



LEARNING AS WORK: Teaching and Learning Processes in Contemporary Work Organisations

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**The High-Performance Paradigm:
A Review and Evaluation**

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a review and evaluation of the literature pertaining to the high-performance paradigm. After seeking to account for the emergence of the paradigm in relation to the so-called ‘crisis of Fordism’, the paper addresses the key questions of ‘*whose performance?*’ and ‘*which practices?*’. The review then explores central debates within the literature, in particular whether high-performance working embodies ‘mutual gains’ for both employers and employees, or constitutes more a vehicle for work intensification and union avoidance. While evidence is found variously to support either side of these debates, it is argued that neither simplistic unitarist nor pluralist depictions of the employment relationship can properly accommodate some of the industrial scenarios presented in recent research relating to this field. In conclusion, the paper suggests that a prevailing tendency within the literature towards the reification of practices as causal ‘factors’ discourages an engagement with both their relational and processual character, and masks the many different ways in which the high-performance paradigm has been enacted, negotiated, configured, and experienced by a range of social actors. Accordingly, a number of suggestions are presented for future research and concept-development in this area.

THE HIGH-PERFORMANCE PARADIGM: A REVIEW AND EVALUATION

This paper is centrally concerned with the ‘high-performance paradigm’, an area which, over the last two decades, has achieved increasing prominence both as an academic concern and a practitioner movement, and one that potentially involves a series of important changes within the contemporary workplace. At the simplest level, the high-performance paradigm refers to a managerial approach which centres on utilising mutually-reinforcing production and labour management practices to drive performance outcomes. The lexicon of this paradigm is itself expanding with growing interest in the topic. A full review of the terminology employed will be provided later in the paper, however, key referents include ‘high-performance work practices’; ‘high-performance work systems’; and ‘high-performance work organisations’. As Wall and Wood (2005) suggest, the very locution ‘high-performance’ itself engenders an axiomatic hypothesis: that a discrete set of practices and/or means of organising work are positively related to ‘performance’ in a general sense. Accordingly, on encountering the subject matter for the first time, a number of questions immediately present themselves: to what extent is there evidence to support this posited link? By what measures of performance? Whose performance? Which practices? Indeed, these, and other related questions, have emerged as central to issues and debates within the burgeoning academic literature pertaining to the topic. The aim of this review is to provide a critical overview of such issues, debates and controversies, to develop a ‘map’ of the main currents of this literature, and to consider the present state of research relating to the most significant of these questions. To these ends, the paper centrally builds upon the work of Butler *et al.* (2004), adopting a similar framework of analysis, but also considerably expanding and amending this to reflect developments in the field.

The high-performance paradigm is characteristically understood to have arisen from Japanese influence, both in terms of Japan’s role as a powerful economic competitor, and in relation to the direct import of Japanese-style production and work organisation practices (see, for example, Lauder 2001: 224; Ashton & Sung 2002: 101; Danford *et al.* 2005: 6–10). It is also, variously, seen to have emerged out of the field of

strategic HRM (SHRM) (for example, Wood 1999; Godard & Delaney 2000; Shih *et al.* 2006). While these links to Japanese-style practices and SHRM are, indeed, important, they must, it is argued here, be understood within the context of broader socio-economic developments, particularly those relating to what has been called the ‘crisis of Fordism’. Accordingly, the first section of this review seeks to contextualise the emergence of the high-performance paradigm, both to promote a fuller understanding of its ascendancy, and also to highlight key tensions between ‘post-Fordist’ and ‘neo-Fordist’ strains of theorising that underpin contemporary debates within the literature. Following this, key conceptual and terminological debates are considered and ‘mapped’ according to different spheres of influence. In relation to this undertaking, the paper explores debates relating to two of the key questions mentioned above — *which practices? And, whose performance?* Following from an engagement with these questions, the discussion considers issues relating to the configuration of practice ‘bundles’, and their utility within different sectoral and political-economic contexts. The review then considers two other key questions — *what evidence is there for the practices–performance link? And, by what measures of performance?* In pursuit of these questions, the paper analyses the current state of research regarding the relationship between high-performance work systems and various performance outcomes, and considers the related issue of the *route to performance*: whether, for example, performance gains linked to practices adoption are achieved via a more motivated and committed workforce, or, alternatively, whether such gains are achieved largely through work intensification. In this connection, the discussion reviews core debates between ‘post-Fordist’ and ‘neo-Fordist’ accounts of high-performance working, and examines the extent to which such debates find support in recent empirical research. Finally, following on from these debates, the review examines the implications of high-performance work systems for the labour movement, and in particular, the question of whether the high-performance paradigm constitutes more a threat to trade union legitimacy, or a new model of industrial partnership which has the potential to provide ‘mutual gains’ (Kochan & Osterman 1994: 45).

THE CRISIS OF FORDISM AND THE GENESIS OF THE HIGH-PERFORMANCE PARADIGM

The emergence of the high-performance paradigm is intimately linked to debates concerning the so-called ‘crisis of Fordism’ and associated Taylorist labour management practices, and the ascendancy of post-Fordism. Indeed, in a recent factsheet issued by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, high-performance work systems are characterised as “everything that Taylorist employment practices are not... the diametrical opposite of employment strategies based on short cycle times; skill minimisation and ‘one right way’” (CIPD 2007). It is worth briefly reviewing the debates concerning the crisis of Fordism in order to facilitate an understanding of the high-performance paradigm’s ascendancy, and, ultimately, to highlight some of the tensions and debates which underpin the concepts involved.

The post-Fordism thesis holds that Fordism, as an archetypal mode of capitalist production, had reached its zenith within leading industrial regions such as the USA, Japan and parts of Europe between the 1920s and 1960s. By the 1970s, however, many of these regions experienced a rapid slowdown in economic growth, recurring crises of mass unemployment, and problems related to economic restructuring. While numerous arguments have been advanced to explain the economic decline and disruption, advocates of the post-Fordism thesis link the downturn to a more general crisis of Fordism itself. One of the first and most influential texts to consider this possibility was Michael Piore and Charles Sabel’s (1984) *The Second Industrial Divide*. According to Piore and Sabel, a central cause of the economic decline was that prevailing systems of production could no longer match up the production and consumption of goods. Fordism, geared as it is to the mass production of standardised, undifferentiated goods, had reached its limits in an era characterised by increasingly fragmented and differentiated consumer demand; growing fluctuations in the supply of resources (principally oil and raw materials); and a more volatile and international marketplace. Fordist systems of mass production were, Piore and Sabel suggested, not flexible enough to ‘deliver the goods’ within a newly emergent socio-economic order.

According to Piore and Sabel, the rigidities of product-specific machinery, the prevailing labour management techniques, the controls exerted by labour movements, the state level macroeconomic controls employed in welfare economies, and post-war international monetary and trading systems — all of which were symptomatic of a model of industrial development founded on mass production — required dramatic revision, perhaps eradication, in order to overcome the ‘chronic economic diseases’ of the time (Piore & Sabel 1984: 4). The authors saw two, ostensibly contradictory, routes to economic regeneration. The first involved greatly extending the system of mass-production and associated regulatory institutions. The second led back towards a pre-industrial era of craft production to a ‘strategy of permanent innovation’ based on the embrace of change, rather than efforts to reign it in: one which at its centre was ‘flexible’, involving high skill levels, small-scale diversification and high levels of technological sophistication (Piore & Sabel 1984: 17). This strategy of ‘flexible specialisation’ was understood to address not only the economic imperatives of a new marketplace characterised by continuous change and volatility, it also addressed — through an emphasis on highly skilled, involved, employees undertaking variable tasks and changing roles — the crisis of dehumanising and alienating work characteristic of Fordism.

Piore and Sabel were at pains to stress that there was no ‘hidden dynamic of historical evolution [nor] law of capitalist development’ (1984: 281) that would ensure flexible specialisation was the inevitable response to the crisis faced by advanced industrial societies. It was simply one response, and one that the authors wished to advocate since it might form the basis for a more participative industrial democracy (Clarke 1992: 15). Indeed, flexible specialisation largely did not come to prevail as a mode of production nor model of work organisation (Boreham 1992; Phelps 2002). Nonetheless, Piore and Sabel had presented a compelling analysis of the limitations of Fordism under the exigencies of a shifting economic order, and, moreover, had identified as alternatives many of the principles that were to become key motifs of the high-performance paradigm — innovation, employee involvement, and high skill levels. Subsequent to the publication of *The Second Industrial Divide*, particularly towards the end of the 1980s, unemployment levels rose further still,

labour unions weakened, and it was the crisis of efficiency more than the crisis of work that came to dominate the emergence of new approaches to production and work organisation (Belanger *et al.* 2002: 157). As Piore and Sabel had recognised, flexible specialisation by no means presented the only alternative to mass-production. Partly as a consequence of a greatly weakened labour movement, many new approaches were developed almost entirely on the back of ‘managerial initiatives and unbridled neo-liberalism...’ (Belanger *et al.* 2002: 157). Indeed, rather than constituting a break from Fordism, some new approaches involved the development of a ‘neo-Fordism’ (Aglietta 1979; Prechel 1994): a reworking of Fordist principles to combine product and process innovations and many of the benefits of flexibility and adaptability to change with a centralised Taylorist-style approach to labour management and control (Vallas 1999; Phelps 2002). The exemplar of this labour market flexibility (LMF) approach (Caspersz 2006) is neatly distilled in Atkinson’s (1985) model of the ‘flexible firm’ — an approach which involves varying the numbers and functions of employees according to the demands of the market. Such a strategy characteristically intensifies employee effort, with workers deployed or withdrawn according to market and other environmental conditions. Under LMF, employees are treated as simply one other factor of production. Accordingly, such approaches generally do not foster significant levels of affective commitment, and consequently, contra the envisaged ‘enrichment’ of the workplace anticipated by the post-Fordist model, employees are less likely to self-manage and participate in decision making processes (Caspersz 2006: 150).

Under the guise of the core mantras of flexibility, variety, quality, and efficiency, an array of organisational innovations were developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Belanger *et al.* 2002: 157). In relation to production management, techniques were developed to shorten product cycle and set-up times, manage inventories more efficiently, control work flows, and otherwise improve a firm’s responsiveness to customer demand. In relation to quality management, some firms established assurance programmes and quality circles. And in relation to work organisation, new approaches employed the principles of flexibility, task discretion, organisational ‘de-layering’ and worker participation (Belanger *et al.* 2002: 157). Such practices were bound up with a number of successive initiatives such as those

relating to the import of Japanese-style practices, including ‘just-in-time’, ‘kaizen’ (continuous improvement), ‘lean’ production methods, and total quality management; business process engineering initiatives; and the ‘learning organisation’ consultancy movement. The high-performance paradigm can very much be seen as derivative from these practice innovations, however, crucially, through a core emphasis on developing high levels of employee commitment and involvement, the paradigm retains the post-Fordist ideal that new forms of work organisation should involve gains for *both* employers and employees (Vidal 2007a). In respect of this post-Fordist lineage, the high-performance approach is thus often held in contradistinction to its neo-Fordist LMF counterpart. While the high-performance paradigm is characteristically understood to hold employees as ‘valued assets’, ‘resources to be developed’, as ‘decisive components’ of productive systems, the LMF approach is viewed as emphasising responsiveness to change above all other concerns (Wood & de Menezes 1998: 485)¹.

The emergence of the high-performance paradigm can thus be understood as the product of a particular historical juncture: as, in a sense, the culmination of a series of successive experiments with new approaches to production, labour management, and work organisation, and ultimately, as undergirded by responses to the limitations of Fordist mass production. It centrally involves the continuation of a post-Fordist thesis in which the engaged, participating, committed employee is posited as the focal point for new forms of work organisation. Moreover, it is premised on a new managerial reflexivity where now, perhaps more than ever, a double hermeneutic is at play in practitioner consciousness (Giddens 1987). The paradigm marks an era in which the gulf between the conceptual discourse of management practitioners and academic researchers has narrowed sharply (Gibbons et al. 1994; Ghoshal 2005). Indeed, the approach centrally involves the notion that key decision makers consciously select from a growing intellectual stock of strategies, approaches, and work practices. Thus, crucially, the distinctiveness of the high-performance approach is seen to reside not so much in the novelty of the

¹ As will be explored later in the paper, however, there remains considerable controversy over the extent to which this distinction at the level of managerial discourse is congruent with (an arguably less clear-cut) workplace reality (see, for example, Edwards 2001; Edwards *et al.* 2002; Godard 2004; Danford *et al.* 2004, 2005; Caspersz 2006; Vidal 2007a, 2007b).

individual practices it invokes but in the manner in which these are combined by practitioners: the manifold ‘bundling’ of practices into ‘systems’ intended to yield performance gains, and ultimately, in the underpinning philosophy informing such combinations.

TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL DEBATES

That the combination of specific practices into work systems should involve more than a simple eclecticism is a cornerstone of the high-performance paradigm (Delery & Shaw 2001). While it is tempting to see high-performance working as simply the latest in a series of managerial fashions, as we have seen, advocates of the approach suggest that its defining characteristic is that there is no ‘one best way’, there are no ‘magic bullets’ or ‘best practices’ *per se*, and that high-performance work systems must, by definition, pertain to the specific environments in which they are implemented (Becker & Huselid 1998; Ashton & Sung 2006). However, beyond a broad agreement but by no means an absolute consensus on these points, there is little consistency within the literature over a number of fundamental conceptual matters. In particular, there is considerable disagreement over the terminology adopted; over which specific practices should or should not be incorporated; and over the meaning ascribed to any particular practice (Lloyd and Payne 2006). Furthermore, given its ascendancy from a multitude of sources, there is little academic ‘centre’ to the paradigm: no clear disciplinary home, no definitive progenitor as such. Such problems are compounded by, in recent years, a growing everyday currency to the high-performance lexicon. In the UK, the approach has increasingly come to be viewed as the vehicle for a high-skills route to organisational and national competitiveness, and in relation to this, the associated terminology has become a shorthand for a neo-unitarist ‘social partnership’ (Guest & Peccei 2001: 213) model in public policy discourse (Lloyd & Payne 2006: 152). The broad referential array of the high-performance lexicon in itself can be understood to constitute a weakness to the paradigm (Godard 2004; Lloyd & Payne 2006; Caspersz 2006) — it risks the danger of capturing everything and nothing about contemporary forms of work organisation. Any attempt to map the conceptual terrain of the paradigm thus faces the immediate danger of presenting a partial account of what has become an

increasingly politicised discursive arena. This review focuses on the most prominent and influential currents of the literature. While the review is necessarily selective, there has been a conscious attempt to encompass a full spectrum of positions and to avoid over-simplifying a complex and variegated field.

'Bundling' and the Influence of Strategic HRM

As suggested above, a defining characteristic of the high-performance paradigm is the notion of 'bundling'. Put simply, 'bundling' involves the understanding that when certain practices are combined in a complimentary manner, these can yield gains as a *gestalt* that are greater than the sum of their individual parts (Becker & Huselid 1998: 56). This effect is variously referred to as the 'combination effect', the 'interaction effect', or more generally, as the effect of a 'synergy' or 'complimentarity' between practices (see, for example, Becker & Huselid 1998; Laursen & Foss 2003; Macky & Boxall 2007). A preoccupation with bundling has dominated both the early high-performance literature (see, for example, Arthur 1992; Appelbaum & Batt 1994; MacDuffie 1995; Huselid 1995; Batt 1995; Kling 1995; Pil & MacDuffie 1996a, 1996b; Delery & Doty 1996; Guest 1997; Ichniowski et al. 1997; Becker *et al.* 1997) and more recent contributions (see, in particular, Appelbaum et al. 2000; Cappelli & Neumark 2001; Ashton & Sung 2002; Way 2002; Guest 2002; Wood & Wall 2002; Godard 2004; Guest et al. 2004; Hartog & Verburg 2004; Datta et al. 2005; Wall & Wood 2005; Combs *et al.* 2006; Macky & Boxall 2007). It is only relatively recently that large-scale studies of the links between the adoption of high-performance work practices have begun to test for 'combination' effects in any systematic way (see, in particular, Combs *et al.* 2006; Macky & Boxall 2007) and thus build an evidence base for a core component of the paradigm². Nonetheless, it is in connection to this preoccupation with bundling that it is also possible to observe a close relationship between the longer-term ascendancy of the high-performance paradigm and the development of strategic human resource management (SHRM).

² Indeed, Wall & Woods's meta-study of research into the practices-performance link which covered many key high-performance work practices studies from 1994-2003 found that few studies tested for the effects of combined practices, and the few that did yielded no compelling evidence for 'synergy effects' (Wall & Wood 2005: 452). Wall & Wood conclude by positing a research agenda which, it appears, recent studies are beginning to address.

A large volume of the early high-performance literature was initially developed on the back of debates concerning the link between human resource management and firm performance — also a defining concern for SHRM. While there are no ‘paradigmatic texts’ as such in the high-performance field, the work of Appelbaum & Batt (1994), MacDuffie (1995), Huselid (1995), Becker & Gerhart (1996), and Appelbaum *et al.* (2000) in particular has been highly influential, and remains to be among the most widely cited. These authors share with one another, and with the SHRM literature more generally, a central engagement with the notion of ‘internal fit’. Briefly, internal fit involves the process of combining human resource management practices in a mutually supportive manner into systems which both minimise inherent contradiction — for example, duplication, or the combination of incompatible practices — and maximise ‘synergy’ effects *a la* the notion of bundling (Macky & Boxall 2007: 538). In addition to stressing the importance of the internal consistency or ‘fit’ of HRM practices, a key emphasis of SHRM literature, and again, the high-performance paradigm, is that of ‘strategic fit’: the process of aligning HRM practices to competitive strategy to improve performance (see, in particular, Schuler & Jackson 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1989)³. Thus the link between practices and performance emerges from the literature as a defining concern for both SHRM and the high-performance paradigm.

In fact, in many ways, it is difficult to disentangle the high-performance paradigm from the literature relating to HRM and SHRM more generally. There is not room here to explore debates about the defining characteristics of HRM, SHRM and their distinction from the supposed predecessor, personnel administration (PA) (for this, see Legge 2005). However, it is noteworthy that a consistent claim made to distinguish HRM from PA is that the former involves a focus on the *effective* as opposed to the latter’s *efficient* management of human resources (Becker & Huselid 1998: 55) — a distinction which is reminiscent of that which is drawn, respectively, between the high-performance paradigm and the LMF approach, and post-Fordism

³ Wall & Wood (2005) further identify a third kind of fit: ‘organisational fit’, which concerns the degree to which HRM practices support or impede other existing practices or technologies; for example, practices relating to a strategy of lean production or total quality management (2005: 431).

and neo-Fordism, as discussed earlier in this paper. Similarly, in a wide ranging review of the difference between personnel administration and (a then newly emergent) human resource management, Mahoney & Deckop (1986) concluded that HRM signalled a move away from a focus on task-specific ‘training’, towards more holistic ‘development’, ‘job enrichment’, ‘group working’, and an engagement with more qualitative aspects of work (Mahoney & Deckop 1986) — again, these are also core themes in the high-performance paradigm. Within the US literature in particular, there is a tendency to treat the notion of high-performance work practices as one and the same as that of SHRM (see, for example, Blasi & Kruse 2006). And in the UK literature, an analysis of high-performance work practices is often subsumed within more general studies of the link between SHRM and performance outcomes (see, for example, Wall & Wood 2006). However, this tendency to conflate the two terms is in a number of ways misleading since the high-performance paradigm encompasses considerably more than a distinctive approach to HRM.

Other Spheres of Influence

As Butler *et al.* (2004: 3) have argued, the lexical variety of the high-performance paradigm belies more than simple differences in terminology. While HRM is a most important component to the high-performance paradigm, the influence of other spheres, particularly those relating to production management and work organisation, is also considerable. Drawing upon the work of Belanger *et al.* (2002), Butler *et al.* propose that the high-performance paradigm (they use the term ‘high-performance management’) is best understood as a composite of three spheres of influence each relating to different aspects of the production process: *production management*, *work organisation* and *employee relations*. Accordingly, different terminology stresses, each in its own way, different dimensions of the paradigm. For example, the concept of ‘high-commitment management’ characteristically refers to a primary engagement with employee relations; whereas the formulation ‘high-performance work systems’ places more of an emphasis on production management, particularly quality management and statistical process control techniques (Butler *et al.* 2004: 3). Table 1, below, provides a map of the current terminology relating to the high-performance paradigm, including the dominant emphasis invoked by different formulations and the key proponents associated with these.

Table 1: The Lexicon of the High-Performance Paradigm (Adapted from Butler *et al.* 2004)

| Terminology | Examples | Dominant Emphasis |
|---|---|----------------------------|
| High-Performance Work Systems | Appelbaum <i>et al.</i> (2000) Becker & Huselid (1995) Danford <i>et al.</i> (2004) Farias (1998) Harley (2002) Kling (1995) Ramsey <i>et al.</i> (2000) Takeuchi <i>et al.</i> (2007) Way (2000) | Production Management ↓ |
| High-Performance Work Practices | Combs <i>et al.</i> (2006) Handel & Gittleman (2004) Huselid (1995) | |
| Performance-Enhancing Practices | Delaney & Huselid (1996) | |
| High-Performance Work Organisation | Ashton & Sung (2002) Blasi & Kruse (2006) Lloyd & Payne (2006) Osterman (2000) | ↓ |
| New Forms of Work Organisation | Edwards <i>et al.</i> (2002) | Work Organisation |
| High-Involvement Work Systems | Edwards and Wright (2000) Felstead and Gallie (2002; 2004) Harmon <i>et al.</i> (2003) | ↑ |
| High-Involvement Work Practices | Pil & MacDuffie (1996a, 1996b) Fuertes & Sánchez (2003) | |
| High-Performance Practices | Godard (2004) | |
| Human Capital-Enhancing Practices | Youndt <i>et al.</i> (1996) | |
| High-Involvement Management | Forth & Millward (2004) | |
| High-Commitment Management | Wood (1996) Geare <i>et al.</i> (2006) | |
| Innovative Human Resource Practices | MacDuffie (1995) | |
| High-Commitment Work Practices | Iverson & Zatzick (2007) | |
| High-Performance Employment Systems | Brown & Reich (1997) | |
| High-Commitment Human Resource Policies | Green (2004) | |
| High-Commitment Management | Baird (2002) Whitfield & Poole (1997) | |
| High-Commitment HRM | Bryson <i>et al.</i> (2005) | Employee Relations |

Table 1 conveys a conceptual delineation which, it must be noted, is rather idealised. It is intended here to promote a broad sense of the different emphases involved with various formulations. The reality of the literature is far more complex, where the terminology adopted is a rather less reliable indicator of any particular author's distinctive emphasis. Indeed, some authors adopt the use of different terminology in successive publications, or even within the same publication. Other authors are more reflexive about their use of language; for example, Pil & MacDuffie

(1996) explicitly state their preference for the term ‘high-involvement’ over ‘high-performance’ given ‘the absence of clear empirical tests of their actual link to economic performance in a given situation’ (1996: 423). Indeed, in general, authors who use the term ‘commitment’ or ‘involvement’ instead of performance wish to avoid the implicit assumption of an inevitable performance pay-off. For the purposes of the discussion here, the key conclusion to be drawn in this respect is that the high-performance paradigm is one at a relatively early stage of articulation, and one that is currently characterised by conceptual and terminological heterogeneity. Nonetheless, from this terminological array, it is possible to discern the three spheres of influence identified by Bélanger *et al.* — production management; work organisation; and employee relations — particularly in relation to the key words ‘system’, ‘organisation’, and ‘HRM’ respectively. It is only in considering *each* of these areas that it is possible to obtain an adequate sense of *which practices* are involved in the high-performance paradigm.

Which Practices?

As noted earlier, there is no definite consensus concerning which practices can be said to constitute high-performance work practices. However, the practices identified by Huselid (1995) are often included (and directly cited) in lists provided by many subsequent authors. These practices are: *comprehensive employee recruitment and selection procedures*; *incentive compensation and performance management systems*; and *extensive employee involvement and training* (Huselid 1995: 635). Becker & Huselid (1998) use this list of practices as the basis for their development of a high-performance work system (HPWS) index — a unitary methodological construct which combines multi-item measures of individual practices to present an entire work system, thus capturing, for example, the configuration of different bundles of practices and, ultimately, their ‘combination effects’. The index has widely become the measure of choice adopted by subsequent researchers within the high-performance field (Macky & Boxall 2007: 546). However, Huselid’s list of practices is by no means exhaustive. It has a distinct *employee relations* emphasis, with a particular focus on HRM practices.

Again returning to Bélanger *et al.*'s (2002) model, a consideration of other spheres of influence affords us with a more inclusive account of the practices involved with the high-performance paradigm. In relation to *production management*, high-performance work practices also encompass work flow and inventory management techniques aimed at securing productive flexibility; such practices are obviously closely related to the case of manufacturing, and are thus less applicable to other sectoral contexts (see the discussion later in this paper). In relation to *work organisation*, the high-performance approach centrally includes the adoption of teamworking, and the use of self-managed teams more particularly. From the perspective of the high-performance paradigm, employees are organised on a team basis as a means of breaking down traditional demarcations of role responsibility and of promoting tacit knowledge and skill sharing across functional divisions (Bélanger *et al.* 2002: 39). One can observe a link in this connection between the adoption of teamworking as a high-performance work practice that facilitates knowledge sharing, employee learning, and the removal of barriers to informal collaboration, and arguments about the knowledge economy, where a key source of competitive advantage is seen to reside in how well an organisation 'manages' 'its' 'knowledge resources', and how well 'it' 'learns' or adapts to changing environmental circumstances (see, for example, Argyris and Schön 1978; Senge 1990; Drucker 1993; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Roos and von Krogh 1996; Davenport and Prusak 2000).

Another key aspect of work organisation associated with the high-performance paradigm is the central principles of employee involvement and participation. In terms of concrete practices, these might involve, for example, the adoption of quality circles or the utilisation of job design which allows employees high levels of task discretion. More generally, they might include practices which involve employees in decision making processes through, for example, structural de-layering, greatly augmented information sharing, improved communication channels, and enhanced opportunities for employees to exercise 'voice'. As the issues of involvement and participation also serve to illustrate, it may in fact be more helpful to identify the *dimensions* of high-performance work systems than to focus on concrete practices. In this vein, the work of Appelbaum *et al.* (2000) has been particularly

influential. Appelbaum *et al.* identify three dimensions: *high skills*, *opportunities to participate in substantive decisions*, and *incentives to use skills and participate in decisions* to high-performance work systems. Such dimensions can be seen to cut across production management, work organisation and employee relations, whereby a wide range of practices configured in a multitude of different ways might variously be adopted in accordance with the three distinctive emphases.

Bélanger *et al.*'s (2002) model of the high-performance approach holds that the sphere of *employment relations* has a pivotal role in underpinning the coherence of *work organisation* and *production management*. Firstly, the emphasis on productive flexibility in relation to production management, and task flexibility in relation to work organisation, in turn requires a degree of contractual flexibility regarding the conditions of employment. Thus, for example, reward may be tied to individual or group performance; employee role definitions may be loose; training and development might play a central role in ensuring requisite skill levels for the variety of roles and tasks relating to involvement in various teams; and so forth. Secondly, principally through the vehicle of organisational culture, an HRM practitioner's central task in high-performance organisations is to encourage employees to identify with the goals of the organisation and to elicit their skills in the service of these goals (Bélanger *et al.* 2002: 44). In short, this entails developing an affinity between the interpersonal relations of production and the technical relations of production (Ashton & Sung 2006)⁴.

There is considerable controversy concerning whether the practices involved with high-performance working have been introduced for reasons that are different from those espoused in the literature. For example, the question of whether high-performance constitutes a subterranean attack on union power and legitimacy has become particularly prominent in the recent literature (see later in this paper). There is also substantial disagreement concerning the current spread of high-performance work practices — whether the very notion of a 'high-performance workplace' is itself

⁴ A number of authors have considered specifically how organisational culture or 'climate' might mediate between high-performance work practices and performance outcomes (see, in particular, Burton *et al.* 2004; Hartog & Verburg 2004; Riordan *et al.* 2005).

a kind of myth. Debates concerning this issue, centre very much on the question, once again, of *which practices* and also the related question: *whose performance?*

Whose performance?

A particular case in point is the 1992 and 1997 National Establishment Surveys of 457 establishments, undertaken in the US. Within these surveys, an establishment was classified as a ‘high-performance work organisation’ if it had two or more of the key practices — self-managed work teams, total quality management, quality circles, job rotation, peer review of performance, and worker involvement in purchase decisions (Blasi & Kruse 2006: 555) — in place with 50 percent or more penetration among its entire employee base (Osterman 1999: 13; Blasi & Kruse 2006: 554). In adopting this classification, the study found that 37.3 percent of the 1992 sample, and 71.4 percent of the 1997 sample were high-performance work organisations (Osterman 1999: 178; Blasi & Kruse 2006: 552). By contrast, Blasi & Kruse analysed data from the National Employer Survey, based on a sample of more than 7000 establishments, undertaken in 1994 and 1997, and found a starkly different rate of dissemination. Adopting a somewhat stricter classification — an organisation needed to have adopted (i.e. achieved penetration to 50% or more of the employee base) at least three practices from a different index from that of the National Employer Survey — these authors found that only 0.93% of all establishments in the USA in 1994 and 1.10% in 1997 could correctly be identified as high-performance work organisations (1996: 565).

Beyond the immediate methodological concerns posed by this broad discrepancy are others which relate, again, to how we classify high-performance work practices, systems and organisations. Put simply, it raises questions concerning whether high-performance work ‘organisations’ are necessarily those in which the majority of the workforce are, at any given time, engaged in ‘high-performance working’⁵; questions relating to how we decide on what constitutes a ‘high-

⁵ Godard (2004: 354), for example, suggests that a good deal of existing research on high-performance working relates to workplaces with relatively low levels of practice-uptake, thus suggesting the norm may be for partial adoption. Godard proposes that high-performance work systems may have declining returns at higher levels of adoption. Thus, owing to cost–benefit trade-offs, employers are likely to opt for low to moderate levels of adoption (2004: 368). This is principally because underlying sources of

performance work system’ — whether this solely dependent on the *number* of practices; and more substantively, questions concerning whether we would expect the high-performance paradigm to prevail as a managerial approach in all industrial sectors, indeed, in all environmental circumstances (see, for example, Pfeffer 1998; Batt 2000). In the literature there is a split between those who argue for a kind of ‘one-size-fits-all’ (Ramsey *et al.* 2000: 503) model of practices with universal applicability (see, for example, Pfeffer 1994; Huselid 1995; Becker & Huselid 1998⁶) and those who adopt more of a contingency approach, in which both the bundling and the dissemination of practices vary by sector, competitive strategy, and other environmental conditions (see, for example, Arthur 1994; MacDuffie 1995; Youndt *et al.* 1996; Appelbaum *et al.* 2000; Batt 2000; Boxall 2003; Bartel 2004; Ashton & Sung 2006; Combs *et al.* 2006; Kalleberg *et al.* 2006). The *whose performance* question is then, firstly a conceptual question — a question of whether the high-performance approach is posited as a universal ‘panacea’ that can be adopted regardless of context; and secondly, it is a research question — a question of whether the approach has in practice been successfully utilised in different economic settings, and of the constraints that are imposed by context.

DEBATES ABOUT CONTEXT

Political-Economic Context

A good deal of the literature relating to the high-performance paradigm tends to treat high-performance work systems as though they were an entity in themselves that can be ‘slotted-in’ to different institutional and regulatory contexts more or less interchangeably. A particularly influential case in point is that of Appelbaum *et al.* (2000), who confine their discussion of context to just a few short paragraphs (Appelbaum 2000: 233; Butler *et al.* 2004: 6). Another strand of, what we might call, ‘institutionalist’ literature, however, has developed a more sustained analytical engagement with how the macro level political-economic context might set limits to

distrust that arise from the structure of the employment relationship make the high-levels of commitment demanded by comprehensive adoption unlikely (2004: 366) (see later in this review).

⁶ It is important to note that in their (1998) work Becker & Huselid developed their position to posit more a ‘broad architecture’ (Ramsey *et al.* 2000) of practices which allowed for a multitude of different implementation possibilities in different settings (1998: 87–91).

the range of strategic options available to any particular enterprise pursuing high-performance work practices (see, in particular, Brown & Reich 1997; Hollingsworth & Boyer 1997; Godard 2002; Doeringer *et al.* 2003; Lorenz & Valeyre 2005; Poutsma *et al.* 2006).

In relation to the UK and the US (which are often treated as environments that are broadly similar in important respects), a good deal of discussion has focused upon the predominance of a neo-liberal state orthodoxy and a set of associated institutional arrangements captured in their depiction as ‘liberal market economies’ (LMEs) (Godard 2002). LMEs are understood to be characterised by high levels of competition on the basis of a low-cost and low-skills equilibrium: the so-called ‘low-road’ to national competitiveness (Harrison 1994; Cappelli *et al.* 1996; Konzelmann & Forrant 2000; Godard 2002). Such ‘destructive’ (Konzelmann & Forrant 2000: 6) market conditions are seen to foster short-termism, and to be unfavourable to high-performance work systems, since the latter involve relatively high set-up costs, and are typically only financially viable in the longer-term (Bailey *et al.* 2001; Cappelli & Neumark 2001; Colvin *et al.* 2001). Moreover, when these ‘low-road’ conditions are coupled with high levels of unemployment, there is little incentive for employers to adopt high-performance work practices, for such labour market uncertainty renders employees more compliant, more loyal, and more committed as the threat of their own job-loss looms large (Godard 2002: 265). Under these circumstances, employers find advantage in adopting more casualised, low-commitment labour management practices that shift the onus of market vagaries on to employees, who themselves have little choice but to accept the changes as their labour becomes more replaceable (Godard 2002: 265). Such problems are compounded by a generally weakened labour movement characteristic of LMEs (Baugher 2007). In a similar manner, a tendency for a minimal state approach toward industry-level training and development in LMEs also disfavours the adoption of high-performance work practices. The relatively high costs of training, coupled with a prevailing fear of ‘talent poaching’ by competitors means that many employers may be reluctant to invest in the development of employees in order to provide the requisite skill levels demanded by

the high-performance approach⁷. Under such conditions, employers might see more advantage in recruiting ‘ready-made’ employees to build a high-calibre workforce (Butler *et al.* 2004: 8).

However, the depiction of the US and UK economies as exemplars of neo-liberal orthodoxy is somewhat over-simplistic and inadequate. Corporate governance in the UK, for example, has involved in recent years considerably more than an unfettered engagement with shareholder value (Armour *et al.* 2002: 30). Significant levels of regulation enshrined in national and European policy measures exist which have a direct bearing on the kinds of practices that might be pursued by employers (Butler *et al.* 2004: 12). Moreover, in both the UK and the US, the state has been involved in actively encouraging the adoption of developmental, ‘high-skills’ employment policies and organisational practices. In the US, there has been a conscious attempt to encourage employers to adopt the high-performance model. The, albeit ill-fated, Office for the American Workplace was established within the US Department of Labor in 1993 to assist employers with implementation of new forms of work organisation (a measure that fell victim to cutbacks three years later) (Godard 2002: 257). Similarly, the Baldrige Award in the US (established in 1988) and Investors in People in the UK (established 1993) can both be understood as initiatives aimed at encouraging the kinds of developmental, participative, employee-centred practices associated with the high-performance paradigm (Pfeffer 1994: 205–21, 1998: 286; Alberga *et al.* 1996; Godard 2002: 257).

While a *laissez-faire* state orientation might well create conditions that are incompatible with high-performance work practices, it does not necessarily follow that a more regulationist political-economic environment will, conversely, favour their uptake. For example, in exploring the prospects for the high-performance approach in the Netherlands, Hartog & Verburg (2004) consider how relatively strict Dutch labour laws constrain or prescribe an individual enterprise’s adoption of certain practices (2004: 57). In Holland, wage agreements are regularly negotiated at the

⁷ As will be discussed later in this review, a number of authors question the extent to which the high performance paradigm does, in practice, demand or involve higher skill levels among employees. Moreover, some authors challenge the assumption that investment in training and development can be equated with higher skills (see, in particular, Lloyd & Payne 2006).

sectoral level through collective bargaining between employers and unions. Consequently, Hartog & Verburg find, an individual enterprise's capacity to vary reward schemes according to performance — a key high-performance practice — is curtailed in important respects. Similarly, other collective agreements over employment conditions relating to job security and compensation set the boundaries for high-performance work systems (Hartog & Verburg 2004: 57). By contrast, a large-scale survey of work organisation in the 15 EU member states undertaken by Lorenze & Valeyre (2005) concludes that national environments characterised by relatively strong systems of employment protection are not only compatible with advanced forms of work organisation, but actually facilitate the adoption of high-involvement, high-discretion work practices (2005: 441). The significance of the labour movement to the high-performance approach and *vice versa* has emerged as a major theme in recent literature, and one that will be explored later in this review. However, for the moment, it is worth noting that national industrial relations frameworks have a crucial role to play in mediating diffusion and character of high-performance working.

In this connection, an important study is that conducted by Doeringer *et al.* (2003) of a Japanese multinational seeking to transplant high-performance work practices from the home country to overseas subsidiaries operating in the US, UK and France. Doeringer *et al.* found that these countries' industrial relations systems each in their own way shaped the character of the hybrid arrangements between the host and the home country, and, moreover, played an important role in balancing the productivity gains for managers and the economic benefits for employees of the practices that were subsequently implemented (2003: 265, 283). The authors propose that existing frameworks of worker compensation and internal labour market structures have an important bearing on which practices are retained and which are adopted. In their study, the tendency in the UK was for a considerably more modest adoption of HPWPs than that found in the US or France, and for more of an accommodation to existing traditional practices. In particular, Doeringer *et al.* found that UK hybrids faced problems in forging cooperation and participation between, for example, technical and engineering employees and those on the shop floor; and that there was far more reliance on contingency compensation, such as team bonuses, to

promote performance than in the US or France. Among the UK firms, pay and job grading practices typically involved accommodation to traditional national practices, since attempts to transplant complex criteria for assessing employee performance tended ‘...to generate labour conflict around issues of favouritism and internal equity’ (2003: 280). Doeringer *et al.* also found that a key obstacle to the introduction of high-performance work practices in the UK was related to the issues of skill, training, and job grade demarcations within the existing industrial relations framework, specifically a ‘...resistance to changes that are perceived as undermining previous status and position. Employees with formal technical qualifications as a rule [were] reluctant to work directly along side production workers on the shop floor’ (2003: 280). Similarly, Doeringer *et al.* found that teamworking, which requires considerable worker cooperation and investment in skills training, can become seen as costly if workers are not committed to participating or to learning. The comparative lack of cooperation between traditionally separate grades of employee characteristic of the UK might, the authors suggest, go some way towards explaining why UK employers are less likely to invest in the skills of manual operators than their US or French counterparts (Doeringer *et al.* 2003: 283).

Doeringer *et al.*’s account of Anglo-Japanese hybrid firms within the UK depicts an economic environment in which the industrial relations framework is far from insignificant, and in fact has a crucial role to play in shaping the dissemination and character of high-performance work systems. In relation to the US, Blasi & Kruse’s earlier-cited wide-ranging meta-review of the spread of high-performance working, reaches a similar set of conclusions. They suggest that existing organisational patterns and industrial relations practices have an important bearing on the diffusion of innovative work practices (Ramirez *et al.* 2007), determining which will be widely adopted and which will be more likely to be confined to relatively isolated pockets of the workplace. Thus, for example, self-managed teams which involve a considerable disruption to prevailing practices have not found widespread adoption, whereas ‘work-related meetings’, i.e. meetings in which quality, output, or performance is reviewed, have a significantly higher incidence level because these do not radically challenge existing industrial patterns (Blasi & Kruse 2006: 572). The authors conclude that the implications of high-performance work systems are wide-

reaching, and amount to considerably more than the adoption of a few fashionable practices. They write: ‘We believe that a “lighter” measure of HPW does not capture the depth of social change implied in this innovation movement. Real workplace change challenges the existing systems of distributing power, prestige, and rewards in social organizations and it is not likely to go as easily as convening an occasional quality circle’ (Blasi & Kruse 2006: 572).

Blasi & Kruse’s arguments here contrast with those of other recent commentators concerning the extent of change that high-performance management can be accurately said to involve. For example, Vidal (2007a) has argued that the degree of employee involvement in high-performance work systems will inevitably stop some way short of ‘substantial empowerment’ since the latter requires ‘...a change in organizational routine and authority structure ... not necessary to achieve the largely *technical* goals of management’ (2007: 199 emphasis in original). As such, Vidal’s arguments suggest that high-performance work systems will never truly constitute a challenge ‘to existing systems of distributing power’ since such a change would ultimately be beyond the scope of the managerial prerogative. These issues return our focus again to how one envisages and defines high-performance work systems. If a stricter classification such as Blasi & Kruse’s is adopted, the term helps us to distinguish between enterprises that are, by their own definition, adopting certain practices that happen to fall within the high-performance domain, and those which can be said to constitute high-performance work organisations ‘proper’. The latter, if we go along with Blasi & Kruse, are those which have adopted bundles of practices that constitute ‘real workplace change’ based on a new system of ‘distributing power, prestige, and reward’ — indeed, such a shift is implied by the post-Fordist underpinnings of the high-performance paradigm. However, utilising this ‘tighter’ definition of high-performance work organisations risks making the analytical mistake of excluding more intermediary forms of work organisation, or perhaps organisations in which only a minority of the employee base are engaged in high-performance working. Moreover, in deciding what constitutes a high-performance work organisation ‘proper’, how do we avoid privileging one, potentially arbitrarily chosen definition over another? The dilemma is thus one of avoiding either an overly-broad definition that risks becoming a catch-all for

seemingly any innovative organisational practice, and a too-narrow conceptualisation which does not allow for the manifold possibilities presented by the high-performance paradigm.

The challenge is also methodological. The prevailing dependence on single-source reports of practice adoption (Truss 2001: 1121; Wall & Wood 2005: 455) in surveys of high-performance working augments the possibilities for a disparity between what respondents *say* they are doing and what they're *actually* doing, and thus promoting a distorted picture of the incidence of the high-performance work practices, and, indeed, the impact of such practices on performance, employee well-being, and so forth. Wall & Wood (2005: 455) go as far as to suggest that the only way to obtain more accurate data on high-performance working is to undertake an independent audit of practices within each enterprise included in a study. There are also related problems with what is meant by any *particular* practice. Survey research, by far the most popular method reported in the high-performance literature, in particular is not well-suited to capturing the nuances of contextual meaning. Thus, for example, depending on the index or measure used, a particular enterprise might be considered to constitute a 'low innovator' that had adopted only one of a bundle of high-performance work practices — say, training and development. And yet, this ostensibly unitary practice might, on closer inspection, involve an entire 'system' that includes management development, high-skills training, knowledge-sharing initiatives, and a range of practices aimed at otherwise facilitating workplace learning. Conversely, a single one-off initiative involving a range of employees in a work-related meeting, might be taken to indicate an organisation involved in teamworking, quality circles, and enhanced information sharing. While there is recognition of such issues within the literature (for example, Hartog & Verburg 2004; Wall & Wood 2005; de Menezes & Wood 2006; Macky & Boxall 2007), current research remains to be some way short of overcoming these.

Political-economic context, then is important in shaping which practices are likely to predominate, and also the rate of their dissemination. Moreover, national policy frameworks have a crucial role to play in defining how the high-performance paradigm is variously 'played out' between employers and employees. The analysis

by Doeringer *et al.* would also suggest that practitioners seeking to implement high-performance work practices in international firms need to have an understanding of the entrenched modes of working and prevailing norms and values of the different political-economic environments in which they operate.

The discussion thus far has also highlighted that, depending on the definition adopted, there are vastly different estimates as to the incidence of high-performance work systems in different national environments. Within the UK, recent studies have suggested that the uptake of high-performance working is somewhere around the 20-30% mark (see, for example, Felstead & Ashton 2000; Ashton & Sung 2002; de Menezes & Wood 2006). However, again, such figures are contested (Lloyd & Payne 2006), and would be quite different if, for example, the measure adopted by Blasi & Kruse (2006) was utilised.

Industrial Sector

Where there is more widespread agreement, however, is that the bulk of the literature devoted to high-performance working has, particularly in relation to early research, somewhat of a bias toward the manufacturing sector (Bartel 2004; Kalleberg *et al.* 2006; Harley *et al.* 2007; Combs *et al.* 2006). Incidence surveys have generally found a higher concentration of high-performance work systems within the manufacturing sector (see, again, Blasi & Kruse 2006; de Menezes & Wood 2006). However, a dominant theme in recent literature relates to the adoption of high-performance working in other sectors, particularly the service sector (see, for example, Batt 2000; Hunter 2000; Boxall 2003; Bartel 2004; Gould-Williams 2004; Combs *et al.* 2006; Jones *et al.* 2006; Kalleberg *et al.* 2006; Connolly & McGing 2007; Harley *et al.* 2007; Scotti *et al.* 2007).

As Combs *et al.* suggest, on first consideration we might expect service sector firms to be among those who would benefit the most from adopting a high-performance approach. In particular, employees within the service sector generally are required to exercise more discretion than their manufacturing counterparts, and as we have seen, motivating employees to exert discretionary effort is central to the high-performance paradigm. Similarly, efforts to influence work attitudes and

behaviour take centre stage in high-performance work system, and such orientations are particularly important to customer-facing employees (Combs *et al.* 2006: 506). However, Combs *et al.* argue, there are a number of reasons why the high-performance approach has generally found more fertile ground within the sphere of manufacturing.

Firstly, manufacturing typically involves the widespread use of complex and dangerous machinery. Characteristically, the response of management to this industrial reality is to develop elaborate bureaucratic rules and standardised procedures to ensure adequate training and safety levels for employees. But the inevitable technological and market changes endemic to the contemporary era invariably mean that products need to change, and in relation to such changes, new technology is likely to be introduced which brings with it the need for new procedures. Adapting to market change thus becomes costly and difficult under the conventional approach, making the more flexible and adaptable high-performance alternative particularly attractive⁸. By contrast, firms within the service sector are typically less bound by technological change (2006: 507). Secondly, manufacturing organisations generally rely more than their service sector counterparts on the internal human resource management system to supply skill and to maintain levels of motivation. Service organisations are either low-end (where skills can be developed on the job) or high-end and professionalised (where external agencies provide skills). Moreover, customer-facing environments provide an impetus for employees to do a ‘good job’, whereas in manufacturing employees are typically removed from direct customer contact (Combs *et al.* 2006: 507). Thirdly, Combs *et al.* argue, the ‘product’ in service sector industry is invariably the product of an encounter, typically an interaction with a client, and thus part of the equation of ‘production’ within service work is always beyond management’s span of control. By contrast, within the manufacturing sector, managers have a much greater capacity to control production

⁸ There is some evidence to support this argument. In their (2002) study, Edwards *et al.* conclude that ‘new forms of work organisation’ (such as those embodied in the high-performance paradigm) are only suitable to technologically advanced settings since outside of this context, the costs of training and management restructuring will outweigh the benefits (2002: 46). Similarly, Kintana *et al.* (2006) found that high performance work systems are more effective in high-technology industries than in mid- or low-tech ones. In fact, Kintana *et al.* found that in low-tech industries, high performance work systems had a negligible impact on knowledge and commitment (2006: 81).

outcomes: once the availability of raw materials is known (through, for example, inventory management, or just-in-time management), high-performance work systems can facilitate fast, consistent, high-quality transformations of those materials. In other words, the impact of high-performance work practices on manufacturing performance can be larger because the influence of such practices is not capped by a limited ability to control final outcomes (Combs *et al.* 2006: 508). Finally, Combs *et al.* suggest, some high-performance work practices are simply better aligned to manufacturing work. Teams are a good example in this respect: they are particularly effective within manufacturing because they allow workers to resolve complex problems arising from considerable task interdependence among manufacturing stages. But service work, by contrast, has lower levels of task inter-dependence and thus the team-gain is likely to be less (2006: 515). In support of these arguments, Combs *et al.*'s research, drawing upon a number recent studies, finds a considerably more robust relationship between high-performance work practices and organisational performance in manufacturing organisations than service organisations. The authors conclude that the greater incidence of high-performance working among manufacturing firms is thus related to the stronger effects such practices have upon performance within the manufacturing sector.

More generally, it is commonly argued that employment in the service sector is sharply divided into high- and low-skill segments, with a profusion of the latter, and as such, the high-skills and high-commitment emphasis of high-performance working has limited applicability within this context (Batt 2000: 540; Harley *et al.* 2007: 608). However, over the last few years, there has emerged a growing body of evidence to challenge this argument, and indeed, many of the arguments outlined by Combs *et al.* above. A number of researchers have found both that partial or whole high-performance work systems have been adopted by a range of service sector establishments, and that these systems are generally associated with positive outcomes (Boselie *et al.* 2001; Peccei & Rosenthal 2001; Spence Laschinger *et al.* 2001. Harmon *et al.* 2003; Harley *et al.* 2007; Scotti *et al.* 2007). More specifically, recent studies have explored the adoption of high-performance work systems within both high- (Bartel 2004) and low-skills (Berg & Frost 2005) segments of the service sector (Harley *et al.* 2007: 610). In addressing the question of how position in the

employment structure of an organisation influenced whether high-performance work practices would have negative or beneficial consequences for employees, Harley *et al.* found overwhelmingly positive effects for both low- and high-skills service sector employees within the same workplaces (2007: 620).

Similarly, we might expect the high-performance paradigm to have limited utility to the non-profit sector. Public and non-profit organisations are seemingly environments in which the pressure to raise performance is not as intense as their for-profit counterparts (Kalleberg *et al.* 2006: 273). However, leaving aside the potential problems with this assumption, it is noteworthy that in their survey of enterprises in the US, Kalleberg *et al.* (2006) found evidence of widespread adoption of self-directed teams and offline committees amongst non-profit organisations, with somewhat lower use of performance-related incentives than their for-profit counterparts. In relation to his research into public sector employees, Gould-Williams (2004) found that teamworking in particular had a: ‘consistent positive effect on employee attitude, with training, empowerment, involvement in decision-making, communication ... and performance-related pay effecting some, but not all outcomes’ (2004: 77).

There is a growing body of evidence, then, which suggests that high-performance work systems have the potential to be used across a range of industrial sectors. However, the literature suggests that the degree of dissemination, plus the particular characteristics of such systems, will vary considerably. Furthermore, some research suggests that rather than adopting a single configuration of ‘best practices’, employers in different political-economic and sectoral contexts are selectively adopting ‘...those components of the HPWO repertoire that are most compatible with their particular organizational, environmental, and technological conditions’ (Kalleberg *et al.* 2006: 294). Context, it thus follows, is crucial to the form that high-performance work systems take.

The notion of practitioners selecting ‘bundles’ of practices according to the environmental conditions, industrial relations context, and the specific performance demands of their particular organisations has a certain rhetorical appeal, and is very

much in keeping with central tenets of the high-performance paradigm. However, it is important to note that this idea is also problematic in certain respects. Firstly, there is some research which questions whether employers, in practice, actually undertake a process of conscious strategic alignment (see, for example, Wood 1999). Secondly, employers rarely act on the basis of perfectly-known environmental conditions, and are unlikely to know *a priori* which practices are best suited to their distinctive context, and, indeed, how best to configure these. Given the stress placed on developing high-performance work systems which have internal coherence, it is likely that some degree of experimentation and ‘trial-and-error’ will accompany the introduction of high-performance work systems, and thus such systems will likely develop in a negotiated manner over time (Godard 2004; Kato 2006). Thirdly, the implicit model of employers freely selecting practices is somewhat voluntaristic. The formulation underplays how other key stakeholders, notably representatives of organised labour, may have a direct and crucial role in the development of such systems (Ramirez *et al.* 2007); and, also how employees may actively resist the introduction of new practices (Wolf & Zwick 2002; Danford *et al.* 2005; Caspersz 2006). Fourthly, the performance gains of high-performance work systems are typically ‘lagged’ — they may not appear until some time after the introduction of new practices (Helper 1998; Zwick 2004; Kato 2006). Thus, it is only over time that employers might establish whether any particular practice is yielding the expected performance benefits. Indeed, the link between high-performance practices and actual performance is anything but straightforward to elucidate. In fact, the precise character of this link, the route of influence, and indeed, whether a link exists at all, has become a central concern in recent literature.

THE PRACTICES–PERFORMANCE LINK

At the broadest level, there are two competing positions concerning the link between the adoption of high-performance work practices and performance outcomes (see Ramsey *et al.* 2000: 503). The first involves, in certain respects, a continuation of the post-Fordist thesis. The core idea here is that, through centring labour management and work organisation around highly skilled, engaged, involved, and ‘empowered’ workers, it is possible to develop a ‘win–win’ situation for both

employers and employees where higher performance is achieved principally through developing a more motivated workforce (Macky & Boxall 2007: 537). Such mutual gains are possible as, on the one hand, employees are seen to benefit from: having more input into their work, in terms of both greater task discretion and ‘voice’; enjoying more varied and meaningful work; feeling valued, both through opportunities to express their opinions and through the developmental investments made in them by employers; to name but a few. Whereas, accordingly, on the other hand, employers are seen to benefit from: having more motivated, committed, loyal, workers (Youndt *et al.* 1996; Pfeffer 1998; Vandenberg *et al.* 1999; Lee & Bruvold 2003; Combs *et al.* 2006); who use initiative without necessarily needing instruction; who innovate in relation to their own work and broader productive processes; who are empowered to act and who want to act (Pfeffer 1998; Perry-Smith & Blum 2000; Berg *et al.* 2003; Aryee *et al.* 2005); who engage more with the quality of their work and that of others (Appelbaum *et al.* 2000); who are less likely to leave the firm (Arthur 1994; Guthrie 2001), less inclined to ‘shirk’, or to be absent from work (Huselid 1995); and so on. However, according to this position, in tandem with these mutual gains come certain corresponding ‘costs’ on each side: employers must cede certain controls to employees; must meet the high financial costs relating to training and development, work restructuring, etc.; and will become more dependent on less replaceable staff. Similarly, employees must accept higher levels of responsibility; must exert more discretionary ‘effort’; and must identify more readily with the performance goals of the organisation.

Running counter to this set of arguments is a second general position which, in many ways, marks a continuation of the ‘neo-Fordist’ thesis (Ramsey *et al.* 2000: 504). This position is heavily informed by a tradition of Marxist labour process critique of which Braverman (1974) provides an exemplar. While by no means a singular position, the approach characteristically envisages a ‘win–lose’ situation for, respectively, employers and employees in relation to the adoption of high-performance work practices. This is because, from this perspective, the performance gains of high-performance working are understood to derive directly or indirectly from work intensification (Ramsey *et al.* 2000: 505), both through job enlargement and through the inevitable staff-reductions that the introduction of high-performance

systems are understood to involve (Iverson & Zatzick 2007). The benefits, thus, are very largely felt by employers, while conversely, the costs, in the main, are met by employees. Employees have to compensate for performance gains both via direct job losses and through a shifted burden of responsibility which compels workers to exert more labour effort; and, ultimately, through employees subordinating their interests to those of the organisation. Advocates of this neo-Fordist position thus challenge the ‘rhetoric’ of the high-performance paradigm, and suggest that research, which has hitherto predominantly focused simply on establishing a link between the adoption of practices and performance outcomes, needs to do more to look inside ‘the black box’ to examine the *character* of this link, particularly in relation to the how employees experience high-performance work systems (Ramsey *et al.* 2000; Grant & Shields 2002). In this way, the ‘route’ to performance, specifically, whether performance gains result from, for example, higher levels of employee motivation, or alternatively, from work intensification, has become a concern of central importance to research in the area.

The ‘Route’ to Performance Outcomes

There are a multitude of theories relating to the precise route by which high-performance work practices might affect performance and the actual ‘mechanisms of influence’ (Wall & Wood 2006: 432). Many vary around a common theme that Boxall & Purcell (2003) describe as the *abilities, motivation, and opportunities* (AMO) model. This model envisages an inter-linear causality between practices, their impact on employees, and the subsequent impact on organisational performance. According to this model, the route by which high-performance work practices influence performance outcomes is as follows: a) practices have an impact on employee’s *abilities*, particularly in relation to knowledge and skill levels, and thus an employee’s capacity and capability for performance changes; b) practices also influence employee attitudes, affecting levels of *motivation* to deploy such knowledge and skills; and c) practices influence the availability of *opportunities* to make full use of these enhanced abilities. In this manner: ‘...employee capability sets the upper limit of performance, motivation influences the degree to which this capacity is turned into action, and opportunity refers to enhancing avenues for the capability of motivated employees to be expressed’ (Macky & Boxall 2007: 539).

In relation to enhancing employee *abilities*, there is evidence to suggest that high-performance work systems aid skills and knowledge development (see, for example, Huselid 1995; Capelli 1996; Ashton & Sung 2002; Hoque 1999); are associated with a range of ‘new skills’ (Felstead & Ashton 2000; Ashton & Sung 2002; Felstead & Gallie 2004); facilitate workplace learning through creating more ‘expansive’ (Fuller & Unwin 2003) learning environments (Ashton & Sung 2002); and potentially reduce skill inequalities between full-time employees and non-standard workers (Felstead & Gallie 2004). In relation to the link between high-performance work systems and *motivation*, a considerable amount of research has explored the impact on levels of commitment. A number of researchers have found that, in particular, the use of flexible work arrangements, enhanced procedures for airing grievances, augmented employee participation in decision making, and high compensation more generally improve motivation levels via increasing organisational commitment (see, for example, Youndt *et al.* 1996; Pfeffer 1998; Appelbaum *et al.* 2000; Whitener 2001; Gould-Williams 2004; Combs *et al.* 2006). Other researchers have found employees in high-performance systems more motivated in relation to higher levels of overall job satisfaction (for example, Berg 1999; Guest 1999; Vandenberg *et al.* 1999; Wright *et al.* 2005; Macky & Boxall 2007). With regard to the link between high-performance work systems and *opportunities* for employees to make use of capabilities, researchers have found, for example, that in relaxing certain rigidities of organisational structure and work design, and introducing teamworking and enhanced information sharing, high-performance work systems provide employees with the latitude to act to their full capacity (see, for example, Huselid 1995; Pfeffer 1998; Delery & Shaw 2001).

More general effects are seen to derive from the changes in internal organisational structures associated with high-performance work systems. For example, Evans & Davis (2005) found that the a key benefit of the adoption of self-managed teams and flexible work design is that these practices bring together people who would not normally interact. This has pay-offs in terms of facilitating knowledge and information exchange, plus enhanced sociability (Combs *et al.* 2006: 504). Batt & Valcour (2003) and Berg *et al.* (2003) both find the flexible work arrangements related to high-performance work systems generally help employees to find more

optimal work—life balance than more conventional work organisation, again resulting in more satisfying working conditions and lower levels of turnover. The links to performance outcomes from each of the areas discussed above — *abilities*, *motivation*, and *opportunities* — are manifold. For example, Scotti *et al.* (2007) follows a chain of causality that runs from high-performance work systems, to employees' perceptions of service quality, to actual service quality, and ultimately, customer satisfaction (2007: 112). In a similar manner, Schneider *et al.* (2006) suggest that the greater opportunities for employees to act, coupled with higher levels of task discretion in high-performance work systems, encourage employees to go beyond contract, 'go the extra mile', which, in turn, can have a positive effect on business performance (Combs *et al.* 2006: 508).

While there is now considerable evidence that high-performance work practices affect performance, sample size differences, competing research designs, and disagreement concerning the selection of practices, have all made for considerable disparities in the findings of existing studies (Combs *et al.* 2006: 502). Accordingly, there are difficulties attendant upon estimating with any degree of adequacy the degree of effect size in the practice–performance link (Combs *et al.* 2006: 502). Most centrally, there are important differences in how performance is measured within the existing research, either directly or via proxies. For example, depending on sectoral and organisational context, measures of financial performance are variously calculated in relation to sales or return on sales, return on assets, equity, profit (which again is measured in a multitude of ways), market returns, or measures of growth (Hartog & Verburg 2004: 58; Combs *et al.* 506). Similarly, operational performance measures have been calculated in relation to levels of employee turnover, job satisfaction, flexibility, managerial legitimacy, and productivity (Hartog & Verburg 2004: 58, 75; Combs *et al.* 506). And productivity itself is measured in a number of ways, for example, output per employee, production time, output divided by labour, to name but a few (Hartog & Verburg 2004: 58). There are also issues relating to the source of performance measures, for example whether these are derived from a single-source, managerial self-reporting, or from multiple sources, or independent measures (Gerhart *et al.* 2000; Ichniowski *et al.* 1996; Truss 2001: 1121;

Wall & Wood 2005: 455)⁹. In addition to inconsistencies in how performance is measured, there are also problems concerning the enduring issue of causal direction in the practices–performance link. The possibility of reverse causality — that high-performing organisations are, for instance, better placed to use participative HRM techniques and to undertake organisational de-layering, etc. — has not yet been ruled out (Wright *et al.* 2005). In this connection, there remains somewhat of a dearth of longitudinal studies which might compare ‘before’ and ‘after’ measures of performance in relation to the impact of high-performance work systems (notable exceptions include Godard 2001; and Wright *et al.* 2005).

Two recent meta-analyses provide a useful indication of the current state of research relating to the high-performance paradigm. Wall & Wood’s (2006) analysis of 25 key studies of the link between HRM and organisational performance (a high proportion of which were investigations of high-performance work practices) concludes that while a link between HRM practices and performance is often assumed (and indeed is found in 19 out of the 25 studies reviewed), the evidence, when reviewed systematically, is in fact rather less compelling. On the basis of a critical assessment of existing studies, the authors find a series of conceptual and methodological flaws, inconsistencies, and limitations which, they suggest, makes reaching any definitive conclusion regarding the links between HRM and performance premature according to the current state of knowledge. By contrast, Combs *et al.*’s meta-analysis of 92 research investigations into the performance effects of high-performance work practices is rather more optimistic. The authors sought to generate a statistical aggregation of the evidence which countered the effects of sampling and measurement error, plus other methodological artefacts, and which overcame individual study attributes, such as those relating to the type and size of organisation studied. From analysis of the 92 previous studies, the authors estimated a high-performance work practices effect size of $r_c = .20$ meaning that “...20% of the utility available from predicting performance differences among organizations is given by HPWPs ... Thus, HPWPs’ impact on organizational

⁹ It is significant to note, however, that in Wood & Wall’s (2006) meta-analysis of existing studies, the authors found that whether performance measures were based on self-reporting, single or multiple sources, made little difference to levels of influence (Wall & Wood 2006: 451).

performance is not only statistically significant, but managerially relevant” (Combs *et al.* 2006: 517–518). Combs *et al.* suggest that while this may not seem like a large effect, compared to other organisational-level phenomena, and given the range of studies it is derived from, this is a not insignificant finding (2006: 517). Similarly, while Wall & Wood found little convincing evidence in favour of the ‘complementarities thesis’ (2006: 452), Combs *et al.* find considerable support, estimating the interactive effects of high-performance systems to be double those of individual practices ($r_c = .28$ for versus $r_c = .14$ respectively) (Combs *et al.* 2006: 519)¹⁰.

Performance through Work Intensification

While there is broad agreement by what we have called the ‘post-Fordist’ and ‘neo-Fordist’ approaches within the high-performance paradigm that there is, indeed, a link between the adoption of high-performance work practices and performance outcomes, there is, as suggested above, a clear difference between these positions in understandings of the ‘route’ by which this performance is achieved¹¹. A number of authors have suggested that more attention must be paid by researchers to exploring inside the ‘black box’ between practices and performance (see, for useful reviews of these positions, Ramsey *et al.* 2000; 2001). In other words, commentators from this position suggest, attention must be paid to the experiential effects of high-performance work systems. This, in part, involves departing from the tendency in existing research to rely on ‘input’–‘output’ models of causality, typically based upon survey data, and to undertake more detailed and in-depth studies that explore how, in

¹⁰ Additional support for the complementarities thesis is also found in the detailed research of Laursen & Foss (2003); and the extensive study undertaken by Macky & Boxall (2006).

¹¹ This statement requires some qualification. Godard (2004), for example, suggests that the high-performance paradigm might ultimately involve a ‘lose–lose’ situation. Since, particularly in economies where workers have few representation rights, the high-performance approach may well have negative consequences for unions and workers, and at best, only marginal performance gains for employers. Godard suggests that previous researchers have tended to over-play the performance and other benefits of high-performance working, and, owing to a number of methodological and conceptual flaws, the evidence base does so far not support the claims that have been made of the approach. Similarly, Harley (2002) concludes that, despite the enthusiastic account provided of high performance work practices, in the context of his research at least the evidence suggests that such practices make little or no difference (2002: 430). However, in Harley *et al.*’s most recent study (2007) considerable support for the more optimistic ‘team’ account of high-performance work systems is found.

practice, high-performance work systems have actually been implemented, enacted, and experienced by workers.

Researchers following this approach have found considerable variations in how the high-performance paradigm has been translated into practice (Godard 1998; Geary & Dobbins 2001; Godard 2004). Based on such research, Godard (2004) distinguishes between two kinds of high-performance system: 'lean' systems, which involve considerable managerial supervision; typically accompany just-in-time inventory management; and are 'efficiency'-focused; and 'team' systems, which afford teams genuine autonomy; normally do not involve just-in-time strategies; and are 'commitment'-focused (2004: 351). While the latter 'team' approaches achieve performance very much through the ways envisaged by the post-Fordist position, the former 'lean' approach follows the neo-Fordist prediction of achieving performance via work intensification. Evidence for the dissemination of a 'team' model is found, for example, in Appelbaum *et al.*'s (2000) study of 4400 workers in 44 US enterprises which were variously drawn from the steel, apparel and medical electronic equipment industries. Appelbaum *et al.* find that high-performance work systems have generally positive implications for levels of employee commitment and job satisfaction (though there were notable differences according to sector), with no significant increase in stress levels — a key indicator of work intensification. However, while Appelbaum *et al.*'s study has been highly influential in the literature, a number of other studies suggest that, at the very least, in other contexts, there is considerable evidence for the existence of a 'lean' model of high-performance working.

One such study is that of Danford, *et al.*'s (2004; 2005) investigation of high-performance working at two aerospace firms *Airframes* and *JetCo*. Here the authors found only partial evidence of increased task discretion, greater participation in decision making, higher skill levels, higher reward possibilities, and the other espoused benefits of high-performance work systems for employees. Instead, the authors observed that considerable work intensification and rising levels of occupational stress accompanied practice adoption (2005: 96–97). In *Airframes*, union leaders broadly accepted the new 'partnership' model enshrined in the high-performance approach, which was initially viewed as a vehicle for cooperative

industrial relations. However, subsequently, there was widespread dissent amongst union members who felt that leaders were uncritically accepting the managerial agenda. At *JetCo*, the union's stance was more critical of partnership agreements, and remained based around an adversarial model of collective bargaining, again suggesting unions have an important role to play in shaping high-performance work systems. Danford *et al.* also explored differences in access to training and development in the two case firms. They found that it was principally managerial grades and new graduates who were favoured and prioritised. Women and temporary workers were typically excluded from access to training and other skill-development opportunities. Moreover, Danford *et al.* found evidence that the rhetoric of empowerment was mobilised by employers to justify, and to help create, a more compliant and business-oriented workforce but remained only notional in terms of involving real changes in power balances. For example, while employees were encouraged to provide input into working practices, management rarely demonstrated that they trusted employee suggestions sufficiently to take them seriously (2004: 20). As such, they propose, the high-performance paradigm was used as a means of obfuscating centralised authority structures, which still remained despite the rhetoric of 'de-layering'. The notion of a win-win partnership in high-performance work systems is thus, Danford *et al.* suggest, largely illusory. Such partnerships, they argue, can never be truly beneficial to both parties because they ignore the irreconcilable conflicts of interest between employers and employees that are structurally embedded in the employment relationship (Godard 2004: 371; Danford *et al.* 2005: 223–224.). As such, Danford *et al.* conclude, when enacted in the workplace, the high-performance approach is very much loaded towards the managerial prerogative (2005: 223–227).

A number of other studies similarly report significant levels of work intensification — defined by Green (2004: 709) as '...an increase in the proportion of effective labor performed for each hour of work' — and higher levels of occupational stress accompanying the introduction of high-performance work practices (see, for example, McKinlay & Taylor 1996; Smith 1997; Brown 1999; Cunningham and Hyman 1999; Landsbergis *et al.* 1999; Ramsey *et al.* 2001; Green 2004, 2006). Other studies have found that the workplace reality of high-performance working follows

much more closely the ‘lean’ model than the ‘team’ model (to again invoke Godard’s distinction) where the rhetoric of the paradigm does not correspond to its enactment (see, for example, Todd 1999; Kumar 2000; McKay 2004; Caspersz 2006; Vidal 2007a, 2007b). Indeed, some authors suggest that the initial set-up outlays and elevated costs required to maintain high-performance work systems (such as those related to wages, development, training, and generally transforming the workplace) (see Bailey *et al.* 2001; Cappelli & Neumark 2001; Godard 2004; Sels *et al.* 2006) actually *necessitate* a ‘lean’ model (Caspersz 2006; Iverson & Zatzick 2007), and generally encourage only partial, low-level adoption of high-performance work practices (Godard 2004). Such cost-benefit disparities are found to be particularly unfavourable to smaller firms (Sels *et al.* 2006). Other studies have found a link between the use of high-performance work practices and ‘downsizing’ either through layoffs (Osterman 2000; Helper *et al.* 2002), or less ‘harsh’ strategies, for example, voluntary redundancies (Iverson & Zatzick 2007). And some commentators have found a conflict between high-performance work practices and policies relating to work—life balance (White *et al.* 2003).

A number of authors, drawing on more qualitative research, have explored the different meanings attached to individual practices and their implications for employees. For example, Edwards *et al.* (2002) distinguish between vastly different enactments of ‘teamworking’: a first ‘Scandinavian’-type model which involves considerable employee discretion, high levels of team autonomy, and complex task-working, contrasts sharply with another, ‘lean-type’ that involves limited levels of control and autonomy, and an engagement with simple tasks (Edwards *et al.* 2002: 96; Lloyd & Payne 2006: 156). In a particularly rich ethnographic study, Bacon & Blyton (2005) find that managers and employees can have vastly different understandings of teamworking and the reasons for its introduction. The authors propose that one of the most prominent employee explanations for why managers implemented teamworking varied around the theme of self-interest. A common belief among employee respondents was that managers introduced teamworking for their own career advancement, and that teamworking was simply the latest in a series of managerial fashions which belied the true managerial interest of cutting jobs and increasing profitability for shareholders. Furthermore, it was commonly felt by

employees that the means by which management achieved compliance to the programme was by actively favouring acquiescent individuals, and indeed promoting such employees to advance the initiative (2005: 25). Paradoxically, employee respondents were generally positive about the benefits of teamworking, but had little trust for, what they considered to be, the ‘rhetoric’ of high-performance working. Accordingly, Bacon & Blyton conclude that: ‘... trust and co-operations of employees is hard-won and even positive changes are not immune from a cynical interpretation of management motives’ (2005: 252). Indeed, the issue of trust has been found by a number of researchers to be particularly important to the success or otherwise of high-performance work systems (see, for example, Appelbaum *et al.* 2000; Whitener 2001; Frenkel & Orlitzky 2005; Zacharatos *et al.* 2005; Macky & Boxall 2007). If employees have little trust in management, they are less likely to ‘buy-into’ high-performance work systems, and, ultimately, such issues have a profound bearing on whether or not high-performance work practices can foster levels of affective commitment (Macky & Boxall 2007: 541–542).

Danford *et al.* (2005) go as far as to suggest that a lack of trust between employers and employees is endemic to the employment relationship, and is simply ‘...the manifestation of a deeper contradiction, of the irreconcilable conflict of interests that arise from this social relation’ (2005: 224). This is a view which finds support in the work of Godard (2004) who argues that such underlying sources of distrust mean high-performance work systems have ‘declining marginal returns’ (2004: 366). He argues that the levels of affective commitment required by more comprehensive adoption are unlikely given that distrust is structurally embedded. Godard goes on to outline a number of other key arguments concerning why high-performance systems inevitably, in his view, lead to work intensification and to follow the ‘lean’ model more generally. Key amongst these are the costs associated with the high-involvement approach which, particularly under conditions of labour market and economic insecurity, are likely to be met through work intensification; and the use of performance-related incentive and pay systems, which, in turn increase pressure on employees and can raise levels of occupational stress (2004: 366–369).

Green (2004) looks to explain significant levels of work intensification found in a range of studies relating to 13 European Union countries over the last decade or so. In considering possible explanations for this generally observed trend, he proposes that key possibilities include an increase in downsizing, the advent of technological-facilitated workflow monitoring, and the increasing use of performance-related incentives — each of which, in turn, is associated with the adoption of high-performance work systems. Green's analysis reveals, respectively, that downsizing intensifies work as the employees who are left have to work harder; technological changes such as the computerisation of workflows enhance the capacity for management to monitor the labour process and to control the flow of work; and, ultimately, such technological changes operate in tandem with systems of linking employee effort to reward permitting 'hitherto unfeasible contracts for greater effort in return for more pay' (Green 2004: 718). Technological changes, coupled with practices relating to total quality management and just-in-time production, have the effect of rendering work more 'visible', more amenable, to use a Foucauldian term, to the 'gaze' of management. For Green, new 'technologies' of work (referring both to technological innovations in the general sense, and new managerial techniques) have augmented management's capacity to 'bring work to the worker' and thus, to use Marx's term, reduce the 'porosity of the working day' (Green 2004: 737). High-commitment policies thus appear to engender greater effort and enhance managerial control of the labour process (2004: 737). In this respect, high-performance work systems can be seen to involve less a 'ceding' of control to employees, and more a change in the *character* and *technologies* of control (Edwards *et al.* 2001: 16–17). Coupled with a weakened labour movement and a concomitant decline in collective bargaining, there are, Green suggests, now fewer checks on the intensification of work.

There are, of course, a number of studies that have rather more equivocal findings, suggesting that neither the overly-optimistic, nor the entirely pessimistic, accounts of high-performance working are empirically justified (see, for example, Ramsey *et al.* 2000; Harley 2001; Thompson and Harley 2007). As such, simply polarising the literature into two opposing camps can mask the complexity and range of positions that exist within the literature (Edwards *et al.* 2001: 570). Even among

those commentators who, in general, support the more optimistic account of high-performance working, there is a growing recognition that beneficial effects, indeed, the ‘win–win’ scenario more generally, is by no means inevitable. For example, Sparham & Sung (2007) view employment stress and high levels of commitment/involvement as ‘two sides of the same coin’ (2007: 6). They suggest that researchers must engage with intrinsic employee job satisfaction which, in turn, is dependent upon how managers interpret and implement any particular set of high-performance practices. They write ‘...if workers see that the practices are beneficial to their well being, as well as to the organisation, they will embrace the working environment in a particular way and will interpret their experience of HPWPs positively’ (2007: 6). However, conversely, ‘...if HPWPs are introduced without due consideration for workers’ intrinsic satisfaction... HPWPs are likely to be seen as exploitative and are unlikely to succeed’ making the prospect of work intensification ‘...a very real outcome’ (2007: 7). In a similar manner, some key critics of the high-performance paradigm have found, in recent research, a degree of support for the more optimistic accounts of high-performance working. A particularly notable example is that of Harley *et al.*’s 2007 study of health service workers in Australia involving some 1300 respondents. The researchers investigated the impact of high-performance work systems on autonomy, affective commitment, job satisfaction and psychological state, turnover intention, and work effort (2007: 615). Their results found striking support for a clear link between the adoption of high-performance work practices and ‘overwhelmingly positive’ (2007: 620) outcomes for employees. As such, the authors note, their findings represent a challenge to the labour process thesis regarding high-performance working. They write:

Our findings differ from earlier quantitative critical work, however, in that we find virtually no negative outcomes. Most quantitative work informed by labour process theory has reported either no association between HPWS practices and experience of work or mixed associations, some positive and some negative... Our results suggest that, in some settings at least, it is possible for HPWS to have beneficial outcomes for workers, which presents a challenge to much theorizing about the nature of work informed by labour process theory. We certainly do not claim that the analysis presented here provides a conclusive test of the validity of the mainstream or the labour process view of HPWS. Rather, we would argue that in this specific setting, the evidence is more consistent

with the mainstream view, which suggests that the labour process theory may require revision (Harley *et al.* 2007: 621).

Harley *et al.* go on to suggest that there is a general need to move beyond simplistic theorisations of capital–labour relations which view the consequences of managerial practices as inevitably negative. While the authors accept that the employment relationship is one of ‘structured antagonism’ (2007: 622), they concede that there ‘will be occasions when positive outcomes will go hand in hand with managerial strategies aimed at improving production’ (2007: 622). Equally, the authors propose that what they suggest is not a simple ‘win–win’ scenario, but rather that ‘...new forms of work organization have complex and sometimes apparently contradictory impacts on the workforce. The challenge for scholars of a critical bent is to ask what the particular circumstances are in which benefits flow to workers from new approaches to the management of labour’ (2007: 622). Such a sentiment accords a great deal with that of Sparham & Sung discussed above, and is one which returns the discussion here to a focus on the influence of key stakeholders in determining the character and ‘flow of benefits’ of high-performance systems.

UNIONS AND THE HIGH-PERFORMANCE PARADIGM

Recent research has suggested that among the principal players who influence whether the high-performance paradigm is enacted in a manner which supports more the ‘team’ than the ‘lean’ model are trade unions (see, for example, Addison 2005; Kim & Bae 2005; Ramirez *et al.* 2007). The UK’s Trade Unions Congress, while lending support to the high-performance paradigm, notes that such new modes of working might be introduced ‘...in a way that reduces autonomy or increases work intensification’ (TUC 2003: 7 cited in Lloyd & Payne 2006: 152) and that only ‘direct involvement’ can secure successful high-performance workplaces with committed employees (TUC 2003: 3 cited in Lloyd & Payne 2006: 152). Indeed, a number of authors have cautiously welcomed the high-performance paradigm, viewing it as, potentially, a vehicle for ‘union renewal’, whereby unions might be able to exchange their traditional, adversarial role, for more of a partnership one without inevitably losing ground to management (Godard 2004: 349). This prospect has become known as the ‘mutual gains’ or partnership approach (Guest & Peccei 2001: 213), and has

become the subject of a good deal of debate within the recent industrial relations literature.

Several authors have challenged the ‘mutual gains’ thesis, suggesting that, to the contrary, the very notion of abandoning an adversarial position in relation to employers is necessarily hostile to unions (see, for example, Taylor 1994; Godard 2004; Danford *et al.* 2005). Baird’s (2002) detailed case study of two Australian firms found that the adoption of high-performance work practices led, over time, to an increasing marginalisation of union involvement, and diminishing opportunities for employees to express dissenting ‘voice’ via the channels available to them under the new forms of work organisation (2002: 373). Similarly, Clawson & Clawson (1999) found that high-involvement practices permitted management to bypass trade unions, and eroded employees’ perceptions of their effectiveness (Lloyd & Payne 2006: 158). The adoption of teamworking in high-performance work systems, in particular, was found to be a means of ‘side-stepping’ unions (Baird 2002: 373); of more generally weakening union legitimacy by undermining seniority rights (Baugher 2007: 136); and of leading towards a ‘..slippery slope of coerced co-operation in workplace bargaining’ when introduced within the context of insecure labour markets (Bacon & Blyton 2006: 235). Such findings would appear to indicate that under certain conditions, particularly in relation to employment insecurity and in ‘low road’ (i.e. low cost/low skills) contexts, high-performance work practices can be seen as a means of ‘union avoidance’ (Boxall 1993), or even, as involving an insidious attack on union authority and legitimacy.

By contrast, a number of recent studies have found a different set of possibilities concerning the implications of high-performance work systems for trade unions. A particular case in point is that of Ramirez *et al.*’s (2007) research into three large telecommunications companies who, in the post-deregulation era, have adopted to varying extents a range of high-performance work practices. Ramirez *et al.* found considerable variations in how unions dealt with the adoption of the practices, and to a degree, the subsequent implications of these practices both for employees and employers. Since, they argue, high-performance work practices ‘...alter power relations within workplaces ... any particular HPWP package can, even while raising

productivity, leave either labour or capital a net loser' (2007: 512). And since most high-performance work systems require the co-operation of both capital and labour, unions have, they suggest, a crucial role in whether or not such systems are effective. This is because unions are required to manage legitimacy struggles between employers and employees. Thus, paradoxically, union power and militancy can actually *contribute* to the successful adoption of high-performance working. Without a strong union threat, the authors argue, employer promises of mutual gains lack credibility. Furthermore, the authors propose, stronger unions have the capacity to 'forestall a low-road route' — and thus help avoid the conditions which, as we have seen, are unfavourable to a high-commitment approach (Ramirez *et al.* 2007: 512). Support for the idea that union involvement is crucial to the success of high-performance work systems is found among a number of other authors (see, in particular, Addison 2005; Kim & Bae 2005; White 2005). And more specific support for the idea that high-performance work systems do not constitute a substitute for traditional forms of 'voice' is found by Bryson *et al.* (2004). White (2004) finds that employees at unionised workplaces adopting high-performance work systems, on average, tend to get more fringe benefits and family-friendly provision (2004: 362). And in a wide-ranging meta-analysis of the links between pay and high-performance work practice adoption, Forth & Millward found that powerful trade unions were generally associated with higher levels of remuneration, generating a wage premium of roughly 10% for employees in workplaces with strong unions when compared to their counterparts in non-unionised workplaces (2004: 117). It is important to note, however, a recent study undertaken by Osterman relating to the manufacturing sector found that workplace union status had little effect on the (positive) high-performance work practice–pay link (Osterman 2006).

The studies above would suggest, then, a somewhat mixed picture concerning the implications of the high-performance paradigm for unions and the labour movement. Again, it would appear to depend a great deal on context, with a wide range of findings between different cases. In general, however, the research appears to lend support to the idea that the 'mutual-gains' model is considerably more likely in organisations adopting a high-skills/high value-added approach to competitiveness, and correspondingly less likely in relation to a 'low road' route, particularly under

conditions of labour market insecurity. As such, the evidence indicates that, to use the words of Deakin *et al.* (2005), ‘...labour-management partnerships tend to be found in contexts where both sides can make credible commitments to cooperate over the medium to long term... most notably through product market regulations which encourage competition on the basis of quality not price, and through employment regulations which grant workers significant voice rights’ (2005: 16). Under other circumstances, indeed, Taylorist work organisation might still prove a far more suitable alternative (Ashton & Sung 2002).

CONCLUSION

By far the bulk of the research evidence considered in this review suggests the need for a more consistent, coherent and rigorous approach to conceptualising and researching high-performance working. In particular, there is a need to avoid a tendency towards the reification of high-performance work systems as though ‘they’ might be divorced from the particular nexus of relationships of which ‘they’ form a part, and then through ‘their’ ‘effects’ be compared — as if ‘they’ constituted an independent entity in ‘their own’ right that might or might not ‘affect’ performance (however measured) within different workplaces. This mode of conceptualising social phenomena is by no means confined to the study of high-performance work systems (see, for a useful discussion of these concerns, Emirbayer 1997). It is allied to a ‘billiard-ball’ model of causality where, in this case, ‘practices’ can, it is assumed, be abstracted as an independent variable, which then variously ‘influences’, is ‘covariant with’, or ‘causes’ (with varying degrees of effect) certain behavioural or attitudinal changes among employees, which in turn affect performance outcomes. Such tendencies towards conceptual and methodological abstraction have the stylistic effect of rendering ‘practices’ as ‘objects’ independent of the pluralities of people who enact ‘them’, engage with ‘them’, modify ‘them’ and otherwise mediate the form ‘they’ take. This encourages theorists, practitioners, indeed, policy makers, to think of high performance work practices as in themselves ready-made ‘solutions’ that might be injected into a range of different ‘contexts’ — an idea which, as discussed in this review, is somewhat at odds with key thinking in the academic field. This inclination towards the billiard ball model can be observed, for example, in the frequent use of

causal language such as ‘impact’, ‘determinant’ and ‘effect’ (Wall & Wood 2005: 455) and the dominance of survey research.

The orthodoxy of the ‘billiard-ball’ approach has a number of consequences. It has been instrumental in a relative neglect of how practices are experienced by employees and managers, and how, indeed, such experiences interact with the success or otherwise of high-performance work systems. A related neglect is of how a full range of ‘stakeholders’ both within and beyond the immediate ‘boundaries’ of any given workplace are involved in shaping high-performance work systems and their performance effects (see again the debates concerning context). In a similar manner, insufficient attention has been paid to the different forms that practices take, and the various meanings attached to central principles of the high-performance paradigm. The very notion of ‘empowerment’, for example, is a relative term which, to be researched adequately, would necessitate considerably more than, for example, checking off the adoption of ostensibly ‘empowering’ practices against, say, a system index. It would need to involve an examination of power-balances (both horizontal and vertical) within command and control networks: an investigation of power relationships, and indeed, a consideration of how these shift in relation to the adoption of new modes of work organisation (the work of Ramirez *et al.* 2007 provides a useful model in this respect).

This latter point also serves to highlight the need to look at high-performance systems developmentally. A number of researchers have begun to take up this challenge by exploring how high-performance work systems, and their consequences for employees, change over time (see, for example, Bruno & Jordan 1999; McKinlay & Taylor 1996; Kato 2006). In the same vein, there is a need for more longitudinal research, whether prospective or retrospective (Wall & Wood 2005: 456–45), in order to better accommodate the processual character of high-performance systems and indeed the development of associated ‘effects’ (see, for example, Vidal’s [2007b] study of how levels of job satisfaction are reassessed over time).

Of course, there are a number of studies in the high-performance literature, including some many cited in this discussion, that are considerably more

sophisticated and methodologically diverse than their general depiction above. Nonetheless, there remains much to be done to develop a clearer conceptual and methodological centre to the paradigm. The literature suggests that there is indeed something new in the high-performance approach. The challenge, in short, is to develop an understanding which captures something of the novelty and distinctiveness of high-performance working without its generality. This will involve more than simply building greater consensus concerning key terms of reference; it ultimately points towards the need for new research and research approaches. In particular, the challenge is to explore how the dialectical tension between employee involvement and employer control is negotiated in relation to high-performance work practices by the full range of social actors within contemporary institutional networks. In relation to this undertaking it may also mean that the unitarist and pluralist domain assumptions underpinning the post-Fordist and neo-Fordist lineages each need to be jettisoned such that researchers can engage with the possibility of a, by no means inevitable, new workplace reality in which: ‘workers are smart enough to recognize the benefits arising from managerial initiatives, while simultaneously retaining a realistic view of the antagonism implicit in capitalist relations of production’ (Harley *et al.* 2007: 622).

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