

## Editorial

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Over the past two decades, organization and management scholars have been engaged in research on the concepts of contingent, i.e. non-standard work (Barker and Christensen 1998; Hipple 1998; Burton-Jones 1999) and boundaryless careers (Arthur 1994; Kanter 1989, 1995; Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Gunz et al. 2000; Kunda et al. 2002). This scholarly research reflects the growing relevance of contingent work in practice (Purcell and Purcell 1998). The external workforce, e.g. independent contractors (freelancers), temporary workers, and employees of service firms, is part of the phenomenon of contingent work. However, external workers are not necessarily peripheral workers (Bidwell 2009). As knowledge intensive firms in dynamic industries in particular increasing rely on an external workforce (Matusik and Hill 1998; Mallon and Duberley 2000; Kunda et al. 2002; Roessing and Kaiser 2013), it is important to recognize that external workers often perform highly skilled and knowledge-intensive work (Kozica and Kaiser 2012; Süß and Becker 2013). Therefore, we can analytically separate the external workforce into low-skilled and high-skilled groups (Marler et al. 2002; Bidwell 2009). The growing proportion of highly-skilled external workers (Storey et al. 2002: 5) is the focus of this special issue.

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It is widely accepted in human resource management research that human resource strategy and practices need to be adapted to different types of workforce in order to be successful (Lepak and Snell 2002). Therefore, one can argue that specific human resource management practices and strategies should be deployed for an external workforce. Human resource practitioners are also increasingly recognizing the relevance of implementing specific human resource practices for external workforces (e.g. Bush 2009). However, there is still little research on the phenomenon of a highly qualified external workforce, or the theoretical and managerial challenges for human resource management that result from it.

Based on this research deficit, the objective of this special issue is to enhance our knowledge about a highly qualified external workforce from a human resource perspective. When publishing the call for this special issue we asked potential authors to address the following questions: What are the conceptual and theoretical differences and similarities between human resource management for internal and external workforces? Should firms try to integrate the knowledge of an external workforce? How can the internal and external workforce share implicit and explicit knowledge? Do firms become dependent on the external workforce when deploying them in core processes? What do we know about the human resource management of mixed internal-external teams? What psychological phenomena are important in the cooperation between internal and external workers? How does being part of an external workforce affect individual work-life integration, commitment, job satisfaction, well-being, and motivation? How can external workers manage their own employability and life-long learning? Is it possible to identify specific qualification strategies for external workers? What are the consequences of an external workforce for the institutional organization of human resource management? How can human resource managers collaborate with internal partners, e.g. procurement departments, or external partners, e.g. service providers? Could this trigger new organizational forms of human resource management?

Understandably, we respect that the authors could answer only some of these open questions. However, we were able to draw together scholars who are working at the forefront of the research domain and make a clear contribution to the outlined area of research. Therefore we can not only highlight the complexity and scope of research on the highly qualified external workforce but also address some important issues that are related to the phenomenon of external work, as the following overview of this special issue and its articles demonstrates.

In the first article, *Uta Wilkens, Caroline Ruiner and Monika Küpper* argue that little is known about the issues knowledge creation and innovation in the context of using an external workforce. Based on this finding, they describe how flexible work arrangements are related to different contract policies. The authors intend to “emphasize the antecedents leading to flexible contract arrangements in comparison to standard employment, and the effects of different contract policies especially for flexible contracting with the highly qualified workforce in knowledge intensive firms.” They base their results on a qualitative, empirical case study of ten knowledge-intensive firms in Germany. As a result they identify three different organizational types of contract policy: permanent employment, independent contracting with freelancers, and a combination of both. The generation and

protection of knowledge appears to be an important antecedent of different contract policies, at least for knowledge-intensive organizations. Moreover Wilkens and her colleagues provide evidence that respective positive or negative effects of standard and flexible contracting depend on the “embeddedness of the contract policy in a broader set of HR practices”. As a managerial implication the authors state that flexible contracting with an external highly qualified workforce requires the control of knowledge channels.

The second article entitled “Shades of Gray: Effect of External Work Arrangements on Firm Performance under Operational and Strategic Contingencies” by *Ricarda Bouncken, Christian Lehmann and Martin Ratzmann* aims at clarifying the “effects of (1) temporary work, (2) independent contracting, and (3) consulting on firm performance, considering the client firms’ tasks, the qualification requirements for carrying out these tasks, and its strategic context”. The authors base their findings on an online survey of German manufacturing companies. The authors first give evidence that “the difficulty of the tasks to be performed by external workers influences their performance”. Temporary work and consulting are appropriate for rather simple tasks with low qualification requirements; independent contracting has a positive effect on firm performance when individuals are appointed to perform complex tasks. Second, the authors argue that two strategic orientations have different effects on firm performance: the so-called innovation orientation can decrease negative effects of temporary work; a high alliance orientation causes positive effects of consulting on firm performance. In summary, this article makes an important contribution as it shows that the use of an external workforce cannot be portrayed as black and white issue. There are lots of grays.

In the third article, entitled “Cooperation despite contingency: What accounts for cooperative behavior of contingent managerial workers?” *Irma Rybnikova* delivers insights into the phenomenon of interim managers as a specific form of highly qualified external workers. More specifically, she aims to investigate the cooperative behavior of interim managers and its influencing factors. Her results that are based on a quantitative survey of interim managers show that previous insights on contingent work in non-managerial positions cannot be transferred to managerial positions. Interim managers, more than non managerial contingent workers, favor task autonomy and honesty of the client organization. The latter fosters the cooperative behavior of contingent managers. Moreover, the author argues that the voluntariness of interim managers influences their cooperative behavior. Rybnikova shows that involuntary interim candidates are more willing to show cooperative behavior than their voluntary counterparts.

The special issue closes with an article by *Miriam Flickinger, Tina Gruber-Mücke and Marina Fiedler*, in which the authors critically analyze the link between human resource practices and organizational ambidexterity. The authors base their insights on an empirical survey of 580 individuals placed by a German temporary work agency and shed light on the “linkages between human resource management practices and ambidexterity with regard to the integration of an external, highly qualified workforce into the firm”. First, they show that there is a positive relationship between organizational ambidexterity and a dynamic internal labor market which offers promotion opportunities. Second, concerning this relationship

the authors do not find differences between temporary and permanent employees. As a managerial implication—which contradicts prior research—the authors argue that firms should not implement specific human resource practices for different types of workforce. Rather, temporary workers should get the same access to internal labor markets as permanent employees.

This special issue was inspired by both the phenomenon of an increasingly flexible workforce in practice and the multiple open theoretical questions that are linked to the phenomenon. We received a number of papers that addressed interesting questions and provided intriguing results. Finally, based on an intensive blind review process with two or in some cases three reviewers, four of the submitted papers could be accepted and integrated in this issue. We hope that the present special issue can enhance our knowledge about highly-qualified external workforces from a human resource perspective. Finally, we would like to thank the authors who provided us with their interesting work and the anonymous reviewers for their comments that helped the authors to improve their papers and to sharpen their contribution to this special issue.

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