**Paradox of talent management in nonprofit organizations**

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**Abstract**

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are important players in achieving societal goals. Although the research on managing human resources management (HRM) in NPOs is growing, it mainly focuses on descriptive characteristics of such management with a particular attention to the management of volunteers. Significantly less is known about the management of paid employees and the most valuable employees – high performers and high potentials, namely “talents”. Recent evolution of the sector in developing economies, trend in introducing social innovation practices, pushed NPOs to implement more professional and even business practices. However, such business approach could have a rejection from the employees. The paradox in NPOs is operationalized in the following way. On the one hand, NPOs have an image of employers that pursue family-like practices, supportive and friendly environment. In HRM literature, this approach could be best described as “soft”. On the other hand, a trend for sustainability in NPOs, commercializing certain functions to become more professional pushes NPOs to implement business-practices, such as performance reviews, identification of key employees (“talents”) and differently managing them to maximize organizational performance. This approach could be better viewed as “hard” HRM. Based on exploratory study and in-depth discussion with twelve leaders of NPOs in Russia, we seek to find several logics that NPOs leaders use in managing their employees. In particular, we explored the attitudes of NPO leaders toward business practices, perceived barriers and ways of implementing that business logic in their HRM. As an important context for this study, we have chosen organization from nonprofit sector in Russia, due to its pre-mature stage in its professionalization. Understanding of how NPO leaders in Russia use business logics in NPOs will help to provide recommendations for the sector as well as extrapolate it into other developing economies.

***Introduction***

Today, when the world faces various “grand challenges”, like, poverty, climate changes, migrations, and human right violations, the role of charities, social entrepreneurs and other nonprofit organizations is crucial in helping to solve these issues and create a better world (Akingbola et al., 2013). Human capital is seen as one of the main assets for organizations to achieve their goals, what makes it in particular important for NPOs that aim to improve societal welfare (Baluch & Ridder, 2021). Although HRM in NPOs has been increasingly studied (e.g., Meyer & Leitner, 2018), there are many knowledge gaps exist (Baluch & Ridder, 2021). Indeed, as research pointed out, the significant bulk of literature focuses on management of volunteers as important human asset of these organizations (Akingbola et al., 2013; Baluch & Ridder, 2021), while management of paid employees remains relatively underexplored. In addition, nonprofit sector experience significant push to become more professional, especially in emerging economies, like Russia (Salamon & Benevolenski, 2021).

The discussion surrounding business logic within the nonprofit community in emerging economies has gained significant attention, particularly in light of the increasing prevalence of social innovation trends (Krasnopolskaya & Meijs, 2019; Taylor et al., 2020; Salamon et al., 2020). Among the most prominent trends in this domain is the utilization of social businesses as exemplars, drawing on their approaches to enhance the sustainability of NPOs through increased commercialization and the adoption of business practices.

In this study, we explore how NPO leaders in Russia perceive the need to implement business practices in their HRM, what barriers they experience in implementing of such practices and how they overcome those barriers.

The reminder of the study is the following. First, we review explain the “soft” and “hard” logics in HRM literature. Then we describe the literature on the inclusive versus exclusive debate in TM research. Second, in the methodology section, we explain grounded theory and abductive approach that we used. Then, we present our findings with the representative quotes from the interview. Finally, we discuss our findings in light with the literature and highlight our contribution. We end our article with practical recommendations for the NPOs in Russia and developing economies.

***Literature Review***

*HRM through the lens of “soft” and “hard” understanding*

The usage of the terms "soft" and "hard" has been prevalent in the literature on Human Resource Management (HRM) for a considerable period. Truss et al. (1997) observed that these terms were initially introduced but have been used subsequently without substantial conceptual clarity. While some components that constitute this dichotomy remain evident, further conceptualization is still required. Truss et al. (1997) proposed that the most significant differentiations between "soft" and "hard" HRM can be outlined as follows. In "hard" HRM, employees are perceived as mere resources, highlighting the exploitative nature of the relationship between management and employees. Under this paradigm, managers assume that workers possess a disliking for their jobs and, consequently, should be subject to constant control. Additionally, this approach places significant emphasis on organizational strategy, aligning all HR decisions with the strategic objectives of the organization. On the other hand, "soft" HRM adopts a more human-centric approach. It posits that employees are committed to the goals of the organization and are, therefore, intrinsically motivated to achieve results. This perspective implies that employees do not require extensive control but rather thrive when provided with a considerable degree of autonomy. Consequently, these concepts have formed the foundation for several other studies on HRM (e.g., Thunnissen et al., 2016; Fee & McGrath-Champ, 2017).

In TM, literature, “soft” and “hard” terms were used by Thunnissen (2016) who extended this conceptualization into TM. One of the main discussions in TM literature remains the inclusive versus exclusive dichotomy (e.g., Dries, 2013). Exclusive TM implies differentiation of key positions and differently fulfilling them with internal and external talent (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). It develops a differentiation between employees into the categories and a high focus on high performers or/and high potentials (Dries, 2013). According to Dries, it is likely that 90% of all resources might be allocated to those few employees that are considered as the most valuable. Although most of TM studies (63%) focus on this exclusive type of TM (Vardi & Collings, 2023), there is also an opposite view, as inclusive TM. It implies that talent is not an employee but a strength that everybody has. Inclusive TM implies that all employees should be supported in nurturing their talents further. Therefore, Thunnisen (2016) concluded exclusive TM could be associated with “hard” term since it is oriented on high productivity and differentiation of the workforces, while inclusive TM can be associated with “soft” characteristic, as its primarily focus on developing talents of everyone.

The nonprofit sector has often been associated with the "soft" logic in organizational management. However, previous studies attempting to conceptualize HRM in NPOs have primarily focused on enumerating practices prevalent in this sector, such as the "family-like" nature of NPOs. Unfortunately, these studies have been limited in their scope. In a recent contribution, Roumpi et al. (2020) introduced the concept of the "ethics of care" and applied it to analyze HRM practices in social enterprises. Their analysis revealed three key components characterizing HRM in NPOs: (i) "ethical and inclusive practices," (ii) "disempowered employees," and (iii) a "culture of acceptance and inclusion."

*Paradox of TM in nonprofit sector*

Although talent management (TM) term is often understood in a form of well-formalized high potential- or reward-programs in large organizations (Vaiman et al., 2012), research showed that it is present in the context of nonprofit organizations too (Tyskbo, 2019; Usanova et al., 2021). In addition, scholars noticed that even when formalized and structured HRM practices are absent, which is often the case for NPOs (Baruch & Ridder, 2021), still “hidden talent mechanisms are inevitable” (Swiales et al., 2014, p. 533). This is true since high performing and promising employees will be noticed in any organization and viewed as valuable contributors to the organizational goals (Swiales et al., 2014). Therefore, when these key employees are recognized, they receive disproportionally more investments in their development, learning (e.g., Dries, 2013) and attention to their needs (Valverde et al., 2013). In the context of NPOs, Usanova et al. (2021) found that key employees often receive higher compensations, bonuses and special attention, for example, by providing more flexibility in terms of working time.

The differentiation of the workforce has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it minimizes budgets since it invests only in a few people in the workforce that are viewed as “strategic” or “key” (Al Ariss et al., 2014). On the other hand, there are no evidence that this approach is beneficial for the organizations since it might demotivate other employee who do not receive such special care (e.g., Swiales et al., 2020). There is evidence that people who are not recognized as valuable perceive lower organizational justice (Dries et al., 2014), are more likely to quit (Dries, 2022) and experience negative feelings such as lower commitment, work efforts and other (Dries, 2014). This could lead to a strong dissonance for the employees in NPOs – organizations that often have an image of the workplace with “family-like” practices, understanding and trustful environment and egalitarian principles (Cunningham, 2010; Fee & McGrath-Champ, 2017). Indeed, TM of NPOs is often viewed as “soft” where both alignment with employees’ motivations and intrinsic rewards, like development opportunities, are present and directed toward all employees equally (Cunningham, 2010; Fee et al., 2017; Baruch & Ridder, 2021). The differentiated attitude, therefore, could significantly hurt the feelings of other employees who also contribute and loyal toward their NPOs but do not perform to a certain level or do not have enough knowledge to perform in expected level. As one of the NPO executive noticed in the study of Schlosser et al., “bring my heart and mind together” (p. 578). This highlight already the tension between two different logics that NPO leaders embrace, one logic that focuses on the “heart” and another one that focuses on the “mind”.

Additionally, since some NPOs do not differentiate between their employees and consider everyone as unique and talented (Tyskbo, 2019; Usanova et al., 2021), therefore, “hard” logic may appear as a non-fitting into the scope of an NPO norms. For example, if “soft” HRM implies that employees are committed to the mission of an organization, therefore they should not be controlled. However, business logic implies clear performance metrics (e.g., key performance indicators (KPIs)), planning and strategic approach, identification key people and differently managing them (Thunnissen et al., 2016). Therefore, the paradox here is that not-for-profit sector often considered as a “humane” place to work (e.g., following “ethics of care” (Roumpi et al. (2020) or “soft” HRM and inclusive TM); but how to maintain such reality if a more professional and business “hard” approach is needed?

***Methodology***

To answer the research question that requires a deep understanding of the reality through personal beliefs, attitudes and subsequent behaviors, the explorative qualitative method is the most appropriate one (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this study, we had in-depth discussions with the 12 leaders of different NPOs about their human resource and talent management approach. In particular, we are interested how executives deal with business practices in their HRM and TM and how do they cope with the situation of not damaging “family-like” feeling and inclusive culture (Roumpi et al. 2020) with a more business-like approach (Thunnissen et al., 2013). Based on those conversations, we seek to find different approaches of dealing with this issue.

We follow the guidance to develop a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the data. First, we developed codes by using mainly inductive approach by trying to be as close as possible to the interviews verbatim. Next, we developed second provisional codes by using an abductive approach. Finally, we developed third-order categories that represent a central theoretical idea of our study.

To follow our promise for guaranteeing the confidentiality of the respondents, we changed assigned pseudonyms to the respondents. Table 1 represents NPOs’ and respondents’ data.

***Findings***

Based on our analysis, we have identified how “nonprofit” and “business” logics in TM were used in nonprofit organizations. We identified that four NPOs use business logics in their HRM since the beginning, while other believe that business logics are important to implement. In particular, we noticed that respondents believe that “business” logic was noticed as a worth trying and important but could not be easily adopted.

1. *NPO leaders recognize the value of business practices*

According to the conversations with the leaders of NPO in Russia, they believe that “business” processes are needed in the nonprofit sector. Although some of the respondents were less confident in providing definite answer, still the consensus about the need of implementing business-practices among respondents was visible.

We also identified several factors that push NPO leaders to implement business-practices in their management approach. For example, they noticed that the sector become more professional that requires more systemic process, more professional employees, and therefore a more professional approach to their management (*competition push*). Others noticed that sponsors and donors in particularly pushing a leader to implement business practices, for example, to come closer to the sustainable model (*donors’ push*). Finally, other respondents mentioned that is the matter of expanding their impact (*altruistic pull).*

“If before, when nonprofit sector just was emerging in Russia, the key competence of an employee in NPO was their personal qualities. Like motivation, charisma, etc. And because the result was achieved due to these qualities, there was no paradox. These qualities were used by the team, there was a nice homy atmosphere. Now, there are more technologies emerge, therefore, you need other competencies. For example, to build a systemic process of private donations, with its own stability, so you need target-specialists, SMM-specialists, marketing people, etc. Therefore, you need a different managerial approach too”. (Maria, Respondent 2, small NPO2)

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **N** | **NPO leader’s pseudonym** | **Position** | **Tenure in NPO** | **NPO description** | **Number of employees and volunteers** | **Type of NPO leaders in implementing**  |
| 1 | Maria, NPO1 | CEO and founder | 10 years | NGO (social services)  | 15 full-time employees5 part-time employees, 20 volunteers | *Abandoner* |
| 2 | Ivan, NPO2 | CEO | 3 years | NGO (social service) | 40 full-time employees 20 000+ volunteers  | *Innovator* |
| 3 | Zhanna, NPO3 | CEO, founder | 7 years | SE (employing disempowered people)  | 10 full-time employees, 20 volunteers | *Adaptor* |
| 4 | Oleg, NPO4 | CEO, founder | 7 years | NGO (community building) | 5 full-time employees, 3- volunteers | *Resister* |
| 5 | Shura, NPO5 | CEO, founder | 10 years | SE (educational service) | 11 full-time employees | *Adaptor* |
| 6 | Alexandra, NPO6 | CEO, founder | 5 years | SE (educational service) | 5 full-time, 8 part-time | *Adaptor* |
| 7 | Evgenia, NPO7 | CEO, founder | 3 years | NGO (educational service) | 3 full-time, 5 full-time volunteers | *Adaptor* |
| 8 | Varvara, NPO8  | CEO, founder | 5 years | NGO (social service) | 8 full-time employees, 80+ volunteers | *Adaptor* |
| 9 | Alena, NPO9 | CEO, founder | 3 years | NGO (educational service) | 1 full-time, 15 part-time | *Adaptor* |
| 10 | Anna, NPO10 | CEO, founder | 10 years | NGO (social health service) | 7 full-time, 100+ volunteers | *Resister* |
| 11 | Ella, NPO11 | CEO, founder | 10 years | NGO (social service) | 25 full-time, 50+ volunteers | *Innovator* |
| 12 | Nina, NPO12 | CEO | 5 years | NGO (social service) | 21 full-time, 40 volunteers | *Abandoner* |

“Well, by default it seems that yes, we consider it important. […] I think that yes, of course, it is necessary”. (Oleg, Respondent 4, NPO4)

“It is business, because people from the business environment are much more understandable to speak in the categories of the business environment. […] For example, a sponsor asked and said: “I have already given you 3 million rubles. Where is the guarantee that I will give you another 2 million, and something will become more stable? That is, a person was very concerned about the topic of sustainability of an NPO. […] So this person awakened additionally more intellectual activity of an NPO in this direction”. (Ivan, Respondent 1, NPO1)

“I myself realize, that we want to do it properly, then we need to better measure our performance, and, therefore, I introduced this system of monitoring and evaluation”. (Alla, Respondent 11, NPO11).

“We actually adopted in the end the performance review for employees, because our mother NPO in the U.S. does so. So, we just asked if they can share their metrics and implemented them too”. (Nina, Respondent 12, NPO12).

As we mentioned earlier, some of the NPOs already use business practices and defined their relationship with employees as purely business:

“For me, I never had any of these nonprofit relationships. For me, it is a real business. Everything is clear and transparent. If you do not do it properly, then you are [out]”.”. (Zhanna, Respondent 3, NPO3)

“We have very business relationships. I control everything, If I do not like the performance, I give a chance but then we have a conversation where I ask the person to leave. I had those cases” (Irina, Respondent 5, NPO5)

1. *What does business logic in HRM and TM for NPO means*

*Building a structure*

“Just to give you a clue, there was nothing structured. I had to make sure that those people who work like employees, but they are volunteers, get a real contract and their work will be legally defined. […] Another thing is clear job descriptions and hiring professionals. […] So, what about the performance metrics? There was even no structure, first!”. (Ivan, Respondents 1, NPO 1)

*Introduce individual objectives and metrics of performance*

“I found it important. Because I wanted to see the performance of employees and also recognize those who do their job right. I also want to show the transparency”. (Nina, Respondent 12, NPO 12)

*Formalization of the processes (rather than individual approach)*

“I do not like this situation when two similar employees with the same job level and same salaries, but one does his job as a watch, and another one never filled those documents”. (Maria, Respondent 2, NPO2)

*Being less involved into the personal lives of employees*

“I would like to be less involved in these personal relations”. (Maria, Respondent 2, NPO2)

1. *Perceived barriers*

According to our analysis, there are several factors that create barriers and challenges for the NPO leaders to implement business practices to their HRM. We identified and conceptualized the following:

*Too high uncertainty*

“In business, everything is clear [for employees]. You have to earn this much money, collect this many customers, achieve such and such metrics, such and such a level of loyalty, such and such a level of something else. […] And it seems to be absolutely normal in NPOs too. For example, for the fundraiser, you can set the plan, I don't know, to the comment manager - such and such a satisfaction plan, such and such a number of projects, and so on. All this is cool, of course. But here we have a planning horizon for such operational-tactical in the organization last summer there was a week”. (Oleg, Respondent 4, NPO4)

*Fear to lose NPOs atmosphere of a freedom*

“What scares me about these things? That it will probably destroy something that is highly valued in NPOs, some kind of freedom, some sort of... In general, NPOs always choose some kind of counterbalance to business. Here. So it might break it down a bit. […] There is a lot of interpersonal relationship that, in general, we can say that we all friends here. Some issues can be resolved in a friendly way, and without involving any special methods, tactics and so on”. (Oleg, Respondent 4, NPO4)

*Loosing motivation of people who feel that they are not trusted anymore*

“I believe that everyone is working here for the mission, and everyone is highly committed to achieve mission goals. If we start implementing performance reviews and different metrics of the productivity and efficiency, then people [employees] will view it as we trying to control them, as we do not trust them. Whereas it can be very heartful for them, since these employees are truly committed. So, it is the issue of trust”. (Nina, Respondent12, NPO12)

“These people know that they are saving the world. And this means that it should be enough, so performance metrics are not needed”. (Ivan, Respondent 1, NPO1)

*Formalization might destroy of what is working now*

“It is very hard to make formalizations because I already have personal relationships with the employees. Since I already have a very different approach to everyone. For example, I have two people on similar positions – they are coordinators. One is very disciplined; another one is very creative and cannot filled a single document. So, I have a different approach to them. And I feel a certain dilemma here because I do not know if I am right here or wrong by having a different approach”. (Maria, Respondent 2, NPO2)

*Fearing to hurt people*

“People are valued here not for the performance but for the commitment. However, unfortunately, some employees use it. For example, there was a lady that could disappear for four months but still getting the salary. […] When I wanted to fire this person, people started coming to me and telling me that it is going to be a bad idea”. (Ivan, Respondent 1, NPO1)

*Nonprofit norms*

“Don't get me wrong, I've seen people who were completely ineffective and in normal life I would kick them out next week, but that's not how it works in an NGO. […] The category of efficiency is alien, the right category is in people's minds - we are saving the world, we are doing a good, that's enough. […] The do not like performance metrics, because their work will become transparent”. (Ivan, Respondent 1, NPO1)

1. *Ways of implementing business practices in HRM*

According to our analysis, NPO leaders could be divided into four groups. Those who never started to implement business practices (*resistors of change*). Those who tried but then gave up (*abandoners*). Those who tried but faced several challenges (*innovators*). Those who use business logic since their NPO started operating (*adaptors*).

*Type 1: Resisters of change*

NPO leaders in this cluster believe that business practices will ruin the atmosphere of freedom in their NPO. Additionally, they believe that the uncertainty of NPO is makes it difficult to put any performance metrics toward their employees.

“I think we are too small for this yet. And as I mentioned, I think people work here because they like the project and we do not take the projects that are not interesting for us”. (Oleg, Respondent 4, NPO4).

Therefore, we can see that hesitators use mainly “soft” mindset in their HRM. They believe that people are committed and therefore perform to their best potential without performance indicators and reviews.

*Type 2: Abandoners*

NPO leaders in this cluster tried to implement some practices but realized that it does not work well with their already established personal relationships with their employees. For example, Maria, CEO of an NPOs mentioned that she wanted to implement timesheet but it did not work out. Additionally, when she wanted to fire an underperformer, she still used approach that could be better described as human-centric and “soft”:

“I hate timesheets myself, so we just gave up on this. […] Well, there was one lady that was burned out. And I did not know what to do. In a sense that her situation was difficult, she had a mortgage, but for me, she did not work well at all. So, I decided to give her sabbatical half a year by still paying her a salary. After she returned back, there was already a new leader who emerged and I thought, what I am going to do? But in the end, this lady said that she reflected and decided to leave on her own”. (Maria, Respondent 2, NPO2)

In contrast, when she launched another NPO, she realized that from the beginning she needs to put boundaries between her and employees and fixed immediately business cold relationships:

 “You know with my another NPO that I just recently registered, so there, I do it right from the beginning. I have cold business relationship with employees only”. (Maria, Respondent 2, NPO2).

*Type 3: Innovators (change advocate or fighters)*

NPO leaders in this group try to find the ways to implement business practices, although facing several challenges. As Ivan (Respondent 1, NPO1), described his approach below, showed that this process was vert energy-consuming. He explained a lot to the employees, he also tried to use ambassadors, he started to change the team and to hire people that would be in line with the business process.

 “I repeatedly, that means sometimes 10 times repeating the same story, was to 10 different people [the importance of this change]. And every time I explained what was the reason, what was my position, what was the argument, what were the alternatives, why did I make this choice. […] Sometimes I did it differently, sometimes I first held 3, 4, 5 meetings, explaining the situation to the opinion leaders, and then I implemented it further. […] Fundraiser and IT had clear performance indicators and metrics. These were new people that I hired specifically. They were people that do not only want to “save the world” but they first of all come to work here for their job, however, at the same time they understand the mission of the NPO”. (Ivan, Respondent 1, NPO1)

Another NPO leader, Ella (Respondent 11, NPO11), also tried to explain to her employees the importance of this new approach of introducing the performance system. She emphasized the altruistic reason, that it will help to measure the impact, analyze our work and take certain actions to increase the impact of their NPO.

*Type 4: Adaptors*

NPO leaders in this group, as mentioned earlier, implemented business practices straight from the beginning of their organizations. They mainly represent social enterprises what explains adopting such business approach. Since in Russia, the law about the social enterprises came into the force only in 2019. Therefore, social enterprises had to operation in, first of all, business environment.

“Absolutely business approach. My organization works on the model that it covers its expenses through its selling its services. It means, how much we sold, this is how much we earned. […] We have clear key performance indicators, controlling the performance of people, but also, I invest in their training and education”. (Shura, Respondent 5, NPO 5)

“Of course, we have self-assessment as well as I collect the feedback from the parents of children [clients]. […]”. (Alexandra, Respondent 6, NPO6)

“From the beginning, we discuss with candidates that this is not a hobby, this is a real job. […] So, we do not have possibilities to work from home, we have very strict working hours in the office”. (Varvara, Respondent 7, NPO7)

At the same time, Adaptors still use quite a “soft” approach when it comes to conflicts or difficult situations. For example, Shura mentioned that would not fire a person immediately but first, has a conversation with the person with the purpose to help. Second, she sends this person for an additional training. Similarly, Sasha tries to be “gentle” with an employee and when has to announce this decision, she makes sure that person understands the difference between her attitude to the persona and to the employee:

“When I, for example, say that I treat you very well as a person, but as a leader, I am obliged to do the following and punish you. In this connection, the employee understood this, and, in fact, the issue was resolved. And I have all my colleagues, including those in business, employees know that I can go beyond the territory of the organization, praise, talk, support, but when I enter the office, I fulfill my duties, I will ask in full, up to explanatory. Well, actually, punishment” (Evgenia, Respondent 7, NPO7).

Also, an interesting finding is that differentiation between employees, appeared only among adaptors. For example, Varvara (Respondent 8, NPO8), noticed that she identified a person who tried to become her “right hand” and therefore she helps her to develop further and takes partly her duties. Similarly, Alexandra (Respondent 6, NPO6), identified a “talent” and helps him to develop professionally further. Another example is Zhanna (Respondent 3, NPO3) who could immediately tell that her talented individuals are concrete two people whom she will try to do her best to retain them.

***Concluding discussion***

The question of business logics in nonprofit organizations is an important issue for Russian NPOs. It is recognized as a growing trend and an essential practice for effectively delivering societal benefits. Based on our analysis, we developed a model that represents challenges that NPOs face while implementing business practices as well as four types of NPO leaders in using those practices. Figure 1 displays this model.

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**Figure 1. Business logic implementation in HRM in NPOs.**

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