

The Ambidextrous HR System: A Consilience-Driven Framework for Paradoxical Organizations

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Abstract: This conceptual paper critically examines a fundamental limitation in the Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) literature: the prevailing models of HR systems are designed for specific, isolated objectives and are consequently ill-equipped for the paradoxical and multifaceted nature of contemporary organizations. We argue that in complex and dynamic environments, systems focused solely on control, commitment, or performance are inherently insufficient to address the multitude of simultaneous strategic challenges organizations face. Drawing on theory from organizational studies (Morgan's metaphors), complexity science, and strategic management (ambidexterity), we propose a novel framework: The Consilience-Driven Hybrid Ambidextrous HR System. This model is conceived to overcome the limitations of existing systems by unifying disparate HR policies and practices through the principle of consilience, enabling organizations to simultaneously pursue exploitation (efficiency, incremental innovation) and exploration (adaptability, radical innovation). The paper delineates the architecture of this system and discusses its theoretical underpinnings. We conclude by outlining significant implications for HR theory and practice, providing a clear agenda for future empirical research to operationalize and validate this proposed framework.

Keywords: HR systems, Conceptual paper, Ambidexterity, Consilience, Paradoxical organizations, Complexity, Theoretical framework

1. Introduction

Strategic Management provides the fundamental framework for strategy development, where formulation, implementation, and evaluation are core phases of the management process (Al-Musali & Ismail, 2016). The implementation phase is critical to the success and overall goal achievement of any organization (Buonomo et al., 2020), a feat impossible without the dedicated effort of its human resources (HR) (Brende & Sternfels, 2022). The field of Strategic HRM (SHRM) facilitates the smooth implementation of corporate strategy (Boungou & Yatié, 2022) by emphasizing the alignment of all HR efforts with the overall corporate strategy—creating an external fit (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Similarly, the internal consistency and alignment of all HR policies and practices—ensuring internal or horizontal fit—are paramount for success (Banholzer et al., 2022).

Literature further advocates for vertical fit, aligning HR practices within each HR function and its sub-functions (Asiaei et al., 2023). This emphasis on "fit" endorses a system thinking approach in HRM (Asiaei et al., 2022). Research has also highlighted the need for HR "bundles" (Asiaei et al., 2018), suggesting that clusters of HR practices work synergistically, rather than in isolation, to positively impact organizational performance (Cosa & Urban, 2023). This logic reinforces the operationalization of HR as an integrated system, consistent with general systems theory.

Previous studies have conceptualized numerous HR systems based on specific assumptions, such as high-performance, high-involvement, high-commitment, innovation-based, high-investment, control-based, safety-oriented, customer-service, and HR information systems (Daou et al., 2019). A critical missing element in this body of work is the incorporation of environmental dynamism, complexity, organizational equivocality, and multifaceted nature into HR system design.

Organizations continuously struggle with organizing and are open to multiple interpretations (Hazan et al., 2021). Their equivocal and multifaceted nature suggests diverse operational realities. Iazzolino and Laise (2016) argued that different metaphors—such as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, instruments of domination, and flux and transformation—are needed to understand organizations amidst high complexity and equivocality. Furthermore, organizational actions are not always internally controlled but are often shaped by external forces, as posited by population ecology models and institutional theory (Ishaq, 2021; Izzo et al., 2022).

This study is rooted in the science of complexity. Given that organizations and their environments are complex, rapidly changing, and often externally influenced, and that business strategies can be emergent rather than purely deliberate (Jain et al., 2017), HR systems must encompass environmental dynamism, complexity, and multiple organizational images. A further problem with existing HR systems is their focus on singular strategic choices (e.g., commitment, performance, safety). The concern that all these choices need to coexist within a single, contemporary HR system has not been adequately raised. True systems thinking, where the whole is

greater than the sum of its parts, necessitates that these strategic choices work together synergistically, much like the established concepts of 'HR bundles' and 'fits' (Pandey et al., 2023).

This paper, therefore, makes three key contributions to address this gap. First, it synthesizes and critiques the limitations of prevailing HR systems, arguing that their singular-focus design renders them inadequate for complex organizations. Second, it explicitly connects the design of HR systems to environmental dynamism, complexity (Paoloni et al., 2020), and the multiple, simultaneous images of organizations (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Third, and most significantly, it responds to this need by conceptualizing a novel, consilience-driven, and ambidextrous HR system designed to embrace paradoxical demands and provide integrated strategic solutions.

The paper is organized as follows: a review of existing HR systems and their limitations; an exploration of the paradoxical and multifaceted nature of organizations and their relationship with complexity; an appraisal of the need for a stable, ambidextrous hybrid HR system supported by consilience ideologies, including its proposed nature and design; and finally, a discussion of managerial implications and future research directions.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual theory-building methodology. The objective is not to test hypotheses with empirical data but to synthesize existing literature across relevant domains to illuminate a critical theoretical gap and propose a novel, integrative framework to address it (Jaakkola, 2020; Gilson & Goldberg, 2015).

The process followed a structured approach to conceptual research:

1. **Problem Identification:** The initial phase involved a critical analysis of the prevailing literature on dominant HR systems (e.g., high-performance, high-commitment, control-based). This analysis was conducted to identify their core assumptions, purported strengths, and, most critically, their shared limitations when confronted with the realities of modern organizational environments.
2. **Theoretical Synthesis and Integration:** To build a rationale for a new framework, we engaged in a synthesis of theories beyond the traditional boundaries of HRM. This involved reviewing and integrating foundational concepts from:
 - **Organizational Theory:** Specifically, Morgan's (1986) metaphors of organization were used to articulate the multifaceted and paradoxical nature of organizations.
 - **Complexity Science:** Principles of environmental dynamism, complexity, and uncertainty were incorporated to establish the context in which HR systems must operate.
 - **Strategic Management:** The concept of organizational ambidexterity (exploration vs. exploitation) was identified as a crucial mechanism for resolving strategic tensions.
 - **Philosophy of Science:** The principle of *consilience*, or the unity of knowledge, was adopted as the guiding logic for integrating disparate HR policies and practices into a coherent whole.
3. **Theory Building through Logical Reasoning:** The novel framework—the Consilience-Driven Hybrid Ambidextrous HR System—was developed through abductive and deductive reasoning (Sætre & Brun, 2023). We reasoned that *if* organizations are paradoxical and environments are complex (established premises), *then* an effective HR system must possess specific characteristics (ambidexterity, hybridity, consilience) to be effective (theoretical proposition). The resulting model is the output of this theory-building process.
4. **Deriving Implications:** Finally, the implications of the proposed framework were delineated for both future research and managerial practice, providing a roadmap for subsequent empirical testing and application.

This methodological approach is appropriate for generating new perspectives and breaking away from established but potentially limiting paradigms, thereby offering a foundational contribution that can guide future empirical inquiry in the field.

3. Literature Review

3.1 HR Systems

HR systems are designed to facilitate organizational performance (Moutinho et al., 2021). They are composed of operational-level HR practices (specific activities to achieve objectives) and HR policies (guiding principles for selecting practices). HR systems operate at a higher level, integrating coherent and reliable policies and practices

to create a synergistic effect for desired outcomes (Kozera-Kowalska, 2020). While a contemporary concept, HR systems have roots in scientific management (task focus), administrative management (organizational focus), and the recognition of human behavior's role in optimal performance (Khan & Ali, 2017; Paoloni et al., 2023). The drive for high performance, involvement, and commitment underpins the need for HR systems (Patel & Guedes, 2017), with organizational philosophy and objectives guiding their selection and implementation (Pedro et al., 2018).

3.2 HR Systems as per Existing Research Literature

This section analyzes existing HR systems to identify limitations that 21st-century organizations must avoid.

Control-based HR Systems aim to reduce labor costs and improve efficiency through rule compliance and performance-contingent rewards (Soheilrad et al., 2017). Features include narrow jobs, centralized decision-making, and close monitoring (Turovets, 2021). Limitations include stifling innovation, discouraging teamwork and risk-taking (Turovets, 2021), and poor responsiveness in customer service and knowledge economies (Sveiby, 2018). They excel only at enhancing efficiency.

High-Commitment HR Systems aim to achieve performance through strong employee commitment and identification with organizational goals (Ali et al., 2021). Features include intensive training, socialization, internal promotions, high compensation, and selective staffing. Benefits include a committed workforce and high productivity (Usama et al., 2020). However, they often lack support for cost-effective innovation, knowledge economy information access, and customer service (Verhoef et al., 2021). Their effectiveness is highly contingent on specific strategies and market conditions (e.g., high-quality product strategies).

High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) (or high-involvement/commitment systems) use management approaches to achieve high performance through people (Soetanto & Liem, 2019). Features include employment security, selective staffing, self-managed teams, decentralization, high contingent compensation, training, reduced status distinctions, and information sharing (Shinde et al., 2022; Buenechea-Elberdin, 2017). Benefits encompass high-quality output, customer satisfaction, skill enhancement, low turnover, and motivation. A major limitation is inconsistency with cost-effective innovation and a lack of resilience in handling environmental complexity and disruption (Shinde et al., 2022). They require a pre-existing climate of motivation and strategic alignment and do not support a risk-taking culture.

High-Involvement HR Systems focus on using HR practices to shape the work environment and latitude (Šebestová & Popescu, 2022). Objectives include delegation, productivity, empowerment, and information flow. Features are formal teams, job rotation, quality circles, and TQM (Radhakrishnan et al., 2017). Like others, they lack in providing innovative solutions, customer service, and risk-taking (Radhakrishnan et al., 2017).

HR Systems for Occupational Safety extend HPWS with safety management practices (Quarchioni et al., 2022; Peykani et al., 2022). Objectives are a safety-oriented climate and low injury rates. They lack support for cost-effectiveness, innovation, risk-taking, customer service, and knowledge economy information (Peykani et al., 2022).

HR Systems for Customer Service are based on policies promoting participation, training, and incentives for service (Al-Musali & Ismail, 2016). Objectives are customer satisfaction and loyalty. They often lack emphasis on internal efficiency, effectiveness, and a framework for innovation (Al-Musali & Ismail, 2016).

High-Investment HR Systems are inclined toward high-involvement and commitment systems, aiming for productivity, commitment, and skill development (Buonomo et al., 2020). Their limitations include a lack of cost-effective innovation, absence of teamwork, and low customer service (Buonomo et al., 2020).

Other systems exist (e.g., for knowledge-intensive teamwork, innovation, diversity), but all share a common trait: they are designed for specific, often isolated, objectives.

A critical analysis of the defining characteristics and documented limitations of these predominant HR systems reveals a consistent and fundamental pattern: each is architecturally designed to excel in a specific domain while inherently creating a significant strategic deficiency in another. This analysis, synthesized from the extant literature, is summarized in Table 1, which moves beyond a checklist of features to highlight the core strategic trade-offs each system imposes. For instance, while control-based systems ensure efficiency, they are explicitly designed to stifle the very innovation and adaptability required in dynamic markets. This systematic deficiency across all models proves that the problem is not one of poor execution but of flawed foundational design. Consequently, as the final row of Table 1 asserts, no singular, existing system can provide the holistic

capabilities—efficiency *and* innovation, commitment *and* cost-control—that modern, paradoxical organizations require to thrive.

Table 1: Strategic Gaps in Traditional HR Systems

HR System Type	Primary Strength	Key Strategic Gap (Critical Missing Capability)
Control-Based	Efficiency, Cost-Control	Innovation & Adaptability (Stifles creativity and risk-taking)
High-Commitment	Employee Loyalty, Culture	Cost-Effectiveness & Radical Innovation (Can be resource-heavy and inflexible)
High-Performance (HPWS)	Overall Performance, Skills	Cost-Effective Innovation (Struggles with disruptive change and complexity)
Customer-Service	Customer Satisfaction, Loyalty	Internal Efficiency & Innovation (Can neglect internal processes and R&D)
Ideal 21st-Century System	Must Integrate All Capabilities	

Source: Developed by the author (2025) based on critical synthesis of extant literature (e.g., Ali et al., 2021; Soheilirad et al., 2017; Soetanto & Liem, 2019).

4. Paradoxical and Multifaceted Nature of Organizations

Organizations are social entities, goal-directed, deliberately structured, and coordinated activity systems linked to their external environment (Jain et al., 2017). This interconnectedness necessitates environmental awareness. As noted by Morgan (1986, cited in Pandey et al., 2023), organizations are "many things at once." They are complex, multifaceted, and paradoxical. A paradox is a statement containing two contradictory yet true elements, such as goals being both opportunities and constraints. Paradoxical situations create disequilibrium, resolved through effort and political processes (Paoloni et al., 2020).

Organizations can be seen as systems evolving through creative destruction and self-organization (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Moutinho et al., 2021), making their future unpredictable. Morgan's (1986) metaphors provide a powerful lens:

- **Machines:** Emphasize efficiency, order, standardization, and control.
- **Organisms:** Highlight adaptation, environmental fit, homeostasis, and survival.
- **Brains:** Feature learning, distributed intelligence, and knowledge networks.
- **Cultures:** Are defined by values, beliefs, traditions, and shared vision.
- **Political Systems:** Are arenas of power, conflict, interests, and alliances.
- **Psychic Prisons:** Exhibit unconscious processes, constraints, and defensive routines.
- **Instruments of Domination:** Involve exploitation, manipulation, and alienation.
- **Flux and Transformation:** Embody constant change, chaos, emergence, and self-organization.

Critically, all eight metaphors can coexist simultaneously within a single organization (Massaro et al., 2016). This multifaceted reality suggests the need for a comprehensive HR system that can engage with all these elements. Existing HR systems, designed for singular metaphors (e.g., control for machines, commitment for cultures), are ill-equipped to address the multiple strategic issues arising from this complexity.

5. Complexity and HR Systems

Existing HR systems often fail to account for environmental uncertainties—both dynamism (rate of change) and complexity (number of factors)—which critically affect an organization's value creation and performance (Soheilirad et al., 2017). HR uncertainty, stemming from environmental uncertainty, is a vibrant yet often overlooked variable. HR strategy is most operational when aligned with the environment (Sveiby, 2018). Firms must build the capacity to fit their resource alignments with environmental demands to achieve superior performance (Ali et al., 2021). Success relies on the capacity to exploit opportunities born from environmental uncertainties, providing an advantage over less adaptable rivals (Usama et al., 2020). This evidence supports the conceptualization of a hybrid HR system that can address environmental complexity and guide firms toward optimum performance.

6. Towards Conceptualization of an Ambidextrous HR System

The consensus in SHRM leans toward a systems perspective over isolated practices (Verhoef et al., 2021). However, conceptual inconsistencies plague existing HR systems due to competing objectives and a lack of solid empirical evidence on their functions. Inconsistent policies and practices within a system render it deficient.

This study identifies the limitations of prevalent HR systems and argues for a new system that provides complete conceptual understanding, addresses modern strategic issues, and embeds the critical success factors from Table 1. Furthermore, existing systems are weak in addressing environmental dynamism and complexity (Shinde et al., 2022); a new hybrid system must also facilitate organizational transformation. The rationale is rooted in organizational analysis: organizations are paradoxical and multifaceted, so HR policies/practices from any single-system perspective will fail if this reality is ignored. These practices are unsustainable amidst fast-paced change. Organizations constantly improvise and redesign due to self-learning, business model demands, and environmental factors (Šebestová & Popescu, 2022), necessitating ambidexterity in HR systems.

Organizational ambidexterity is the capacity to be efficient in managing current business while adapting to future changes. It involves equally using both exploration (search, experimentation, innovation) and exploitation (refinement, efficiency, execution) for sustained performance (Radhakrishnan et al., 2017).

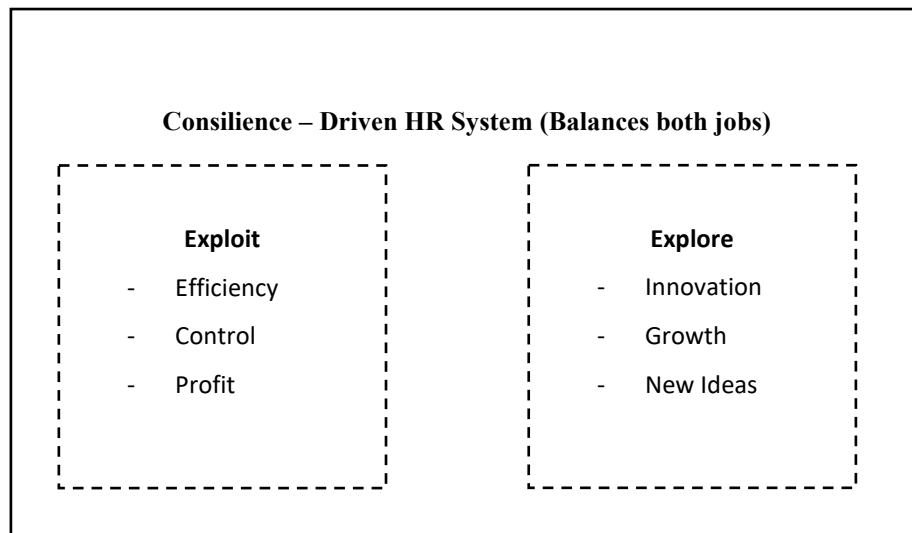
An ambidextrous HR system would function on two fronts:

- **Exploitative Front:** Strategic intent is cost and profit. It demands operational competencies, focus on operations, efficiency, and incremental innovation. The structure is formal and mechanistic, with a culture of efficiency, low risk, quality, and customers. Leadership is authoritative and top-down.
- **Exploratory Front:** Strategic intent is innovation and growth. Critical tasks include adaptability, new products, and breakthrough innovation. Entrepreneurial competencies are key, with an adaptive, loose structure focused on milestones, growth, and a culture of risk-taking, speed, and experimentation. Leadership is visionary and involved.

Operationalizing such a system demands insights from **consilience**—the unification of knowledge from independent disciplines to reveal common explanatory principles (Brende & Sternfels, 2022). Applying biological models (e.g., population ecology) to organizational science is an example. The term "hybrid" signifies that the proposed system incorporates and realigns effective policies and practices from all existing systems (e.g., performance management, training, selective hiring, job design, security, involvement, team development, information/innovation policies, customer service, compensation).

The proposed system must not only develop Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs) and ensure a level playing field for Knowledge, Motivation, and Opportunities to perform (KMOs) but also develop the firm's **dynamic capabilities**—the ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure resources to address changing environments (Hazan et al., 2021). This is achievable by investing in human resources to produce cost-effective innovations, contingent on an HR philosophy that views people as a source of competitive advantage (Iazzolino & Laise, 2016). A consilience-driven, ambidextrous HR system would be autopoietic (self-regulating) (Ishaq, 2021), qualifying all assumptions of general systems theory and adapting to changing conditions (Izzo et al., 2022).

The Ambidextrous HR Balancing Act



Source: Developed by the author(s) (2025).

Figure 1: The Consilience-Driven Hybrid Ambidextrous HR System Model

This study proposes that the primary function of a contemporary HR system is to serve as a dynamic framework for managing the core tension between exploitation and exploration. Rather than a static set of policies, it must be an adaptive mechanism that integrates these competing demands.

As would be illustrated in Figure 1, the *Consilience-Driven HR System* is conceptualized not as a choice between two paths, but as a unifying structure that actively balances them. The *Exploit* function focuses on refining existing capabilities, ensuring efficiency, control, and profitability in current operations. Simultaneously, the *Explore* function is dedicated to fostering innovation, growth, and the development of new ideas for future viability.

The model represents the system's foundational principle of *consilience*—the unification of knowledge from across the organization to ensure that HR practices supporting one function do not contradict but are strategically aligned with those supporting the other. This model moves beyond the limitations of singular-focus systems (as critiqued in Table 1) by making the conscious management of this tension its central purpose, thereby enabling the multifaceted and paradoxical organization to thrive in complex environments.

7. Discussion

This paper set out to conceptualize an HR system capable of navigating the paradoxes inherent in modern organizations. While the proposed Consilience-Driven Ambidextrous HR System presents a theoretically compelling solution, its practical application invites critical discussion and unveils significant challenges.

The foremost implementation challenge lies in achieving genuine *consilience*. Unifying policies from the exploitative and exploratory fronts requires overcoming deeply ingrained organizational contradictions. Can a single performance management system truly reward both efficient execution *and* failed experimental learning? This demands a radical rethinking of HR philosophy and may encounter resistance from leaders and systems accustomed to clear, singular priorities. The model, therefore, does not propose a simple checklist but a profound cultural and structural shift towards embracing and managing tension, akin to the principles of paradoxical leadership (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Furthermore, the model's effectiveness is likely highly *context-dependent*. The optimal balance between exploitation and exploration is not static; it must dynamically shift in response to industry volatility, competitive threats, and organizational life cycle stage. An ambidextrous system in a stable manufacturing firm may lean heavily on its exploitative front, while a tech startup might prioritize exploration. This contextual fluidity suggests that the model is a meta-framework—a guiding philosophy—rather than a one-size-fits-all prescription. Future research must explore the contingent factors that determine this balance.

A third point of discussion is the *resource intensity* implied by this model. Maintaining dual structures, competencies, and cultures is inherently costly and complex. It requires significant investment in managerial time to reconcile conflicting agendas and in capital to fund both incremental improvements and radical

innovation. For many organizations, especially SMEs, this may seem prohibitively expensive. This critique forces a consideration of the minimum viable level of ambidexterity required for different types of firms and how the consilience principle can be applied most efficiently.

Despite these challenges, the model's value is in providing a necessary *corrective lens* for SHRM theory. It moves the field beyond seeking a "best" system and towards developing a "most adaptable" one. By explicitly integrating the external environment and multifaceted nature of organizations into its core design, the framework offers a more robust foundation for building organizational resilience. It makes the case that the primary role of HR is no longer just alignment, but *orchestration*—orchestrating the tensions between competing demands to fuel sustainable performance.

In conclusion, this conceptualization is not the end of the conversation but a vital beginning. It succeeds not by providing easy answers, but by framing the right questions for both scholars and practitioners: How do we measure HR ambidexterity? What leadership styles enable consilience? And how do we manage the inherent costs of this complexity? The pursuit of these questions will drive the empirical work needed to advance this theory into practice.

8. Managerial Implications

This conceptualization urges management to revisit recruitment strategies, as a misfit between candidate, job, and organization (Turovets, 2021) would undermine the proposed system. It demands vigorous training programs with impact assessments to develop employees for cost-effective innovation. Management must realize that the HR system should support both human capital-enhancing practices (Ali et al., 2021) and building dynamic capabilities (Usama et al., 2020) for the entire organization. Consequently, environmental complexity, uncertainty, and dynamism (Verhoef et al., 2021) must become regular considerations in crafting and implementing corporate strategy.

9. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

SHRM literature is silent on conceptualizing an HR system that solves multiple modern strategic issues, particularly one consistent with multiple organizational images (Soetanto & Liem, 2019) and dynamic, complex environments (Buenechea-Elberdin, 2017). Our conceptualization, focusing on an ambidextrous system that simultaneously explores and exploits opportunities with human resources, aims to help contemporary organizations excel by controlling their multifaceted challenges. It is logically assembled based on the limitations of existing systems, their lack of coping capacity, and the veracity of organizations' paradoxical nature.

This paper offers thought-provoking insights for SHRM and organizational scholars regarding the role of HR systems in performance. Future research should focus on establishing the sustainability of this conceptualization, identifying and operationalizing the constructs of an ambidextrous HR system, and empirically measuring its impact on organizational performance across varying contexts (e.g., public/private sector, family businesses, different industries). Scholars should analyze, evaluate, and verify the applicability and cogency of the proposed system, suggesting modifications based on the changing nature of specific organizations.

Ethical Compliance: This article is based on a conceptual analysis of existing literature. No human or animal subjects were involved in this research, and thus, no ethical approval was required.

AI Assistance Declaration: The author utilized ChatGPT. The AI was used solely for purposes of text refinement, and improving grammatical clarity. The core ideas, theoretical analysis, critical conceptualization, and final arguments remain entirely those of the author. The AI acted as a tool to enhance the clarity and coherence of the writing and was not used to generate the foundational intellectual contributions of this work. The author submitted the AI check report generated by Turnitin.

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