

# Sustained Competitive Advantage: Building Work Culture through Strategic HRM in Indian Firms

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**Abstract:** *It is known that providing quality products or services for a long period to maintain sustained competitive advantage (SCA) with the fellow firms in the market is quite a challenging task for the employer. In this paper, we examine one of the tangible resources namely Human Resources (HR) which is considered as internal sources, from strategic perspective and how it could be playing an important role to build a work culture in order to achieve SCA in Indian firms. We focused BWC with only two empirical dimensions of potential source for achieving SCA namely (i) unique value, (ii) sustainable. The study undoubtedly concluded that the firm's performance is a function of the potential return to influence strong culture into the firms. Hence, SHRM practices were highly influential factors in promoting better work culture, which surely helps to maintain SCA in the competitive market of Indian firms.*

**Keywords:** Sustained competitive advantage, work culture, strategic HRM, Indian firms

## 1. Introduction

Due to rapid growth of economic changes in the global market, organizational competitiveness has become an important factor in the strategic management literature that explains an organization's success. In addition to this, close to twentieth century, management has come to accept that people not products, markets, cash, buildings, or equipment are the critical differentiators of a business enterprise. All the assets of an organization other than people are inert. They are passive resources that require human interventions to generate value in terms of firms' success for the long period. Similarly, Greer (2001) suggested that the success of companies in the present competitive environment largely depends upon the caliber of their human resources and innovative employee management programs and practices, it includes both soft skills and ability to manage work task by the employees. Thus, one of the most critical factors that can help the firm to seek better performance through effective management of its people is the implementation of HRM practices (Porter, 1985). The resource based view suggests that human resource systems can contribute to sustained competitive advantage through facilitating the development of competencies that are firm specific (Lado, Augustine, Wilson, and Mary, 1994) that is the organizations are having well determined vision to keep its value and products & services with the fellow competitive organizations. It can be achievable by highly motivated employers. All of the firms constantly make an effort to attract its own stake holders by providing quality products or services with the fellow firms in the competitive market. However, we are not only focused on linking strategic HRM practices with SCA variables; but we are also concerned on how the work cultural variables are influenced by HRM practices. Also, we are curious to find out the relationship between sub-elements of internal cultural variables (i.e. shared vision, flexible work environment and reinforcement) in order to achieve SCA in Indian firms.

## 2. Review of Literature

Strategic HRM systems playing a significant role in creating success for an organization is not new. Scholars in the field of strategic human resource management focus specifically on the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable the firm to achieve its goals (Wright and McMahan, 1992). However, we know that one of the most important and broad based challenge currently facing the organization is, adopt people who are different (Robbins, Judge, and Sanghi, 2009). In India, the employees of any given company come from different parts of the country. They speak different languages, and differ in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, etc. However, this disparity might bring disharmony among the employees. So, we aimed to use another variable from cultural perspective variable as we have stated in the introduction. This part of the article provides few empirical works of the past and relevant studies;

- Strategy and strategic human resource management
- Building work culture
- Sustained competitive advantage

### Strategy and Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)

Strategy, as stated by Johnson and Scholes (1993), gives the direction and scope of an organization over the longer term ideally matches its resources to its changing environment. Mintzberg et al., (1988) mentioned strategy possess a number of meanings, namely: (i) a plan, or something equivalent - a direction, a guide, a course of action (ii) a pattern - consistency in behavior over time (iii) a perspective - an organization's fundamental way of doing things (iv) a ploy - a specific 'maneuver' intended to outwit an opponent or a competitor. Though HRM and SHRM come under the same category, these can retain few similarities and differences in terms of activities, process and functions as stated by Boxall and Purcell (2008). They defined HRM as 'all activities associated with the management of people in

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the firms. These activities are commonly referred to as HR practices (e.g. recruitment and selection, employee training and involvement) and are designed to create added value to the firms. But, Strategic HRM is designing or redesigning the practices, structure, system and process to manage human resource by adopting a specific or collective strategy in the view of long-term outcome or competitiveness of the firms. Barney (1991) specified in his study that human resources may be seen as a source of SCA. From the literature survey, in this article, we attempted to link few HRM practices (i.e. staffing, employee separations, learning and development, performance appraisal and compensation) from the strategic perspective with the outcome variables of SCA.

### **Building Work Culture (BWC)**

Managing human resources in the organization requires understanding of the influence of both internal and external environments of the organization. The internal environment refers to internal work culture, whereas, external environment refers to enterprise culture. Kanungo and his associates mentioned that both internal and external environment affect work culture (Kanungo and Jaeger, 1990; Mendonca and Kanungo, 1994). Work culture can (i) help attain a shared vision and goal congruence amongst employees to meet organizational goals (ii) empower employees to be flexible and achieve organizational goals (Pascale, 1985) and (iii) energize the employees of an organization (Wilkins and Ouchi, 1983). These studies stressed upon three core factors as internal cultures, namely (a) shared vision (b) flexible work environment and (c) reinforcement.

### **Shared Vision**

Vision is an important element for strategy implementation and change in the firm success (Doz and Prahalad, 1987; Hunt, 1991). Despite its seeming importance, vision is still not defined in a generally agreed upon manner and statistically based empirical research on the phenomenon may be held back by the various ways in which vision has been treated. Hunt, (1991) specified that vision is a form of leadership (Sashkin, 1988) in which a 'visionary leader' revises an organizational culture to understand, accept and carry forward his or her plans for the organization. Vision may also represent a pattern of organizational values that underlies a unique visionary pattern for an organization's future (Green-wood and Hinings, 1993). Creating a shared vision with all of the employees is a critical first step in the organization (Senn and Childress, 1999). A shared vision reduces resistance to change and enables all employees to contribute towards the success of the firms in the long period.

### **Flexible work environment**

When flexible work environment is considered normal in the workplace it becomes much easier to negotiate and implement flexible work arrangements. McMahan and Pocock (2011) pointed out that flexible work environment arises from the top: from the board, the CEO and the senior managers of the firm. Mainstreaming flexible work helps

minimize negative responses from colleagues and if flexible work options are available to all the employees in the firm rather than a select few, there is less opportunity for resentment. Moreover, workplace flexibility is seen as key to attracting and retaining employees across all generations (Ranstad, 2011). Further, DCA (2010) stressed upon flexibility at work place. In Australia, the age group of 18-24 years was significantly more likely to consider resigning due to lack of flexibility (14% strongly agreed vs. 7% average across all age groups). Another study conducted by Boston College Center for Work & Family of six large companies found that 70% of managers and 87% of employees reported that working a flexible arrangement had a positive or very positive impact on productivity; 65% and 87% reported flexible work arrangement had a positive or very positive impact on the quality of work.

### **Reinforcement**

Even though the operant theoretical foundation for the application of behavioral analysis or behavior modification was established in the 1950s (Rogers and Skinner, 1956), it has been observed that the basic reinforcement paradigm is applied in the area of organizational behavior and HRM (Adam and Scott, 1971; Luthans and White, 1971). According to Afifi, Anderson and Guerrero (2007) positive reinforcement rewards individuals and groups of individuals for good action. So, building bridges between reinforcement and sustained competitive advantage could possibly add strength to the organization from strategic HR perspective. As keeping in mind of Kanungo and Hartwick's (1987) work, we were inspired by internal factors of BWC which has three sub-cultures like shared vision, flexible work environment and reinforcement. We attempted to examine how the subcultures shape up by the strategic HRM practices and we also tried to find relationship between subcultures of BWC domains in order to achieve SCA.

### **Sustained competitive advantage (SCA)**

Though the idea of SCA surfaced in 1984, the actual term 'SCA' emerged in 1985, when Porter discussed the basic types of competitive strategies firms can possess (low-cost or differentiation) to achieve SCA. Every organization might have two types of competitive advantages such as comparative advantage and differential advantage. Comparative advantage or cost advantage is a firm's ability to produce goods or services at a lower cost than its competitors which gives the firm the ability to sell its products or services at a price than that of its competitors or to generate a larger margin on sales. A differential advantage is created when a firm's products or services differ from its competitors and are seen as better than a competitor's products or services by the customers. SCA is distinct from the concept of CA. Within the resource based view, SCA exists only when other firms are incapable of duplicating the benefits of a CA (Lippman and Rumelt, 1982). Resource-Based View argued that a firm has the ability to achieve and maintain SCA if it possess resources that are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and non-substitutable (Barney 1991). Therefore, the present article deals with human resources as strategic perspective how it could be a platform for building

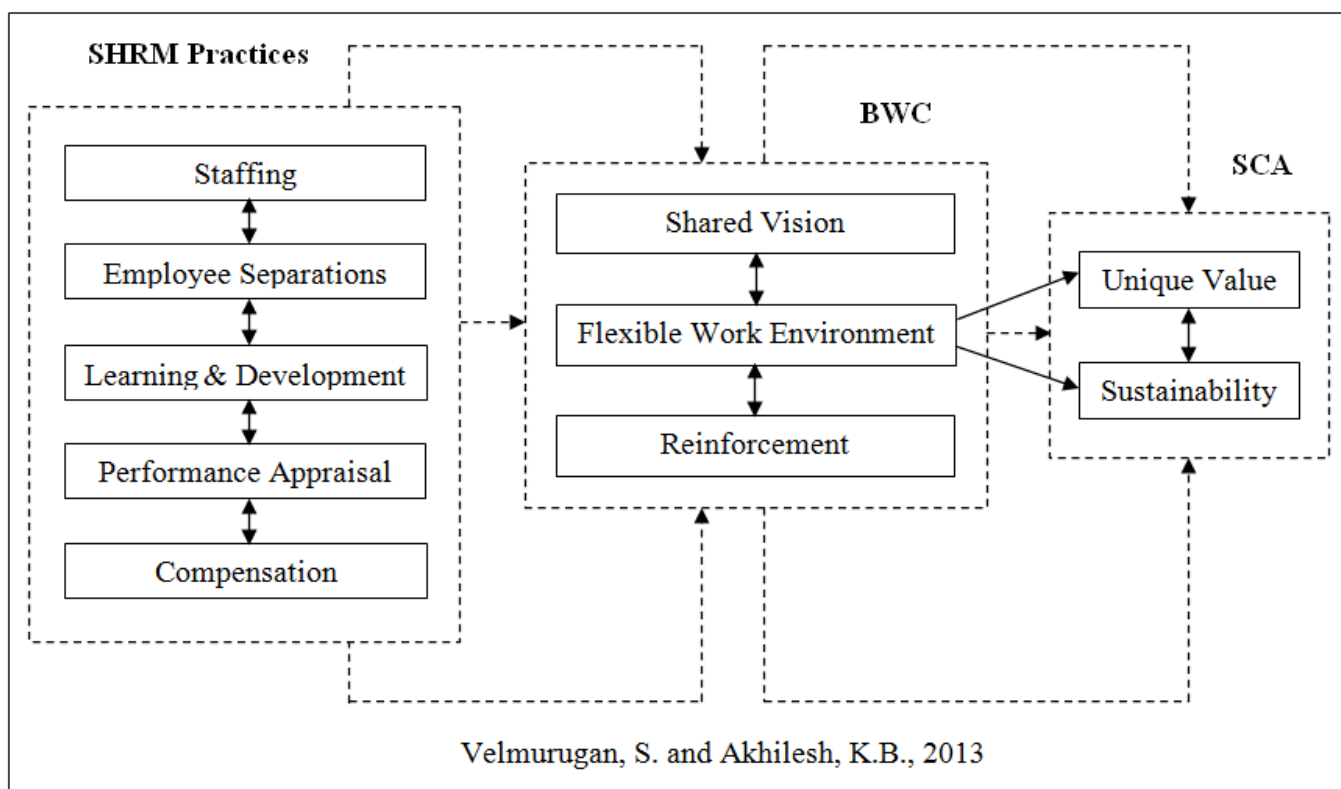
work culture among the employees who could really contribute to achieve SCA in Indian Firms.

**Problem Formulation**

This paper examined sustained competitive advantage from resource based view of strategic human resource practices and how it influenced by building work culture among workforce in Indian organizations. The literature stated that there are five variables of SCA, but the present work came with the result of only two potential variables of SCA which gets influenced by the methods adopted.

**Conceptual model**

This part of the article explains through schematic diagram, how building work culture into the work force by implementing strategic HRM practices helps to achieve sustained competitive advantage in Indian firms. Based on existing literature, we have chosen few HR practices from strategic perspective and we have also considered few variables from firms’ cultural context that is BWC. As mentioned in the methods and materials, we have collected data from HRM professionals from Indian firms and we were curious to examine the relationships between Strategic HRM practices, BWC and SCA. We have also applied the appropriate statistical method and the data driven conceptual model (n=90) as depicted in fig. 1 as follows;



**Figure 1:** Model for building work culture through SHRM to achieve SCA

**3. Methods and Materials**

The article focuses on examining HRM practices from strategic perspective and how it could be a better platform for BWC among the employees who are the real contributors to achieve SCA in the firms. It also attempts to find causal relationship between BWC and SCA. We were very keen in adapting strategy to handle methodological issues in the study.

**Research Design Strategy**

We adopted descriptive research design for the study because this approach is mostly directed towards identifying and explaining various characteristics of the research problem. The universe of the study includes a minimum of 100 employees and above in the firms. The respondents were human resource personnel working at different levels (i.e.

Designations vary from Director-HR to Assistant Manager-HR) in the organizations.

**Sampling Strategy**

Purposive sampling strategy was adopted with the total sample size of 90 (n= 90), the criteria used to select sampling unit in the firm were; gender, age, language, competency, and company size in the current company.

**Data Collection Procedure**

We came up with research questionnaires that were employed to collect data by using two different techniques (i) Web based method (e-mail) and (ii) Interview schedule (i.e. face to face) method. In web based method, the respondents were requested to fill the questionnaires followed by consent letter which gives brief details about the study along with ethical considerations. In interview

schedule method, the respondents were requested to read carefully consent letter and agreeing to participate in the study by signing on it before filling up the questionnaires.

#### 4. Results

This part of the article explains the various statistical methods adopted for the study; it also explains the characteristics of sampling unit and the findings of the study. We employed descriptive statistics (i.e. frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation (SD), minimum, and maximum) to understand demographic variables of HRM professionals and organizational profile questionnaire which were semi-structured interview schedule (Table I & Figure 2). Other statistical method of parametric tests like Pearson coefficient correlation to check relationship between Strategic HRM practices and BWC variables; we then performed one-way ANOVA to explore significant differences between BWC variables with across three types

of firms which were considered for the study. Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) method employed to measure linear relationship between potential predictor and dependent variables.

The findings on the basis of statistical analysis of this study revealed demographic details of HRM professionals in the firms (Table I); 72.2% of male and 27.8% of female HRM professionals participated. With regard to designation, 12.2% were belonging to director/head-HR, and other two categories were Manager/General Manager-HR (67.8%) and Assistant manager-HR (20.0%). 43.3% data was collected from private firms, 28.9% and 27.8% of data were collected from public and MNC firms respectively and the mean age was 22.41 years. The HRM professionals' work experience range (Figure 2) between 3 to 30 years, and mean was 11.23 (SD= 6.71).

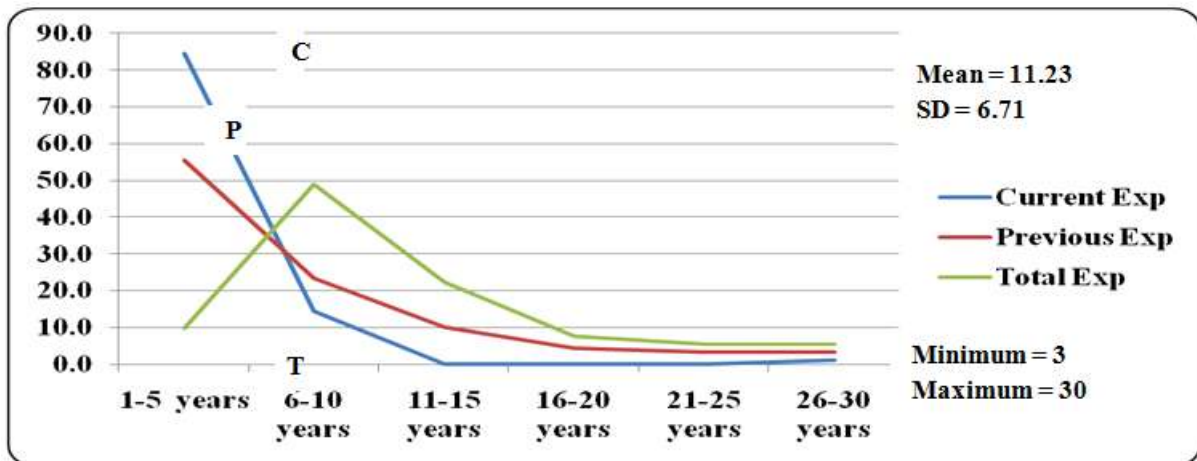


Figure 2: HR Professionals' work experience in the firms

Table 1: Demographic details of HRM professionals and the firms

Variable(s)	N=90	%	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	65	72.2	--	--	--	--
Female	25	27.8	--	--	--	--
<b>Designation</b>						
Director/Head- HR	11	12.2	--	--	--	--
Manager/General Manager- HR	61	67.8	--	--	--	--
Assistant Manager-HR	18	20.0	--	--	--	--
<b>Age of the organization</b>						
Age	90	100	22.41	21.24	3	100
<b>Ownership</b>						
Private	39	43.3	--	--	--	--
Public	26	28.9	--	--	--	--
MNC	25	27.8	--	--	--	--

Note: SD – Standard Deviation; Min - Minimum; Max – Maximum.

We also found the relationship between Strategic HRM practices and BWC dimensions that whether the kind of HRM practices included in which really contribute to BWC in Indian firms resulted positive relationship between SV dimension of BWC and staffing ( $r = .418, p < 0.01$ ), L&D ( $r = .279, p < 0.01$ ) and compensation ( $r = .422, p < 0.01$ ) dimensions of Strategic HRM. Similarly, we also noticed relationship between FWE dimension of BWC and staffing

( $r = .428, p < 0.01$ ), L&D ( $r = .345, p < 0.01$ ) and compensation ( $r = .539, p < 0.01$ ) dimensions of SHRM. We also found RI dimension of BWC and staffing ( $r = .373, p < 0.01$ ), L&D ( $r = .345, p < 0.01$ ), PA ( $r = .271, p < 0.01$ ) and compensation ( $r = .458, p < 0.01$ ) dimensions of Strategic HRM.

**Table 2: Mean, SD and correlations**

	Mean	SD	Staff.	ES	L&D	PA	Comp	SV	FWE	RI
Staff.	29.82	2.98	1							
ES	26.06	3.30	.561**	1						
L&D	30.19	3.80	.747**	.593**	1					
PA	27.60	3.37	.578**	.601**	.746**	1				
Comp	27.17	3.77	.636**	.374**	.588**	.443**	1			
SV	20.72	2.91	.418**	.001	.279**	.114	.422**	1		
FWE	20.42	2.81	.428**	-.021	.345**	.161	.539**	.691**	1	
RI	19.59	2.86	.373**	.066	.345**	.271**	.458**	.620**	.741**	1

\*\* $p < 0.01$  level (2-tailed); \* $p < 0.05$  level (2-tailed).

**Note:** Staff. – Staffing; ES - Employee Separation; L&D - Learning and development; PA - Performance Appraisal; Comp - Compensation, SV – Shared Vision, FWE - Flexible Work Environment; RI - Reinforcement.

We employed one-way ANOVA to check the significance between ownership and BWC variables (Table III), it revealed that there was no significance between ownership and SV and FWE dimensions of BWC. But, there was

significant between ownership and RI, in the view of BWC, RI strategy implementation was good in private ( $F = 4.170, p < 0.05$ ) firms followed by MNC and public firms.

**Table 3: One-way ANOVA between ownership, Building work culture and SCA**

Variable(s)	Private (N=39)	Public (N=26)	MNC (N=25)	F-value	df	Sig.
Shared Vision	21.13	20.04	20.80	1.108	(2, 87)	.335
Flexible Work Environment	21.00	19.46	20.52	2.438	(2, 87)	.093
Reinforcement	20.36	18.35	19.68	4.170	(2, 87)	.019*

\* $P < 0.05$  level

Moving onto Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) and as we stated in introduction part, we examined relationship of predictor' variables (SV, FWE and RI) of BWC with only

two dimensions of SCA such as unique value and sustainability (Table IVa & b).

**Table 4a:** MRA between predictor' variables and unique value

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	't' value	Sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	13.274	1.282		10.351	.000
Shared vision	-.031	.078	-.055	-.402	.689
Flexible work environment	.371	.094	.636	3.952	.000*
Reinforcement	-.167	.085	-.291	-1.965	.053

a. Dependent Variable: Unique Value

The multiple regression model with three predictors produced (Table IVa)  $R^2 = 0.189$ ,  $F(3, 86) = 6.685$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . As we can be seen in coefficients Table, FWE ( $p < 0.05$ ) had significant positive weight, it indicates HRM professionals' views that FWE contributes to have unique value of dimensions of SCA. Similarly, Table IVb also revealed regression model with three predictors  $R^2 = 0.124$ ,  $F(3, 86) = 4.072$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . It shows that FWE ( $p < 0.05$ ) had significant

positive weight, it indicates HRM professionals' views that FWE contributes to have sustainability of dimensions of SCA. But, though reinforcement variable is not highly contributing in both unique value and sustainability dimensions of SCA, it showed just closer to p-value, in case of predictor variable of SV did not contribute to the multiple regression model, hence, shared vision dimension of BWC is not having any impact on SCA.

**Table 4b:** MRA between predictor' variables and sustainability

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	't' value	Sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	13.864	1.422		9.748	.000
Shared vision	-.022	.086	-.037	-.256	.799
Flexible work environment	.329	.104	.527	3.156	.002*
Reinforcement	-.175	.094	-.285	-1.850	.068

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainability

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine strategic HRM practices (e.g. staffing, employee separations, learning & development, performance appraisal and compensation) with SCA variables; we concerned that how the work cultural variables influenced by HRM practices; We were also curious to find out relationship between internal cultural variables (i.e. shared vision, flexible work environment and reinforcement) in order to achieve SCA in Indian firms. The present work argued with existing empirical work done in the past. Strategic HRM is a management of human resources in accordance with the intentions of the firms on

the future direction that it wants to take. It is concerned with longer term people issues as part of the strategic management process of the business. Hence, Strategic HRM process and its functions are influencing the behavior of individuals in their efforts, which certainly supports to reframe and implement the strategic needs of the business success (Schuler, 1992). HR professionals usually implements strategic HRM practices based on their assumptions about the nature of both the work task and the employees behavior. However, these managerial assumptions are shaped by the influence of prior experiences from cultural perspective in the firms (Zeynep, et. al., 2000). Multiple organizational sub-cultures and employment modes coexist and influence the degree to which HR strategies are enacted. In addition, changing employment modes in the firms convey different meanings to employees and reinforce

different attitudes and behaviors, sometimes, it may even cause for major changes in HR practices from strategic perspective (Jennifer & Ellen, 2003).

Barrett and Bass (1976) mentioned in their work that most of the research in industrial and organizational psychology focused within one cultural context. This context possibly brings constraints upon both the theoretical and practical solutions to the organizational problems (p. 1675), if the firms' culture differs based on the role, power structure and the capability to manage firms by the managers who bring their own national cultures into the workplaces (Harrison, 1994). So, the present study focused on work culture within firms' internal context, as stated in review of literature and on conceptual model. The BWC dimension has three sub-elements in the context of work culture which are essential to achieve firms' long term goals and objectives. The present work carried strong argument related to Harrison, (1994) work is that there were variations in the RI dimension of BWC across three different firms (i.e. private, MNC and public), it also contributed that the kind of rewards system inculcated in the private firms absolutely differs from MNC and public firms in India. Hence, we concluded that this is due to structure and system of the work culture in the private firms, though the culture of a successful firm can be difficult to describe and categorize (Barley, 1983; Gregory, 1983). Hence, it is invariably understood and it remains inherently proprietary (Barney, 1986). Our study also revealed subjective experiences of HRM professionals on the dimensions of BWC, they expressed that the two dimensions of BWC (i.e. SV and FWE) variable has not brought any significant difference across three type of firms, but RI brought significant difference between three types of firms. It shows that the sub-culture of reinforcement was implemented too well in the firms.

People management is a powerful tool in the management of culture. They are integral to any strategic approach to HR. Salaman (2001) points that all significant changes to organizational processes, practices and policies rely on a change in culture. Another research study focusing on culture types as determinants of performance (Deshpande, Farley, and Webster, 1993) shows that Japanese companies with corporate cultures stressing on competitiveness (markets) and entrepreneurship (adhocracies) out-performed those dominated by internal cohesiveness (clans) or rules (hierarchies). Jackson and Schuler, R.S. (1995) argued that organizational culture and HRM are inseparable in an organization. It was not considered a critical contingency variable to explain organizational behavior and human resource practices (Zeynep, et. al., 2000). Weick (1985) argued that culture and strategy were partly overlapping constructs. Yet, organizational culture has been described as the missing concept in management and HR studies (Schein, 1996). Hence, before we explore the role of organizational sub-cultures in enabling or constraining the translation of HR strategies into HR practice, we need to begin by investigating the established links between work culture and Strategic HRM. Day and Wensley (1988) focused on two categorical sources (e.g. superior skills and superior resources) in creating a competitive advantage (CA). Furthermore, other authors have elaborated on the specific skills and resources which can contribute to maintain SCA.

But in this article, we used culture as an important factor to explore the relationship between dimensions of BWC and SHRM practices. It resulted that almost all three dimensions of BWC variable positively correlated with Strategic HRM practices. It also contributes that the kind of strategic planning which were implemented by the HRM professionals into the workforce definitely showed positive impact on cultural variable. With the evidence of significant differences between BWC variables across three types of firms, we were curious to find out the relationship between BWC and SCA variables. The result of MRA found the strong positive relationship between FWE and unique value and sustainability dimensions of SCA (Table IVa & b).

## 6. Scope for Future Work

- We have examined relationship between dimensions of BWC and only two dimensions of SCA. The future work would be focused on causal relationship between BWC and other dimensions of SCA. Thus, it might give better understanding of casual relationship between BWC and SCA.
- On the other hand, there will be a scope to explore mediating effects between Strategic HRM, BWC and SCA variables in Indian firms.

## 7. Conclusion

The key finding of this study is undoubtedly that human resource is an essential element and taken into the account in any business to nurture strong work culture which would definitely bridge between BWC and 'unique value' & 'sustainability' of business growth. However, the study concluded that when the employers are framing strategy in order to achieve SCA, they have to draw attention from HR professionals in the view of BWC. Moreover, when HR professionals are involved to design HR strategies, they have to focus more on different sub-cultures (e.g. shared vision, flexible work environment and reinforcement) which could bring positive impact on SCA. We suggest that if HR professionals transfer strategic HR in to HR practices and supports workforce in terms of the sub-culture elements (i.e. Shared vision, flexible work environment and reinforcement) of BWC within the firms, they will definitely nurture platform for a better work culture which could bring positive impact on unique value and sustainability dimensions of SCA as they invariably execute strategic plan of action to set up systems and structure which enable work culture amongst the workforce. Work culture is an important factor which could absolutely show an impact on SCA in terms of delivering customer centric quality products and services.

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