

A suggested conceptual framework for the relationship between strategic leadership and human resources maturity levels: The mediating role of job strengthening

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the mediating role of job strengthening in the relationship between strategic leadership and human resources maturity levels. A conceptual framework is developed to clarify both the direct and indirect links among these variables, drawing on insights from previous research and the Upper Echelons Theory, which provides a solid theoretical lens for explaining the proposed model. The review of the literature reveals that studies addressing the combined relationships among strategic leadership, job strengthening, and human resources maturity remain relatively limited. This highlights the need for further theoretical investigations and empirical applications of the framework across different organizational contexts, thereby enabling meaningful comparisons and strengthening the proposed hypotheses. The study contributes to the literature by offering a novel conceptual perspective on how strategic leadership influences human resources maturity, both directly and through the mediating role of job strengthening. By addressing an identified research gap, this framework can serve as a foundation for future research endeavors seeking to advance knowledge and practice in strategic leadership and human resource development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizations, human resources are increasingly recognized as a critical driver of organizational success. This recognition has elevated the importance of effectively managing, investing in, and developing human capital through both traditional and modern approaches. Yet, despite notable advancements in this field, assessing the true effectiveness of such efforts remains a contested issue. As a result, scholars and practitioners have turned their attention toward human resource (HR) metrics and analytical frameworks that not only measure the efficiency with which organizations mobilize their human capital but also provide essential indicators of the performance and sustainability of organizational units. Within this context, HR metrics have evolved to encompass various approaches, including those that evaluate the level of human resource maturity, a concept that reflects the progress and sophistication of HR systems and practices. Measuring HR maturity serves two fundamental purposes: first, it enables organizations to diagnose their current state and identify gaps; second, it provides a foundation for charting a path toward strategic objectives, thus serving as both a diagnostic tool and a progress indicator. Consequently, assessing HR maturity is increasingly viewed as a strategic imperative that signals a shift in how organizations conceptualize and manage their workforce. This shift underscores the centrality of strategic leadership, which embodies a management style characterized by vision, transformation, and long-term development. Strategic leadership, by aligning resources and organizational priorities, acts as a catalyst for advancing HR maturity. Its effectiveness lies in its capacity to articulate and support a vision that emphasizes strengthening and investing in human resources as a strategic asset.

From this perspective, job strengthening – which entails enhancing employee capabilities, fostering talent, and building efficiency – emerges as both a direct outcome of strategic leadership and a critical input to HR maturity. By empowering employees and expanding their competencies, organizations create conditions conducive to sustainable growth and innovation. Accordingly, this study seeks to build a theoretically grounded conceptual framework that explains the mechanisms through which strategic leadership contributes to HR maturity, while positioning job strengthening as a mediating variable in this relationship.

1.1 Research Problem

Organizations today operate in highly dynamic internal and external environments characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and turbulence.

Confronting these challenges requires leadership capable of envisioning the bigger picture and guiding the organization toward sustainable growth through strategic thinking. Strategic leadership, in this context, is defined by its ability to anticipate challenges, crises, and opportunities; to ensure the organization's resilience; and to mobilize individuals toward transformative change that preserves stability while fostering continuous development and maturity. Scholars argue that strategic leadership plays a decisive role in organizational maturity, as it provides the vision, adaptability, and commitment necessary to navigate uncertainty (Abdul Rahim, 2019; Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). By shaping long-term objectives, empowering subordinates, and aligning human capital with strategic goals, strategic leaders create a climate that accelerates the progression of human resource maturity levels. However, the effectiveness of this relationship may not be linear or automatic. It is likely to be contingent upon the extent to which employees experience *job strengthening*; a mediating mechanism that translates leadership vision into enhanced skills, empowerment, and ownership of responsibilities.

Despite the theoretical relevance of these dynamics, limited research has systematically examined the indirect pathways through which strategic leadership contributes to human resource maturity. In particular, little attention has been given to job strengthening as a mediating factor that enables leadership practices to be internalized at the employee level and subsequently reflected in organizational maturity outcomes. Furthermore, sectoral contexts (public vs. private; service vs. manufacturing) may shape the strength and direction of these relationships, yet comparative evidence remains scarce. Accordingly, this study seeks to fill this gap by proposing and justifying a conceptual framework that positions strategic leadership as an independent variable, human resource maturity as the dependent outcome, and job strengthening as a mediating mechanism. This framework is grounded in Upper Echelon Theory, which emphasizes how leaders' cognitive orientations, values, and decisions shape organizational outcomes (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). By extending this theory into the domain of human resource maturity, the study offers a novel perspective on how strategic leadership fosters resilience and development through the strengthening of employees' roles.

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the relationship between strategic leadership, as an independent variable, and the level of human resource maturity.
- To highlight the connection between strategic leadership and job strengthening.
- To explore the relationship between job strengthening and the level of human resource maturity.

- To develop a conceptual framework that incorporates the potential mediating role of job strengthening in the relationship between strategic leadership and human resource maturity.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to provide a deeper theoretical understanding of how strategic leadership influences human resource maturity, while considering job strengthening as a mediating variable. It also seeks to uncover the variance in the relationship between strategic leadership and job strengthening. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the proposed conceptual framework has not been previously introduced in the literature. Accordingly, this study provides a novel theoretical contribution by integrating four key variables within a single framework. Moreover, it offers an incentive for researchers and practitioners to conduct applied studies that test the proposed model, generate recommendations regarding its practical implications, and assess the potential for its generalization as one of the explanatory models for strategic leadership and its essential effects within organizations. The findings of this study are therefore expected to open new avenues for future applied research, potentially identifying additional mediating variables that may further enrich the explanation of the relationship between strategic leadership and human resource maturity.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Strategic Leadership

The Concept of Strategic Leadership represents a leadership approach that emphasizes building a long-term vision to determine the organization's direction, define its objectives, and set the means to achieve them in alignment with its mission and vision (Al-Diraoui, 2022). It also reflects the leader's ability to guide the organization with balanced oversight, develop employees' skills in accordance with strategic changes, and influence behaviors through procedures that facilitate achieving organizational goals (Al-Amri & Al-Maqrami, 2021).

The literature has proposed multiple dimensions of strategic leadership, yet the most recurring ones across studies include:

- Strategic orientation: Guides the organization's future direction, sets objectives, and identifies strategic alternatives by analyzing both the internal and external environments. It aligns organizational efforts through effective communication and unified planning (Jabbara, 2017; Al-Shamaila, 2017).
- Organizational culture: Represents the shared values and norms that shape behavior and activities, fostering cohesion and a collective mission (Kitonga, 2017).
- Developing human capital: Refers to nurturing employees' capabilities and experiences as an inimitable resource that strengthens competitiveness and organizational success (Aziz, 2021; Al-Zahrani & Shuaibi, 2023).
- Core competencies: Focuses on leveraging individuals' unique abilities as a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Alayoubi et al., 2020).
- Ethical practices: Embody integrity, honesty, and fairness in leadership behavior, reinforcing trust and enhancing the organization's reputation (Al-Daradkeh, 2020; Al-Zahrani & Shuaibi, 2023).
- Continuing education: Demonstrates leadership commitment to training, learning, and capability enhancement within the organization (Abdul, 2016).
- Balanced organizational control: Involves maintaining equilibrium between financial oversight and strategic monitoring to adapt to environmental changes and sustain organizational effectiveness (Alayoubi et al., 2020).

Strategic leadership has been empirically linked to a wide array of organizational and behavioral outcomes. Prior studies reveal its positive impact on Crisis management (Al-Diraoui, 2022; Hassan et al., 2022; Hussein, 2020; Salem & Al-Qaddafi, 2019; Makhzoum & Bari, 2022), Organizational learning capabilities (Al-Zahrani, 2018), Institutional excellence (Al-Zahrani & Shuaibi, 2023; Al-Mughairy & Dahliz, 2023; Boudherham & Salhi, 2021), Organizational success and performance improvement (Aziz, 2021; Al-Lawati et al., 2021), Development of policies and intellectual capital (Al-Qaisi, 2015; Al-Amri & Al-Maqrami, 2021), Human capital growth (Al-Taie & Abu Raden, 2013). Collectively, these findings underscore that strategic leadership contributes not only to organizational advancement but also to individual and human resource development, positioning it as a cornerstone for sustainable success.

2.2 Human Resource Maturity

The concept of maturity refers to the achievement of a system's elements at a specific stage of development, enabling the organization to benchmark its level of advancement against comparable practices within its sector (Jamshidian et al., 2016). In this sense, maturity reflects not only the degree of progress but also provides a basis for comparison with standard indicators applied in similar contexts. While numerous studies have examined institutional or organizational maturity, relatively fewer have addressed human resource (HR) maturity, which constitutes the central focus of this study. Human resource maturity refers to models and metrics that describe and assess the degree of advancement in HR management practices based on specific graded criteria, with each metric representing a distinct stage of maturity (Suwaid & Ashour, 2021).

Suwaid and Ashour (2021) synthesized earlier contributions on assessing HR management maturity. The number of maturity criteria identified in the literature ranges from three (Nguyen, 2016) to seven (Suwaid & Ashour, 2021). Following the recommendation of Jamshidian et al. (2016)—who argued that increasing the number and diversity of criteria provides a more comprehensive and accurate assessment—this study adopts the seven-criteria model, given its breadth and ability to reflect recent developments in HR management. The seven dimensions can be summarized as follows:

- Competence of HR Leadership: The primary determinant of HR maturity is the appointment of a highly competent HR manager or leadership team. Maturity is measured through the manager's expertise, professional background, and their ability to effectively contribute to HR activities and organizational performance.
- Horizontal Alignment and Integration: This dimension emphasizes coordination between the HR department and other units at the same organizational level, ensuring cohesive policies and practices that foster collaboration and organizational coherence.
- Vertical Alignment and Integration: This criterion evaluates the extent to which HR policies and practices are aligned with the organization's strategic values and objectives. It also considers whether HR operates as an advisory or executive function and its role in shaping business strategies.
- Strategic Role of HR Management: Building upon vertical alignment, this level reflects whether HR actively participates in the formulation of organizational strategies rather than being limited to implementation. This underscores HR's transformation from an administrative to a strategic partner.
- Utilization of Experts and Consulting Firms: To address capability gaps, HR units may collaborate with external experts or specialized firms. This engagement enhances organizational effectiveness by ensuring timely access to advanced knowledge and practices.
- Methodology for Evaluating HR Systems: The existence of robust performance measurement systems is a critical maturity indicator. Evaluation metrics allow organizations to monitor progress, correct deviations, and pursue continuous improvement.
- Reliance on Information Technology: Technology plays a pivotal role in enhancing HR efficiency and effectiveness. Approaches such as e-HRM, digital HR management, and artificial intelligence applications enable faster, more accurate, and cost-effective practices, reflecting higher maturity levels.

For each of these seven dimensions, maturity can be assessed through graded indicators, typically spanning four levels—from systemic maturity to strategic integration maturity—thereby offering a structured framework for evaluating HR advancement.

2.3 Job Strengthening

The Concept of Job strengthening refers to achieving excellence by uncovering, consolidating, and maximizing employees' strengths, while placing the right person in the most suitable position (Qatoun, 2021). It encompasses identifying, developing, and enhancing employees' strengths to improve their performance (Sabaa & Manasriya, 2020). According to Basal (2021), empowerment is a subsequent stage that enables employees to apply their skills, utilize their strengths, and contribute effectively to organizational objectives. The empowerment approach is crucial because it guides employees to focus their time and effort on their core strengths, positively impacting their career outcomes. It also serves as a catalyst for both individual and organizational success by highlighting areas where employees excel, thereby informing targeted development efforts (Sabaa & Manasriya, 2020). Moreover, empowerment fosters motivation, engagement, human capital development, and organizational belonging (Qatoun, 2021). The application of power—not merely its possession—is

essential, as success stems from maximizing strengths and driving actual individual growth (Ramadan, 2017).

Several requirements are essential to achieving effective job strengthening (Zinger & Folkman, 2019):

- **Enhancing Learning Motivation:** Employees are motivated to learn when they recognize that acquiring and consolidating skills positively impacts their performance and goal achievement.
- **Clear Objectives:** Well-defined goals facilitate the assignment of appropriate employees to suitable roles, ensuring strengths are optimally utilized to achieve objectives.
- **Support and Assistance:** A culture of support—encompassing supervisors, colleagues, and peers—enhances HR capabilities and strengthens performance, particularly in complex work environments.
- **Application and Practice:** Skills are consolidated and developed through practical application, which is central to achieving HR development objectives.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in two main pillars; The first is Empirical Findings, where, the prior studies that clarify and demonstrate relationships among the study variables as illustrated in the next sections. The second is theoretical Basis, where, the Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) provides the foundation. This theory posits that an organization's strategic choices and performance outcomes are influenced by the characteristics of its senior leaders. Leaders' interpretations of their environment, shaped by personal experiences and sector-specific contexts, affect organizational outcomes such as human resource strengthening and maturity (Hambrick, 2007; Kalkhouran et al., 2015). Accordingly, strategic leaders in both public and private sectors influence HR development and organizational maturity through their traits and decision-making processes. Job strengthening and human resource maturity can thus be viewed as outcomes determined by the strategic leader's capabilities and sectoral context.

3.1 Strategic Leadership and Human Resource Maturity

Strategic leadership encompasses multiple functions, including translating vision into action by influencing teams through personal ability rather than positional authority (Al-Lawati et al., 2021). While research linking strategic leadership directly to HR maturity is limited, Abdul Rahim (2019) demonstrated that strategic leadership contributes to organizational maturity. However, human resource maturity reflects a leader's effectiveness in achieving goals and mobilizing individuals, serving as an indicator of strategic influence. Strategic leadership optimizes organizational resources and fosters competitive advantage, while promoting creative thinking and reinforcing organizational values (Makhdoum, 2021; Salam & Al-Hakimi, 2023). Hence, it may hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: There is a statistically significant relationship between strategic leadership and the level of human resource maturity.

3.2 Strategic Leadership and Job Strengthening

Strategic leadership is a key component of intellectual capital, prioritizing HR development and human capital enhancement (Al-Amri & Al-Maqrami, 2021; Al-Taie & Abu Raden, 2013). It plays a central role in directing organizational strategy, empowering employees, and identifying strengths for strategic capability development (Shahid & Bousahmin, 2016). Further, job strengthening, a subset of job strengthening, focuses on developing weaker areas of employees' competencies, whereas job strengthening reinforces existing strengths. Strategic leaders influence followers over the long term, enhancing job capabilities and motivating strategic change, with the ultimate goal of innovation through human capital development (Suklun, 2020; Nyamao, 2016). Therefore, the second hypothesis can say:

Hypothesis 2: There is a statistically significant relationship between strategic leadership and job strengthening.

3.3 Job Strengthening and Human Resource Maturity

Institutional maturity is a strategic objective pursued by ambitious organizations. Human resources, as the core pillar of institutional development, achieve their optimal outcomes when job is strengthened, directly contributing to organizational goals and maturity. Empirical studies confirm that job strengthening enhances job performance (Sabaa & Manasriya, 2020), productivity (Qatoun, 2021), decision-making

capabilities (Basal, 2021), and job satisfaction (Khalifa, 2017). These outcomes are measurable indicators of HR performance. Given that human resource maturity reflects the overall developmental level of an organization (Jamshidian et al., 2016), job strengthening serves as a critical pathway toward achieving such maturity, since it focuses on leveraging employee strengths to fulfill organizational objectives. Thus, it may hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3: There is a statistically significant relationship between job strengthening and human resource maturity.

3.4 Strategic Leadership, Job Strengthening, and Human Resource Maturity

Strategic leadership is fundamentally committed to strengthening subordinates' jobs. One of the clearest indicators of this commitment is its focus on attracting talent and developing employees' capabilities and skills to achieve organizational goals (Sembiring & Damayanti, 2023). Moreover, strategic leadership fosters innovation and creativity (Hussein & Ali, 2020) and ensures sustained organizational excellence (Al-Amri, 2010). Job strengthening represents a vital component of human resource development, as evidenced in studies emphasizing human capital development as a pillar of strategic leadership (Bouderham & Salehi, 2021). It further drives organizational change across plans, structures, and roles to achieve long-term goals while simultaneously fostering short-term successes (Al-Mughairy & Dahliz, 2023). It develops employee capabilities and motivates them toward strategic growth (Al-Amri & Al-Maqrami, 2021). Job strengthening represents a tangible form of this developmental approach, as strategic leaders mobilize individuals' energies, direct behaviors, coordinate efforts, and empower employees in their roles (Al-Lawati et al., 2021). Strategic leadership also cultivates administrative excellence, prudence, creativity, and wisdom (Jad al-Rab, 2012; Al-Khafaji, 2008), all of which are reflected in the maturity levels of human resources. Human resource development and maturity, particularly at the strategic level, are outcomes of long-term empowerment and the sustained application of job strengthening (Nguyen, 2016). Job strengthening thus mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and HR maturity by translating leadership influence into tangible skill development and performance improvement. Accordingly, we can hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 4: Job strengthening plays a mediating role in the relationship between strategic leadership and human resource maturity.

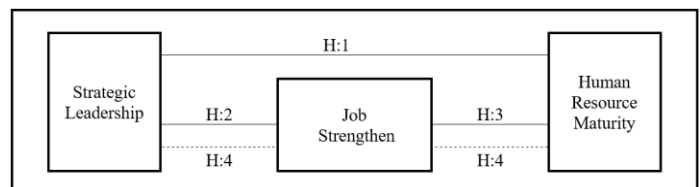


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework

4. CONCLUSION

Drawing on the reviewed literature and the Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), a conceptual framework for this study can be proposed (Figure 1). This framework highlights both; The direct relationship between strategic leadership and human resource maturity levels. The indirect relationship, wherein job strengthening mediates the influence of strategic leadership on human resource maturity. This model provides a structured theoretical basis for future empirical studies to test the relationships between strategic leadership, job strengthening, and HR maturity, offering a comprehensive contribution to the fields of organizational development and strategic HR management.

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