
New Work Practices, Participation and Organisational Performance: Prospects for High Performance Work Systems in Australia

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Introduction

Much recent discussion of employee participation in the management, industrial relations and human resource management literature has focused on the concept of 'high performance work systems' (HPWS). Both advocates and critics of this approach have accepted that HPWS have the potential to drive performance gains in organisations and that such performance gains are likely to arise chiefly through the participative forms of work organisation inherent in this approach to labour management. This makes an understanding of HPWS an important element in understanding contemporary debates about work practices, participation and organisational performance.

This chapter is divided into six sections. In the first, HPWS are located within broader and longer-term debates about worker participation. The second section sets out the theoretical debates about the role of participation in HPWS and, in particular, its importance in explanations of the putative performance gains arising from HPWS. The third section reviews the evidence about HPWS, employees and organisational performance. In the fourth section discussion turns to the factors which appear to encourage the adoption of HPWS practices. The final two sections deal with HPWS in the Australian context, the first considering its prevalence and the likelihood of widespread adoption and the second considering policies which might encourage its adoption.

New work practices, participation and organisational performance: Background

A concern with performance has underpinned the arguments made by advocates of employee participation in the workplace for many decades, although

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of the current state of knowledge, perhaps the most sensible orientation is a Gramscian combination of pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will.

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