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## **PERFORMANCE OF UNIONIZED EMPLOYEES UNDER COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS: THE ROLE OF HRM PRACTICES, EMPLOYEE AND FIRM CHARACTERISTICS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents findings of a study that investigated the determinants of performance of unionized shop-floor employees engaged in private sector firms operating with collective bargaining agreements in Sri Lanka. The specific objectives of the study were to investigate the effects of 1) HRM practices, 2) employee characteristics, and 3) firm characteristics on the performance of unionized shop-floor employees under collective bargaining agreements. The HRM practices under consideration were training, job security, employee empowerment, and employee relations. Age, gender, the duration of employment, the highest education qualification, and skill category were considered as employee characteristics, whereas firm size and firm age were considered as firm characteristics. Data were collected from unionized shop-floor employees attached to private sector firms that have active trade unions and maintain formal collective agreements. The results underscore a strong positive relationship between HRM practices and employee performance; training and employee relations practices had the strongest effects. Further, the years of business operation had a significant effect on employee performance. However, the effect of employee characteristics was not significant. The effect of firm size was also not significant. The findings have important implications for HRM professionals and business leaders working in unionized work environments.*

**Keywords:** Collective Bargaining Agreements, Employee Characteristics, Employee Performance, Firm Characteristics, HRM Practices, Shop-Floor Employees, Trade Unions

## 1. Introduction

Employees represent a vital organizational asset that plays a key role in enhancing organizational performance. Among various determinants of employee performance, human resource management (HRM) practices, employee characteristics, and firm characteristics stand out as critical considerations (Boxall & Purcell, 2022). Organizations implement HRM practices such as training, job security, employee empowerment, and employee relations to enhance employees' performance (Godard, 2011). At the same time, employee characteristics—such as age, gender, educational qualifications, and skill category—along with firm characteristics like size and years of operation are also known to significantly influence employees' performance outcomes (Boxall & Purcell, 2022; Chung & Lee, 2010).

The context of the present study is the unionized private sector firms operating under collective bargaining agreements. In unionized environments, trade unions and collective bargaining agreements play an important role in deciding the employer-employee relationship. Recognized trade unions negotiate over key employment terms, including wages, job security, and working conditions. Collective bargaining agreements not only enhance benefits to employees but also help in improving organizational stability and productivity (Godard, 2011).

In the Sri Lankan context, limited empirical research exists on the unionized private sector firms with collective bargaining agreements. The present study investigated the determinants of performance of unionized shop-floor employees engaged in private sector firms operating under collective bargaining agreements. The specific objectives were to investigate the effects of 1) HRM practices, 2) employee characteristics, and 3) firm characteristics on the performance of unionized shop-floor employees under collective bargaining agreements. The HRM practices under consideration were training, job security, employee empowerment, and employee relations.

Age, gender, the duration of employment, the highest education qualification, and skill category were considered as employee characteristics, whereas firm size and firm age were considered as firm characteristics.

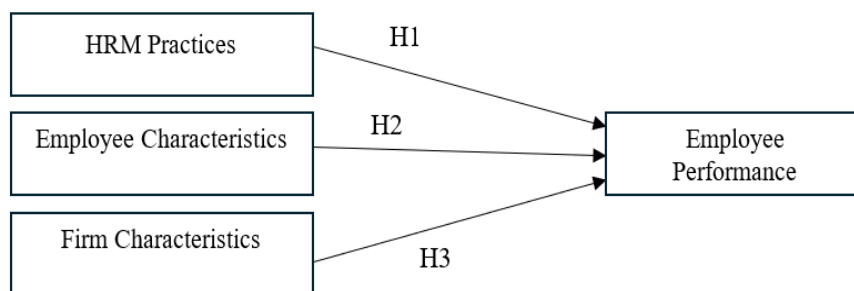
This research contributes to both theory and practice on trade unions and management by addressing an important research gap. First, the context of the study is unionized private sector firms with active collective agreements. The understanding of dynamics involving HRM practices, employee characteristics, and firm characteristics on employee performance provide opportunities to design and implement more meaningful and effective policies that align with both organizational and employee interests. Second, in a highly competitive business environment, organizations are deeply focused on improving their workforce outcomes to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. This study enhances the understanding of how specific HRM practices, such as training and development, job security, employee empowerment, and employee relations, influence the performance of employees. Third, this research investigated the impact of employee characteristics, namely, gender, the duration of employment, the highest education qualification, and skill category on employee performance. Understanding these factors helps to focus on diversified employee groups to enhance their motivation, engagement and performance. Fourth, the study investigated the effects of firm size by the number of employees and firm age in years on employee performance. This provides opportunities to understand how internal contextual factors influence employee performance. Overall, the study contributes to a less developed area in literature, where union presence and collective bargaining are the focal point. The study also highlights practical implications for HRM professionals and business leaders to formulate HRM policies that align with both organizational and employee interests when firms have an active trade union presence and maintain formal collective agreements.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining**

Trade unions play a significant role in determining employee rights, benefits, working environment, and organizational culture. The trade unions are more powerful in the context where collective bargaining is in force. Collective bargaining is a process where trade unions negotiate issues such as shift output, wages, working hours, welfare, and working conditions with the management. Hence, collective bargaining agreements can immensely influence employee performance, their welfare, and organizational stability (Godard, 2011). The findings of Marchington and Wilkinson (2019) suggest that employee performance is notably affected by the existence of a trade union within the workplace. Previous evidence also suggests that trade union presence has implications for HRM practices (Wilson et al., 2019), suggesting that effective HRM policies must balance union dynamics to promote mutual performance gains.

The present study examined the effects of HRM practices (i.e., training, job security, employee empowerment, and employee relations), employee characteristics (i.e., age, gender, employment duration, the highest education qualification, and skill category), and firm characteristics (i.e., employee size, and firm age) on the performance of unionized shop-floor employees engaged in private sector firms operating with collective bargaining agreements. The conceptual framework developed for the study is shown in Figure 1. The relevant literature is reviewed in the following sections.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework for Determinants of Employee Performance under Collective Bargaining Agreements

## 2.2. Performance of Employees and HRM Practices

Employees' performance involves work quantity, quality, timeliness, attendance, and efficiency and effectiveness on the job. Previous

research showed that HRM practices immensely contribute to enhance employee performance (Aisyah, 2021; Wickramasinghe & Mahmood, 2017). Human capital theory and the resource-based view (RBV) support the claim that organizations can enhance productivity and growth by investing in their employees. The social exchange theory explains how employees respond positively when they feel supported by HRM practices (refer to Ahmad et al., 2023). The institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) explains how collective bargaining agreements affect HRM practices in unionized organizations. The present study is grounded in the RBV, social exchange theory, and institutional theory to inform the role of HRM practices when collective bargaining agreements are in effect. Below sections review, in brief, the literature on HRM practices and employee performance that is within the scope of the study.

### **2.3. Training Practices and Performance of Employees**

Training involves the methods of improving capabilities needed to perform employees' job roles (Mira et al., 2019). The influence of training on employee performance has been well investigated, and the evidence supports that training leads to improved employee performance (Gunarathna et al., 2022; Mira et al., 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2014; Wickramasinghe, 2013). Several previous research studies across different parts of the world showed a strong positive relationship between training and employee performance (Gunarathna et al., 2022; Jehanzeb & Bashir, 2013; Wickramasinghe, 2009). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H1a: Training practices positively influence employee performance.

### **2.4. Job Security Practices and Performance of Employees**

Job security is one of the basic requirements of any employee. It ensures the continuation of his/her job, which could influence their job performance. Hence, job security reflects whether employees feel secure in their jobs, which could lead to higher performance (Ahmed et al. 2017). Some of the key attributes of job security were identified as the continuation of the job and income security (Taamneh & AL-Gharaibeh, 2014). Previous empirical studies, such as Adebayo and Lucky (2012),

showed a significant positive relationship between job security and employee performance. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H1b: Job security practices positively influence employee performance.

## **2.5. Employee Empowerment Practices and Performance of Employees**

Employee empowerment practices provide opportunities to contribute to day-to-day work activities, making each employee accountable for his/her decisions (Baird et al., 2018). Enabling employees to participate in decision-making facilitates their engagement in their jobs (De Costa & Wickramasinghe, 2024). Previous research showed positive effects of employee empowerment on employees' performance improvement (Baird et al., 2018; Fernandez & Moldogaziev, 2013). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H1c: Employee empowerment practices positively influence employee performance.

## **2.6. Employee Relations Practices and Performance of Employees**

The practices that organizations adopt to build a positive relationship between non-management employees and the management of an organization are known as employee relations (Avey et al., 2011). Effective employee relations are essential to develop a positive working environment. Employee relations practices also help in maintaining legal compliance of the organization (Pathinayake & Wickramasinghe, 2023). Several previous research studies examined how employee relations influence performance outcomes and provided evidence that positive employee relations practices lead to enhanced employee performance (Avey et al., 2011). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H1d: Employee relations practices positively influence employee performance.

## **2.7. Employee Characteristics and Performance of Employees**

Employee characteristics that organizations heavily rely on to increase their performance include age, experience, skills, and qualifications (Chung & Lee, 2010; Judge & Bono, 2001). Age is an important employee

characteristic that is associated with employee performance (Judge & Bono, 2001). Judge and Bono (2001) showed that older employees have greater job-related knowledge, which influences their performance. Employee competencies and speed of task completion vary by their gender (Judge & Bono, 2001). When employees attained a higher level of education, their performance was found to be higher (Chung & Lee, 2010). The duration of employment or tenure is also an indication of employees' experience that has a direct relationship with their performance (Chung & Lee, 2010). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H2: Employees' characteristics influence employee performance.

## **2.8. Firm Characteristics and Performance of Employees**

The contextual characteristics of organizations directly influence the stability of an organization and could also influence employee performance (De Costa & Wickramasinghe, 2026; Delery & Roumpi, 2017). The years of business operation and firm size in terms of the number of employees engaged are some of the key firm characteristics that have been tested in previous research in different contexts (Boxall & Purcell, 2022). According to Delery and Roumpi (2017), long-established organizations are more likely to have refined HRM practices, which enhance the performance of employees. Older firms have established processes and mature cultures that can influence the behaviour of employees (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). The level of interaction between employees and management can influence the employees' performance. The employees of a larger firm may experience fewer interactions, while employees of a smaller firm may experience more flexible and closer interactions with management (Dammage et al., 2011; Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Jayabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2007). That is, the size of the firm is an important consideration. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H3: Firms' characteristics influence employee performance.

## **3. Methodology**

The study population is unionized shop-floor employees in private sector organizations with active trade unions and collective bargaining agreements in Sri Lanka. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to pool the respondents. The measures used in the study were

developed in the English language. The measures developed for the study are given in Box 1. All measures were on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Individual and firm characteristics were in dichotomous response categories, coded as 0 and 1, where 1 is assigned for the higher value (age - below 35 years/35 years or more; gender - male (1)/female (0); the duration of employment - less than 10 years/10 years or more; highest education qualification - below Advanced-level/with Advanced-level or above; Skill category - skilled/unskilled; Firm size - less than 50 employees/50 employees or more; Firm age - less than 10 years/10 years or more). The survey questionnaire was translated into the native language, *Sinhala*, and printed copies were distributed. Responses were anonymous.

### Box 1: Measures

<p><b>Employee relations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel that the management maintains good relations with the trade union</li> <li>• Both the management and the trade union stand by me when I am in trouble.</li> <li>• I feel that the management and trade union adhere to the terms and conditions of the collective agreement.</li> <li>• I feel that the management tries to win advantages for both the employer and employees through trade union relations.</li> <li>• I feel that the management treats me the same as they treat other employees</li> <li>• I feel that the management and the trade union have effective negotiations between them</li> </ul>	<p><b>Job security</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel that I can keep my job in this organization</li> <li>• I feel secure about my future pay growth</li> <li>• I feel that I will be getting the basic pay even if my performance is not up to the expected standard.</li> <li>• I am entitled to paid leave to secure my income during the illness of a child/spouse</li> <li>• I feel that I will be provided with the option to transfer to another job within the organization if required.</li> <li>• I have benefits and entitlements after retirement</li> <li>• I feel equal treatment at work</li> </ul>	<p><b>Empowerment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have the authority to change machine settings</li> <li>• I do minor machine repairs to ensure the product quality and productivity</li> <li>• I am encouraged to use my expertise in problem-solving and decision-making matters directly relevant to my job tasks</li> <li>• I am allowed to suggest improvements/kaizen.</li> <li>• My management is encouraging me to suggest new ideas and improvements.</li> <li>• I have received the resources needed to perform my job tasks.</li> <li>• I have access to information relevant to my job role and responsibilities.</li> <li>• The management of the organization appreciates my ideas and contributions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Training</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am satisfied with the training opportunities provided to me by the organization</li> <li>• I have acquired a deeper understanding/knowledge from training and development programs</li> <li>• The knowledge gained through the training programs was relevant to my job role.</li> <li>• I am always appreciative of my enthusiasm to learn new things.</li> <li>• I am utilizing skills and knowledge acquired through training programs in performing my job.</li> <li>• I am always appreciated for applying new learning in performing job tasks.</li> <li>• I was able to deliver the best results from skills and knowledge gained through training programs</li> </ul>		<p><b>Employee performance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am presently performing at my highest level</li> <li>• I am currently working with the lowest cycle time</li> <li>• I am trying my best to comply with product specifications</li> <li>• I am trying my best to reduce the number of defective products</li> <li>• I adhere to time schedules</li> <li>• I can meet production norms.</li> <li>• I am willing to put extra effort into achieving production targets.</li> <li>• I am eliminating non-value adding or rework operations of products which I have produced</li> <li>• I am willing to extend my fullest support to achieve the organization's goals</li> </ul>

A total of 152 printed questionnaires were distributed; 90 valid responses were received. Regarding respondents' characteristics, they were mainly male (91%), skilled (71%), and with a lower level of formal

education (82% below A/L). Respondents were mainly engaged in large-sized firms (94%) and had more than 10 years of operation.

Data was analyzed using SPSS. Measures were tested for validity and reliability. Cronbach Alpha values were above 0.7 for each variable. For all measures, factor analysis was conducted. Bartlett's test of sphericity ( $p < 0.05$ ) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistics ( $KMO > 0.80$ ) confirmed the adequacy. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses.

#### 4. Findings

Table 1 provides correlations between variables. The results of the hierarchical regression are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 1: Correlations**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Employee Performance	3.7	0.6	1											
2 Employee relations	3.4	0.7	.270*	1										
3 Training and development	3.6	0.5	.324**	.221*	1									
4 Job security practices	3.5	0.6	0.128	.645**	.407**	1								
5 Employee empowerment	3.3	0.6	.350**	.586**	.469**	.633**	1							
6 Age	-	-	.376**	-0.08	.240*	-0.007	0.158	1						
7 Gender	-	-	-0.139	0.016	0.083	-0.082	-0.105	-0.005	1					
8 Duration of Employment	-	-	.392**	-0.021	0.134	0.107	0.184	.758**	-0.113	1				
9 Education Qualification	-	-	-0.18	0.131	0.11	0.126	0.122	-0.2	.403**	-0.06	1			
10 Employee category	-	-	-.352**	-0.197	-.284**	-.309**	-.362**	-.365**	-0.022	-.355**	-0.127	1		
11 Size of the firm	-	-	.293**	-0.05	-0.073	-0.036	-0.135	0.117	-.436**	.271**	-.296**	-0.173	1	
12 Age of the firm	-	-	.293**	-0.05	-0.156	-0.032	-0.151	0.017	-.436**	0.174	-.296**	-0.065	.788**	1
13 Ownership of the firm	-	-	-0.109	-0.141	-0.196	0.167	-0.119	-0.003	-0.106	0.063	-0.016	-0.066	0.161	.231*

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the model summary. Model 1 includes employee characteristics as independent variables. Model 2 adds firm characteristics. Model 3 includes employee characteristics, firm characteristics, and the four HRM practices. The  $R^2$  value of Model 1 was 0.254 ( $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that 25.4% of the variance of performance was explained by Model 1. Even though the addition of firm

characteristics led to increase  $R^2$  value in Model 2, the F change value ( $p > 0.05$ ) of the model is not significant. The  $R^2$  value of Model 3 was 0.690 ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that HRM practices contribute significantly to enhancing employee performance.

**Table 2:** Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Change Statistics		
				R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change
1	.504 <sup>a</sup>	0.254	0.203	0.254	5.03	0.001
2	.541 <sup>b</sup>	0.293	0.224	0.039	1.98	0.146
3	.690 <sup>c</sup>	0.475	0.391	0.183	5.927	0.000

Table 3 shows the coefficients for each model. Model 3 indicates that training practices ( $\beta = 0.205$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), employee relations practices ( $\beta = 0.216$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), job security practices ( $\beta = -0.229$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and firm age ( $\beta = 0.509$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) significantly predict employee performance. Accordingly, training practices (H1a) and employee relations practices (H1d) significantly positively influence employee performance, supporting H1a and H1d, respectively. Job security practices (H1b) significantly negatively affect performance. H1b proposed that job security practices could have a significant positive effect. Hence, H1b is not supported. The significant negative effect can be interpreted as a consequence of the context of the study – shop-floor unionized employees under collective bargaining agreements. The collective bargaining agreement itself provides job security. The negative effect may suggest that employees bound by a collective agreement in a unionized environment become more confident about their job security granted by the collective agreement. Therefore, employees may perceive that their jobs are highly secure, and as a result, they may feel less pressure to put effort into their performance. Hence, the job security practices may have a reverse effect. The effect of employee empowerment practices (H1c,  $\beta = 0.123$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) is not significant. Hence, H1c is not supported. Of the hypotheses tested, H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1d are for objective 1 of the study. None of the employee characteristics are significant. Hence, H2, which is for objective 2 of the study, is not supported. Firm age ( $B = 0.509$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ) had a significantly positive effect; firm size was not significant. Therefore, H3, which is for objective 3 of the study, is partially supported.

**Table 3:** Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Model		B	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.601	14.73	0
	Age	0.016	0.109	0.913
	Gender	-0.088	-0.552	0.583
	Duration of employment	0.208	1.553	0.125
	Education qualification	-0.169	-1.335	0.186
	Employee skill category	-0.251	-2.536	0.013
2	(Constant)	3.716	6.202	0
	Age	0.066	0.455	0.65
	Gender	-0.038	-0.239	0.812
	Duration of employment	0.156	1.146	0.256
	Education qualification	-0.097	-0.733	0.466
	Employee skill category	-0.242	-2.449	0.017
	Firm size	-0.044	-0.158	0.875
Firm age	0.421	1.57	0.121	
3	(Constant)	2.495	3.636	0.001
	Age	-0.006	-0.046	0.963
	Gender	0.041	0.277	0.783
	Duration of employment	0.215	1.741	0.086
	Education qualification	-0.188	-1.582	0.118
	Employee skill category	-0.174	-1.848	0.069
	Firm size	-0.09	-0.355	0.724
	Firm age	0.509	2.129	0.037
	Training	0.205	2.283	0.026
	Employee relations	0.216	2.925	0.005
Job security	-0.229	-2.605	0.011	
Employee empowerment	0.123	1.422	0.160	

## 5. Conclusion and Implications for Theory and Practice

Among the HRM practices investigated, training exhibits a significant positive relationship with employee performance. This indicates that if employees receive more training opportunities, they may exert higher performance, which suggests the importance of investments in training even in unionized firms. The study identified a significant negative effect of job security practices on employee performance. In organization settings without collective bargaining, job security practices may be of high value. The setting of the present study is unionized firms with active collective bargaining agreements. Collective bargaining agreement itself is a guarantee for job security in almost all organization settings. Hence,

the negative effect may suggest that employees bound by a collective agreement in a unionized environment become more confident about their job security granted by the collective agreement. Therefore, employees may perceive that their jobs are highly secure, and as a result, they may feel less pressure to put effort into their performance. The study also found a significant positive effect of employee relations on employee performance. This suggests the importance of establishing and maintaining effective communication and collaboration between the two groups - management and employees. However, employee empowerment practices do not have a significant positive effect on employee performance. This study also examined the impact of employee characteristics - age, gender, the duration of employment, highest education qualification, and employee skill category - on employee performance. According to the findings, none of the variables had a significant statistical relationship with employee performance. With regard to firm characteristics, the impact of firm size on employee performance was not significant, indicating that the organization's scale in terms of the number of employees does not affect employee performance. However, the years of operation (firm age) had a significant positive effect on employee performance. Employees in more established firms show better performance. This can be due to the stable processes and better resources such firms have developed over time.

### **5.1. Theoretical Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study add to the existing literature on the effects of HRM practices, employee characteristics, and firm characteristics on employee performance, in the context of trade unions and collective bargaining agreements in private sector organizations. First, this study emphasizes the strong link between HRM practices and employee performance, showing the necessity of continuous investment in establishing and maintaining appropriate HRM practices, specifically, training and employee relations. However, the findings challenge the conventional findings of a positive link between job security practices and employee performance. Although in general, job security leads to higher performance, the findings showed that trade union presence could provide excessive job security, which could reduce the pressure on employees to put effort into their job performance. However, this should be further investigated in future research.

Second, this study adds new insights to the existing literature on employee characteristics and their performance. The statistical insignificance of employee characteristics on their performance indicates that the impact of HRM practices conditioned by collective agreements minimize the impact of individual differences on their performance.

Third, the study also identified a complex relationship between firm characteristics and employee performance. Although the size of the firm does not have a significant effect on employee performance, the firm's years of operation had a significant effect. This suggests the importance of the stability of the organization that has gained over the years of operation for employee performance.

## **5.2. Practical Implications of the Findings**

First, the findings of this study are important for HRM professionals and business leaders operating in a unionized work environment with collective bargaining agreements. The findings suggest that organizations should invest in HRM practices to exert higher employee performance. For example, HRM professionals could prioritize employee training strategies to enhance long-term employee performance.

Second, the negative relationship between job security on employee performance suggests that, while the collective agreement has defined the stranded, the organization must have an effective employee performance recognition system. The HRM strategies of such organizations need to be focused on a merit-based reward system, streamlined performance appraisal, and incentive schemes to exert employee performance.

Third, employee relations practices could be strengthened to enhance employee performance. Strong employee relations practices can improve teamwork even in a unionized environment. Organizations could focus on open communication and avenues for collaboration between management and employees to improve employer-employee relationships.

Fourth, the findings also highlight that employee characteristics do not significantly influence their performance. This suggests that in a unionized environment with collective agreements organizations may not rely on employee characteristics, such as age and gender of employees.

Fifth, the positive relationship between firms' age on employee performance emphasizes the importance of the stability of the organization. Hence, newly formed firms could focus on building strong systems and processes to target long-term performance enhancement.

### **5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies**

First, future research could test the relationships proposed in this study in different country contexts to increase the generalizability of the findings. Second, since this study had investigated only four HRM practices, future studies could consider expanding the number of practices. Third, future research could investigate potential mediating or moderating effects in the HRM-performance relationship. Fourth, the results showed a significant negative relationship between job security practices and employee performance, which merits further investigation to uncover the underlying causes. Lastly, it is recommended that future studies expand the scope of employee relations practices by separately assessing employees' relationships with employers, trade unions, and management to obtain more targeted insights within unionized workplaces.

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