

Management Configurations in an Internationalized Brazilian Organization: Human Resources Management, Market and Labor Relations Dynamics

Configurações da Gestão em Organização Brasileira Internacionalizada: Dinâmicas de Gestão de Pessoas, Mercado e Relações de Trabalho

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Abstract: The article analyzes the different configurations of management in a family-owned and recently internationalized firm and observes how the organization understands human resources management (HRM), market dynamics and labor relations in different contexts. This qualitative research consists of a case study based on a field survey and in-depth interviews with human resources managers in a large Brazilian family-owned organization operating in South America. The findings point out differences in management in the firm's manufacturing plants depending on the country and similarities of the HRM practices within the same country. It was possible to observe a transitioning form of HRM toward the strategic level in the case of Brazil. However,

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this form of HRM is subsidiary to the traditional notion of HRM in other Latin American countries. Also, the firm monitors the labor market, and the labor relations it establishes are adapted according to the country. The study contributes theoretically by discussing management configurations for HRM, market and labor relations under a transnational approach, and the methodology allows comparative research. Finally, the research offers an empirical contribution by illustrating the management dynamics of a family-owned and recently internationalized firm in different regions of South America.

Keywords – Family-owned multinational firm; South America; Human resources management (HRM).

Resumo: O artigo analisa as diferentes configurações de administração em organização de recente internacionalização e como esta interpreta as dinâmicas de gestão de pessoas (HRM), do mercado e relações de trabalho em contextos distintos. Realizou-se pesquisa qualitativa por meio de levantamento documental e entrevistas com gestores de pessoas em organização de origem familiar brasileira de grande porte operando na América do Sul, e com sindicalistas. Os achados indicam distinções nas práticas de gestão nas plantas fabris dependendo do país, não obstante as similaridades destas em um mesmo território. Verificou-se uma HRM em transição para o nível estratégico no caso do Brasil, e ainda subsidiário da noção tradicional nos outros países latino-americanos. O mercado de trabalho é monitorado e as relações de trabalho são adaptadas para cada país de atuação, com suporte jurídico local. Revela-se ainda o enfraquecimento dos sindicatos no contexto da América do Sul. O estudo contribui teoricamente ao discutir as configurações da gestão sob a HRM, mercado e relações de trabalho sob uma abordagem transnacional; metodologicamente propicia pesquisas comparativas; e empiricamente ilustra dinâmicas de gestão de empresa familiar de recente internacionalização em distintas regiões do continente sul-americano.

Palavras-chave – Empresa multinacional de origem familiar; América do Sul; gestão de pessoas.

Introduction

Transformations in the global economy encouraged the expansion of Brazilian firms, but their internationalization is a relatively recent phenomenon. Despite the great potential, these organizations have a small presence abroad due to existing barriers to advance in international markets at the beginning

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of the twenty-first century (Borini et al., 2012). However, the international presence has been growing (Barakat et al., 2021), and firms' motivation has shifted from the search for new markets (Santos, 2013) to active efforts aimed at increasing knowledge and developing technology to gain efficiency (Nova et al., 2021). As for the international operation of these firms in South America, Latin American multinational firms' operation in this subcontinent is growing (Pinto et al., 2017), albeit in a smaller proportion than the average presence of multinationals from non-Latin American countries, especially in the case of family-owned firms (Lude & Prüggl, 2019).

These companies' dynamism is challenging their strategic management models. They are complex organizations with sophisticated logistics, production chains, capital mobilization processes, type of property, or government support. There are also intangible aspects regarding their host countries' national and business contexts and cultures (Magnani et al., 2018), face institutional pressures from both their home countries and nations where they are operating (Cooke et al., 2019).

Amidst the developments in the global context, the recent transformations of the businesses' strategies regarding labor market and labor relations are noteworthy, in addition to the changes in the configuration of human resources management (HRM) models in Latin America and Brazil. Movements related to business deregulation, privatization, removal of trade barriers to attract foreign investment, and the institutionalization of reforms to increase flexibility in labor legislation (Coslovsky et al., 2017) led to new parameters in labor relations and HRM. This arrangement provided different and still little studied reactions in unions and firms in Latin America, a region of economically volatile countries.

The literature has recommended that multinational companies manage human resources as a set that operates coherently in different countries and consistently observes local conditions (Gooderham et al., 2015). However, there is a knowledge gap to be explored on HRM in Latin America. In general, the few existing research include case studies on business performance, addressing elements regarding the context of the countries where a firm operates. In this sense, the literature has not advanced in understanding the characteristics of business performance in regional terms (Elvira & Davilla, 2005; Amorim & Carvalho Neto, 2021).

Thus, it is worth investigating how Brazilian multinationals operating in South America behave since most of these companies are in an initial stage of internationalization (Cyrino et al., 2010; Budhwar et al., 2017) and expanding rapidly and intensely despite the late entrance in the international market (Carneiro et al., 2018). It is crucial to analyze the HRM of these internationalized organizations and explore their understanding of the dimensions of labor relations and the labor market (Amorim & Carvalho Neto, 2021).

This article analyzes the different configurations of management dynamics in a Brazilian family-owned and recently internationalized firm, observing how the organization understands HRM, market and labor relations in different contexts. This qualitative research uses a case study to explore the firm's operation in its many manufacturing plants in Brazil and other countries in South America.

The study assumes that one of the main points in firm administration is the human resources management. So, the article observes an integrated interpretation of HRM practices (micro level) from the perspective of labor relations – as suggested by Carvalho Neto (2013) – even though theoretical aspects have encompassed structural aspects (macro level). Amorim and Carvalho Neto (2021) pointed out that studies aligning the perspectives of labor relations and HRM are disseminated in Europe (Brewster, 2007) and Asia (Cieri et al., 2022) but are rare in South America.

Kauffman (2010) also points out the importance of such research and the need to involve unions as HRM favors employers in the balance of power. Also, Gall (2018) exposes that academia has been replacing the field of studies on industrial relations with research on HRM.

This article is an outcome of broader research on content connecting human resources, labor market, and labor relations using qualitative methods of analysis. The next sections present a literature review and the methodology. The results and discussions are presented subsequently, followed by the final considerations.

Literature Review

The analysis of the dimensions of HRM in a family-owned multinational company involving distinct but complementary elements such as labor market and labor relations involves multiple theoretical options and challenges to limit the research scope, which are reinforced considering the COVID-19 pandemic, as reported by Carnevale and Hatak (2020) and Gigauri (2020).

Labor market perspectives consider labor supply indicators such as the proportion of employment and discouraged workers, average real wages, workforce performance and qualification, occupations profile, social division of labor, participation of primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors in workers' occupation, productivity standards, workforce gender and age groups, proportion of formal and informal work, regardless of the changes in the world of work in the global context (Todolí-Signes, 2017).

Labor market dynamics played a significant role in the social gains experienced across Latin America in the early years of the twenty-first century, as pointed out by Brummund and Rodriguez-Castelan (2018), even though such progress has been uneven across countries and the economic slowdown in the region from 2015 onward has revealed the volatility of these achievements.

For Brummund and Rodriguez-Castelan (2018), an improvement in matching workers and companies can help reduce the gaps and lags between labor supply and demand. Also, protecting workers from job turnover can help prevent vulnerable families from falling into poverty – and the design of such protection or employment policy should minimize distortions in the labor market. Finally, players must comply with the regulations, while monitoring labor policies can help assess these policies' benefits and costs.

Zeitoun and Pamini (2021) reinforce that the analysis of the relationship between unions and HRM practices is a mechanism subjected to implicit actions, especially in the case of crises, to improve performance in the workplace in a distinct business field, usually for companies without a dominant family or individual owner, and in growing markets. Hence Townsend and Hutchinson (2017) reveal that line supervisors are crucial in labor relations for dealing with complaints and disciplinary matters, communication, and involvement with HRM policies, as they can influence union membership. Rufrancos

(2019) discusses an example from Mexico, showing that union density has been declining since the 1980s, and union membership is associated with lower wages, contrary to what the literature has shown for most industrialized nations. However, while union density may be on the decline, unions still have an important role to play in expressing worker preferences regarding compensation and ensuring that employers comply with the law.

Stavrou et al. (2021) analyzed how the institutional context affects decision-making in subsidiaries of multinational companies employing a particular HRM to respond to institutional duality, considering the differences between the country of the company headquarters and the country where it is operating. For the authors, subsidiaries of multinational firms adopt particular HRM practices depending on the combination of institutional contexts and the nature of the practices in the host country and the country of operation. The study by Stavrou et al. (2021) compared HRM practices in subsidiaries of multinational companies in different countries, combining liberal and/or coordinated market economies. The researchers analyzed HRM from 1,196 companies in 10 countries, observing that subsidiaries follow the parent company only for the most persuasive rules, predominantly exercising discretion to take advantage of the opportunities arising from the institutional duality when choosing the practices to compete in the country of operation.

Johanson and Vahlne (2009) suggest that firms' internationalization processes should be analyzed as a gradual process in which the organization adopts different strategies, depending on its development stage. The operations start with commercial import-export transactions, establishing a commercial office to represent the company's interest in another country. At this stage, the company is already considered an international organization. When the firm invests in production facilities abroad, it moves to the stage of a multinational company. After this stage, the multinational company may start to establish subsidiaries in different parts of the world, gradually developing ties of knowledge and commitment with foreign markets, until reaching the status of a global company.

For Gooderham et al. (2019), the comparative identification of convergences and divergences among HRM practices in different contexts suggests the search for empirical evidence reflecting the

organizational strategy. Despite the recommendation by Wright and Steinbach (2022) of using strategic HRM – adopting a perspective that surpasses financial outcomes, and incorporating stakeholders' needs – studies analyzed the Brazilian (Amorim et al., 2021) and South American contexts (Cristiani & Peiró, 2019) and found that these locations still did not experience the strategic HRM along the lines suggested by Wright and Steinbach (2022).

According to Schneider (2009), the market economy in South America has four main characteristics structuring the companies' access to essential capital, technology, and labor force. The region counts on diversified business groups, multinational corporations, a low-skilled workforce, and labor relations where most workers have fluid, short-term links with companies and weak or horizontal links with other workers through unions. Turnover is relatively high, and work relationships are individualized in the continent since the law protects workers with formal contracts, while the majority work informally.

Lima et al. (2022) concluded that in Argentina and Brazil, the labor relations systems present low interaction between firms and unions, although the interaction is more significant in the Brazilian sociopolitical context. A possible explanation is the conflict mitigation by large Brazilian organizations. They reduce the union's influence by anticipating workers' demands, revealing knowledge of union activities, which does not seem to occur in Argentina. The authors point out that Brazil and Argentina have high union fragmentation in their labor relations systems. Brazil has national regulations, and the country institutionalized collective bargaining. The rules in Argentina are very specific for each union depending on the type of activity, leading to less security among contractors. In Brazil, the worker can choose to become a union member, whereas, in Argentina, workers are required to join the union according to the professional category. Another important factor is that recent reforms in labor legislation have strengthened companies, weakening workers and the state's regulatory power in both countries.

Amorim and Carvalho Neto (2021) discussed three other South American countries – Paraguay, Chile, and Uruguay. The authors showed that Paraguayan firms stand out for their freedom in defining how to proceed when hiring. In Chile, a greater negotiation with unions was identified at the company

level, but the unions' influence on human resources policies and practices is low. As for Uruguay, they observed spaces for coordinated negotiation, which translates into less hierarchical labor relations. When researching Uruguayan local and multinational companies, Cristiani and Peiró (2018) revealed that collaborative HRM practices were significantly related to lower employee turnover rates, while calculative HRM practices were significantly associated with higher organizational and financial results. For the authors, the results showed the importance of the Latin American context in the relationship between HRM practices and company results. In turn, given the size and diversity of the economies in Argentina and Brazil, there is broad internal alignment between their labor relation environments in terms of increased flexibility in hiring labor.

Finally, Amorim and Carvalho Neto (2021) highlighted that multinational firms from North America, Europe, and Asia operating in South America have a strong ability to influence local economies, as they benefit from the support of national governments. Furthermore, there has been a significant expansion of Latin American-owned multinational companies in the region, particularly companies from Brazil and Mexico. In general, regardless of origin, such companies have a largely controlled HRM under strong guidance from their headquarters. Such levels of centralization and control displayed by the headquarters of multinational companies facilitate the importation and reproduction of HRM practices from abroad into the region.

The following section describes the methodology adopted in this research.

Methodology

The research used qualitative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2004), involving documental and bibliographic research (Eisenhardt, 1989), and in-depth interviews (Salmons, 2014) with two strategic managers in human resources management (HRM) and two union leaders.

According to Yin (2001, p. 32), the case study is a research strategy that helps understand complex social phenomena. It is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-

life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident.”

The case study “copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide design, data collection, and analysis, and as another result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 2001, p. 32-33). For Flick (2004) triangulation is “used to name the combination of different methods, study groups, local and temporal settings and different theoretical perspectives in dealing with a phenomenon.” The author lists four types of triangulation: data, investigator, theory, and method (Flick, 2004). This research employs data triangulation based on a documental survey, semi-structured interviews, and documents from available databases on the studied organization.

The research adopted a single case study, chosen since it is a typical and minimally representative case (Yin, 2001, p. 72-73), which matched the following conditions posed for this study: the company should be headquartered in Brazil, with units in Latin American countries, be within the group of companies with capital control and management that are mostly Brazilian and with international operations (sales offices, warehouses, distribution centers, manufacturing, assembly, service provision, banking/financial services, research, and development or franchising in South America) (Barakat et al., 2021).

Because of restrictions imposed by the research context – short period for surveys with more extensive samples and difficulties in conducting “in loco” visitations to know the regional realities – the company was chosen for convenience (Creswell, 2012). Thus, it was possible to access the organization directly using the authors’ academic and professional contacts.

Within these characteristics and under the condition of confidentiality, the company granted access to its human resources policies and practices from the perspective of the strategic level managers. Likewise, specialist union advisors and union leaders representing the same company’s professionals in Brazil and other Latin American countries were contacted.

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An in-depth interview was conducted with the professional responsible for the company's global HRM to collect the firm's perspective, a professional who has been with the company for over five years. This person was responsible for the HRM dynamics, describing the process and indicating the main elements of the firm's culture, climate, quality of life, career, and development. Another in-depth interview was carried out with the professional responsible for the regional HRM for South and North America, who had been with the company for over three years. The perspective of the union was collected from an in-depth interview with the Brazilian union leader responsible for union coordination at the main plant of the company studied in Brazil and another with an Argentine union advisor, a specialist in labor relations for the Southern region. Trullen et al. (2020), when explaining the ways of implementing HRM, characterize it as a dynamic process involving the interaction between multiple actors, starting with the adoption of a new practice and ending with its routinization. This was the perspective of interaction with the actors interviewed for the proposed methodological triangulation in the research.

The interviews were carried out through videoconferencing platforms for online meetings, recorded with authorization (Salmons, 2014), and fully transcribed afterward. The transcription and documents were submitted to content analysis in three stages (Bardin, 2016), pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and treatment of the results with inferences and possible interpretations. In the pre-analysis, terms related to firm general management, human resources, labor relations, and labor market were highlighted. Thus, HRM practices, interaction with legislation and unions, and the configuration of the labor market identified in the respective contexts were compiled. Subsequently, the material collected was interpreted in the light of the theoretical references. Despite the number of interviewees, the content of the answers, added to the documentary sources, proved adequate for the discussion of the phenomenon studied as recommended by Creswell (2012).

The research limitations include the difficulties in interviewing the strategic managers of the organization responsible for its internationalization, the maintenance of the ethical secrecy of the source, and barriers of carrying out research in foreign territories, as indicated by Lima et al. (2022).

Results

The company headquartered in South Brazil is in the manufacturing industry. It is a closed corporation and family-owned company like many in the region and was founded in the 1940s. It has gone through a solid process of expansion to the Brazilian market that dates back to the late 1970s, with international expansion in the following decade. Its city of origin has an institutional environment (Gooderham et al., 2019) with resources accumulated over time, such as educational structures for professional training, a labor market that receives rural labor from nearby regions, presence of the work culture associated with foreign immigration, among other aspects. The region presents a privileged position in terms of logistics, offering the company a significant competitive advantage, with road connections to important economic centers and some of the main Brazilian ports.

At the time of the research, the company had industrial plants in states of the five regions of Brazil in an uninterrupted path of growth and diversification of activities. At the national level, it is an influential company among peers and has a constant presence on lists of outstanding companies for its results, general business performance, and people management. A pioneer in its field for investing in publicity and advertising since the late 1950s, it sells products in around 30 countries through more than 90,000 points of sale in Brazil and abroad. It is a large company with over 5,000 employees in several countries, operating 9 manufacturing plants in Brazil and 12 abroad.

Its internationalization began with the installation of the first foreign plant in Paraguay in 1977, in association with local entrepreneurs. In the following decade, it started to consolidate the bases for the exportation of several product lines through subsidiaries, thus reaching all South American countries and some countries in Africa, and Central and North America, consolidating the first stage of internationalization – as understood by Johanson and Vahlne (2009). According to these authors, in this gradual movement of international insertion, companies acquire knowledge and skills that allow them to enter other markets. In the 1990s, the firm continued its international expansion by establishing a plant in Argentina in 1994 and taking over another company in that country in 1999. Also, it expanded to Chile in 1997 by acquiring a local company and two plants in Bolivia in 2000.

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The 2000s were marked by innovation processes aimed at diversifying the product portfolio and expanding the range of operations, seeking a leadership position in the domestic market of the countries in which it operated. The firm used to launch new products to compete with global players in the same line of business in Latin America. The step toward the third phase of internationalization (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009) took place with the first plants in the United States in 2007 (in that same year, the company installed a plant in Ecuador). In 2008 the operations in Colombia started with a new plant, and by acquiring a Peruvian company, it began operations in Peru that same year. After a joint venture, it began operations in Uruguay in 2009, expanding through acquisitions in Ecuador (2010) and Peru (2013). It unified its industrial activities in Peru with a new plant inaugurated in 2015.

The internationalization process led the company to a new status, being considered an organization with a high degree of internationalization based on its sales, revenues, assets, and workforce abroad indicators. It consolidated its operations in the United States through market repositioning by associating with a local company in 2014 and acquiring a new company in 2021. It maintained its dynamics of expansion and diversification in the Brazilian market by acquiring renowned brands and their respective plants in 2017 and 2021. Research data indicated that, in 2019, international businesses were responsible for approximately 20% of the firm's total revenue. Exports accounted for around 4% of its turnover in the approximately 30 countries where the firm had commercial relationships, with emphasis on the African countries.

Santos (2013) analyzes the international expansion of Latin American companies as a response to the intensification of competition and the competitive advantages built in each Latin American socio-spatial formation, which allow them to change the patterns of competition in their industries and assume the condition of world players. Despite being a family-controlled company, whose pretensions tend to be less daring in the Brazilian case, the administration put forward by the founder's third generation aimed precisely at this process. The opportunity for international expansion started in the last decades of the last century and sought to privilege the acquisition of local companies in several South American countries. According to research data, this occurred because the search for new markets has always been associated

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with the company's learning from the local economic, political, and legal context, which is a usual internationalization strategy, according to Hall and Soskice (2001).

The perspective of HRM's operation follows these premises of learning and disseminating the guidelines of the organization. For example, the global HRM manager's routine alternates visits to the manufacturing plants with periods of work at the headquarters. The company's HRM has been opening space to reinforce interventions at a strategic level. Thus, in recent years the area has been accelerating the implementation and consolidation of policies, practices, and structures such as shared service centers, HR business partners, and the outsourcing of transactional activities, such as payroll and recruitment, legal support to HRM, and selecting employees for less complex positions. Over time, the efficiency of these processes is re-evaluated, often with the firm re-internalizing previously outsourced processes.

In general, these initiatives to increase efficiency in processes result in cost reductions in the company's area and its various plants. Based on the consolidation of the Brazilian experience, the practices were disseminated in other countries in a movement described by Trullen et al. (2020) for the routinization of innovative HRM practices. However, one of the concerns at the strategic level is that the company had an employer branding still far from its consumer market branding. In other words, it was a company recognized for its products, but not in the same proportion for the quality of its organizational climate and working and career conditions, despite being positioned among one of the best in the rankings evaluating these elements. This "branding imbalance" creates difficulties in attracting staff and consolidating careers in the organization, both in Brazil and abroad, contrary to what was advocated by Stavrou et al. (2022).

Especially concerning HR business partner practices, the company has two administrative units linked to the human resources decision level, focusing on operations in Brazil and plants abroad. According to the interviewees, this corporate strategy was fundamental in terms of HRM, as there are very different dimensions between the Brazilian plants and operations and each of the realities abroad. This finding is in line with what Cruz et al. (2017) found regarding HRM, the labor market, and labor relations in the Brazilian case and the findings by Amorim and Carvalho Neto (2021) concerning Latin America.

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With regard to labor relations, the organization has a labor affairs area focused on supporting national managers of the various plants in contacting unions and other labor issues. This is because, in the Brazilian case, the union structure is a single union in each territory. Therefore, each Brazilian plant deals with a different union, which brings different dimensions to collective bargaining. At the plant located in the state of São Paulo, a traditional stronghold of more confrontational unionism, there is a reinforcement in the processes of monitoring union actions; at the plant located in a city in the Northeast, there is a more stable negotiation, with a smaller apparatus of legal support to the HRM aimed at this purpose, corroborating the findings of Amorim et al. (2021). For plants abroad, there is specific legal support for each country where the firm operates since labor legislation and labor relations vary in terms of the organization's insertion in the respective markets, corroborating the findings of Lima et al. (2022).

The research indicated that the relations with the unions have been stable, with rare cases of strikes or conflicts partially explained by labor markets with high levels of unemployment and deregulation of labor relations in recent times, as reported by Todolí-Signes (2017). There was a calculative speech focused on results – as understood by Cristiani and Peiró (2018) – and pressured by the low margin of the industrial sector, economic variables related to the macroeconomic context, and the competition of two major global players from North America and Europe. Competitors in their expansion strategy in Brazil followed the same dynamics of acquiring local firms and expanding the business, complying with legal requirements, observing the labor relations and adapting to the Brazilian labor market, following the orientation by Johanson and Vahlne (2009).

The most complex condition of collective bargaining is verified in plants located in the United States due to local labor legislation that involves dynamics of recognition of unions as workers' representatives, as indicated by Rufrancos (2019). The report from interviewees indicates that the HRM of the plants abroad is usually one step behind the Brazilian plants. The need to know the culture of unions in each country was highlighted to adapt HRM in terms of negotiation and to understand the labor market, reinforcing the role of culture in the context of organizational insertion (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hence the

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fundamental support of the local legal office in each country to interact and obtain legal protection considering the dynamics of labor relations.

The study of HRM's operational processes reveals different configurations in the headquarters and subsidiaries abroad. Attracting and retaining personnel at the plants in different countries is not challenging for the most basic positions, with low turnover abroad. However, the research identified leadership development as one of the main challenges. There was a strong focus on internal recruitment, filling more than 70% of the open positions in Brazilian and international plants. For cost reasons, there were no expatriation processes for executives at the time of data collection, with priority given to hiring local professionals, a distinct approach to the trend indicated by Vianna and Souza (2009). The perspective of career development was timid abroad, while in Brazil, it was based on a development and training plan, primarily based on distance training platforms. The remuneration followed the parameters in force in the respective countries, mainly in operational terms, since the hiring took place through the unions of the different countries. In this regard, Argentina had the most significant union mobilization, with salary and working conditions being the most discussed issues in negotiations, usually conducted by a legal firm hired locally.

This perspective was confirmed by the union members interviewed, who highlighted the reality of the global weakening of unions in the context of South America, corroborating the studies by Zeiton and Pamini (2021). Union representatives reinforced the great difficulty of unions to coordinate and the barriers to convincing workers to adhere to labor causes, since the latter increasingly witness new forms of precariousness of work, as described by Vaclavik et al. (2020). According to the interviewees, new dynamics in the context of labor relations depend on redesign strategies to convince formal and informal workers to participate in collective actions, especially in the area of services. The following section discusses the main findings.

Discussion

The research main findings can be consolidated into a few topics. The firm has been successful in its operations abroad. From the point of view of its HRM, it has sought to consolidate the positioning in

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its area strategically but faces different challenges due to the enormous diversity of contexts in which it operates. Regarding its structuring in Brazil, the area follows policies and practices that are disseminated and common to other companies of its size in Brazil, but it has been forced to make course corrections and adaptations abroad. One example of this dynamic is the adoption of outsourcing and, sometimes, internalization (taking back the responsibility for processes that had been outsourced) of human resources processes related to payroll, for instance. In other cases, the firm sought an HR business partner to improve the policies and practices of subsidiaries abroad, adapting to the local contexts.

The strategic insertion and the search for adaptation to the local labor markets have demanded intense learning in HRM. This can be seen in the difficulties in hiring managers in foreign countries, which has led the company to structure internal recruitment processes. The reinforcement of the company's brand has been sought both in Brazil and other countries, especially among younger people, with the dissemination of opportunities in the company through contacts and dissemination in local educational institutions, from high-school to colleges.

Concerning labor relations, the organization created minimum structures to support legal issues to meet the demands at each plant in Brazil and abroad, in a mimetic isomorphism based on the coordination of the area responsible for HRM. One major challenge is to maintain an alignment of the forms of contracting between the different countries. As a general guideline, the Brazilian standard is taken as a reference and, then, the adaptability to local labor standards is verified, implementing the parameters suggested by Trullen e al. (2020).

Two arguments can be delineated after analyzing the data. First, it is possible to affirm that, at least in relation to the South American countries, the scenario of evolution in the company's HRM area is similar to that verified in Brazilian regions of recent economic development – such as the Central-West, North, and Northeast regions of the country. In these regions, the human resource area is still transactional and in the early stages of consolidation. Likewise, the trade union movement operates restrictedly with little effective influence on organizations. In these cases, compliance with basic labor standards is also the standard in the company's plants abroad, as indicated in the work of Amorim et al. (2021).

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In addition, from an institutional point of view (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996), HRM in these Brazilian regions is in the initial stages of structuring its professional bodies for exchange experiences. This was also observed in the case study in the firms' subsidiaries in South America and reflects the findings of Lima et al. (2022).

The second argument lies in how multinationals operate in other regions of the world, reflected in the works by Brewster (2007), Cieri et al. (2022), and Gooderham et al. (2015). The history of the firm analyzed revealed the search for convergence of policies and practices based on models from its headquarters in Southern Brazil. However, given the local realities, some divergence is accepted, implemented, and placed as policy and practice. In general, the maturing process of both convergence and divergence has been long and largely dictated by the HRM's ability to convince the importance of respecting and including contextual conditions in the organization's strategic plan. In these aspects, the researched company behaves similarly to multinationals operating in Europe, as analyzed by Geary et al. (2017) and Stavrou et al. (2022).

Such dimensions obtained from the research findings generate as a reflection how much it is up to the people management professional the responsibility of positioning himself to leverage more strategic local actions. This is because they tend to subordinate themselves to the bosses and whims of the head office in order to be better evaluated, and, in this sense, they feel less empowered to argue their positions about the local reality that they believe are not the ones that will be accepted by the company. Thus, a vicious circle is formed, in which the parent company sees itself coordinating the actions and the subsidiaries just obeying the rules. From the point of view of the long-term results for the business, this does not seem to be a win-win game.

Another concern derived from the results indicates how fundamental it would be to develop local conceptual bases for HRM, not only in Brazil, but in each of the locations where the subsidiaries of internationalized firms are installed. In this sense, the strength that is observed in the headquarters and the consistency of HRM policies would somehow be shaped, also gaining, in each new local reality, its own identity and strength.

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This perspective raises the question of where to actively position the organization's HRM policies and practices in the arc of their convergence and divergence in relation to the matrix. An insensitive or less strategic positioning of the organization vis-à-vis the local realities of its subsidiaries in Latin America would certainly passively place it in the midst of the hierarchical nature of the region's economies and markets.

Finally, a further provocation that needs to be thoroughly investigated refers to the post-pandemic scenario and its impact on labor relations in internationalized firms, affecting the conduct of people management in union actions related to the institutionalization of practices such as professional expatriation, cultural fit, and telecommuting.

Conclusions

The article analyzes the performance of a Brazilian company's administration, observing its internationalization process, human resource management (HRM), labor relations, and the labor market. The research consisted of a case study and adopted a qualitative approach, conducting field research through document analysis and in-depth interviews.

The research findings revealed that HRM deals with constant challenges in a complex scenario in a multinational company, evidencing the influence of factors such as the labor market and economic trends in strategic or routine decisions, both in its operations in Brazil and abroad.

The proximity to the strategic core of the organization revealed that HRM strives for a proper alignment in its practices with the nuances of the labor market and labor relations. While in Brazil, it seeks to introduce contemporary practices (shared service centers, HR business partners, outsourcing of transactional areas), HRM abroad does not outsource some activities and takes on tasks such as hiring the workforce. However, external legal support is used in plants in Brazil and abroad to offer more protection in labor relations. Thus, the firm uses the Brazilian experience as a model to disseminate practices abroad, adapting them to the local scope, a strategy rarely observed in internationalized firms.

This measure is influenced by the context of the labor market in South American countries, with high rates of unemployment and deregulation, minimizing the outbreak of conflicts and strikes between

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firms and workers, in addition to marking the weakening of unions. Nevertheless, it was found that the dynamics established with the unions depend on the local union action, varying according to the country and even in different areas of Brazil.

Despite the success of the firm's internationalization in terms of operational and commercial growth and competitiveness, this process still did not achieve recognition of workers and faces obstacles in attracting local talent.

Thus, the research findings raise some non-excluding elements that could explain the dynamics of the internationalized firm: (1) issues related to labor relations and the labor market became more valued within the scope of HRM as part of its international performance; (2) human resources and labor relations management are treated as separate professional and knowledge areas, led by elements outside the organization; (3) HRM, faced with an international expansion, proved to be reactive to the purposes of the top management of the family-owned company studied, not having a strategic action in its definition; and (4) the stage of the firm's HRM in its headquarters is more advanced than the stage of this same area in its subsidiaries abroad.

The identity crisis historically experienced by HR areas in their process of mediating conflicts in the relationship between capital and labor, in recent years more intensely with the pressures for a strategic performance, is also evident in the internationalization processes of companies. The constant geographic displacement, the search for new markets, the distinct labor profiles, and the dissemination of new technologies present themselves as challenges already known but with increasingly challenging nuances for people management.

This study presented some limitations. It is worth highlighting the difficulty of conciliating the participants' busy agendas to schedule the interviews during the research period, which resulted in a limited number of firms consulted and interviewees.

The article contributes to the advancement of the discussion of HRM in a family-owned company that has recently been internationalized in the different labor markets and labor relations in Brazil and Latin America and presents convergences and divergences of HRM practice little explored in the literature.

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Such results reveal the potential for research continuity in other Brazilian companies operating abroad. The article encourages HRM development initiatives linked to the organizations' local and/or regional contexts. In a more general sense, a better understanding of these dimensions justifies future studies with HRM units, aligning with the dimension of organizational strategies and institutionalization of HRM actions and the impacts of changes in the world of work under the aegis of workers and their representation.

Further studies need to encompass new players in South America coming from European, North American, and Asian origins. These researches also may focus on interpreting the dynamics of HRM, the labor market, and labor relations in South American countries, reflecting a movement of institutionalizing comparative studies involving such strands of analysis in a changing and increasingly globalized world of work.

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