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Building a High Performance Work Model: Opportunities for Human-Capital Resilience during Uncertain Times

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Abstract
The literature on the use of human resources to boost individual and collective organisational performance has been predominantly silent on whether a model can help show how it can be implemented in practice. As SMEs are pressurised to perform there is an urgent need for HRM practice and research to investigate whether developing such a model could contribute in deepening our understanding and knowledge of ‘how’ human capital can contribute to such an acute problem during uncertainty. This paper’s research results were collected from a survey of 85 managers and employees from four SMEs in the UK. The results were used to develop this paper’s main contribution, namely a ‘high performance work model’ which extends the theoretical foundations of resilience and contingency theories. The model also produce this paper’s second contribution, namely the concept of ‘human capital resilience’. The model and its theory will help SMEs to identify aspects they need to focus on in order to more effectively manage their human resources and secondly to show how performance management can be implemented in practice at the micro and macro levels. Doing so addresses a performance implementation gap in SMEs, enables their longer-term survival and builds their human capacity for the future. The number of SMEs surveyed and questionnaire categories are the study’s limitations. Areas for future HRM research are highlighted.

Keywords: performance, uncertainty, HRM, model, resilience, human capital
**Introduction**

SMEs are under pressure to perform during times of uncertainty (i.e. to learn how to become resilient – Mafabi et al., 2015). Uncertainties abound in examples such as the fast pace of change and the attendant need to cope (Dykes et al., 2018) whilst building on management employee relationships (Sverdrup & Stensaker, 2018; Rousseau & Shperling, 2003). The latter require that Human Resource managers are increasingly being pressurised to amend their practices (Van de Ven & Jing, 2012) and use their organisations’ meagre resources (Yang & Meyer, 2015), including insufficient financial capital (Naldi et al., 2007) in order to boost people’s performance (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2014). It is anticipated that doing so enables their organisations to survive in the longer term (Conz et al., 2017). The problem though is that these pressures and uncertainties have not only strained an already problematic manager/managed performance problem but it has also surfaced new questions on managers’ capacity to manage during times of uncertainty and increasing pressures. This implies that organisations’ ability to utilise knowledge (Miller et al., 2018) that could help generate some creativity (Alacovska, 2018), even via informal channels (Umney, 2016) underlie the deep-seated macro-level, organisational problems that HR professionals and research might crave that their propositions will offer some hope and scope (Jones & Macpherson, 2006). It therefore appears that the problem of organisational performance is linked to the need for organisations, HR managers and staff to learn how to adopt and sometimes adapt practices that help in fostering their resilience during uncertainty (Auer & Cazes, 2000; Mendy & Rahman, 2018).

In this paper I define resilience as the ability of managers and employees at the micro level to adapt to the organisational pressures at the macro-level so as to renew their capability of bouncing back from the pressures of uncertainty through efficient and effective use of resources – i.e. human and non-human (Cooper et al., 2013). The challenge however is the way organisations go about developing and sustaining such ability (Truss et al., 2013) not only as part of efforts to address management’s incapacity (Cunnigham, 2010) but also to foster better relationships (Rousseau & Shperling, 2004). This is not enough as the HRM literature and research are yet to build a high performance model to show how to develop human capital when the latter have been challenged by an endless list of pressures within SME contexts. To date the focus in the resilience and adaptation literature has been on structural mechanisms applied on people (Truss et al., 2013; Mossholder et al., 2011) by management use of resources (Reinhardt et al., 2018; Alacovska, 2018) in their anticipation to do so in a timely manner (Dykes et al., 2018) that enhances performance. Such actions might avoid resilience damage (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003) although HRM’s performance enhancing strategies have been applied inappropriately (Conz et al., 2017) thereby fostering uncertainty, job losses and precarious employment conditions (Auer & Cazes, 2000) in an era of pressures (Gunasekaran et al., 2011). Pressure to adapt during uncertain times is defined in this paper as a set of events which pose adverse effects on SMEs and their ability to survive amidst difficulties (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018; Smith & Tracy, 2016; Wright et al., 2014). The focus of this article is to highlight what happens when SMEs rely on traditional adaptation and HRM literatures (e.g. contingency model, change management strategies) to survive under merger adaptation pressures (Dirks et al., 2009). To be able to do so, I look into instances when employment relationships during SME mergers and post-mergers to build a model that leads to the introduction of a new theory on how to foster high performance work organisations and engender collective resilience.

The adapting to difficult merger and post-mergers literature hardly focuses on the role of resilience in restoring damaged employment relationships despite HRM’s keen interest in this area (Bach & Bordogna, 2011, Wilkinson, 1998; Ram & Edwards, 2003) and the seminal work in the Special Issue of *Work, Employment and Society). Welcoming as attempts at mending
damaged work relations might be (Dirks et al., 2011), the recommendation to involve unions (Fichter et al., 2011) and adopt adequate governance and structural mechanisms (Hoetker & Mellewigt, 2009) have not succeeded in making us more knowledgeable on how to address power struggles (Ferner et al., 2012), placate staff’s lack of involvement and pain (Lindgren et al., 2014) or even their apathy, resistance and antagonism to the proposed mechanistic structures (Thomas et al., 2011; Ford et al., 2008). An emerging story of how staff (management and employees) went about addressing their performance and resilience issues during times of uncertainty offered the basis for building a model, which is aimed at helping to address the employment relationship (in)capacities at the heart of SME organisations’ adverse adaptation contexts, theoretically and practically.

My contribution to the theoretical debates is as follows. Firstly, I contribute to the merger and post-merger adaptation’s theoretical foundation by identifying a gap, which is a lack of a model that highlights the contextual and relationship-based nature of Human Resource Management, employees and organisational interactions as a challenge to the traditional literature’s focus on hierarchical, mechanised structures that might have led to the damaged work relationships (Miller et al., 2018; Mendy & Rahman, 2019). On this basis, I develop a new high performance work model that recognises distinct human characteristics that have been missing in previous literatures’ over-emphasis on the structural mechanisms of work environments (Auer & Cazes, 2000). It is anticipated that my proposal will contribute to the type of creativity required (Alacovska, 2018) by looking into the formal and informal subjectivities and processes involved (Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015; Schilke & Cook, 2013) in HRM and organisations. Secondly, I postulate an innovative theoretical angle – ‘human capital resilience’ – which situationally appreciates and understands the ineffective employer-employee performance relationship and, more importantly, a dynamic work model of how to practically restore such a ‘renewal’ (Jones & Macpherson, 2006). The ‘restoration’ of human capital potential (Miller et al., 2018) needs to go beyond addressing HRM and organisational procedures and structures to address why these have contributed to the uncertainty in the first place and what can be done both practically and theoretically. Important as these human aspects are, what has been lacking is a theory like ‘human capital resilience’ theory which theoretically projects interaction/relationship issues at its core whilst providing a practical, organisationally-process-based tool simultaneously. Thirdly, this paper contributes to the HRM literature on performance and to do so innovatively (via model and theory building).

In the next section, the sources of the theoretical appointment is limited to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) given their neglect on how to develop resilience capacities in work. The storyline developed (similar to Sarpong & Maclean’s (2017) ‘microstoria’) was found to have contributed to the arguments on adaptability under uncertainty (Todnem By, 2005), resilience and contingency models/theories (Williams & Horodonic, 2016). These then provide bases for research insights, implications and future opportunities for HRM studies.

**Employment relations under uncertainty**

Kelly and Amburgey (1991) and Dunphy and Stace (1988) believe that organisational structures help facilitate behaviours needed to resolve unstable employment relationships (Conz et al., 2017; Vakola et al., 2004). However, the structures have come under strain from the speed, frequency, volatility and power struggles during times of change (Ferner et al., 2012; Cummings & Worley, 2005; Moran & Brightman, 2001). Although noted, management incompetence has not helped (Sanders et al., 2014) address performance issues where they matter – i.e. at the macro and micro-levels of adaptation. Such a mooted debate topic needs attention.
**Macro and micro level**

To find out what the nature of the uncertainty is and what impacts it had (Sanders et al., 2014) I distinguish two levels of analysis following Pryor et al.’s, (2007), Wischnevsky’s, (2004) and Smith and Lewis (2011) micro (i.e. individual) and Williams and Horodonic’s (2016) and Conz et al.’s (2015) macro-levels (organisational, national or even international). Reinhardt et al. (2018) identified the richness of the analysis to be had. Specific references are made to four SMEs in the UK contexts. The two levels have been selected to highlight the tensions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018) as well as aspects of complementarity (Smith & Tracy, 2016). The literature proposes an examination of vertical and horizontal communication in order to find out if tensions exists at the macro-organisational (Reckwitz, 2002) as well as at the sub/micro-cultural level (see Tragedy of the Commons’ - Smith and Lewis, 2011; Hardin, 2009). Such recommendation might have been triggered by the failure of the organisational mechanisms or structures (Cummings & Worley, 2005) that were anticipated to support performance and people-related activities (Southwick & Charney, 2018). More importantly, there has been an oversight on proposals on ‘how’ individual resilience might be developed as a way of dealing with uncertainty (Burnes, 2004) whilst simultaneously redressing HRM’s contribution to performance problems during such uncertain times.

At the macro-level-type organisations have come under strain when confronted with uncertainty (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017; Morley et al., 2015; Festing et al., 2013). The literature has responded by proposing a modelling of what happens between members (relationally) or speeding the implementation mechanisms at the macro-level (Dykes et al., 2018) so as to resolve the uncertainties (Top et al., 2015) and constant readjustments (Auer & Cazes, 2000). Other scholars have focused on what can be done at the micro-level as the tensions and conflicts persist when individuals seek to implement what is needed (Rousseau & Shperling, 2004). Such attempts have had negative impacts on members’ psychological wellbeing (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2014), their creativity and performance (Gupta & Singh, 2014) their knowledge distribution (Bendig et al., 2018) or retention (Hari et al., 2005) or lifelong learning capacity (Auer & Cazes, 2000). Such a situation highlighted a theoretical vacuum which demanded a look into developing overall capacity to address the tensions caused by the micro or macro-level of resilience to adversity (Mafabi et al., 2015; Coutu, 2002) as Jarzabkowski et al., (2018). These attempts are expected to resolve some of employment relationships and performance issues (Rousseau & Shperling, 2004). To see what can be contributed, resilience and contingency theories are explored and analysed next.

**Resilience theory**

The claim is made that the time for resilience research is upon us (Ates & Bititci, 2011) partly due to the frequency (Conz et al., 2017) and speed of uncertainty (Dykes et al., 2018). The need to investigate this aspect has been enhanced by the repeated nature of organisational and management’s implementation problems (Huy et al., 2014; Sorensen, 2011) and SME challenges (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2014; Gunasekaran et al., 2011). The coping mechanisms at micro (Conway & Monks, 2011) and macro levels (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017) are couched using the discourse of ‘bouncing back’ (Fredrickson, 2001). Resource-rich MNE firms (Mafabi et al., 2015; Coutu, 2002) have benefited at the expense of less-resource-rich firms (e.g. SMEs) that are left at the mercy of strategic situational factors (Cooper et al., 2013; Mendy, 2019). The challenge for HRM research and practice is to find out whether the structures and mechanisms facilitate positive attitudes despite the employment relations difficulties caused during uncertainty (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Cooper, 2013). To this end it would be interesting to ascertain the extent to which a redress of working relations has facilitated psychological capital, voice (Akhtar et al., 2016; Luthans, 2007a) and involvement in smaller
institutions (Rousseau & Shperling, 2004) given the importance that has been attributed to such claims. It is also theoretically claimed that high performance (Gupta & Singh, 2014; Cooper et al., 2013), entrepreneurship (Spillan & Parnell, 2006), new forms of labour relations (Bosch, 2004) and strategic flexibility (Hitt et al., 1998) could be developed at the micro-level. Debates still abound regarding what proposition is best suited to address both macro and micro-level uncertainty issues.

Therefore, the bulk of resilience literature focuses on comeback characteristics (Von, 2005) via learning (Jones & Macpherson, 2006), skills development (Bullough et al., 2014) ambidexterity (Stokes et al., 2014), high performance (Lepak & Snell, 1999), entrepreneurship (Jenkins et al., 2014; Auer & Cazes, 2000). Limited attention is paid to a wide range of contexts (Winch & Bianchi, 2006) and SMEs are left to devise their own plans (Mossholder et al., 2011; Truss et al., 2013) by falling back to the same mechanisms that did not work before (Seligman, 2011).

**Contingency theory**

The contingency model of HRM is examined here given its promises to redress relational issues during uncertainty. It assumes the possibility of ascertaining the nature and impact of work relations between an organisation’s internal, external activities and those aspects that need adaptability (Fiedler (1964; 1986). Addressing the environmental challenges (Uhlenbruck et al., 2017), including the structural and speed constraints of doing so (Dykes et al., 2018) remain polarised debate topics as scholars are yet to agree as to whether the HRM and organisational structures should be kept open or closed (Daskalaki et al., 2015; Jack et al., 2013). It is therefore implicit in the theoretical discussions that HRM, organisational activities or characteristics are needed to address the employment relations problem per se. More importantly, whether the structures, procedures and cultures and capacities are dynamic enough to enhance resilience (Huselid, 1995; Lepak & Snell, 1999) among SME members more sustainably during merger, post-merger uncertainties and failures (Banal-Estañol & Seldeslachts, 2011) demands research attention (Mendy & Rahman, 2018).

Pfeffer (1994) believes that organisations ought to be aligned with external contexts in line with Uhlenbruck et al.’s (2017) work on mergers and acquisitions. This ‘best fit’ model was assumed by its proponents to remedy the types of mechanisms needed for adapting to adversities. However, part of what created the adversity in the first instance could be a lack of trust in the management/non-management work relationship (Sverdrup & Stensaker, 2018), a competitive external environment, lack of personal, individual ownership and overall instability (Rousseau & Shperling, 2004; Auer & Cazes, 2000). However, Fiedler (1964; 1986) and Scott (1981) were quick to recognise that leadership capacity is not the only driver to address adverse volatility (see Sorensen et al., 2011) or the structural difficulties caused by the mechanisms adopted (Conz et al., 2017). Something else is required to add to the literature’s focus on structures and mechanisms, including creativity, appropriate decision-making (Hudson et al., 2015), management capabilities (Bendig et al., 2018), varied range of contributions and resources (Yang & Meyer, 2015; Gunasekaran et al., 2011) as well as a process of ‘how’ to do so in work relationships (Mendy & Rahman, 2018). Even at the macro-organisational level, the literature’s emphasis on staff competences as a missing resource (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 2001) only captures the formal structural aspects like what companies need to do in areas like staff retention and development (Horgan & Muhlau, 2005; Dolan et al., 2005; Lepak & Snell, 2002) and employee voice and communication (Perkins & White, 2011; Dykes et al., 2018). An examination of research methodology is conducted next to see whether a process-type model can help.
Research Methodology

Data collection

This paper relied on a survey informed by appropriate literature. From an initial twelve-category questionnaire, an initial pilot test with the help of three additional experienced researchers in the field, twenty top and middle managers, twenty SME members and four SMEs in the UK was whittled down to ten. All of the questionnaire categories are in tandem with those identified in the literature. People’s characteristics (e.g. their biases) were included in the data collection phase as part of the storyline’s development and model building.

For data collection purposes an empirical survey was conducted to look into whether people’s relationships and the pressures to perform facilitated resilience behaviours (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003). A cross-section of a randomly selected sample of management and other SME members were interviewed. Each participant proved knowledgeable about the nature of the adversities and types of adaptation measures in line with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) data confirmability.

To heighten the validity and response rate a face-to-face survey was conducted separately between August 2004/2005 and December 2011 with eighty-five participants instead of a recourse to speedy timelines using other methods such as the telephone or online system. The companies had operations in Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire, UK. Anonymity was waived.

Questionnaire Survey

The ten questionnaire categories was equally administered to all participants. All departments were represented by adopting a purposeful sampling covering each of the SMEs’ sections. The survey population is defined as SMEs in two UK counties. All participants were randomly selected and successfully interviewed. All the responses were transcribed and provided the basis for the analysis. Unreported aspects are used elsewhere. The survey required the identification and selection of members and firms whose characteristics, including their subjectivities (Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015) fitted those in volatile situations (Smith and Lewis, 2011) and thereby needing some ‘restoration’ (Miller et al., 2018) as shown in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Companies</th>
<th>Role types</th>
<th>Total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bakkavor-Laurens</td>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>10 employees, 7 management=17 in 2004/05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>2 employees, 3 management=5 in 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longhurst Housing</td>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>10 employees, 7 management=17 in 2004/05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>2 employees, 2 management=4 in 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eden Housing</td>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>10 employees, 7 management=17 in 2004/05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>2 employees, 2 management=4 in 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lagat</td>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>10 employees, 7 management=17 in 2004/05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>2 employees, 2 management=4 in 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Companies, role types and survey numbers

Interviews lasted roughly an hour and were started with the question ‘what specific uncertainties happened and how did you and your firm respond?’ Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their lived experiences of the volatile situations in conformity with Huy et al.’s (2014) and Auer and Cazes’s (2000) approach.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a three-stage procedure. The first involved a presentation of what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as ‘thick descriptions’ so as to begin to appreciate the complexities and subjectivities (Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015). This helped in developing some
representative mapping of participants’ experiences in terms of how they managed the uncertainty in my performance model (see Langley, 1999). A thematic analysis and interpretation of participants’ experiences was conducted following Alvesson and Skoldberg (2017). This ushered in the second stage, which is extracting a story or what Sarpong and Maclean (2017) refer to as ‘microstoria’ with emphasis on their subjectivities as these had been largely missed in previous adaptation to uncertainty and relationship repair literatures (see Pentland, 1999 for an earlier attempt). Six critical thematic considerations were drawn from people’s stories as follows, structural components, contribution of objectives, initiating capacity development, identifying resources, developing human agency, enacting and building resilience. Cultural and communication fragmentation subsumed under communication issues appeared to have paradoxically led to positive aspects of how staff adapted to the pressures. These themes are included in building this paper’s model and helped in providing a theoretical balance on adapting to uncertainty, performance and resilience. In the third stage I encouraged three other independent research colleagues to go a stage further by looking into ‘why’ the axially coded data (‘organisational structures’, ‘operations’, ‘resource usage’, ‘management and non-management expertise’, ‘adaptation mechanisms’) was not only showing the nature of the employment relationship but also a high performance work model to help to practically resolve the issues raised in the descriptions (Elo & Kyngäs (2007).

Findings
The study’s results are presented in three stages, firstly, a thematic representation in the form of a story as the themes fitted such a description; followed secondly by the identification of a model and thirdly the concept of ‘human capital resilience’ to help in balancing the theoretical debates on uncertainty, performance and resilience.

Emergent structures and relations practices

Emergence of new organisational mechanisms
In the early stage of the innovation, management and staff became aware of the severity of the challenges their firms faced. They both stressed the differences between previous and current times when cultural values of collaboration, friendship, transparent communication and working in teams used to be the norm or the ‘normal’ state as managers and staff talked about:

‘There’s got to be some structure…a set way’ (Lagat staff)…’

‘jobs are designed directly according to delivery plans’ (Bakkavor Manager)

‘Customers are a priority’ (Bakkavor staff)

‘Work as a team, supporting each other and meeting deadlines’ (Longhurst manager)

‘people hark back to good times’ (Eden manager)

In each of the four firms, the adaptation initially triggered two main reactions simultaneously; firstly management were busy designing, implementing plans, extending people’s training and development programmes for the foreseeable future whilst scouting for additional resources to do so. However, increasing their firms’ coping strategies through a variety of new openings happened at the same time as employees’ contributions were being controlled via ‘hard’ measures such as additional work whilst ‘decrease[ing] salary and increase[ing] hours’ (Longhurst manager).

Disciplinary boundaries pushed
Staff began to show how to operationalise their adaptation and to use their resilience characteristics more strategically in the process. An employee at Bakkavor said in 2011 ‘we
will have to start taking disciplinary action on employees who don’t want to change because they don’t see the need; these are minimum wage jobs and we are being asked too much’. One Manager at Eden pointed out in 2004/05 ‘there is a lot of work on disciplinary issues, staff training and quality support…’ whilst Longhurst’s Manager made the following statement in 2011 ‘you need to be very disciplined; it is important to have the plan and revisit it….’ Management started to impose strict disciplinary and sometimes even punishing those staff that did not adhere to their new procedures and structures and being insensitivity to their ‘welfare’ (Bakkavor staff).

**Building capability under pressure**

There was an inclination for management to develop new strategies that emphasised higher values such as cooperation, cross-functional working at the same moment as they reinforced the required procedures. The latter included structurally, mechanised management measures. Non-management started to openly discuss how strict the new methods were and how they felt treated as if they were machines and objects. Staff started to bypass their management as they developed ways of talking to each other outside the management structures. The new management mechanisms included a ‘constant’ monitoring of non-management by their team-leaders and others. This was felt necessary by the latter to be able to meet the increasing order deadlines, production targets and required performance levels such as:

‘to chart a new culture and new ways of working between….employees...in terms of how it works out, which way we want to go and how we want that way to be’ (Longhurst manager) ‘the workload for them (managers) is colossal; managers don’t know what a working week is like...but it’s way beyond 35 hours; you see emails relating to work issues come at night and that’s regular and very early in the morning, say at 6.30a.m.’ (Eden staff).

Faced with the adversities, management appeared to rely increasingly on their power and ‘disciplinary procedures...’(Longhurst Manager; ‘disciplinary procedures’ (Eden Manager).

**Communication damage leading to human capital agency**

Staff talked about management’s proposal for an employment tribunal as a way to further assess staff’s capability on top of the ‘...basic competences’ (Longhurst Manager) that have not enhanced ‘communication of future plans’ and ‘there’s a massive communication gap between the interaction of senior and lower management’ (Bakkavor manager). However, the impact of the authority-oriented measures increasingly made staff disenchanted with the communication channels. Such attempts to resolve communication loss further fragmented the secondary communication processes as new language and norms were used to redefine the relationships. Such differences created an atmosphere of communication fragmentation and employment mystery, those critical aspects that the introduction of new communication channels is expected to resolve.

**Cultural fragmentation and unchartered employment roles**

As managers felt left out, remarked by the Training Officer at Lagat in 2011, jobs began to be imposed leaving members to their own interpretation devices of how these might be done with what resources. Members, in effect, started to (re)define what characteristics and activities were needed to be resilient in executing their roles and responsibilities. The wider socio-‘cultural divide’ between management and non-management staff started to increase thereby putting pressure on the small emerging groups’ capacity to be resilient in carrying out their roles and developing a new identity. Management became drawn to a new ‘them and us culture’ at Bakkavor and Eden. Non-management staff began to innovate new roles, which they thought fitted their capabilities. The new responsibilities differed from the ones formally developed by management. By so doing, staff were increasing their capacity to contribute and to create space
for a varied range of behaviours. They highlighted values such as individual and collective respect and dignity as they started ‘confiding’ to each other, other than those developed by managers, who no longer value ‘our opinion’ (Eden and Lagat staff).

**Developing performance and resilience capacity**
Non-management behaved like independent agents in their companies’ innovation contexts as they became more confident in what they could do to contribute. They developed new groups to ‘support each other through…networking’, (Lagat staff), ‘dipping into other people’s roles to support staff’ whilst ‘wanting to have responsibility on the way things are going’ (Bakkavor manager). By contributing to their firms’ competence they exposed the incompetence of the higher-ups. These actions and activities showed what an increase in one’s capability could do in modifying or even ‘shifting’ the ‘cultural divide’ between the two different groups, between the various employment practices and systems and how they choose to participate in work, formal and informal relationships and so on. Management’s attempt at redressing the communication blockage only served to formalise an already hierarchical and mechanised forms of communicating with non-management. Although it could be argued that computer technology might help in rendering communication channels less formalised, the simultaneous use of e-mails allow for faster communication flows thereby preferring one type of information over another bringing with it a ‘new culture’ where ‘the CEO has only spoken once to the business’ (Bakkavor manager) and an increase in ‘turnover figures’ (Lagat staff).

**Building the new High Performance Work Model**
In this section I build a high performance model based on the preceding story so as to answer this paper’s research question and achieve its objectives. Two main areas were found useful to draw from; firstly a process of how people at work can address performance when they have been challenged and secondly a combination of the model’s characteristics produced ‘human capital resilience’ in uncertain environments.

Considerations of previous research on uncertainty (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017) have emphasised aspects such as changing organisational structures (Kelly & Amburgey, 1991; Dunphy & Stace, 1988) or attempting to modify people’s behaviour (Vakola et al., 2004) by changing the cultural values (Reinhardt et al., 2018; Reckwitz, 2002), improving communication and trust (Lines et al., 2005) at the macro and micro-levels (Bendig et al., 2018; Dykes et al., 2018). However, the proposals have been met with a lot of contextual volatility (Top et al., 2015) and performance-related difficulties (Conz et al., 2017; Sanders et al., 2014) and even failure (Cooper et al., 2013) prompting calls to search for more innovative alternatives (Jarzabowski et al., 2018; Alacovska, 2018) especially given the fundamental problem that these measures created – i.e. ineffective work relationships (Auer & Cazes, 2000; Rousseau & Shperling, 2004). These incidents highlight the need for improvements and therefore a new model on ‘how’ to do so (Mendy & Rahman, 2018). My ‘high performance work model’ seeks to address this void and consists of the following aspects 1) reinstating collegiality, 2) jointly identifying relational terms and conditions for relationship restoration 3) agreeing and acting on relational terms and conditions of the employment relationship, and 4) building sustainable resilience as seen in Figure 1 below:
High Performance Work Model

**Figure 1. High Performance Work Model**

High Performance Work Aspect 1 of my high performance model, which is reinstating collegiality, encapsulates activities, actions and behaviours vital in reinstating collegial working in uncertain contexts. The findings from the four cases clearly highlighted a breakdown in people’s working relationship. Both management and employees designed and implemented a range of mechanisms that they thought would reinstate a collegial environment and resolve the uncertainty associated with adaptation. The divergent stories highlighted what aspects each group wished to emphasise. The resultant ‘them-and-us culture’ indicated a predominant blame environment, which does not augur well for collegiality in volatility. Although new procedures for fixing the adaptation issues were initiated firstly by management and then by non-management, each group tried to take credit for fixing the macro-level problems. Performance was restored after both groups realised the need to respect the following namely that 1) although operating from a less advantageous control, power and authority perspective, non-management identified roles and responsibilities as a way to contribute to the collegiality impasse; 2) non-management identified colleagues in their departments and other strategic business units to work in a cross-functional capacity to resolve the firms’ challenges in the here and now; 3) support mechanisms were created for colleagues sometimes through the sub-cultural entities and 4) checking mechanisms included innovative ways to communicate within and across functional areas.

High Performance Work Aspect 2 of my model highlights necessary issues for the joint identification of workable employment relationship conditions. This includes identifying what the boundaries of the relationship are, what characteristics are necessary in each boundary (i.e. the management’s and non-management’s), a clarification of any potential ambidexterity/ambiguity issues in the procedures guiding each of the participants’ actions and behaviours for a more strategic employment relationship. Both parties endured varying responsibility levels for this to happen in practice. Management needed to provide the resources (e.g. training and development opportunities, financial and other material rewards, including time to experiment new ideas) whilst non-management’s support (tacit and explicit) is critical for success. In my research, it was shown how management’s adoption of structural, mechanised forms of communication, work procedures, appraisal and performance monitoring only served to fuzzy the hierarchical boundaries between the two groups further increasing uncertainty. Their actions, although well-meaningly intended, led to the unintended consequence of limiting the functional benefits that could have been accrued from this aspect of the model. Non-management staff provided the opening for a new lease of life in collaboration.
High Performance Work Aspect 3 of my model centres on management and non-management agreeing conditions of the new working relationship and HR’s role. The four SMEs studied generally highlighted relationships that were mainly based on ‘who is boss’ and who gets imposed on (see Taylor’s scientific management principles). The SME members appeared to have embarked on a process which started at micro-level – one involving finding out alternative conditions to facilitate wider, macro-level transformation. They initiated new conditions other than the ones imposed by top management (Bendig et al., 2018) but also explored different implementation mechanisms similar to those in other literatures (Truss et al., 2013; Conway & Monks, 2011). Contrary to received wisdom, they did not envisage cajoling managers to share their tactics speedily (Dykes et al., 2018), suggesting attempts to strengthen their (power – see Ferner et al., 2012) positions contrary to management’s Taylorism. Members demonstrated characteristics that HRM professionals ought to nurture as they engage with others (James, 2014) as a way of ‘how’ to implement post-merger adaptation to uncertainty. In this way, implementing resilience enhancing capacities is shown (see Table 2).

High Performance Work Aspect 4 of my model entails an addition and thereby a contribution to our understanding of the revived/new employment relationship whilst embedding resilience in HRM studies at both macro and micro level. The contribution highlights the need for HR researchers and practitioners to not only focus attention on damaged work relationships (Rousseau & Shperling, 2004; Auer & Cazes, 2000) or on interactions (Reinhardt et al., 2018) but more importantly, their impacts (positively or negatively) on resilience building capacity for adapting to the uncertainty of mergers and post-mergers. The argument presented in this paper and the empirical evidence have demonstrated that an extension of previous research should go over and beyond the formal activities, people’s actions and their nature (see Sanders et al., 2014; Huy et al., 2014) to include how staff from various positions identify and select combinations from the micro and macro-levels’ aspects they considered beneficial to perform and be resilient when challenged at work. It should also accommodate the informal (Umney, 2016), which in this paper includes the cultural and the personal preferences and objectives of all groups (e.g. family, friends, relatives and significant others). It was noted even in the four SMEs that the sub-cultural cliques and personal affiliations that staff were able to identify, build and maintain served as their impetus to ‘bounce back’ from (i.e. be resilient to) the difficult periods of volatility and post-merger changes (Jenkins et al., 2014). Therefore what happens within the formal procedural, bureaucratic and hierarchical workplace (e.g. the four SMEs) should be complemented by the informal resilience and contingency aspects staff chose to inject into my model on workplace performance and theory on human capital resilience (Mendy, 2019).

Human Capital Resilience

In developing this theory, I note the over-concentration of previous studies on specific, organisational resilience characteristics as HR resources (Yang & Meyer, 2015; Gunasekaran et al., 2011; Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 2001) or on either the macro (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018; Mafabi et al., 2015) or micro-level of analysis (Neen, 2018; Conway & Monks, 2011; Jones & Macpherson, 2006) at the detriment of low-resourced SMEs (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011). The process signals the importance of two things not highlighted in previous literatures: recognising human agency or capital as an HR resource and systematically designing and implementing a process that helps in this recognition here, i.e. a way for members to identify the need to be resilient under situations that stifle such an ability to contribute (see Table 2 for characteristics) below:
Table 2. Comparison of resilience theory, contingency theory and human capital resilience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Resilience theory</th>
<th>Contingency theory</th>
<th>Human Capital resilience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Create an environment to bounce back</td>
<td>Maintain open structures</td>
<td>Identify structures via which activities are implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Enhance individuals psychological capital</td>
<td>Align the internal and external activities</td>
<td>Start to contribute personal, individual objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Encourage high performance</td>
<td>Identify a strong leadership team to guide vision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Be a flexible organisation</td>
<td>Be flexible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Develop strategic orientation</td>
<td>Have appropriate leadership</td>
<td>Combine structures and objectives that are most beneficial in developing capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Generate resources</td>
<td>Develop adequate resource usage</td>
<td>Identify varying resources needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Develop skills</td>
<td>Develop and retain staff</td>
<td>Develop human capital – i.e. the capacity to adapt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Institute change – stabilise change by making organisational initiatives stick</td>
<td>Encourage staff to have a voice/say</td>
<td>Reinforce previous aspects to develop and sustain resilience capacity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussions

My model provides a different (new) way of looking into resilience theory, HRM/employment studies and contingency model on the ineffective nature of management/non-management employment and human, social relations within the adaptation contexts. I have also shown a process via which the broken work relationship can be restored relationally, at least to the heavenly status it used to be perceived in rather than the traditional research’s over-emphasis and reliance on the benevolence of communication and participation mechanisms from management. The study’s theoretical contributions are featured hereunder as well as the academic, practical and scientific implications.

Previous studies tended to highlight what HR and management in general must do to restore broken relationships. Lewin’s (1947) and Kotter’s (2008) two seminal pieces could be considered as initial attempts to deal with the process of how to implement effective change, although at the macro-societal and inter-organisational level. A process that looks into what the interacting parties (i.e. both non-management and management) can do in mending damaged working relationships and the capability for individuals (at micro) and organisations (at macro-level) to contribute to resilience building have been crucially neglected. It is therefore clear from the stories that in order for SMEs to be more effective in their adaptation to uncertainty, consideration should be given to a performance model that celebrates the contributions of all parties in the here and now and more strategically.

The third contribution of my model and its theory is that they offer an additional practical tool, which highlights a number of things that previous research on how to adapt to adverse volatility and mend employment relationships have failed to capture, namely 1) the temporality (i.e. contingency of time and space), 2) the importance of people’s personal preferences, the development of some knowledge of linking individual/personal (micro) and organisational (macro) preferences in adaptation procedures and activities. Although building staff capability is emphasised as critical in adversity-type environments (see for example the HRM literature,
resilience and contingency literatures), organisational structures and architectures (see Puranam et al., 2012) continue to evolve, so too do their cultures (Hofstede, 2001).

This paper also recognises a number of implications discussed as follows. The question whether the model has sufficient research quality to be able to achieve the intended plan (an SME and its members being capable of surviving adverse changes and restoring their working relationships strategically). To answer this question an evaluation of a number of the model’s applications is considered in line with its justification. Firstly, the model is derived from members who reported that a need to increase the quality of what they contributed when they realised that their resilience capacity was being stifled by the adversity of the changes and the ad-hoc behaviour of managers (‘ad hoc’ because they conformed to behaviours and characteristics developed in the contingency model). One could say that the reports may confirm, but not falsify what is already known however. However, there is a second or alternative implication of what has been proposed. What the model adds is not simply a combination of resilience theory, the contingency model of HRM and strategy characteristics in the following way. Its aspects were drawn by following a number of systematic steps – (see Descartes, 1993; Kuhn, 1970; Lakatos, 1976) over a longitudinal period of time contrary to Dykes et al., (2018). These steps include collecting observations, searching for a mapping that is of high quality (i.e. by mapping observations onto a set of pronouncements/statements or theory).

**Conclusion and new research opportunities for HRM**

Although it is assumed in resilience theory that coping characteristics can help SMEs (Yang & Meyer, 2015) to become high performing (Lepak & Snell, 2006), an examination of the theories suggested that making a ‘comeback’ by using the recommended characteristics (Seligman, 2011) needed something more radical and innovative (Reinhardt et al., 2018). The most suitable theories for such an investigation were found in resilience theory and the contingency theories given their implicit assumptions of support. Their exploration highlighted that they could benefit from some model that showed how performance could be implemented effectively in struggling SMEs as well as some conceptual emergence (Mendy, 2019).

Reflecting on the empirical reports and story highlighted that it is when humans take initiatives over time in identifying and making appropriate use of resources that they added quality and value to their SMEs’ work relationships and adaptation processes. The author then tried to abstract their way of implementing the activities using a bottom-up approach and their perspectives seemed to fit aspects of resilience theory and contingency performance. A model called ‘high performance work model’ was developed from such an exploration which then led to the emergence of the paper’s second contribution, namely ‘human capital resilience’ theory.

The proposed new high performance work model and human capital resilience theory are provided within and for a specific context and research aim: to address the performance implementation gap when four SMEs were challenged to survive under uncertain times. This suggests that human agency and the ‘comeback’ ability need to be considered as central characteristic not only in adaptation theories (Todnem By, 2005; Smith &Lewis (2011) but also in the theoretical foundations of resilience and contingency. However, constraining HRM studies within its immediate discipline or researching into an endless quest for resources when this is problematic especially in SME contexts or into agency also does not seem advisable (Bendig et al., 2018). The clarion need to add human contributions to the theories and methodology has led to two beneficial injections into HRM research and practice: firstly a ‘high performance work model’ and secondly, the concept of ‘human capital resilience’ to show what
aspects SMEs need to focus on when they are dealing with performance issues within volatile environments. The model and concept need further exploration to see what new types of research questions, aims, opportunities and methodological and model developments could arise for HRM in the unfolding areas of people performance, resilience capacity building and effective workplace relationships.

References


