lean producers with differentiator manufacturing strategy goals use HPWS practices to a greater extent than lean producers with costleader manufacturing strategy goals.

Hypothesis 1: Quality- and flexibility-oriented lean producers use HPWS practices to a greater extent than cost-oriented lean producers.

RQ3: How do manufacturing strategy goals impact the contribution of HPWS practices to operational performance improvement in lean production?

Expectation: Lean producers with differentiator manufacturing strategy goals use HPWS practices more efficient than lean producers with costleader manufacturing strategy goals.

Hypothesis 2: Quality- and flexibility-oriented lean producers use HPWS practices more efficiently than cost-oriented lean producers.

3.2. Characteristics of lean producers

The sample of lean producers consists of 270 business units. Hypotheses are tested on the sample of lean producers. Among lean production techniques process-orientation plays the most important role. It is followed by pull and quality management. The use of TPM program is ranked last (Table 3).

Table 3 Lean producers in the sample – operationalized with lean production techniques

Variable	Lean (N=270)	Non-lean (N=127)	ANOVA	Average
Process-orientation	3.85	2.50	F=182.093 Sig.=0.000	3.42
Pull production	3.63	2.24	F=166.724 Sig.=0.000	3.18
Quality management	3.67	2.21	F=295.489 Sig.=0.000	3.17
TPM program	3.41	2.13	F=166.719 Sig.=0.000	3.00

3.3. Hypothesis 1: level of use of HPWS practices in lean production environment

It is assumed that level of use of HPWS practices differs between cost-oriented and quality- and flexibility-oriented lean producers. According to my results, **level of use of HPWS practices does not differ in the two goups (H1 is rejecets, Table 4)**. In accordance with previous studies differences revealed in lean system configuration were found in the technical subsystems. Quality- and flexibility-oriented lean producers are more advanced in the use of lean production techniques compared to cost-orriented lean producers.

Socio subsystems of lean producers with cost-orinted and quality- and flexibility-oriented manufacturing strategy goals are similar. There are only small differences between the two groups, however some differences contradicts conceptual assumptation of the thesis:

- quality- and flexibility-oriented lean producers emphasize quality improvement and involvement (decentralization)
- cost-oriented lean producers have a higher proportion of multi-skilled workers and they use rotation, training and groupwork to a greater extent.

Table 4 HPWS practices (standardized values) and manufacturing strategy goals

HPWS practice	Variable	Quality- and flexibility-oriented (N=158) (original answers)	Költség-orientált (N=112) (original answers)	ANOVA	Average
Hierarchy	Number of organizational levels	0.0636 (3.87)	**-0.0249 (3.77)**	F=0.528 Sig.=0.468	0.0269 (3.83)
Quality improvement, involvement	Involveved in process improvement activities	**0.2462 (3.51)**	0.0807 (3.34)	F=1.979 Sig.=0.161	0.1776 (3.44)
	Contnuous improvement	***0.4513 (3.94)***	*0.2673 (3.71)*	*F=3.275 Sig.=0.071*	*0.3749 (3.84)*
Groupwork	Functional teamwork	0.0019 (57.31)	**0.0710 (59.52)**	F=.336 Sig.=0.563	0.0304 (58.23)
Training	Training (log)	0.1378 (25.68)	**0.1473 (26.41)**	F=0.007 Sig.=0.935	0.1418 (25.99)
Job-enrichment, rotation, job-enlargement	*Multi-skilled worker*	*-0.0601 (44.77)*	***0.1526 (50.63)***	*F=2.953 Sig.=0.087*	*0.0281 (47.20)*
	Rotation	0.0829 (3.14)	**0.1522 (3.21)**	F=0.294 Sig.=0.588	0.1116 (3.17)
Decent-ralization	Autonomy	**0.0967 (3.12)**	-0.0103 (3.02)	F=0.765 Sig.=0.382	0.0523 (3.08)
	Delegation	**0.2590 (3.31)**	0.2387 (3.29)	F=0.030 Sig.=0.862	0.2506 (3.30)

Note: **higher value**; *significant at p=0.1*

According to my results, lean producers with different manufacturing strategy goals build different lean system configuration in which the same socio subsystem works with slightly different technical subsystem.

Lean experts and lean advocates argue that maturing lean system means elaboration of its practices. In other words, a lean system is continually built on a higher level of use of its elements. My findings underline that this is not a universal way of deploying lean production system because levels of use of elements differ by manufacturing strategy goals. Lean production system is still an integrated socio-technical system in which the level of use of HPWS practices has a limit.

3.4. Hypothesis 2: effectiveness of HPWS practices in lean production environment

To reduce the number of dependent HPWS variables were transformed into HRM factors using factor analysis (Talbe 5).

Talbe 5 HRM factors in analyzing moderation

Latent variable	HPWS practice	Variable in IMSS questionnaire	1	2	3
Involvement and development	Practices related to quality improvement	Involved in process improvement activities	0.720		
		Continuous improvement	0.748		
	Decentralization	Delegation	0.699		
	Training	Training	0.699		
Employee	Task	Multi-skilled worker		0.844	
		Rotation		0.843	
Groupwork	Groupwork	Functional team			0.961

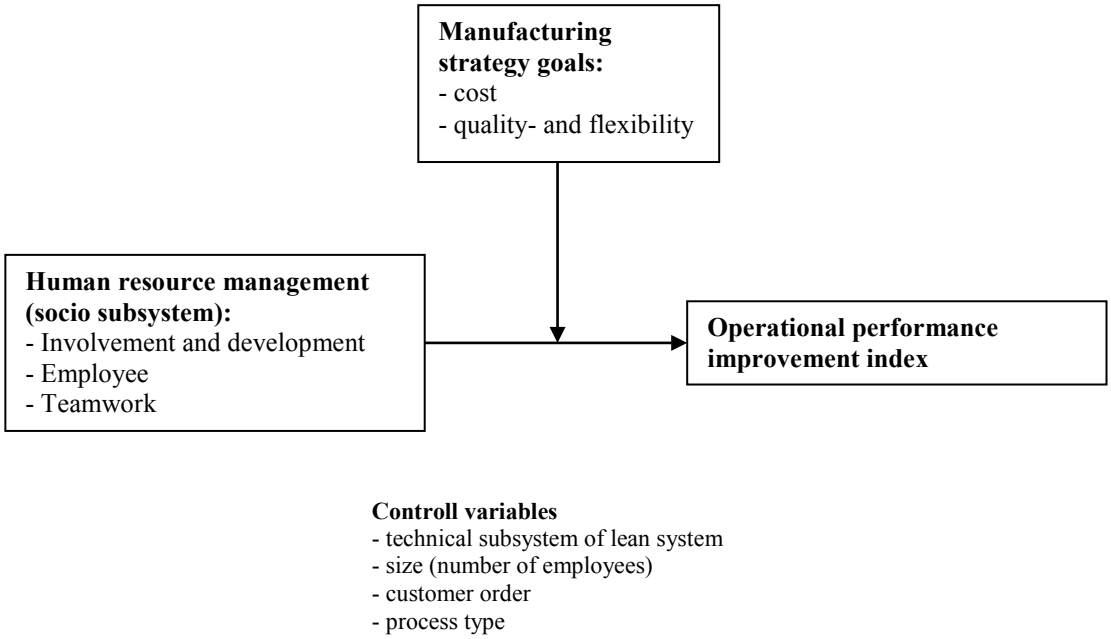
Based on the results of group comparison (Figure 4) and interaction effect the thesis conculded:

(1) HRM factors do not have any impact on operational performance improvement in lean production;

(2) according to the analysis of group comparison, HRM factors do not effect operational performance improvement;

(3) according to the analysis of interaction effect, relation between HRM factors and operational performance improvement are not impacted by manufacturing strategy goals.

Figure 4 Testing hypothesis 2 – group comparison



Based on my results Hypothesis 2 can not be supported. **Use of HPWS practices does not have any impact on operational performance improvement. So both strategies are inefficient to utilize HRM. Altogether, HRM does not contribute to performance improvement of large producers, neither in general (Matyusz 2012) nor related to employee-focused programs like lean**.

Generalizibility of the findings is weak because of problems encountered in operationalization. Lean production techniques relate to elements of internal lean system and only a limited set of HPWS practices are considered. Careful interpretation of the results is required because of the use of an international cross-sectional database and the possible impact of the recession. Further works should clarify cultural issues that are ignored in this study, while it is often analyzed in HRM literature.

This thesis rejected the impact of manufacturing strategy goals on lean socio subsystem, however it still underlines the importance of HPWS in large lean producers. Large lean producers put above average efforts in deploying HPWS practices. These efforts indicate that the standardized set of HPWS practices acts as a qualifier cretiron. Qualifier criterion means that large (lean) producers can achieve better performance, if they employ multi-skilled

worker who is trained, able to work in groups and can be involved in improvement activities. However, even these companies are unable to improve their performance trough HPWS practices. To utilize the potential of HPWS practices a more mature technical subsystem and better HRM is required.

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