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# When do bundles of high performance work systems reduce employee absenteeism? The moderating role of workload

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## ABSTRACT



Although Human Resource Management (HRM) scholars have frequently called for a more contextualized approach to HRM, there is still a limited understanding of how the HRM-employee outcome relationship varies under different conditions. This study tests a model that positions workload as a moderator of the relationship between perceived skill-, motivation- and opportunity-enhancing High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) and employee absenteeism. Using data from 194 employees, the results revealed that under high workloads, perceived opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices reduce absenteeism. However, workload did not influence the relationship between skill-enhancing and motivation-enhancing HPWS and absenteeism. The findings highlight that demanding work conditions in the form of a high workload can alter the relationship between HRM and key employee outcomes in such a way that the benefits of some HR practices become particularly useful when employees really need them. In addition, the findings underline the need to focus on the differential effects of skill-, motivation- and opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices for a richer understanding of the HRM-employee outcome relationship.

## KEYWORDS

HPWS; ability; motivation- and opportunity-enhancing HPWS bundles; absenteeism; contingency approach; workload

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, a substantial body of research has shown that more intensive use of high performance work systems (HPWS) is associated with positive employee-centered outcomes, like higher individual performance (e.g., Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009), lower turnover (e.g., Gardner, Wright, & Moynihan, 2011) and higher work attendance

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(e.g., Kehoe & Wright, 2013). HPWS have been defined as a set of complementary HR practices (including rigorous selection and recruitment procedures, training and skill development, career development opportunities, performance appraisal, rewards, and employee involvement) designed to contribute to organizational efficiency and effectiveness by enhancing employees' skills, motivation and opportunities to contribute at work (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kallenberg, 2000). Extending this logic, scholars have recently shown that skill-, motivation- and opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices impact employee outcomes in a heterogeneous way, suggesting that decomposing the HPWS construct into three dimensions is particularly important for gaining a better understanding of the HPWS–employee outcome link (e.g., Gardner et al., 2011; Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012). There has also been a growing focus on employees' perceptions of and attitudes toward HPWS practices that are implemented within organizations (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii & Wright, 2008). Indeed, scholars have shown that employees' attitudes (like commitment) and subsequent behaviors at work (like absenteeism and turnover) are more shaped by employees' perceived experiences of HPWS than by 'actual' implemented HPWS practices (Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, & Croon, 2013; Liao et al., 2009).

Despite these developments, remarkably little research has been devoted to the conditions under which different HPWS practices, 'actual' or perceived, influence employee outcomes (Peccei, Van de Voorde, & Van Veldhoven, 2013). This is important to investigate as Human Resource Management (HRM) scholars have suggested that a wide range of individual, organizational, cultural and institutional factors may affect the HPWS–employee outcome relationship (Bal, Kooij, & De Jong, 2013; Jiang, Takeuchi, & Lepak, 2013; Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, & Gould-Williams, 2011). Indeed, some researchers have even wondered whether it makes sense at all to think of HRM and outcomes in terms of universally valid relationships (e.g., Delery & Doty, 1996; Johns, 2006). The few empirical studies following this line of enquiry have indeed revealed a number of variables that can affect the relationship between HPWS and employee outcomes, including the sector (Blom, Kruijen, Van der Heijden, & Van Thiel, 2018), employee age (Kooij, Jansen, Dijkers, & De Lange, 2010), job control (Jensen, Patel, & Messersmith, 2013), trust (Innocenti, Pilati, & Peluso, 2011), procedural and interactional justice (Kuvaas, 2008) and team cohesion and task complexity (Chang, Jia, Takeuchi, & Cai, 2014) to name a few. These findings underscore the need for more empirical research exploring *when* different bundles of HPWS practices affect employee outcomes.

Accordingly, and consistent with a more contextualized approach to HRM, we examine the moderating role of demanding working conditions in the form of workload in the relationship between perceived bundles of skill-, motivation- and opportunity-enhancing HPWS and absenteeism. A large proportion of the working population are confronted with high levels of workload; for example, in Europe, 36% of workers report working to tight deadlines, while 33% report working at high speed (Eurofound, 2015). Such high levels of workload is a key precursor of employee ill-health and absenteeism (Darr & Johns, 2008). Yet despite recognized links between these prevalent experiences, health-related problems such as stress, and organizational outcomes such as absenteeism (Darr & Johns, 2008), the moderating role of workload has received no attention in the extant literature on the HPWS–employee outcome relationship.

In the present study, we draw on well-established theoretical approaches to construct two sets of hypotheses. Building upon Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), we posit that for employees who face high levels of workload, the resources and support provided by HPWS will become especially useful in reducing employee absenteeism levels. Indeed, the propositions of both COR theory and the JD-R model postulate that job resources, including HR practices, gain particular saliency in the context of high demands (e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2018).

This article contributes to the strategic HRM literature on HPWS and employee outcomes in three ways. First, we extend HRM research by adopting a contingency perspective in order to examine under what conditions perceived HPWS have beneficial effects on employee outcomes (Bal et al., 2013; Jensen et al., 2013; Peccei et al., 2013). In particular, we address a blind spot in the HRM literature by empirically testing to what extent the link between perceived HPWS and absenteeism depends upon the level of job demands experienced by employees, that is, their workload. Much of the existing work in this area have investigated the psychological and motivational mechanisms through which HPWS influence employee (health-related) outcomes (Jiang et al., 2013; Lepak, Jiang, Han, Castellano, & Hu, 2012). As such, it has largely ignored the possibility that the relationship between HPWS and outcomes might depend on the particular work demands employees are confronted with.

Second, in investigating the aforementioned research gap, we differentiate between the three sets of HPWS practices – those that are skill-enhancing (recruitment and selection; training and development), motivation-enhancing (performance appraisal and rewards) and opportunity-

enhancing (participation, autonomy, and communication). In so doing, we connect with a growing body of literature that emphasizes the differential effect of bundles of HR practices on employee outcomes (e.g., Boxall, Ang, & Bartram, 2011; Gardner et al., 2011; Jiang et al., 2012). This so called bundle based approach is rarely applied albeit it provides important insight into which set of practices are most relevant for the creation of desired outcomes, that is, reduced absenteeism (Jiang et al., 2012). Indeed, Boxall et al. (2011) argue that it is important to be aware that different bundles of HR practices can be pushing in different directions.

Finally, departing from a significant body of strategic HRM research capturing managerial reports of HPWS, the present study represents a contribution by assessing employees' perceptions of the HPWS in place. Some existing research has examined the link between HPWS and absenteeism through managerial reports of the HR practices (e.g. Guest & Peccei, 2001; Guthrie, Flood, Liu, & MacCurtain, 2009). Although important in its own right, such an approach ignores the potential for variability in employee perceptions of HPWS which is imperative to capture (Boon, Belschak, Den Hartog, & Pijnenburg, 2014; Jiang, Hu, Liu, & Lepak, 2017). Moreover, scholars have argued that due to manager's tendency to overstate the extent of HR practice implementation, gathering employee perceptions of the practices is believed to represent a more reliable estimate (Guest, 2011).

In what follows, we first review the nature of the primary association between perceived HPWS and absenteeism. Then, we theorize how workload may moderate the direct effects of bundles of HPWS on absenteeism.

### **Theoretical background and hypotheses**

Employee absenteeism can be defined as a form of withdrawal behavior whereby employees avoid unfavorable work situations by not showing up for work (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). Employee absenteeism is regarded as a root cause of losses in productivity and company performance (Neuborne, 2003). In Europe, absenteeism rates are between 3 and 6% of working time and are estimated to cost about 2.5% of GDP (Eurofound, 2010). Employee absenteeism is a serious outcome for organizations as it is usually seen as one of the first stages in the quitting process (Bowen, 1982) as employees attempt to increase the psychological and physical distance between themselves and the organization (Farrell & Peterson, 1984). Therefore, investigating strategies to reduce absenteeism is critical not only because of the detrimental consequences it may have on the employee (i.e. ill health) and the organization (i.e. losses in company performance), but also because at this stage of the

withdrawal process, management can still take action to avoid absenteeism culminating into turnover (Allisey, Noblet, Lamontagne, & Houdmont, 2014). Two decades of empirical research has shown that the use of HPWS are associated with reduced employee absenteeism (e.g., Zatzick & Iverson, 2011; Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005; Guthrie et al., 2009). Based on the absenteeism literature (Johns, 1997; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009), the stress model offers a central explanation as to why employees are more likely to be absent from work. However, previous research also shows that employees who possess more resources are less likely to suffer from job-related stress (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). Hence, the resources provided by HPWS practices (e.g. better development and career opportunities, performance feedback, rewards, job autonomy and participation) reduce absenteeism by protecting employees against stress (Boon, Belschak, Den Hartog, & Pijenburg, 2014). Both the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) recognize how resources such as HPWS, are both (1) functional in achieving work goals and (2) help employees deal with their job demands i.e. a high workload (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). In line with previous research in strategic HRM (Boon et al., 2014; Kehoe & Wright, 2013), we position HPWS as important resources, which, should make employees less likely to be absent. However, we depart from previous research by suggesting that the relationship between perceived HPWS and absenteeism depends on the levels of workload experienced by employees.

### **The moderating role of workload in the HPWS-absenteeism link**

One of the propositions of the JD-R model is that individuals are more likely to draw on their resources under more stressful conditions – including those induced by high job demands (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). Similarly, Hobfoll's (2002) COR theory argues that the acquisition (strengthening or augmenting) of resources, and the accompanying positive outcomes, become increasingly important in the context of resource loss. This implies that resources acquire particular salience in the context of high job demands. To illustrate, Van Woerkom, Bakker and Nishii (2016) showed that job resources were associated with reduced employee absenteeism only for those employees who had to cope with high work demands, but not for those who experienced low work demands.

Following this line of reasoning, we argue that the effects of perceived HPWS on employee absenteeism should be considered in light of employee work demands. Specifically, HPWS which constitute valuable

job resources for employees should become particularly important when workload levels are high (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). Indeed in such a situation of high workload, employees are in more need of the cognitive, motivational and energetic resources inherent to a HPWS system to deal with demanding work conditions. Employees who have access to HPWS practices may be more likely to experience demanding work conditions as a situation they can handle, rather than as stressful and debilitating (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Biron, 2010).

We anticipate that all dimensions of HPWS provide employees with valuable resources and support, and thereby positively influence employee outcomes. At the same time, in line with a bundle based approach (Jiang et al., 2012), we purport it is possible that skill, motivation and opportunity dimensions of HPWS may differ in the degree to which they influence absenteeism under demanding work conditions, that is, workload. This is because each of these dimensions serves a different purpose, and may be more or less helpful in tackling the copious challenges confronted at work (Boxall et al., 2011; Jiang et al., 2012; Veld, Paauwe, & Boselie, 2010).

Skill-enhancing HPWS practices like selection, training and development are designed to ensure that employees have the organization-specific knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) needed to meet the demands of the job. Such practices help provide employees with the knowledge, skill utilization and learning resources required to adequately perform their job (Boon et al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2012). Employees facing high levels of workload are more likely than those with low or moderate workloads to benefit from a match between their KSA and their job requirements, and are more likely to find value in learning and career opportunities (Bakker, Van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou, 2010). This means, in turn, that skill-oriented HPWS are likely to reduce absenteeism at least somewhat more among employees facing high workloads than among their counterparts whose work is less demanding.

Motivation-enhancing practices like benefits and promotion opportunities stimulate employees to attend work even under stressful work conditions, because they offer assurance that the additional effort invested to cope with more demanding working conditions will be positively appraised and rewarded by the organization. Previous research has shown that employees who experience an imbalance between their efforts and the resources they receive back from the organization, that is, appreciation and rewards, experience increased feelings of stress and are absent more often (Biron & de Reuver, 2013; Geurts, Schaufeli, & Rutte, 1999).

Opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices are those that increase employees' opportunities to contribute to the organization. They include



policies designed to empower and involve employees, for instance by strengthening communication among coworkers and between employees and managers, allowing employees more access to information, and giving them more control over day-to-day decision making within their jobs (Jiang et al., 2012). Previous research has shown that such empowered and involved employees are better able to cope with more demanding working conditions (Bakker et al., 2010). In particular, highly skilled workers with unstructured, complex jobs (which matches the sample in the present study) work more effectively when they have the latitude to make their own decisions about how to organize their work (Chung-Yan, 2010; Frese & Zapf, 1994). Consequently, we expect that ‘when things get tough’, employees who perceive more opportunity-enhancing HPWS are more likely to experience their workload as a situation they can handle.

We also expect that opportunity-enhancing HPWS will have an even stronger effect on absenteeism under a high workload than skill- and motivation-enhancing practices for two primary reasons. First, opportunity-enhancing practices create the conditions under which the other two bundles operate. Indeed, Boxall and Macky (2009, p. 12) argue that ‘it is the choice to improve employee involvement opportunities in the work process that leads on to the ability (A) and motivation (M) dimensions’. In effect, opportunity-enhancing practices form the building block upon which the ability and motivation practices are required to improve employee and organizational outcomes. That is, however good an employee’s skills or training, and however generous the firm’s appraisal and reward systems, both are of little value if employees lack opportunities to display their skills and abilities (Lepak, Liao, Chung, & Harden, 2006). Secondly, motivation-enhancing and skill-enhancing practices are less focused on improving the situation of the employee and their well-being than opportunity-enhancing practices (Boon et al., 2014). As a result they are less likely to ameliorate withdrawal behavior such as absenteeism. Indeed the JD-R model for example recognizes that, above all resources, autonomy and control are the most pivotal when it comes to enabling employees to cope with demands such as workload (e.g. Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Following the above arguments, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses 1a-c: Workload moderates the relationship between perceived skill- (2a), motivation- (2b), and opportunity-enhancing (2c) HPWS practices and absenteeism, such that the negative relationship between these practices and absenteeism is stronger under conditions of high rather than low levels of workload.



Hypotheses 2: Perceived opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices are more negatively related to absenteeism under conditions of high workload than are perceived skill- and motivation- enhancing HPWS practices.

## Method

### *Sample and procedure*

This study was conducted in a single company in the Netherlands that provides mail services within the Netherlands and parcel and logistic services worldwide. Corporate HR invited the researchers to survey professional staff members at the firm's corporate headquarters. The staff worked in various departments within the firm (e.g., finance, legal, HR, and corporate communications). A total of 782 employees with fixed contracts were asked to complete a web-based survey. A cover letter that accompanied the questionnaire guaranteed respondents' confidentiality. The cover letter also informed potential respondents that the goal of the study was to examine diverse issues in the workplace, such as work practices, and job-related behaviors and attitudes. By means of a unique code, questionnaire data could be linked with absenteeism data retrieved from the company's employee absence records.

In total, 205 employees completed the questionnaire (a response rate of 26.2%). Eleven respondents were excluded because they took disability leave within the study period (i.e., they were absent 20% or more working days), thus potentially biasing the dependent variable (absenteeism). Of the respondents, 67% were men, and 63.4% had completed a bachelor's degree. Participants' average age was 46.4 years ( $SD = 10.8$ ). To lessen concern about possible sampling bias, we used a non-parametric chi-squared test to compare the 194 employees in the sample with the full set of professional staff members working at the corporate headquarters along the two demographic variables. T-test results showed that the two groups were not statistically different in terms of age ( $\chi^2 = 2.78$ ;  $df = 1$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) or gender ( $\chi^2 = 0.89$ ;  $df = 1$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Furthermore, a one-sample t-test showed that employees in the sample had the same level of absenteeism as the full set of employees ( $t = .00$ ;  $df = 193$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

### *Measures*

*Employee-experienced HPWS.* The measure of HPWS comprised 23 items assessing employees' perceptions of the skill-, motivation- and opportunity-enhancing practices used in their organization.

The items were derived from Gardner et al. (2011) except where otherwise indicated.

In total the skill-enhancing practices were captured by seven items, namely those related to recruitment, selection, training and development (sample item: 'The results of the performance evaluation process are used to determine employees' training needs'). One of Gardner et al. (2011) original measures (on tuition reimbursement for completing college classes) was dropped as it was deemed irrelevant for the Dutch service industry. We supplemented the four remaining items of Gardner et al.'s measure with one item adapted from Snell and Dean (1992) ('Much money is spent in my unit on training employees') and two items assessing coaching on the job inspired by Macky and Boxall (2007).

Eight items measured motivation-enhancing practices, namely those related to performance appraisal and rewards (sample item: 'Qualified employees have the opportunity for promotion to positions of greater pay and/or responsibility within the company'). Two items in Gardner et al. (2011) original scale on the opportunity to earn group- and company-wide bonuses were dropped (deemed irrelevant for the company under study). The remaining four items from Gardner et al. (2011) were supplemented by four items adapted from Kinicki, Jacobson, Peterson and Prussia (2013) assessing the quality of the firm's performance management process.

The final eight items in the HPWS scale measured opportunity-enhancing practices, related to participation, communication and autonomy at work (sample item: 'Employees in this job are involved in formal participation processes'). We dropped one item from Gardner et al. (2011) (on employees' access to a reasonable and fair complaints process) because this item was deemed irrelevant in the Dutch work setting. The six remaining items from Gardner et al. (2011) were supplemented by two additional items tapping participation in decision-making and autonomy at work, one from Boon, Den Hartog, Boselie and Paauwe (2011) and the other from Veld, Paauwe and Boselie (2010).

All items with one exception were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'fully disagree' (1) to 'fully agree' (5). The exception was one item from the skill-enhancing scale which solicited hours of training per year. Following Gardner et al. (2011), the answers given to this item were recoded into five groups in conformity with the 5-point scale of the other items. Cronbach's alphas for the skill-, motivation- and opportunity-enhancing HPWS scales were .72, .75 and .86, respectively.

*Workload* was assessed using three items derived from the 'pace and amount of work' scale of the Dutch Questionnaire on the Experience

and Assessment of Work (QEEW) (Van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994). Employees were asked to rate their experience of time pressure, required working speed, and amount of work in their job (sample item: ‘Do you have to hurry?’). Participants responded on a 4-point scale from 1 (‘never’) to 4 (‘always’). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .85. Evidence for the validity of this scale has been reported in previous studies (e.g., Bakker et al., 2010).

*Absenteeism* was measured as the proportion of working days employees were absent in a 1-year period. Objective absenteeism figures were obtained from employee absence records maintained by the organization. To reduce the skewness of the distribution, a log transformation was applied to this variable (Guthrie et al., 2009).

*Control variables.* We controlled for gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age and commitment as they may be associated with absenteeism (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998; Wu & Chaturvedi, 2009). As the age of employees was not normally distributed (the kurtosis value was above  $-1.0$ ), we decided to distinguish between younger ( $\leq 45$ ) and older ( $> 45$ ) workers. Affective commitment was measured with a scale developed by Allen and Meyer (1990). Following Moideenkutty, Blau, Kumar and Nalakath (2001), we selected three of the five items with the highest factor loadings reported by Allen and Meyer (1990) (sample item: ‘I feel like “part of the family” at my organization’). Items were answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 = ‘strongly agree’). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .81.

## Results

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations and correlations for the focal variables used in the study. Only opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices are negatively correlated with absenteeism ( $r = -0.19^*$ ).

To test the hypothesized model, we used hierarchical regression analyses. Table 2 shows that workload significantly moderated the relationships between opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices and absenteeism ( $B = -.18^{**}$ ,  $s.e. = .07$ ), but not between skill-enhancing and motivation-enhancing HPWS practices, and absenteeism ( $B = .02$ ,  $s.e. = .08$ ;  $B = -.03$ ,  $s.e. = .07$ , respectively). Therefore, Hypothesis 1a and b were not supported.

To further examine the conditional direct effects of workload on the opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices-absenteeism association, we conducted simple slopes analyses under three different conditions of workload (at  $-1$  SD, mean, and  $+1$  SD). As Table 2 depicts, while under conditions of high levels of workload there is the expected negative association between opportunity-enhancing HPWS and absenteeism ( $B =$

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations and correlations between the study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	0.33	0.47							
2. Age	0.60	0.49	-.44**						
3. Commitment	4.32	1.22	-.10	.08					
4. Skill HPWS	3.01	0.61	.11	-.08	.27**				
5. Motivation HPWS	3.57	0.68	.09	-.06	.23**	.60**			
6. Opportunity HPWS	3.68	0.70	.04	-.00	.34**	.54**	.65**		
7. Workload	2.29	0.53	-.02	-.14*	.07	-.03	-.03	-.06	
8. Absenteeism	0.27	0.32	-.01	.02	-.19**	-.14	-.18*	-.04	-.10

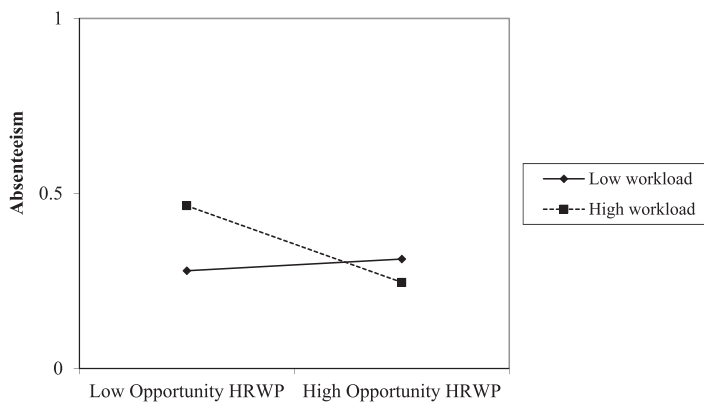
\* $p < .05$ .\*\* $p < .01$ ;  $n = 189$ ; min/max scores: Skill HPWS, Motivation HPWS, Opportunity HPWS (1–5); Workload (1–4); Commitment (1–7); Gender (0 = male, 1 = female); Age (0 =  $\leq 45$ , 1 =  $> 45$ ); Absenteeism: log 10 transformation (0–1.32).**Table 2.** Regression results for the conditional effects of workload on the relationship between skill-, motivation- and opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices and absenteeism.

Predictor	<i>B</i>	s.e.	<i>T</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
<i>F</i> (10,179)=2.72**				
Gender	-.01	.05	-0.16	.13
Age	.02	.05	0.38	
Commitment	-.05*	.02	-2.41	
Skill HPWS	-.09	.19	-0.50	
Motivation HPWS	.13	.16	0.83	
Opportunity HPWS	.35	.18	1.90	
Workload	.72**	.24	3.05	
Skill HPWS * Workload	.02	.08	0.30	
Motivation HPWS * Workload	-.03	.07	-0.38	
Opportunity HPWS * Workload	-.18**	.07	-2.42	
<b>Conditional direct effect of Opportunity HPWS on absenteeism</b>				
	<i>B</i>	s.e.	LLCI ULCI	
-1 SD	.03	.06	-0.08 to 0.15	
M	-.06	.04	-0.15 to 0.02	
+1 SD	-.16**	.05	-0.26 to -0.06	

\* $p < .05$ ;\*\* $p < .01$ ;  $n = 189$ ; unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5000; LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval 95%; UL = upper limit.

-.16\*\*, s.e.=.05, bootstrap 95% CI = -0.26 to -0.06). Under conditions of average and low workload the association between opportunity-enhancing HPWS and absenteeism is not significant ( $B = .03$ , s.e.= .06, bootstrap 95% CI = -0.08 to 0.15;  $B = -.06$ , s.e.= .04, bootstrap 95% CI = -0.15 to 0.02, respectively). We graphically illustrated the interaction by plotting two slopes of the moderating variable: -1 SD and +1 SD (see Figure 1). These results support hypotheses 1c.

Finally, based on our results that the moderation of high workload was significant for the opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices-absenteeism link, but not for the skill- and motivation-enhancing HPWS practices-absenteeism linkage, we can conclude that under conditions of high workload, the influence of opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices was stronger than that of skill- and motivation-enhancing HPWS practices, thereby confirming Hypothesis 2.



**Figure 1.** The relationship between opportunity HRWP and absenteeism as a function of workload: Curves for 2 different levels of the moderator ( $-1$  SD and  $+1$  SD of workload).

## Discussion

The present study provides evidence for the differential impact of HPWS bundles on employee behavior, and shows that some of these relationships are contingent upon the degree to which employees face high levels of workload.

In accordance with COR theory, employees who are confronted with resource loss as a result of a high workload are likely to cope better at work if they can replenish their resources through opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices (Bakker et al., 2010). Opportunity-enhancing practices empower employees by giving them more control over their work (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998), thereby enabling them to design or shape their own jobs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). This, in turn, makes those empowered employees more resilient in the face of a high workload, and therefore more likely to show up for work. The findings can also be interpreted using the JD-R model which also suggests that individuals are more likely to draw on their resources under stressful conditions – including those induced by high demands (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). In this regard HPWS are more likely to reduce absenteeism under conditions of high workload as resources gain particular saliency in the context of demands. It has been observed that employees who have access to HPWS may be more likely to experience demanding work conditions as a situation they can handle, rather than as stressful and debilitating (Bacharach et al., 2010). In the present study, the results suggest that when confronted with high levels of workload, employees can use their opportunity-enhancing practices to deal persistently with their overbearing workload and choose the right approach to better deal with the situation and avoid withdrawing from the organization, that is, absenteeism (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018).

We expected that skill-enhancing HPWS, like (e.g. rigorous selection, development and training), would better prepare employees for high levels of workload, and consequently lead to less absenteeism. However, we did not observe this under conditions of high workload. Likewise, although we anticipated that motivation-enhancing practices (i.e., those dealing with performance appraisals and rewards) would keep employees motivated to attend work even when this required additional effort (i.e., under demanding work conditions), this was not borne out by our analysis.

These findings may reflect the nature of the sample in our study. As our respondents were specialized, highly educated professionals, it may be that they had already benefited from organizational investment in training and skills development, and in performance-based compensation and rewards (Lepak & Snell, 2002). Consequently, skill- and motivation-enhancing HR practices might not have offered these professionals an extra source of resources in the form of enhanced competency levels and appreciation for compensatory effort respectively that would strengthen their capacity to cope with a high workload. For skill-enhancing HPWS, it may be that employees feel that they already have the abilities and skills to adequately cope and accomplish their tasks. Indeed, Jex, Bliese, Buzzell, and Primeau (2001, p. 401) highlight that 'it is logical to conclude that stressors would be much more threatening to those who do not perceive themselves as capable of performing their job tasks'. For motivation-enhancing HPWS, there was also no statistically significant moderating effect of workload. This could also reflect the view that Dutch employees in our sample do not directly benefit from more motivation-enhancing practices when faced with high workloads. Additional effort of employees might not have immediately been rewarded by the organization partly because of the existing rules and legislation governing pay in the Netherlands and therefore these practices might not influence employees' decision to withdraw from the workplace, that is, being absent when faced with high workloads. Moreover, performance management practices can help employees to grow, develop and boost their personal success in the long run, but may be something which doesn't help them deal with an overbearing workload in the short term (Aguinis & Pierce, 2008).

The results of the present study also reveal that under conditions of a high workload, opportunity-enhancing practices are the only such practices to reduce absenteeism. These results are in line with our expectations that opportunity-enhancing practices form the building block of HPWS bundles (Boxall & Macky, 2009) and that they are better geared towards improving the situation of the employees and their well-being (Boon

et al., 2011) which is particularly important in the context of an overbearing workload. It somewhat confirms the notion that resources associated with the JD-R model including involvement, control and participation in decision making have the strongest effect on health related outcomes (e.g. Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Overall, a significant theoretical implication of the findings is that the core premise of both COR theory (Hobfoll, 2002) and the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) which suggests that resources gain particular saliency in the context of high demands, does not hold for all types of job resources. Indeed, when looking at the salience of resources from a strategic HRM viewpoint, it appears that opportunity-enhancing practices are the only such practices that function according to the propositions of the well-established theoretical perspectives. It may be that the particular job resource provided should specifically match the demand (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). For example, in this case, skill-enhancing and motivation-enhancing practices may be less suited to dealing with an overbearing workload for the reasons outlined above.

Given the differential results regarding the impact of the different HPWS bundles in impacting absenteeism under conditions of high workload, our findings underscore the need to differentiate between practices in future research (Jiang et al., 2012). In fact, contrary to the widely held assumption that all practices need to be implemented concurrently, the present study shows, that for specialized, highly educated professionals, at least for the outcome of absenteeism, that only opportunity-enhancing practices are relevant for dealing with an over bearing workload.

### **Implications for practice**

Our results provide key insights for practitioners. In a professional context characterized by high workloads, HR systems designed to involve and empower employees to manage their own jobs may serve as an effective means to prevent high absence rates. This highlights the importance for organizations to invest in HR systems, particularly which focus on involving employees and garnering their participation in decision making, in order to avoid the costs associated with absenteeism. This is especially useful information if organizations have limited financial resources to invest in a comprehensive set of HPWS practices. Finding that opportunity-enhancing HPWS reduce absenteeism under high levels of workloads, demonstrates to managers, contrary to some of the critical arguments in the SHRM literature (e.g. Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000), that investing in HPWS are more likely to improve rather than impair employees' experiences at work (Guthrie et al., 2009).



Furthermore, our findings highlight the importance of employees' perceptions of HPWS practices. It is not sufficient for organizations to invest in designing and implementing HPWS if they fail to effectively communicate their existence to employees (e.g., Den Hartog et al., 2013). By communicating that the intended goal of the (opportunity-enhancing) HPWS practices reflects care, support, participation and autonomy at work; organizations can further reduce withdrawal behavior.

### **Limitations and future research**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the response rate was relatively low, and somewhat lower than the average response for studies using data collected from individuals (52.7% according to Baruch & Holtom, 2008). To assess the possible impact of subject attrition on our data, we examined the mean differences in the demographic variables and absenteeism between the respondents and non-respondents in the data collection. Based on the results obtained, we are reasonably confident that any attrition was random and hence unlikely to have biased our results (Little & Rubin, 1987).

Second, our study relied on self-reported data to measure the associations between bundles of HPWS and workload. The correlation among the variables in our model were rather modest, ranging from  $-.06$  to  $-.03$ , countering the common assumption that common method variance (CMV) is a universal inflator of correlations (Spector 2006). Moreover, CMV leads to a diminution of the interaction term, which makes interaction effects more difficult to find. This implies that finding interaction effects in data with possible CMV 'should be taken as strong evidence that an interaction effect exists' (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010, p. 470).

Third, our reliance on data from staff members in one logistic services organization in the Netherlands limits the generalizability of our findings. In the Netherlands, the influence of institutional factors on work-related issues is relatively large (Boselie, Paauwe, & Jansen, 2001), limiting managerial discretion in choosing to use specific HPWS practices (Rabl, Jayasinghe, Gerhart, & Kühlmann, 2014). In addition, prior research suggests that HPWS might have a stronger positive effect on individual outcomes in service compared to manufacturing industries (e.g., Liao et al., 2009). Therefore, future research should replicate this study in other industries and countries.

Fourth, our use of skill, motivation and opportunity enhancing practices were inspired by the influential study of Gardner et al. (2011). While the practices adopted are highly consistent with those used in the

mainstream strategic HRM literature (e.g. Subramony, 2009) and consistent with a recent review of the practices typically considered by researchers under each bundle (Gile, Buljac, & van de Klundert, 2018), they are by no means exhaustive. For example, contrary to some of the studies, we don't incorporate teamwork as an opportunity-enhancing practice, health care benefits and rostering and scheduling as motivation-enhancing practices and job description generation throughout job analysis as a skill-enhancing practice.

Finally, the data is cross-sectional. This means it is possible that employee outcomes influence the way employees perceive and appraise HPWS, rather than perceived HPWS affecting employee outcomes. Although, the causal relation between employee outcomes and employee perceptions of HPWS is established in the literature (Piening, Baluch, & Salge, 2013), longitudinal research is needed to further investigate the possibility of reverse causality and feedback loops in the HRM-employee outcome chain. Further longitudinal research could also explore the role of endured exposure to high and low levels of work demands.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study extends work in strategic HRM by demonstrating that the level to which employees experience demanding working conditions in the form of workload affects the link between opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices and absenteeism. These findings underline the importance of adopting a contingency perspective on the relationship between bundles of HPWS and behaviors, and suggest that investments in the different bundles of HPWS practices are more beneficial in some work contexts than in others.

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