

Beyond mutual gains and conflicting outcomes: a functional ambivalence perspective on high-performance work systems

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Abstract

Purpose – To shed new light on the nature and influence of high-performance work systems (HPWS), this study investigates the relationships between ability-, motivation- and opportunity-enhancing (AMO) bundles of HPWS and employee psychological well-being - measured as work engagement—via two psychological pathways: employee self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion.

Design/methodology/approach – The study analyzes data from Russian employees working in domestic ($n = 403$) and foreign-owned ($n = 110$) firms.

Findings – The study offers partial support for the conflicting outcomes perspective on HPWS. It explains these mixed findings by highlighting the intended and unintended consequences of organizational interventions.

Originality/value – The study provides initial evidence for a contingency perspective on HPWS effects by extending the analysis of employee resources and well-being to the high-power-distance context of Russia and examining whether these effects vary by organizational ownership (domestic versus foreign-owned).

Keywords HPWS, AMO bundles, Mutual gains, Self-efficacy, Emotional exhaustion, Work engagement, Russia

Paper type Research article

Introduction

High-performance work systems (HPWS), defined as coherent bundles of human resource (HR) practices designed to enhance employee skills, motivation, and opportunities to contribute, have long been associated with improved organizational performance (Combs *et al.*, 2006; Jiang and Messersmith, 2018). Yet their implications for employee well-being remain the subject of considerable debate. Some studies report positive outcomes, including higher engagement and commitment, whereas others highlight negative consequences such as work intensification, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019; Han *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, early work by Ramsay *et al.* (2000), rooted in the labor process tradition, argued that performance improvements associated with HPWS may stem from intensified work demands rather than enhanced employee empowerment. Later studies have echoed these concerns, suggesting that HPWS can simultaneously enable and constrain employees (e.g. Dorta-Afonso *et al.*, 2023; Dorta-Afonso and Romero-Dominguez, 2025;



Han *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2020; Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2023). Collectively, these studies point to a fundamental theoretical tension: HPWS appear capable of generating both mutually beneficial and conflicting outcomes, yet existing frameworks offer only limited explanations of how these opposing effects coexist.

Despite growing recognition of these mixed effects, our understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which HPWS influence employee well-being remains limited. In particular, relatively little is known about whether different components of HPWS exert distinct psychological effects, or how contextual factors shape these relationships. To address this gap, this study examines the differential effects of ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing (AMO) bundles of HPWS on employee psychological well-being (engagement), focusing on self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and work engagement. The AMO framework has become a central organizing lens in HRM research allowing scholars to unpack how specific HR practices influence both performance-related and psychological outcomes (Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2023).

This study is motivated by three interrelated considerations. First, scholars increasingly question the treatment of HPWS as a unitary construct, noting that AMO bundles may operate through distinct mechanisms and produce divergent outcomes for employees (Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2023; Dorta-Afonso *et al.*, 2023; Dorta-Afonso and Romero-Dominguez, 2025; Li *et al.*, 2024). Yet little is known about the discrete and combined effects of these bundles, especially with respect to employee well-being. It is therefore unclear whether different bundles reinforce each other, offset negative impacts, or generate new tensions. Rather than treating HPWS as uniformly beneficial or detrimental, we adopt this nuanced lens to unpack how distinct HR practice bundles generate co-existing benefits and costs for employees. This dual focus allows us to explain why HPWS can simultaneously foster engagement and strain – a paradox that simplistic “beneficial/harmful” frameworks fail to capture. Importantly, our study goes beyond documenting such trade-offs by theorizing them explicitly as manifestations of functional ambivalence, thereby shifting the focus from whether HPWS are beneficial or harmful to how and under what conditions they generate both outcomes simultaneously.

Second, existing research on HPWS and well-being has been dominated by psychology-based frameworks, such as the job demands–resources model and social exchange theory (Guerci *et al.*, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2023; Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020). While valuable, these approaches tend to focus on linear mechanisms and often underplay the possibility that the same organizational practices can generate simultaneously beneficial and adverse effects. To complement these perspectives, we draw on Merton’s (1936, 1976) notion of functional ambivalence and unintended consequences of a purposeful action as a sensitizing theoretical lens. In contrast to dominant frameworks that treat positive and negative outcomes as competing explanations, the ambivalence perspective conceptualizes them as inherently interconnected and co-produced, offering a more integrative explanation of HPWS effects. This framework is particularly suitable because it captures the dual nature of HPWS effects (mutual gains versus conflicting outcomes); helps reconcile seemingly contradictory findings in the literature; emphasizes the role of contextual factors (e.g. power distance, ownership type) in shaping outcomes; and aligns with emerging evidence that HPWS can enhance performance while undermining well-being (Wang *et al.*, 2022; Li *et al.*, 2024). Thus, our theoretical contribution lies not only in applying Merton’s framework to HRM, but in demonstrating its value for explaining the persistence of mixed empirical findings in HPWS research.

Third, most empirical evidence on HPWS has been generated in Western or Asian contexts (Jyoti and Rani, 2019; Guerci *et al.*, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2023; Li *et al.*, 2024), leaving post-socialist and high-power-distance environments relatively underexplored. Russia represents an especially informative setting due to its hybrid institutional environment where Western-inspired HR practices coexist with distinct governance structures and legacies. Importantly, HR practices in Russia vary substantially by organizational ownership, with foreign-owned firms often adopting more formalized and performance-oriented systems, while domestic

firms tend to rely on more hierarchical and informal arrangements. These ownership-related differences may shape how HPWS are implemented and experienced by employees. Still, they remain largely absent from prior research.

Guided by this perspective, our study aims at unpacking the ambivalent effects of HPWS by examining both mediating mechanisms and contextual contingencies. Specifically, we investigate how AMO-based HPWS bundles influence employee work engagement through self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion, and how these relationships are moderated by organizational ownership (domestic versus foreign-owned firms). By combining the AMO framework with an ambivalence-based theoretical perspective, our approach enables a more fine-grained and theoretically grounded explanation of why HPWS generate divergent employee outcomes. This approach allows us to move beyond average effects and toward a more contextualized understanding of HPWS outcomes.

We address the following research questions: (1) *How do ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing HPWS bundles differentially affect Russian employees' psychological well-being in terms of self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and work engagement?*; (2) *To what degree do self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion mediate the relationships between different HPWS bundles and work engagement among R. employees?*; and (3) *How does organizational ownership type moderate the relationship between HPWS bundles and employee outcomes in Russia?*

Using survey data from employees in domestic ($n = 403$) and foreign-owned ($n = 110$) firms in Russia, this study makes three contributions. First, it extends the HPWS literature by demonstrating that the effects of HPWS are bundle-specific and ambivalent, particularly in high-power-distance and hybrid institutional contexts, such as Russia. Second, our study advances understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying HPWS outcomes by jointly examining self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion as mediators. Third, it highlights organizational ownership as an important boundary condition shaping how HPWS with its specific bundles are experienced by employees, thereby reinforcing the need for more context-sensitive theorizing in HRM research. More broadly, we contribute to theory by positioning functional ambivalence as a unifying lens that explains why HPWS simultaneously produce gains and strains, thereby reframing the mutual gains versus conflicting outcomes debate as complementary rather than competing perspectives. Overall, by drawing on [Merton's \(1936, 1976\)](#) notions of functional ambivalence and unintended consequences, our study offers a more nuanced account of why HPWS continue to generate both opportunities and strains for employees.

Theory and conceptual development

Positive effects of HPWS on employee outcomes

Mainstream HRM research emphasizes the *mutual gains perspective*, which posits that well-designed HPWS generate benefits for both organizations and employees ([Han et al., 2020](#); [Ho and Kuvaas, 2020](#)). Empirical studies consistently show HPWS to be positively linked to higher organizational, group, and individual performance ([Guest, 2017](#); [Jyoti and Rani, 2019](#); [Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019](#)), as well as enhanced employee skills, job satisfaction, trust in management, organizational commitment, and decreased quiet quitting and turnover intentions ([Wu and Chaturvedi, 2009](#); [Ogbonnaya and Valizade, 2018](#); [Benítez-Núñez et al., 2024](#); [Agarwal et al., 2025](#)). Some authors extend this logic to employee well-being, suggesting that HPWS can foster work engagement and psychological health by providing employees with valued resources ([Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020](#); [Kloutsiniotis et al., 2021](#); [Günther et al., 2022](#)). More recent work argues that “true” or “eudaimonic” employee well-being stems from fulfilling deeper psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness associated with ability- and opportunity-enhancing HRM ([Messersmith, 2026](#)).

From the *mutual gains perspective*, HPWS are expected to enhance self-efficacy, defined as individuals' belief in their ability to successfully perform work-related tasks ([Bandura, 1986](#)).

By investing in training, participation, and performance feedback, HPWS can strengthen employees' sense of competence and control, which in turn supports motivation and engagement (Guerci *et al.*, 2022). Several studies confirm positive links between HPWS and self-efficacy (Saksida *et al.*, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2020). HPWS have also been shown to reduce stress and emotional exhaustion, a key element of burnout and a state in which individuals feel emotionally overextended and depleted of their emotional and physical resources (Maslach and Leiter, 2016), by increasing access to job resources, clarifying role expectations, and enhancing perceived organizational support (Kilroy *et al.*, 2016, 2017; Jyoti and Rani, 2019; Benítez-Núñez *et al.*, 2024).

Negative effects of HPWS on employee outcomes

In contrast, *critical HRM scholarship* challenges the assumption of interest alignment between employers and employees, arguing that HPWS may generate performance gains at the expense of employee well-being (Ehnröoth and Björkman, 2012; Ramsay *et al.*, 2000). Drawing on labor process theory, this perspective emphasizes that HR practices often serve managerial control objectives by intensifying work, extending effort, and tightening performance monitoring (Loon *et al.*, 2019; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019). Therefore, HPWS may increase workload, job insecurity, role overload, and work–life conflict, thereby contributing to stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and lower job satisfaction (Combs *et al.*, 2006; Jensen *et al.*, 2013; Ho and Kuvaas, 2020).

Although HPWS can provide employees with additional skills and discretion, the critical view posits that these gains are frequently offset and outweighed by increased performance demands embedded in the system (Han *et al.*, 2020; Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020). As a result, the same practices that appear empowering may simultaneously produce work intensification. Nonetheless, empirical evidence of these negative effects remains mixed and sometimes inconsistent across contexts (Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2023), suggesting that the consequences of HPWS are neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative, but contingent on how practices are designed, implemented, and experienced.

HPWS as a multidimensional construct: the AMO framework

One important reason for inconsistent findings lies in the tendency to conceptualize HPWS as a single, synergistic construct, consisting of internally coherent and complementary bundles (Subramony, 2009). In practice, though, organizations often pursue multiple and sometimes conflicting objectives, such as cost reduction and employee development. These tensions are reflected in HR systems that combine practices with diverging logics and consequences (Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019; Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020). To capture this complexity, we adopt the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework, which disaggregates HPWS into analytically distinct practice bundles (Saksida *et al.*, 2017; Jyoti and Rani, 2019). This approach allows for a more fine-grained examination of how different HR practices influence employee well-being through partially independent mechanisms.

Ability-enhancing practices, such as recruitment, training, and career planning, are generally associated with positive employee outcomes. By strengthening human capital, these practices enhance self-efficacy, psychological empowerment, and perceived employability, while mitigating stress and resource loss associated with competence deficits (Ehnröoth and Björkman, 2012; Saksida *et al.*, 2017; Guerci *et al.*, 2022; Agarwal *et al.*, 2025). They also support extra-role behaviors, such as employee voice and proactive problem solving (Mowbray *et al.*, 2021).

Opportunity-enhancing practices, such as involvement in decision-making, information sharing, teamwork, and job autonomy, are similarly linked to favorable well-being outcomes. These practices foster engagement, psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation by enabling employees to exercise discretion and influence over their work (Heffernan and Dundon, 2016;

Liu *et al.*, 2020). By expanding perceived control, opportunity-enhancing practices can generate cycles of psychological resource gain and reduce emotional exhaustion (Castanheira and Chambel, 2010; Guerci *et al.*, 2022).

Motivation-enhancing practices, including performance appraisal, merit-based pay, and promotion, represent the most contested dimension of HPWS. While they may enhance self-efficacy by linking effort and performance and clarifying expectations (Saksida *et al.*, 2017), helping employees cope with stressors and role demands (Jyoti and Rani, 2019; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019). However, they can also intensify competition, pressure, and job insecurity (Jensen *et al.*, 2013; Loon *et al.*, 2019). A further complication is the workforce sorting effect (Shaw, 2014), whereby reliance on external rewards may undermine intrinsic motivation and foster “winner-takes-all” dynamics that erode confidence among lower-performing employees (Guerci *et al.*, 2022). As a result, motivation-enhancing practices are particularly prone to generating ambivalent well-being outcomes. Table 1 summarizes the literature reviewed in this section.

Functional ambivalence and the unintended consequences of HPWS

Most prior research on the dual effects of HPWS has relied on psychology-based frameworks, such as the job demands–resources model, conservation of resources theory, and signaling perspective (Kloutsiniotis *et al.*, 2021; Guerci *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2022; Li *et al.*, 2024). While these approaches offer valuable insights into specific mechanisms, they often struggle to explain why the same practices simultaneously generate beneficial and harmful effects. To complement these perspectives, we draw on Merton’s (1936, 1976) concepts of functional ambivalence and unintended consequences of purposive action as a sensitizing theoretical lens. Merton argued that purposeful actions often produce not only intended outcomes but also unanticipated benefits, drawbacks, or perverse effects. His distinction between manifest and latent functions highlights discrepancies between actors’ intentions and the actual consequences of their actions. Such unintended consequences may arise for several reasons. These include limited knowledge, short-term managerial priorities (what Merton termed the “imperious immediacy of interest”), and deeply embedded normative assumptions that legitimize practices despite their adverse effects.

Applied to HPWS, this framework highlights how HR practices designed to enhance performance operate within complex social systems characterized by competing interests and structural constraints. For example, managers may implement HPWS with the intention of empowering employees and improving efficiency, yet these same practices can simultaneously increase work intensity, role ambiguity, or psychological strain (Guest, 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2023). Other examples include situations when workplace flexibility and diversity programs reinforce gender stereotypes (Williams *et al.*, 2014), health and wellness initiatives fuel discrimination (Powroznik, 2017), or performance management create manipulative and distorted relationships (Franco-Santos and Otley, 2018). Importantly, functional ambivalence does not imply randomness. Rather, it directs attention to the systemic conditions and interpretive processes through which intended and unintended outcomes co-occur.

Several mechanisms help explain these unanticipated outcomes. First, employees’ interpretations of *managerial intent* play a critical role. While HR practices may be intended as supportive, employees can experience them as controlling or exploitative, undermining well-being despite their formal design (Nishii *et al.*, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2024). Ability- and motivation-enhancing practices, for instance, may be experienced by employees as deficit-focused feedback (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012), signaling low value and fostering anxiety, defensive behaviors, or burnout. Second, unintended effects may result from *false managerial assumptions* about employee priorities. While management pursues efficiency and cost reduction, employees may value job security, work-life balance, or health (Benson, 1977). This misalignment can transform well-meaning practices into sources of stress. Third, HPWS

Table 1. Positive and negative effects of HPWS on employee well-being and related outcomes

Study	Journal	Context/Sample	HPWS conceptualization	Positive outcomes	Negative outcomes	Key insight
Agarwal et al. (2025)	<i>Human Resource Management</i>	Indian IT companies	HPWS	Psychological meaningfulness and availability Job satisfaction	Quiet quitting	Psychological meaningfulness and availability explain HPWS – quiet quitting link
Benítez-Núñez et al. (2024)	<i>Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management</i>	Hospitality sector COVID-19 context	HPWS		Hindrance stressors, turnover intentions	Hindrance stressors explain HPWS – employees’ outcomes link
Bos-Nehles et al. (2023)	<i>International Journal of Management Reviews</i>	Review	AMO bundles	Performance, engagement, wellbeing Job satisfaction	Unintended effects	HPWS should be studied as a multidimensional rather than a unitary system
Dorta-Afonso et al. (2023)	<i>International Journal of Hospitality Management</i>	Hospitality sector	HPWS		Burnout	HPWS improve job satisfaction partly because they reduce employee burnout
Dorta-Afonso et al. (2025)	<i>International Journal of Hospitality Management</i>	Hospitality sector	HPWS	Engagement, quality of life	Burnout	HPWS simultaneously create resource gains and strain effects through different pathways
Guerci et al. (2022)	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	European organizations	HR practices	Happiness, relational well-being	Health-related well-being	Different dimensions of well-being may respond differently to HPWS
Guest (2017)	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	Conceptual review	HRM systems	Engagement, satisfaction, and positive work experiences	Work pressure, stress, and work intensification	HRM may generate both positive and negative outcomes simultaneously
Günther et al. (2022)	<i>German Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	German teleworkers, COVID-19 context	Telework-oriented HRM	Job satisfaction, engagement	Psychological strain	Complementary effects of HRM and leadership on employee wellbeing
Han et al. (2025)	<i>Human Resource Development International</i>	Employees in organizational settings	HR practices	Employee well-being and performance	Strain	Employee well-being acts as important mechanism linking HPWS to performance

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Study	Journal	Context/Sample	HPWS conceptualization	Positive outcomes	Negative outcomes	Key insight
Han et al. (2020)	<i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	Conceptual and empirical synthesis	HPWS	Performance, motivation, engagement	Burnout, stress, and work intensification	Negative HPWS effects emerge under specific conditions when job demands outweigh resource gains
Jensen et al. (2013)	<i>Journal of Management</i>	US employees	HPWS	Employee attitudes such as job control and turnover intentions	Anxiety, role overload	Job control conditions HPWS strain effects
Kim et al. (2023)	<i>Human Resource Management</i>	Korean employees	HPWS	Employee resources and work-related attitudes	Mental health strain	Simultaneous resource and demand effects
Kloutsiniotis and Mihail (2020)	<i>European Management Journal</i>	European employees	HPWS	Reduced exhaustion	Increased exhaustion	The impact of HPWS on emotional exhaustion depends on the balance between job demands and job resources
Kloutsiniotis et al. (2021)	<i>Employee Relations</i>	UK employees	HPWS	Engagement	Exhaustion, work pressure	HPWS have a “dark side” where performance gains can coexist with reduced employee well-being
Li et al. (2024)	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	Chinese employees	HR practices	Wellbeing, engagement	Stress	Different HR practices influence well-being through distinct mechanisms and should not be treated as a uniform system
Loon et al. (2019)	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	UK public sector	Wellbeing-oriented HR practices	Employee support, psychological wellbeing	Pressure, cynicism, stress	Organizational well-being initiatives can create paradoxical outcomes and unintended consequences
Ogbonnaya and Messersmith (2019)	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	UK employees	AMO-based HPWS bundles	Engagement, job satisfaction	Work pressure (bundle-specific)	HPWS bundles have differential well-being effects

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Study	Journal	Context/Sample	HPWS conceptualization	Positive outcomes	Negative outcomes	Key insight
Peccei and Van De Voorde (2019)	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	Review	HRM systems	Happiness-related wellbeing and performance	Work intensification, strain	Different dimensions of well-being respond differently to HRM, helping explain mixed findings in the literature
Ramsay et al. (2000)	<i>British Journal of Industrial Relations</i>	UK employees	Performance-oriented HR practices	Productivity	Work intensification, strain	Performance gains from HPWS may result from intensified employee effort rather than employee empowerment
Shaw (2014)	<i>Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior</i>	Review	Performance-based rewards and pay HR system	High-performer retention	Confidence loss among others	Reward systems can motivate some employees while creating adverse consequences for others through workforce sorting effects
Shi et al. (2024)	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	Chinese employees	HPWS	Happiness, performance	Health depletion	Different dimensions of well-being play distinct roles in linking HPWS to employee performance
Van De Voorde et al. (2012)	<i>International Journal of Management Reviews</i>	Review (multiple countries)	HRM systems	Job satisfaction, commitment, happiness-related well-being	Health-related well-being, work intensification	Different dimensions of employee well-being respond differently to HRM, helping explain contradictory findings in the literature
Wang et al. (2022)	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	Chinese employees	HPWS	Lower burnout	Higher burnout	The effects of HPWS on employee well-being are contingent on organizational context, particularly departmental formalization

Source(s): Authors' own work

often embody *inherent contradictions* that generate ambivalent employee responses over time, such as balancing autonomy and control, competitiveness and teamwork, or cost reduction and employee development. Such tensions create inconsistent practices, ambivalent outcomes, and employee attitudes that oscillate between commitment and resistance. Finally, unintended consequences often arise from a *lack of cultural or contextual fit*. As [Merton \(1936\)](#) emphasized, outcomes are shaped by the interplay between actions and environment. HR practices that ignore local societal values risk misinterpretation and resistance. Aligning managerial intentions with cultural context is therefore essential.

To sum up, based on the above, the ambivalent effects of HPWS are not unexpected but predictable outcomes of purposive managerial action in complex employment systems. Rather than resolving the mutual gains versus conflicting outcomes debate, the concept of functional ambivalence helps explain why both perspectives capture important but partial truths. Integrating the AMO framework with Merton's notion of functional ambivalence allows us to theorize HPWS as a multidimensional system that generate co-existing benefits and costs through distinct psychological mechanisms, shaped by organizational and institutional contexts. This approach provides a theoretically grounded basis for examining how HPWS bundles influence employee self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and engagement, and why these effects may vary across organizational ownership structures in Russia.

Hypotheses development

As outlined in the Introduction, our study seeks to unpack the ambivalent effects of HPWS by examining how different HR practice bundles relate to employee well-being through distinct psychological pathways and under varying organizational conditions. Building on the theoretical framework developed above, we formulate hypotheses around three core HPWS bundles – ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing practices—and their relationships with employee self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion, as well as the moderating role of organizational ownership.

The Russian context and HPWS-employee outcome relationships

Context plays a critical role in shaping how HR practices are implemented and experienced ([Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020](#); [Shirokova et al., 2023](#)). Russia provides a theoretically informative setting due to its hybrid institutional environment, in which formal HR systems co-exist with informal practices and structures. Rather than treating the Russian context as socio-culturally and institutionally homogeneous, prior research revealed its ambivalence and hybridity – the simultaneous presence of practices rooted in sociocultural legacies and market-oriented reforms ([Andreeva et al., 2014](#); [Zavyalova et al., 2020](#)).

Contemporary HRM in Russia reflects this hybridity. Merit-based recruitment, training, and performance management increasingly co-exist with informal networks, arbitrary decision-making, and short-term administrative approaches (see [Balabanova et al., 2015, 2018](#)). These institutional features condition how HPWS bundles are enacted and interpreted thereby shaping their psychological consequences for employees ([Zaloznaya and Gerber, 2021](#)). Importantly, ownership differences between domestic and foreign-owned firms introduce additional variation in formalization, transparency, and employee involvement, making Russia a suitable context for examining the contingent and ambivalent effects of HPWS.

Ability-enhancing practices

Ability-enhancing HPWS practices, such as selective recruitment, training, and career development, are designed to strengthen employee competences and align skills with job demands. In the Russian context, these practices remain unevenly implemented, particularly in domestic firms where short-term employment relations and reliance on personal networks can

limit or discourage developmental investment (Balabanova *et al.*, 2016; Zavyalova *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, pressures for innovation and competitiveness have led many organizations, especially foreign-owned firms, to adopt more systematic approaches to employee development (Gurkov, 2014; Latukha and Selivanovskikh, 2016). When effectively implemented, ability-enhancing practices are expected to increase employees' resource gain, perceived competence and control, thereby strengthening self-efficacy and reducing emotional exhaustion by mitigating skill-task mismatches (Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019; Agarwal *et al.*, 2025; Messersmith, 2026). Therefore, we propose the following:

- H1a. Ability-enhancing HPWS practices are positively related to employees' self-efficacy.
- H1b. Ability-enhancing HPWS practices are negatively related to employees' emotional exhaustion.

Motivation-enhancing practices

Motivation-enhancing practices, including performance appraisal, merit-based pay, and promotion, represent the most controversial dimension of HPWS with respect to employee well-being. In Russia, these practices operate in a context characterized by economic volatility, income inequality, and widespread concern for employment and income stability (Anikin, 2017). Although performance-based rewards may signal meritocracy and effort-reward alignment, they can also heighten perceived insecurity, competition, and dependence on managerial discretion. Building on the concept of functional ambivalence, motivation-enhancing practices may simultaneously motivate high performers, while undermining the self-efficacy of average employees through *workforce sorting effects* (Shaw, 2014). Moreover, performance monitoring and variable pay may function as job demands rather than resources, increasing pressure and emotional exhaustion (Loon *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2024). These dynamics are likely to be particularly salient in institutional environments where trust in formal evaluation systems is limited. We therefore hypothesize:

- H2a. Motivation-enhancing HPWS practices are negatively related to employees' self-efficacy.
- H2b. Motivation-enhancing HPWS practices are positively related to employees' emotional exhaustion.

Opportunity-enhancing practices

Opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices, such as employee participation, information sharing, and job autonomy, directly concern the distribution of influence within organizations. In Russia, hierarchical structures and centralized decision-making remain prevalent, particularly in domestic firms, limiting employees' formal opportunities for voice and discretion (Balabanova *et al.*, 2018; Zavyalova *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, competitive pressures and exposure to international management models have increased experimentation with participatory practices, especially in foreign-owned organizations. By expanding employees' perceived control and involvement, opportunity-enhancing practices are expected to strengthen self-efficacy and reduce emotional exhaustion via greater autonomy and psychological safety (Guerci *et al.*, 2022; Messersmith, 2026). Thus, we propose:

- H3a. Opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices are positively related to employees' self-efficacy.
- H3b. Opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices are negatively related to employees' emotional exhaustion.

The mediating effects of self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion

Prior research demonstrates that the relationship between HPWS and employee outcomes is often indirect, operating through psychological mechanisms rather than direct effects alone (Wang *et al.*, 2022; Shi *et al.*, 2024; Singh *et al.*, 2025). Self-efficacy represents a key personal resource that enhances motivation and work engagement, defined as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002, p. 74), while emotional exhaustion reflects depleted coping capacity and is negatively associated with engagement (Leiter and Maslach, 1998; Van de Voorde *et al.*, 2016). We therefore conceptualize self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion as plausible psychological mechanisms through which HPWS bundles may influence employee engagement. Ability- and opportunity-enhancing practices are expected to bolster engagement primarily by strengthening self-efficacy, whereas motivation-enhancing practices may undermine engagement by increasing exhaustion and weakening confidence among some employees. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

- H4. Self-efficacy mediates the relationships between (a) ability-enhancing, (b) motivation-enhancing, and (c) opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices and work engagement.
- H5. Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationships between (a) ability-enhancing, (b) motivation-enhancing, and (c) opportunity-enhancing HPWS practices and work engagement.

The moderating effect of organizational ownership

Finally, we examine organizational ownership as a key contextual moderator. Foreign-owned firms in Russia tend to exhibit higher levels of formalization, transparency, and procedural consistency in HRM, alongside greater investment in employee development and welfare (Balabanova and Edendiev, 2015; Saari and Melin, 2021). These features may buffer the potentially adverse effects of HPWS—especially motivation-enhancing practices—by reducing ambiguity and enhancing perceived fairness. In contrast, domestic firms often rely more heavily on hierarchical control and informal practices, which may amplify the stress and insecurity associated with performance-based incentives (Gurkov, 2016; Balabanova *et al.*, 2018; Saari *et al.*, 2018). Under such conditions, motivation-enhancing HPWS are more likely to reduce self-efficacy and increase emotional exhaustion. We therefore propose:

- H6. Organizational ownership moderates the relationships between motivation-enhancing HPWS and (a) emotional exhaustion and (b) self-efficacy, such that these relationships are stronger in domestic firms than in foreign-owned firms.

The model tested in this study is presented in Figure 1 below.

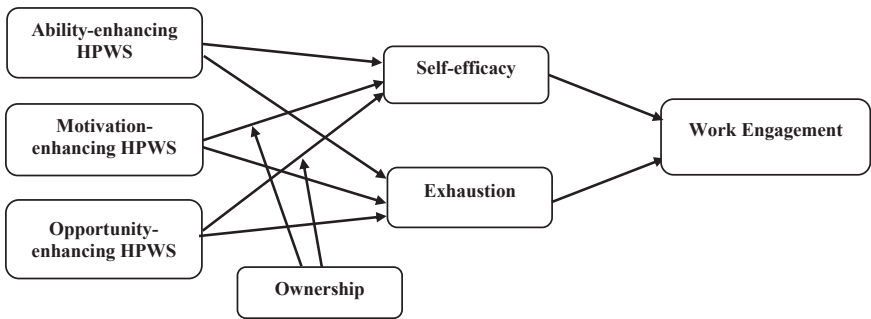


Figure 1. Theoretical model. Source: Authors’ own work

Methodology and research design

The empirical analysis is based on survey data collected in 2014, a period during which many Russian organizations were actively adopting or consolidating HPWS under conditions of economic volatility and institutional transition. This period is theoretically relevant because it captures HPWS implementation in a hybrid HRM environment rather than in mature, standardized systems. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire originally developed in English. The instrument was translated into Russian and then back-translated into English by two professional translators. The back-translated version was carefully reviewed by the authors to identify and resolve any discrepancies. To ensure clarity and contextual appropriateness, the Russian version of the instrument was pretested with five native Russian speakers who were living and working in Russia at the time of data collection.

Data collection

Sample A: Russian employees in domestic organizations. Sample A consists of white-collar employees working in domestic Russian organizations located in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Organizations operated in five industries: food processing, machine building, construction, metals, and finance. The target population comprised non-managerial and lower-level white-collar managerial employees reporting to middle- or senior-level managers working in relatively large organizations (more than 500 employees). Data were collected via a telephone survey administered by a professional data collection agency in Russia. A total of 965 employees were contacted, and we received 403 usable responses from employees working in 232 organizations (response rate around 42%). Respondents received a small standardized financial incentive from the agency. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity was guaranteed. The demographic characteristics of Sample A were as follows: the average age was 36.3 (SD = 9.9), average weekly working hours were 41.3 (SD = 6.0), and 35% were male respondents. Participants were evenly divided between Moscow and St. Petersburg (50% each).

Sample B: Russian employees in foreign-owned organizations. Sample B consists of white-collar employees working in Russian subsidiaries of four Finnish multinational corporations operating in construction, power engineering, finance, and food production. These organizations were also located in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Data were collected via an online survey after obtaining approval from corporate HR departments. A total of 185 employees were invited to participate, and 110 usable responses were obtained (response rate about 59%). The average age of respondents was 36.0 (SD = 9.5), average weekly working hours were 41.7 (SD = 8.6), and 47% of respondents were male.

For analysis, the two samples were combined. Both samples consisted of Russian nationals employed in the same industries and located in the same geographic areas of Russia. The combined sample consisted of 513 respondents working in either domestic or foreign-owned firms.

Measures

All constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). All measurement items are reported in [Appendix 1](#).

Independent variables. HPWS were measured using an adapted and abbreviated version of the scale developed by [Sun et al. \(2007\)](#). Item selection was guided by factor loadings and construct coverage in previous research. To better reflect the Russian context where performance evaluation often relies on managerial judgment, we replaced [Sun et al.’s \(2007\)](#) appraisal items with two items from [Lepak and Snell \(2002\)](#). We also included a measure of pay level, consistent with extant HPWS research (e.g. [Lepak and Snell, 2002](#)).

Following [Jiang et al. \(2012\)](#), we constructed three HPWS bundles: *ability-enhancing practices* comprising selection (three items) and training (two items); *motivation-enhancing practices* consisting of remuneration (three items), performance evaluation (three items), and

job security (two items); and *opportunity-enhancing practices* comprising participation (two items) and job design (six items). Cronbach’s alphas were 0.82, 0.81 and 0.86, respectively, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Mediating variables. *Self-efficacy* was measured using four best loading items from [Riggs and Knight \(1994\)](#) ($\alpha = 0.79$). *Emotional exhaustion* was measured using three best-loading items from [Maslach and Jackson’s \(1981\)](#) original scale. The item “I feel burned out from my work” was excluded to avoid potential misunderstanding of the term “burnout” among respondents unfamiliar with the concept at the time of data collection ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Moderating variable. *Ownership* was operationalized as a dummy variable coded 0 for domestic, Russian-owned organizations and 1 for foreign-owned firms (Russian subsidiaries of multinational corporations).

Dependent variable. *Work engagement* was measured using the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; [Schaufeli et al., 2006](#)), capturing vigor, dedication, and absorption (three items each) ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Control variables. We controlled for *gender* (a dummy, 0 = female and 1 = male), *age* and *organizational tenure* (measured by interval scales), *hierarchical position* (a dummy, 0 = non-supervisory and 1 = supervisory), and *average weekly working hours* (in hours).

Validation and analysis

We assessed the measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis. The model demonstrated acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 1477.580$, $df = 533$, $RMSEA = 0.059$, $CFI = 0.897$). All constructs exhibited Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability values above 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability. Although the average variance extracted (AVE) for three constructs was below the conventional 0.50 threshold, all AVE values exceeded 0.40, and composite reliability values were well above 0.60. According to established methodological guidelines, AVE values below 0.50 may be considered acceptable when composite reliability is adequate and discriminant validity is supported ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)). Discriminant validity was further confirmed, as squared inter-construct correlations were lower than the corresponding AVE values (see [Table 2](#)).

To assess potential common method variance (CMV), we employed the unmeasured latent method construct (ULMC) approach ([Williams et al., 1989](#)). The ULMC model exhibited slightly improved fit compared to the baseline measurement model ($\chi^2 = 1459.02$, $df = 532$, $RMSEA = 0.059$, $CFI = 0.899$). The latent method factor accounted for approximately 9% of the total variance, well below the commonly cited 25% threshold. We acknowledge the limitations of post hoc statistical remedies for CMV detection ([Antonakis et al., 2010](#)). However, recent methodological evidence suggests that CMV is unlikely to constitute a serious threat to validity in most organizational research contexts ([Bozionelos and Simmering, 2022](#)). We therefore conclude that CMV is unlikely to materially bias our findings, while returning to this issue in the Limitations section.

Table 2. Constructs used in the study

Construct	Alpha	CR	AVE
Ability HPWS	0.82	0.828	0.509
Motivation HPWS	0.81	0.813	0.425
Opportunity HPWS	0.86	0.851	0.426
Self-efficacy	0.79	0.802	0.505
Emotional exhaustion	0.87	0.856	0.665
Work engagement	0.89	0.891	0.479
Source(s): Authors’ own work			

Empirical results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability estimates for all variables are reported in Table 3. Inspection of the correlation matrix and variance inflation factors (VIF) indicated no concerns regarding multicollinearity. The hypothesized six-factor structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 2026.04$, $df = 742$, $CFI = 0.871$, $RMSEA = 0.058$). Structural model estimates are presented in Table 4.

Among the control variables, hierarchical position was positively associated with emotional exhaustion ($b = 0.126$, $p = 0.014$), indicating that employees with supervisory responsibilities reported higher levels of exhaustion than non-supervisory employees. Organizational tenure was positively related to self-efficacy ($b = 0.208$, $p = 0.001$) and negatively related to emotional exhaustion ($b = -0.119$, $p = 0.038$). At the same time, tenure was negatively associated with work engagement ($b = -0.138$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that longer-tenured employees felt more capable and less exhausted, but also less engaged in their work.

Direct effects of HPWS bundles

Consistent with Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we found that *ability-enhancing HPWS* is negatively associated with *emotional exhaustion* ($b = -0.320$; $p = 0.001$) and positively with *self-efficacy* ($b = 0.246$; $p = 0.001$). The same was also true for *opportunity-enhancing HPWS* (*emotional exhaustion*: $b = -0.270$; $p = 0.001$; *self-efficacy*: $b = 0.395$; $p = 0.001$), thus providing support for Hypotheses 3a and 3b. In contrast, and in line with Hypotheses 2a and 2b, *motivation-enhancing HPWS* was found to be positively associated with *emotional exhaustion* ($b = 0.230$; $p = 0.011$) and negatively with *self-efficacy* ($b = -0.244$; $p = 0.008$). These results indicate that motivation-enhancing practices are linked to less favorable psychological outcomes for employees in the Russian context. All three HPWS bundles were positively associated with *work engagement* (*ability*: $b = 0.247$; $p = 0.001$; *motivation*: $b = 0.284$; $p = 0.001$; *opportunity*: $b = 0.138$; $p = 0.022$). These findings indicate that HPWS can simultaneously increase employee engagement and psychological strain, consistent with the notion of functional ambivalence.

Mediation analysis

The mediation analysis revealed significant indirect pathways between all HPWS bundles and work engagement. *Ability-enhancing practices* influenced work engagement indirectly through both *emotional exhaustion* (indirect: $b = 0.042$; $p = 0.001$) and *self-efficacy* (indirect: $b = 0.050$; $p = 0.004$), consistent with complementary mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). A similar pattern emerged for the relationship between *opportunity-enhancing HPWS* and *work engagement* as it was mediated by both *emotional exhaustion* (indirect: $b = 0.042$; $p = 0.001$) and *self-efficacy* (indirect: $b = 0.096$; $p = 0.001$), also indicating complementary mediation. By contrast, *motivation-enhancing practices* showed competitive mediation: *emotional exhaustion* (indirect: $b = -0.032$; $p = 0.018$) and *self-efficacy* (indirect: $b = -0.053$; $p = 0.009$). These results suggest that although motivation-enhancing practices are positively related to engagement overall, they are simultaneously associated with psychological processes that may undermine engagement for some employees.

Moderation by organizational ownership

The moderation analysis showed that *organizational ownership* is significantly and negatively associated with *self-efficacy* ($b = -0.112$; $p = 0.034$) and marginally negatively with *emotional exhaustion* ($b = -0.088$; $p = 0.093$), indicating baseline differences between employees in domestic and foreign-owned firms. The interaction term *ownership X motivation HR* significantly moderated the relationship between *motivation-enhancing bundle* and *self-efficacy* ($b = 0.111$; $p = 0.024$), supporting Hypothesis 6b. As illustrated in Figure 2, the

Table 3. Correlation table

	Correlations		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	Mean	SD												
1. Gender (female = 0)	0.37	0.484	–											
2. Age (in years)	36.13	9.765	0.071	–										
3. Tenure (in years)	4.73	4.892	–0.014	0.579**	–									
4. Working hours	41.41	6.653	0.166**	0.021	–0.021	–								
5. Position (non- supervisory = 0)	0.42	0.493	0.174**	0.274**	0.133**	0.077	–							
6. AMO Ability	3.719	0.898	0.017	0.146**	0.121**	–0.062	0.097*	(0.82)						
7. AMO Motivation	3.479	0.787	0.109*	0.133**	0.028	0.025	0.142**	0.612**	(0.81)					
8. AMO Opportunity	3.573	0.863	0.189**	0.236**	0.157**	0.066	0.290**	0.321**	0.491**	(0.86)				
9. Ownership	–	–	0.106*	–0.037	–0.159**	0.023	–0.190**	0.043	0.127**	0.155**	–			
10. Self-efficacy	4.394	0.567	0.032	0.163**	0.250**	0.005	0.117**	0.192**	0.140**	0.274**	–0.091*	(0.79)		
11. Emotional Exhaustion	2.316	1.105	–0.058	–0.029	–0.100*	–0.001	0.066	–0.155**	–0.099*	–0.178**	–0.115**	–0.267**	(0.87)	
12. Work Engagement	3.800	0.712	0.054	0.078	0.023	0.044	0.106*	0.468**	0.509**	0.443**	0.133**	0.389**	–0.307**	(0.89)

Note(s): $N = 513$; **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Alphas in parentheses on the diagonal axis

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 4. SEM results

Controls (only significant ones)	Direct effects		Indirect effects [bootstrap, 95% CI]		Total effects	
	Std. est	p-level	Std. est	p-level	Std. est	p-level
Hierarchical position → Emotional exhaustion	0.126	0.014				
Organizational tenure → Emotional exhaustion	−0.119	0.038				
Organizational tenure → Self-efficacy	0.208	<0.001				
Organizational tenure → Work engagement	−0.138	0.002				
<i>Main relationships</i>						
Ownership → Emotional exhaustion	−0.088	0.093				
Ownership → Self-efficacy	−0.112	0.034				
Ability HR → Emotional exhaustion	−0.320	<0.001				
Motivation HR → Emotional exhaustion	0.230	0.011				
Opportunity HR → Emotional exhaustion	−0.270	<0.001				
Ability HR → Self-efficacy	0.246	0.001				
Motivation HR → Self-efficacy	−0.244	0.008				
Opportunity HR → Self-efficacy	0.395	<0.001				
Ability HR → Work engagement	0.247	<0.001				
Motivation HR → Work engagement	0.284	<0.001				
Opportunity HR → Work engagement	0.138	0.022				
<i>Moderation relationships</i>						
Ownership X Motivation HR → Emotional exhaustion	−0.074	0.128				
Ownership X Motivation HR → Self-efficacy	0.111	0.024				
<i>Mediation relationships</i>						
Ability HR → Emotional exhaustion → Work engagement	0.247	<0.001	0.042	0.001	0.222	0.001
Ability HR → Self-efficacy → Work engagement	0.247	<0.001	0.050	0.004	0.230	0.001
Motivation HR → Emotional exhaustion → Work engagement	0.284	<0.001	−0.032	0.018	0.186	0.002
Motivation HR → Self-efficacy → Work engagement	0.284	<0.001	−0.053	0.009	0.165	0.010
Opportunity HR → Emotional exhaustion → Work engagement	0.138	0.022	0.042	0.001	0.161	0.005
Opportunity HR → Self-efficacy → Work engagement	0.138	0.022	0.096	0.001	0.215	0.001
Note(s): <i>N</i> = 513; Explained variance (<i>R</i> -squares): Emotional exhaustion = 15%; Self-efficacy = 23%; Work engagement = 53%; CI – confidence interval						
Source(s): Authors' own work						

negative association between motivation-enhancing practices and self-efficacy was stronger in domestic firms than in foreign-owned firms. The moderation of the relationship between *motivation-enhancing bundle* and *emotional exhaustion* was non-significant ($b = -0.074$; $p = 0.128$), leading to a rejection of [Hypothesis 6a](#). This means that our analysis supported all hypothesized relationships except for the moderating effect of ownership on the relationship between motivation-enhancing HPWS practices and emotional exhaustion ([Hypothesis 6a](#)).

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

Our study makes several contributions to the literature on HPWS by refining existing debates on their effects on employee well-being and by highlighting the importance of HPWS

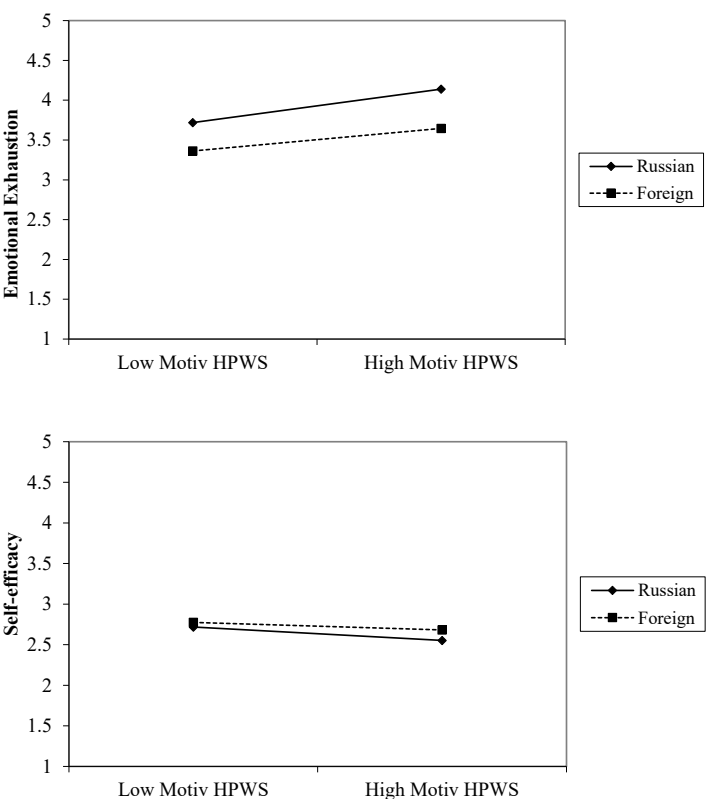


Figure 2. The moderation effect of ownership on the relationship between motivation HPWS and emotional exhaustion and motivation HPWS and self-efficacy. source: Authors’ own work

multidimensionality and contextual influences. Rather than portraying HPWS as either beneficial or harmful, our findings reveal a more nuanced pattern in which different HR practice bundles generate distinct psychological outcomes.

First, our analysis contributes to the ongoing debate between the *mutual gains* and *conflicting outcomes* perspectives on HPWS (Han et al., 2020, 2025; Kim et al., 2023; Kloutsiniotis et al., 2021), by showing that both perspectives capture partial aspects of the same phenomenon. While the combined effect of all three HPWS bundles (ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing) is associated with higher employee work engagement, individual bundles exhibit divergent relationships with employee self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion. Specifically, we find that motivation-enhancing practices are associated with higher engagement but also with lower self-efficacy and higher exhaustion, whereas ability- and opportunity-enhancing practices demonstrate more consistent positive links to employee well-being. These findings underscore the importance of conceptualizing HPWS as a multidimensional system, in which different practices operate through distinct psychological pathways and may generate trade-offs rather than only benefits. This finding challenges assumptions of strong internal synergy within HPWS (Combs et al., 2006; Subramony, 2009; Jiang et al., 2012) and aligns with emerging work emphasizing paradoxical and conflicting outcomes (Han et al., 2020; Guerci et al., 2022; Kloutsiniotis et al., 2021). Instead of suggesting that HPWS deliver mutual gains, our analysis indicates that positive outcomes depend on how different bundles are combined and balanced, and on the organizational context in which they are implemented.

Second, our study contributes theoretically by using [Merton's \(1936, 1976\)](#) concepts of *functional ambivalence* and *unintended consequences* as a sensitizing lens to interpret these mixed patterns. These concepts help explain why HPWS, which are designed to enhance performance and motivation, can simultaneously produce intended benefits (e.g. performance enhancement) and unintended costs (e.g. reduced self-efficacy, increased exhaustion) (see [Bos-Nehles et al., 2023](#); [Dorta-Afonso et al., 2023](#); [Dorta-Afonso and Romero-Dominguez, 2025](#)). For example, motivation-enhancing practices may stimulate engagement while also intensifying pressure, monitoring, and competition, thereby undermining self-efficacy and increasing exhaustion. Although drawing on these concepts does not resolve tensions between competing perspectives, it helps clarify why such tensions persist, even when HR practices are implemented with positive intentions. The contrasting effects of the motivation-enhancing bundle reflect broader tensions within HRM, such as short-term performance pressure versus long-term employee development and external incentives versus intrinsic motivation. Ability- and opportunity-enhancing practices tend to support long-term employee development and social exchange, whereas motivation-enhancing practices emphasize immediate results and short-term gains. Overreliance on motivation-enhancing practices may illustrate what Merton termed as the “imperious immediacy of interest,” whereby short-term objectives overshadow longer-term consequences for employee well-being.

Third, our study extends research on HPWS to the high-power-distance and institutionally-hybrid context of Russia, which remains underrepresented in the literature (see [Ehrnrooth et al., 2023a, b](#); [Latukha et al., 2020](#)). We find that Russian employees respond positively to ability- and opportunity-enhancing practices, despite their uneven implementation in domestic organizations. Investments in selection and training, skills development, and participation appear to increase self-efficacy and engagement as well as reduce exhaustion, thus suggesting that employees value meritocratic and empowering practices even in contexts characterized by hierarchical relations and informal arrangements. These results support the view that limited participation in Russian organizations reflects organizational practices rather than employee preferences, highlighting unrealized potential for opportunity-enhancing HR practices.

Finally, the moderation results underscore the importance of organizational ownership as a boundary condition. Our analysis shows that the negative association between motivation-enhancing practices and self-efficacy is stronger in domestic firms than in foreign-owned organizations, suggesting that more formalized, transparent HR systems may buffer some of the psychological costs associated with performance-based incentives. This finding reinforces calls for greater attention to organizational-level context in HPWS research and contributes to emerging work on hybrid HRM systems (e.g. [Bos-Nehles et al., 2023](#); [Ge and Zhao, 2020](#); [Liu et al., 2020](#)).

Practical implications

Our findings offer several implications for HR managers and organizational leaders seeking to optimize the balance between performance enhancement and employee well-being through HPWS. In general, our results suggest that the composition and balance of HPWS bundles matter.

Ability- and opportunity-enhancing practices appear to provide more stable benefits for employee well-being by strengthening skills, autonomy, and perceived control. For ability-enhancing practices, it is crucial to combine training initiatives with support for employees' self-esteem and to avoid overloading them with excessive demands. This helps translate investments in employee development into sustainable gains in competence and well-being. With regards to opportunity-enhancing practices, managers should prioritize the clear articulation of career paths and reduce uncertainty for employees. Providing transparent opportunities for growth and development fosters a sense of control and predictability, which in turn strengthens engagement and reduces stress.

Motivation-enhancing practices require particular attention. Although they are associated with higher engagement, they are also linked to increased exhaustion and lower self-efficacy, especially in less formalized organizational settings. Managers can mitigate these risks by using motivation-focused incentives in moderation and combining them with the aforementioned ability- and opportunity-enhancing practices. This would leverage developmental benefits while avoiding excessive pressure. We recommend emphasizing transparency in performance evaluation, ensuring stability in base pay, and regularly monitoring employee strain. Whenever possible, it is better to link performance bonuses to team outcomes rather than just individual results to reduce competitive strain. Integrating HPWS with supportive well-being initiatives may also help offset unintended consequences. Finally, supportive leadership is essential. Leaders who provide psychological safety, regular feedback, recognition, and opportunities for recovery can help mitigate the emotional demands associated with HPWS.

Additionally, our analysis highlights the relevance of ownership-specific strategies: foreign-owned firms in Russia may leverage their formalized HR processes to mitigate the negative effects of motivation-focused practices, while domestic firms should prioritize increasing transparency and reducing reliance on informal networks to enhance the efficacy of ability- and opportunity-enhancing bundles.

In summary, by linking theoretical insights with practical recommendations, our analysis offers guidance to organizations in developing more sustainable and balanced HR strategies. Our findings underscore that optimizing HPWS outcomes requires not only selecting an appropriate mix of practices but also continuously adapting them to the organizational context and proactively managing their unintended consequences.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single national context, which limits generalizability. Future research could examine whether similar results can be found in other post-socialist or high-power-distance contexts. Second, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference because all variables were measured at one point in time. Consequently, we cannot establish temporal ordering or fully rule out unmeasured confounding variables. As a result, our findings reflect associations rather than definitive causal relationships. To strengthen causal inference, future research should adopt multi-wave longitudinal or experimental designs. Third, HPWS bundles were measured using employee perceptions, which is common in most prior research, but could be complemented by objective or multi-source data in future studies. Finally, the data were collected in 2014. While the political environment has since shifted, key features of employment relations in Russia remained relatively stable. Nevertheless, future research should verify these relationships under evolving economic, social and political conditions.

Conclusion

This study advances understanding of HPWS by examining their ambivalent effects on employee well-being in the Russian context. Our findings show that while HPWS bundles in general are positively associated with work engagement, they operate through different and sometimes opposing psychological mechanisms. Motivation-enhancing practices, specifically, are associated with both higher engagement and increased strain, whereas ability- and opportunity-enhancing practices show more consistently positive associations with well-being. These results reinforce the view that HPWS cannot be adequately understood through unidirectional frameworks, as their effects inherently involve simultaneous resource gains and strains.

By applying Merton's concept of functional ambivalence, we offer a nuanced interpretation of these findings, emphasizing that HPWS are purposive managerial interventions that may

produce both intended benefits and unintended costs depending on how they are configured and contextualized. Importantly, our use of the ambivalence perspective goes beyond describing mixed outcomes. It provides a theoretical explanation for why such outcomes systematically co-occur, rather than treating them as inconsistent or contradictory findings. Our study highlights why HPWS continue to generate mixed outcomes and why balance, context, and ongoing adjustment are critical. In doing so, we reframe the mutual gains and conflicting outcomes perspectives as complementary lenses capturing different facets of the same underlying phenomenon.

Overall, our findings robustly support the ambivalence perspective on HPWS, demonstrating that different HR practice bundles trigger distinct psychological mechanisms (self-efficacy vs. exhaustion). These mechanisms jointly produce co-existing positive and negative outcomes for employee well-being while contextual factors (ownership) critically shape the balance between resource gain and loss. This highlights the value of combining the AMO framework with an ambivalence perspective to better capture the complexity of HRM systems in practice.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for context-sensitive and balanced HR strategies that account for both performance goals and employee well-being. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes by positioning functional ambivalence as a unifying framework for understanding HPWS outcomes, thereby offering a more integrative and realistic account of HRM effects than existing linear models. By integrating sociological theory with empirical evidence from a non-Western setting, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of HPWS. This perspective acknowledges both the benefits of HPWS and their inherent tensions and risks.

In conclusion, optimizing HPWS requires organizations to strike a careful balance between performance objectives and employee well-being. This can be achieved by combining ability- and opportunity-enhancing practices with a moderate use of motivation-focused incentives and by emphasizing team-based rather than purely individual rewards to reduce excessive competition. Organizations should also support employee well-being through recovery opportunities, open communication, and leadership that fosters psychological safety and mutual trust. Finally, HPWS should be adapted to the organizational context, for example, by leveraging formalized HR processes in foreign-owned firms and increasing transparency in domestic organizations. By proactively managing the ambivalent effects of HPWS, organizations can enhance performance while safeguarding employee well-being.

Appendix

Measurement scales

High-Performance Work System (based on [Lepak and Snell, 2002](#); [Sun et al., 2007](#))

- (1) Great effort is taken to select the right person for jobs in this company (selection).
- (2) In this company, considerable importance is placed on the staffing process (selection).
- (3) Long-term employee potential is emphasized in the (employee) selection process in this company (selection).
- (4) In this company I am provided with extensive training programs (training).
- (5) In this company I generally go through training programs every few years (training).
- (6) I receive bonuses based on the profit of the company (remuneration).
- (7) In this company there is a close tie or matching of my pay to my individual and/or my group's performance (remuneration).

- (8) In this company salaries for employees in my position are higher than those of our competitors (remuneration).
- (9) In this company my performance evaluation assesses the quality of my output (performance evaluation).
- (10) In this company my performance evaluation assesses the quantity of my output (performance evaluation).
- (11) In this company my performance evaluation includes developmental feedback (performance evaluation).
- (12) I can most probably stay with this company for as long as I wish (job security).
- (13) Job security is almost guaranteed to me in this company (job security).
- (14) In this company I am often asked by my supervisor to participate in decisions (participation).
- (15) In this company I am allowed to make decisions (participation).
- (16) I set my own pace of work (job design).
- (17) I decide on the order in which I do things (job design).
- (18) I decide when to start/finish a piece of work (job design).
- (19) I decide how to go about getting my job done (job design).
- (20) I choose the methods to use in carrying out my work (job design).
- (21) I can vary how I do my work (job design).

Self-efficacy ([Riggs and Knight, 1994](#))

- (1) I have confidence in my ability to do my job.
- (2) I have all the skills needed to perform my job very well.
- (3) I am an expert at my job.
- (4) I am very proud of my job skills and abilities.

Emotional exhaustion [Maslach and Jackson \(1981\)](#)

- (1) I feel emotionally drained from my work.
- (2) I feel used up at the end of the workday.
- (3) I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.

Work engagement ([Schaufeli et al., 2006](#))

- (1) At my work, I feel bursting with energy.
- (2) At my work, I feel strong and vigorous.
- (3) When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.
- (4) I am enthusiastic about my job.
- (5) My job inspires me.
- (6) I am proud of the work that I do.
- (7) I feel happy when I am working intensely.
- (8) I am immersed in my work.
- (9) I get carried away when I am working.

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