Relations industrielles


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L'avenir des relations industrielles dans les Amériques
The Future of Industrial Relations in the Americas
El Porvenir de las Relaciones Industriales en las Americas
Volume 44, Number 1, 1989

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050491ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/050491ar

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Publisher(s)
Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN
0034-379X (print)
1703-8138 (digital)

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Cite this review
https://doi.org/10.7202/050491ar
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?

James THWAITES

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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

This is an excellent review of research in several areas that are presumed to affect the per-
formance 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 ex-
perience in the United States does not seem entirely appropriate to Canada, although condi-
tions 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, par-
ticipated in significant research studies concerning employee participation and grievance pro-
cedures, respectively.

The purpose of this monograph becomes clear in the final chapter. Performance of com-
panies 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, af-
fect 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 predic-
ting 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 per-
formance. 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 exam-
ple, a more problem-solving approach to grievances, high pension coverage, employee par-
ticipation 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 mak-
ing research on human resources more rigorous and also relevant to industry.

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