

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Morris M. KLEINER, Richard N. BLOCK, Myron ROOMKIN,
Sidney W. SALSBURG : *Human Resources and the Performance
of the Firm*. Madison, Wisconsin, Industrial Relations Research
Association Series, 1987, 343 pp., ISBN 0-913447-382

Bernard Portis

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[See table of contents](#)

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the resurgence of interest in the business community and the policies and role of companies in the national economic, social and political contexts, employers' associations may be on the point of coming into their own as field of study. Governments and unions cannot afford ignore them. Can the IR community?

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Human Resources and the Performance of the Firm, by Morris M. Kleiner, Richard N. Block, Myron Roomkin, Sidney W. Salsburg (eds.), Madison, Wisconsin, Industrial Relations Research Association Series, 1987, pp. 343, ISBN 0-913447-382

This is an excellent review of research in several areas that are presumed to affect the performance of the firm: industrial relations strategy: labour relations practices; compensation; employee participation; grievance procedures; pensions; hiring procedures; turnover and employment security. For each area there is an extensive review of recent research conducted almost entirely in the United States. For some topics, such as pensions and retirement, the experience in the United States does not seem entirely appropriate to Canada, although conditions could change if early vesting of pensions and the abolishment of mandatory retirement come to Canada. Industrial relations specialists in Canada, Anil Verma and David Peach, participated in significant research studies concerning employee participation and grievance procedures, respectively.

The purpose of this monograph becomes clear in the final chapter. Performance of companies was not of great concern in the past when American companies faced little international competition and could pass on increased labour costs to their customers. However, in recent times the performance of these firms has become much more uncertain and the American government has become concerned about how various factors, including human resources, affect corporate performance.

The monograph supplies no easy answers. Corporate performance is hard to measure and also difficult to relate to human resources. Even relating human resources to more immediate outcomes such as absenteeism and productivity has been difficult. Some of the contributors to this volume recognize that research in labour economics is not completely adequate for predicting corporate performance and that researchers should also consider process-oriented or managerial research with particular firms or industries.

The contributors to this monograph have summarized very well recent research, mostly by labour economists, which relates personnel and labour relations practices to corporate performance. While it is difficult to show that any particular practice makes firms more successful, there is much evidence that more successful firms have more up-to-date practices. For example, a more problem-solving approach to grievances, high pension coverage, employee participation or productivity sharing programs set forth in labour contracts, and even simply union representation are found among more productive and profitable companies.

As businesses and unions achieve more progressive practices in human resources, they may be willing to do evaluation research themselves or support research by academics. Five or ten year from now a more conclusive piece of research should be possible on the performance of the firm. Until then, the monograph prepared by the IRRA should be a useful guide to making research on human resources more rigorous and also relevant to industry.

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