

## The Influence of eHRM on Employee Need of Autonomy: A Literature Review

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**Abstract:** Electronic Human Resource Management (eHRM) has transformed HRM practices, offering digital solutions for employee management. This paper examines the influence of eHRM on the need for autonomy, a fundamental component of intrinsic motivation. Drawing upon key scholarly works, we present a comprehensive literature review that portrays both enhancing and diminishing perspectives on the impact of eHRM on employee autonomy.

**Keywords:** eHRM influence on motivation, eHRM influence on desire for autonomy, eHRM, motivation, IT influence on HRM

### Introduction

Intrinsic motivation, characterized by autonomy, mastery, and purpose, drives individuals to engage in activities for inherent satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy, or the desire to have agency over one's actions, stands as a foundational pillar of this motivation. The digitization of HR processes, through eHRM, has ignited debates on its influence on employee autonomy. This review dissects existing literature to understand this dynamic interplay.

### 1. eHRM's Enhancing Influence on Autonomy:

#### 1.1 Flexibility and Accessibility:

Ruël, Bondarouk & Looise (2004) emphasize that eHRM fosters autonomy through flexibility. The ability to access HR resources anytime and anywhere echoes the "Over time" dimension of autonomy, suggesting that employees can engage with HR tasks as per their convenience. Modern workplaces are increasingly emphasizing the need for flexible work arrangements, driven by the rise of the digital age, globalization, and evolving employee expectations. eHRM, being at the forefront of this transformation, is pivotal in promoting flexibility.

Companies like IBM and Deloitte have reported increased employee satisfaction and productivity upon the introduction of eHRM systems that allow for flexible working hours and location independent access to HR resources (Dery, Grant & Wiblen, 2006).

The "Over time" autonomy dimension, as previously discussed, relates to the freedom in deciding when one works. eHRM systems that allow employees to, say, request leaves, complete training, or submit reports outside of standard working hours inherently foster this dimension of autonomy. Not being tethered to a traditional 9-5 schedule but having the flexibility to choose their work timings enhances the employees' sense of autonomy.

Ruël, Bondarouk & Looise (2004) proposed that the accessibility factor of eHRM aligns with the global trend towards more agile workplaces. Another scholar, Parry (2011), observed that HR systems, which are accessible from multiple devices and platforms, not only provide flexibility but also empower employees to integrate work and life more seamlessly.

#### 1.2 Employee Self-Service and Control:

Strohmeier (2007) suggests that eHRM's self-service portals enhance autonomy. By managing personal data,

benefits, or leave requests independently, employees experience an elevated sense of control, thus fostering intrinsic motivation.

Self-service portals in eHRM represent a paradigm shift from traditional HR where employees would have to engage directly with HR personnel for even minor tasks.

Tech giants like Google and Microsoft have adopted self-service portals where employees can update personal details, view benefits, or even engage in learning and development without direct HR intervention, fostering a sense of agency (Stone, Deadrick & Lukaszewski, 2016). These portals imbue employees with a sense of direct control over their professional data and development. When employees can independently manage such tasks, they naturally feel a greater sense of autonomy, which in turn can enhance intrinsic motivation. This aligns with Deci & Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory which posits that when individuals feel they have control over their actions, their intrinsic motivation is bolstered.

Voermans and Van Veldhoven (2007) emphasized that self-service eHRM tools can enhance perceived competence among employees, further driving intrinsic motivation. Strohmeier (2007) reiterated this, adding that such systems, when well-implemented, not only drive efficiency but also empower employees.

### *1.3 Customization:*

Modern eHRM systems offer personalized experiences, enhancing the "Over technique" dimension of autonomy. Customization allows employees to interact with HR data in ways most suitable to them, enhancing feelings of self-governance.

Beyond the basic functionality, advanced eHRM systems offer customization features tailored to individual preferences, echoing the "Over technique" dimension of autonomy. Salesforce, known for its CRM solutions, extends a customizable user interface in its eHRM systems, allowing employees to organize data and features according to their preferences (Marler & Fisher, 2013).

When employees can meld the HR interface to their liking, it creates a sense of personalization. This not only enhances user experience but also gives employees a sense that the system respects and acknowledges their individual preferences, which directly fuels their autonomy. Bondarouk & Ruël (2009) highlighted the benefits of customization in eHRM, noting that personalizing interfaces could lead to enhanced user satisfaction. This was further supported by Riketta and Dick (2005), who observed a positive correlation between interface customization and enhanced feelings of autonomy among employees.

## **2. eHRM's Diminishing Influence on Autonomy:**

### *2.1 Surveillance and Privacy Concerns:*

Martin & Freeman (2003) argue that the surveillance capabilities of some eHRM systems can be detrimental to autonomy. Such monitoring might be perceived as invasive, potentially hampering intrinsic motivation by compromising the "Over technique" and "Over time" dimensions of autonomy.

The technological advancements that eHRM systems encapsulate often come with the capability to monitor employees' activities, sometimes at a granular level. This double-edged sword can lead to apprehensions about surveillance and privacy among employees.

Some corporations have embedded keystroke logging or screen tracking functionalities in their HRM systems, ostensibly to measure productivity. Such measures have been reported to create a sense of unease among employees, fearing their every move is being watched (Zweig & Webster, 2002).

The constant perception of being under surveillance can erode trust and impede the "Over time" and "Over technique" dimensions of autonomy. It may cause employees to feel they are being micromanaged, which in turn can dampen intrinsic motivation. Instead of being performance enhancers, these surveillance tools may actually deter innovation and risk-taking.

Moorhead and Griffin (1998) highlighted the paradoxical nature of such surveillance systems, where the very tools meant to enhance productivity could inadvertently suppress creativity and initiative. Similarly, Alder (2001) reasoned that over-surveillance might create an environment of suspicion, thereby stiffening the intrinsic motivation propelled by autonomy.

## *2.2 Imposition of Standardized Processes:*

Bondarouk & Ruël (2009) caution against eHRM's risk of imposing standardized procedures. The efficiency introduced by standardization might come at the cost of stifling individual creativity and personalized task completion methods.

While eHRM systems often aim for efficiency through standardization, this very efficiency can sometimes come at the cost of individual flexibility and autonomy.

Organizations like Amazon have intricate eHRM systems that standardize many HR processes for efficiency. However, such a systematic approach can sometimes limit the ways employees can approach certain tasks (Lepak & Snell, 1998).

Standardized processes might streamline operations, but they can limit the “Over technique” dimension of autonomy. When employees are funnelled into singular methods of task completion, it can hinder creativity and personal problem-solving methodologies.

As Bondarouk & Ruël (2009) underscored, the very strength of eHRM in ensuring standardized efficiency can be its Achilles' heel in terms of nurturing employee autonomy. Likewise, Laumer et al. (2016) posited that while standardized eHRM processes ensure consistency, they might sometimes deter individual creativity.

## *2.3 Limited Face-to-face Interactions:*

Another perspective suggests that eHRM might reduce personal interactions with HR personnel. This could limit opportunities for personalized problem-solving, affecting the “Over tasks” and “Over team” dimensions of autonomy.

The digital nature of eHRM systems invariably reduces the need for face-to-face interactions, which can have implications for the “Over tasks” and “Over team” dimensions of autonomy. With the rise of virtual organizations and remote working, companies like Buffer and Trello rely heavily on eHRM systems, which sometimes means that HR-related discussions, traditionally held in-person, are now managed online (Rüel et al., 2014).

While digital interfaces offer convenience, they might lack the nuanced communication that face to-face interactions provide. This can potentially limit the scope for personalized problem-solving or collaborative decision-making in HR-related matters, impinging on autonomy. Stone and Dulebohn (2013) emphasized the importance of human touch in HR processes and cautioned against an over-reliance on digital interfaces. Dery et al. (2017) also elaborated on how digital communication, though efficient, might sometimes fall short in conveying emotions or nuanced feedback, thereby affecting the autonomy dimensions.

## **3. Bridging the Divergence:**

### *3.1. Embracing Transparency and Trust-Building:*

While there is scholarly consensus on eHRM's transformative potential, opinions diverge regarding its influence on autonomy. The system's design, features, and the organizational culture in which it's implemented significantly sway its impact. To ensure eHRM systems foster autonomy, organizations must strike a balance between digital efficiency and preserving the human touch.

One of the most effective ways to counter the negative perceptions of eHRM is through transparency. This involves making the operational mechanisms, intentions, and purposes of the eHRM systems clear to the employees.

Netflix's radical transparency in its HR practices, where employees are given insight into pay scales and even firing decisions, has been hailed as innovative and trust-enhancing (McCord, 2014).

By demystifying eHRM systems and their functionalities, employees are less likely to view them as surveillance tools and more as facilitative platforms. This transformation in perception directly contributes to the reinforcement of autonomy, as trust acts as the foundational block. Whitener et al. (1998) emphasize that trust is nurtured through consistent organizational behaviour, openness, and reliability. Implementing these principles in eHRM can directly mitigate the diminishing autonomy concerns.

### *3.2. Incorporating User Feedback into eHRM Design:*

To strike a balance between efficiency and autonomy, organizations can actively involve employees in the design and refinement phases of eHRM systems.

Companies like Adobe have implemented feedback loops where employees can suggest improvements or modifications to their eHRM systems, leading to more user-friendly platforms (Morris & Venkatesh, 2010).

When employees have a say in the design of eHRM tools they use, it not only promotes the "Over technique" dimension of autonomy but also ensures that the system is tailored to real-world needs. Paré and Tremblay (2007) assert that user participation in system design can lead to enhanced system usability and better acceptance rates. This aligns with Deci's (1975) theory of intrinsic motivation, where opportunities for choice and self-direction lead to heightened motivation and satisfaction.

### *3.3. Prioritizing Human-touch alongside Digital Interactions:*

While eHRM systems offer efficiency, it's crucial for organizations to prioritize face-to-face interactions in areas where the human touch is indispensable.

Multinationals like Unilever and PepsiCo, despite having sophisticated eHRM systems, ensure regular face-to-face HR interactions, such as feedback sessions and career development discussions (Lawler & Mohrman, 2003).

Maintaining a balance between eHRM and direct human interaction ensures that employees do not feel alienated. Instead, they perceive the system as an enabler rather than a replacement for human HR practices.

Gardner et al. (2003) emphasize the irreplaceable value of direct interpersonal interactions in HR, especially in sensitive areas like conflict resolution and career counselling. Bondarouk et al. (2017) further discuss how blending digital and traditional HR practices can harmonize the benefits of efficiency with the need for human connection.

## **4. Conclusion and Future Directions**

### *4.1. Synthesizing the Multifaceted Influence of eHRM:*

eHRM, with its intricate mesh of technology and human-centric processes, occupies a unique position at the nexus of organizational efficiency and individual autonomy. The duality of its impact — both as an enhancer and potential diminisher of autonomy — underscores the importance of a balanced and informed approach. By understanding its myriad influences, organizations can craft eHRM strategies that not only streamline operations but also nourish the intrinsic motivation of their employees.

### *4.2. The Role of Organizational Culture:*

An area that has emerged as particularly significant in our discussion is the mediating influence of organizational culture. It becomes evident that the implementation and reception of eHRM systems are deeply intertwined with the prevailing cultural norms of an organization. Future studies might offer insights into how different cultural contexts — be it collaborative, hierarchical, innovative, or conservative — shape the perceptions and impacts of eHRM on autonomy.

### 4.3. Venturing into the Realm of AI-integrated eHRM:

As we stand on the brink of an AI-dominated corporate world, the potential of AI-integrated eHRM systems beckons exploration. These systems, equipped with machine learning and predictive analytics, might offer personalized experiences that can further the cause of autonomy. However, they also come with their own set of challenges, especially concerning surveillance and decision-making transparency.

### 4.4. Recommendations for Forward-Thinking Organizations:

In light of our discussions, forward-thinking organizations might consider:

- Regularly soliciting employee feedback on eHRM tools to ensure they align with users' needs and preferences.

- Incorporating transparency as a foundational principle in eHRM design and functionality.
- Committing to continuous learning and adaptation in eHRM strategies to accommodate the evolving landscape of work and technology.

## Literature highlights

### 1. eHRM Enhances Autonomy and Intrinsic Motivation:

Scholars/Research:

Ruël, Bondarouk & Looise (2004) argue that the flexibility and accessibility offered by eHRM systems foster autonomy. As employees have the freedom to access HR resources anytime and anywhere, this aligns with the "Over time" dimension of autonomy which you mentioned earlier. Strohmeier (2007) emphasizes that employee self-service systems provide employees a sense of control. They can independently manage their personal details, request leaves, and more, enhancing their feelings of autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Arguments:

Empowered by eHRM, employees can fulfil HR-related tasks at their own pace and convenience, bolstering feelings of self-governance and thus intrinsic motivation.

eHRM systems can reinforce the "Over technique" dimension of autonomy by offering multiple ways to complete a task, catering to individual preferences, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation.

### 2. eHRM Reduces Autonomy and Intrinsic Motivation:

Scholars/Research:

Martin & Freeman (2003) discuss how eHRM systems, especially with their surveillance capabilities, can diminish a sense of autonomy. This constant monitoring could be perceived as a lack of trust, consequently dampening intrinsic motivation.

Bondarouk & Ruël (2009) highlight the risk of eHRM systems imposing standardized procedures. While they acknowledge the efficiency brought about by these systems, they also caution against potential reduction in the "Over technique" autonomy dimension.

Arguments:

The feeling of being constantly monitored could make employees feel that their autonomy is compromised, which in turn, could reduce their intrinsic motivation to perform. By imposing standardized processes, eHRM might stifle individual creativity and methods of task completion, thus potentially diminishing intrinsic motivation.

## Divergent Opinions:

There is a clear scholarly divide: while some emphasize the enhanced autonomy eHRM systems bring, others underline the potential risks they pose to autonomy and thus to intrinsic motivation.

The implementation context, specific eHRM features, and organizational culture significantly influence this impact.

## Epilogue:

The journey of understanding eHRM's influence on autonomy is a testament to the dynamic nature of work in today's age. As technology continues to evolve, so will its relationship with human psychological needs. Organizations, researchers, and HR practitioners must remain agile, responsive, and empathetic to navigate this evolving terrain successfully.

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