

# Human Resource Management in the Informal Sector in Senegal: In Search of a Model

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## **Abstract**

This paper studies HRM in the informal sector. More specifically, we want to identify practices of HRM in the IS, explain how they are put in practice, and suggest elements of a theory of HRM in the IS in Senegal. We want to show that the integration of informal units' activities in existing social processes, allows for a type of HRM with a high level of (or potential for) coherence between social, economic and environmental issues. In order to do that, we rely on the study of units of production of goods and services involved in different trades, namely clothing, car repairing, metalworking, woodworking and shoemaking. The focus, as mentioned earlier, is on units regrouped in specialized areas, in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Our method of investigation is empirical, qualitative and inductive.

Our analysis of the data resulted in the identification of the following categories: The socio-cultural context of the informal sector; the workplace and practices of HRM, and Other contextual factors.

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In the informal sector, HRM is more about processes than results. It is not about the systematic minimization of transaction costs; empirical data show that processes of socialization for the integration of apprentices are central and part of motivation practices. Thus, HRM in the IS cannot be about the systematic maximization of material gains; it is more about the reinforcement of a tradition and an organizational culture. This may explain why growth objectives are often excluded from owners' explicit agendas.

**Keywords:** Informal sector, HRM, Theory of HRM, Contextual factor

## Introduction

This paper aims at understanding and explaining human resources management in the informal sector in Senegal. Two reasons justify our focus on this sector. First, the informal sector is a key component of African economies<sup>1</sup>; it is more representative of African labor markets than the formal sector. Second, it has not been given the attention that it deserved by business teaching and research in African universities<sup>2</sup>.

This is largely related to the fact that research on the management of the firm in African contexts, conducted by African scholars, has mainly focused on how the “modern” formal firm in Africa act differently from or similarly to the firm in the Western world. In this debate, the argument has mostly been culturalist (Adeleye, 2011 & Tidjani, 1995); the dominant model has been the Northern American and European firms. Such a research has certainly some comparative value, and may constitute a first step toward understanding the firm in Africa. However, most of the time, it did not go beyond the comparative exercise. Furthermore, the problem of comparative research based on a dominant model is that it leads to an identification of practices that are done differently, not on practices done exclusively by individual actors or organizations that are the object of the comparison.

Research on the informal sector does not lead to these drawbacks for many reasons. Western economies are assumed to be mostly formal, thus not comparable to African economies, so far largely informal. Because businesses in the informal sector in Africa are imbedded into social processes, they are analyzed on the basis of their specificities, and their intrinsic values, not in comparison to Western values<sup>3</sup>. In that respect, the informal sector is a potentially important candidate for a research agenda on the construction of a theory of the firm in Africa.

This is certainly a difficult agenda. It is one that requires a lot more research on business in Africa, especially in its francophone part. It especially requires research that is not limited to general management issues, but includes more specific issues such as marketing, finance, accounting, human resource management (HRM), information systems, to cite but a few examples. This paper is an attempt to understand HRM in the informal sector and to contribute to the construction of theories on business in Africa.

### **Why is Human resource management a key issue in the informal sector?**

When, a few years ago, our research team decided to look at HRM in the informal sector (IS), it was not just because the study of human resources in organizations was our “job”. In addition to arguments mentioned above on the importance of the informal sector, was the fact that most theories and analyses related to it came from Economics and Sociology in Senegal. The internal context of informal units of production remained a “black box”. For students in

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<sup>1</sup> According to Maldonado and al. (2004), in Sub-Saharan Africa,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of non agricultural jobs were in the informal sector in the early 2000, compared to  $\frac{2}{3}$  ten years earlier.

<sup>2</sup> In Senegal for example, business schools ignore it; first attempts for systematic research on the issue are 4 to 5 years old. Sociology is by far ahead of business on the issue.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that comparative studies (see Hernandez, 1995), and studies focusing on the search for functional equivalent to modern management (see Tidjani, 2006) do not exist.

the field of business, interested in the IS, a different approach was needed. Given that the firm is defined as a system open on its environment, an understanding of its functioning requires knowledge about both its internal and external contexts.

The choice of HRM as a focus is also based on the fact that the most important resource of informal businesses is by far labor (BIT, 1993). This labor intensive characteristic explains why the informal sector is seen as the primary source of job creation in Africa in general, and in Senegal in particular (Diallo, 2011; DPS, 2003<sup>4</sup>; Kante, 2002; Maldonado & *al.*, op.cit; Wane, 2004).

However, most interesting is the fact that in addition to its central place, labor in the IS presents issues whose resolution will probably lead to significant move towards social and economic progress in African countries, given the large number of people involved in the sector. Let us mention some of these issues. Most workers in the IS have a low educational level<sup>5</sup>, low qualifications, and acquire their competencies on the job (Madila, 2005). In addition to youth, labor in the informal sector includes women, unemployed and migrants, all of them being considered to be among the most vulnerable groups in African societies (Marchand, 2005). In many cases, their working conditions are characterized by irregular revenues and insecurity.

This being said, labor in the informal sector in Africa is not a case of absolute deprivation. In effect, its characterization is generally based on the situation of labor in the formal sector, used as a reference or a model. Such a comparison may be irrelevant. Thus, despite its relative weakness (compared to labor in the formal sector) we conceptualize labor in the informal sector as the key factor in the success or failure of informal units. This makes the management of human resources a central aspect of IS units.

Because of their integration to social processes, these units can play a significant role in the social and economic development of local economies (Amara & *al.*, 2010). In effect, this conceptualization of the IS, makes HRM an activity that goes beyond units of production, to include the sociocultural spaces where they operate. Therefore, a significant transformation of HRM in these units is likely to affect these spaces and vice versa.

This conceptualization of the IS also suggests a greater emphasis on informal units regrouped, on the basis of their trades, in specialized areas. Isolated units offer much less opportunities for issues that we are interested in. So, our studies on the informal sector in Senegal have concerned tailors, carpenters, shoemakers, car repair shops, all organized by trade, in specialized areas, in Dakar, the capital of Senegal.

Our approach to the IS brings two related debates to the center of our research. The first one is on HRM and local development<sup>6</sup>. The second is on industrial districts and specialized

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<sup>4</sup> UEMOA is the West African Economic and Monetary Union; the DPS is the Direction dealing with previsions and statistics in Senegal.

<sup>5</sup> Apprentices who constitute the majority of the labor force were rejected by the educational system between the age 12 and 15. Thus, the informal sector has a social function in the wider society.

<sup>6</sup> In the Francophone literature, this debate is referred to as “Gestion des Ressources Humaines et développement des territoires” (see: Khelifaoui, n.d.; Lecoutre, 2005 ; Defelix & *al.* ; Bories-Azean et

production systems. Industrial districts and specialized production systems have similar dynamics. In these debates, business is not perceived just as a unit of production seeking highest levels of performance, in the traditional meaning of the concept. It is an entity that has social and economic responsibilities both vis-à-vis its members and the spaces where it operates.

What counts the most in such production systems is the “industrial atmosphere”, a Marshallian concept that Molina (n.d.) defines as “the flux of experiences, information and knowledge, circulating...with little or no constraint. These resources are immaterial and can be considered as tacit knowledge specific to the district”. What defines industrial districts is the combination of economic, social and cultural issues.

Ideally, according to Harrison (1992), such districts, spaces or territories, will present the following characteristics:

- Each small business specializes on one aspect of the production process
- Relationships among small businesses is characterized by cooperation (i.e. competition and cooperation)
- Businesses belong to several networks, in order to compensate for their individual weaknesses
- Small businesses receive public support from the State and local governments.

These elements constitute Marshallian positive externalities. According to Harrison (n.d.), the positive externalities are more present in spaces where religion, culture and family ties determine business activities. Similar arguments are generally used to explain the emergence, functioning and performance of informal units in Senegal<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, in our research, we expected HRM in the IS in Senegal to exhibit the following features. Different practices would be influenced both by the limited capacities of the individual business and by the relationship between the latter and the community where it operated. We also expected HRM to have implicit developmental objectives that is to seek a balance between economic, social and environmental objectives. In this process, networking becomes a fundamental relational resource. Because of the limited capacities of individual informal unit (which largely justifies their regrouping), an approach based on specialized production spaces, is more conducive to a good understanding of the dynamics and impact of HRM in the IS.

## **Method**

This paper studies HRM in the informal sector. More specifically, we want to identify practices of HRM in the IS, explain how they are put in practice, and suggest elements of a

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al.).

<sup>7</sup> The best case study is certainly the “Mourides”, a subgroup of the Muslim population. Their capacity to mobilize their resources all around the world has made them one of the most powerful groups in the country both politically and economically.

theory of HRM in the IS in Senegal. We want to show that the integration of informal units' activities in existing social processes, allows for a type of HRM with a high level of (or potential for) coherence between social, economic and environmental issues. In order to do that, we rely on the study of units of production of goods and services involved in different trades, namely clothing, car repairing, metalworking, woodworking and shoemaking<sup>8</sup>. The focus, as mentioned earlier, is on units regrouped in specialized areas, in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Thus, we exclude isolated units of production.

Our method of investigation is empirical, qualitative and inductive. We try to explain a social phenomenon in its natural and real context, by relying on an in-depth study of some cases of informal businesses, as suggested by Yin (2003). The flexibility of the research process used allows for changes both in the formulation of the problem and in the data collected (Royer and Zarlowsky, 1999). This makes this process a somehow unstructured one, where data collection, coding, and data analysis, are not separated. Not surprisingly, this approach is often criticized for its lack of rigor, the large amount of data to analyze that makes it time consuming, and its lack of external validity (David, 2003).

But, the case studies that constitute the basis for this paper are exploratory. In effect, although the dynamics of the sector have been the object of studies by economists, sociologists and even some business researchers, we did not know of any study focusing especially on HRM. Thus, this methodology was appropriate since it allows for the identification of relationships among variables in very contingent contexts (Barette & Carrière, 2003); it also stimulates the emergence of discourses as expressions of interviewees' meaning, feelings and ideas (Cossette, 1994). There is probably no methodological alternative for an understanding of HRM in the informal sector.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Practices of HRM are herein analyzed as concrete actions taking place in historical, organizational and cultural contexts (Johnson & al. 2007). The dynamic combination of these contexts constitutes a social process. Data collection included on site interviews of business units' owners and personnel, observation during interviews and documents on the different trades; this triangulation (Jick, 1979; Stake, 1995) allows for internal validity<sup>9</sup>.

Interviews were conducted over a year, including the academic year 2009-10<sup>10</sup>. A total of 54 interviews were conducted with production units' owners, some members of the personnel, and some service providers. Each interview was about 45 minutes long on the average, with note taking, and recording when permitted.

Data collected on site were content analyzed. According to Allard-Poesi & al. (1999), content analysis is based on the idea of repetition. Repetition of words, expressions or other elements

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<sup>8</sup> These studies were conducted by our research team, at the University Cheikh Anta Diop, in Dakar (see Sarr, 2010; Nimaga, 2010; Silla, 2010; Sall, forthcoming; Tidjani, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Most research conducted on these trades appears under the form of « gray or unpublished literature » (see Niang on shoemakers, 1985; Fall on carpenters, 1984; Dumoulin on car repairing, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> This is true except for Tidjani's paper (2006).

of a sentence are an indication of interviewers' preoccupations. Following Allard-Poesi and al.'s recommendations, data were analyzed and organized on the basis of our research objectives. They were then regrouped into categories that, according to us, best characterized HRM and its context in the informal sector in Dakar, as shown in the table below.

## Results

Table 1. Catégories, sub-catégories et meanings

Categories	Sub-categories	Components
<b>Socio-cultural contingencies</b>	Owner profile	Level of education decision making process Level of knowledge in the trade Management style Priority given to cash flow vs. long term return
	Impact of the community	Family and friends involvement in the business Collective vs. individual orientation Solidarity Family links Social support
	Social role of the IS	Jobs for school failures Second chance for unemployed Possibility for youth employment
<b>The workplace and HRM</b>	Technology used	Basic and unsophisticated production equipment No renewal of production equipment for lack of means
	Employee qualifications Personnel attitudes et behavior	Low levels of qualification among apprentices On the job training On the job training including moral education and respect for traditional values Hierarchical control
	Work motivation	Sharing meals with apprentices Knowing the boss' life and professional trajectory Possibility for apprentices to do their own activities in the shop Targeting apprentices' pride Self evaluation Direct supervision Physical punishment when needed Family support

	compensation  Conditions of work and work organization  Responsibility in the business	Rewarding Non monetary compensation Monetary compensation based on level of activity of business unit, status and experience Performance based compensation Social assistance  Non pre-organized work process Level of participation Worker autonomy Worker involvement Pollution avoidance Apprentice external look Workplace conditions  Conditions for delegation
<b>Other contextual factors</b>	Labor market  Regulatory framework  Public support	Lever of reliance on in the labor market Level of reliance on family and friends  Attitudes vis à vis institutions Contract vs. law  Level of public support Business units and taxes Support from NGO and other institutions, not the State

Our analysis of the data resulted in the identification of the following categories:

- The socio-cultural context of the informal sector
- The workplace and practices of HRM, and
- Other contextual factors.

In the following, we examine the elements of each category and the type of HRM that emerge from their interactions.

### **The socio-cultural context**

The three components of this context are the owner, the community, and the informal sector. There is an implicit contract between the community and informal business units whose owners play an intermediary but important role. Informal units are recognized for the central role they play in offering apprenticeship opportunities to young kids who could not even finish their elementary education. Whether it is called recruitment practices or not, the



presence of these apprentices in large numbers in the IS contributes to the reduction of unemployment, and responds to an imperative of solidarity in the community.

The way young people enter informal workplaces influences HRM processes. Apprentices access informal business units on the basis of family or friends request for help directed towards owners. Thus, this access includes elements of networking. Owners have professional and moral responsibilities. Professionally, they have to take apprentices to high levels of qualification, and communicate to them their managerial philosophy. Morally, they must provide societal skills, and often act more as parents than simple managers. While in the modern (and formal) enterprise, practices of HRM would only include the professional dimension, both the moral and professional ones make HRM in the informal sector.

### **HRM in the workplace**

From the data we identified the following HRM practices, in addition to “recruitment” already mentioned: on the job training, work motivation, control over employees’ attitudes and behaviors, compensation, delegation, and setting work conditions. Thus, we used a functional equivalent approach. This approach consists in using normative concepts of HRM to characterize practices of HRM in the informal sector that are assumed by us to have the same purpose as those suggested by the literature. In the discussion, we will underline the limits of this approach. The underlying logic of the functional equivalent approach is that the HRM architecture is universal; differences are in the way practices are executed depending on countries, sector, firm sizes, etc.

Let us discuss the specific characteristics of some HR practices in the IS. The literature on motivation emphasizes positive reinforcement. In the IS, motivation is generated through rewards, punishment (even physical), and symbolism. Examples of symbolism are: the boss sharing meal with apprentices; learning about the boss’ professional trajectory; affecting apprentices’ pride. The justification for the use of these motivation tools is the father to son (father to daughter) relationship between the owner and apprentices that originate from the way apprentices enter the workplace.

Apprentices’ compensation is often mistakenly considered as an exploitation of youth labor because of its irregularity and the relatively small amounts generally given to apprentices. However, the owner rationale is that there is no obligation to pay apprentices since they come to the shop to learn a trade. But, because they actually contribute to the operations of the business, owners recognized it through some form of compensation that is also an acknowledgement of progresses realized in their learning.

Actually, practices of work compensation are better understood when analyzed in conjunction with practices of on the job training in the informal sector. On the job training has two purposes in this sector. The first one is to allow apprentices to master their trade. When they reach that level, they can stay or leave. When they stay, they become permanent employee of the business and receive a regular and full compensation.

When they leave, they can either be recruited in another unit, or create their own shop. When they do the latter, they realize the second purpose of on the job training that is to generate

future entrepreneurs. The lack of statistics does not allow us to provide exact figures on the number of qualified apprentices who stay, leave to join another unit, or who create their own unit. But, empirical observation shows that a large number of qualified apprentices create their own businesses, given low entry costs in most trades. The uniqueness of HRM in the informal sector resides in its capacity to stimulate the apparition of new entrepreneurs and the reproduction of different trades. This cannot be found in the modern formal sector.

The relationship between the boss and employee in IS' HRM is a combination of control and autonomy. The moral responsibilities of the owner lead him (or her) to develop mechanisms of control of employees' behavior and attitudes. At the same time, and paradoxically, objectives of stimulating entrepreneurship through on the job training require the creation of spaces for an autonomous expression of apprentices. Opportunities given to apprentices to produce their own goods or services during times set by the owner are example of such autonomous spaces.

The uniqueness of HRM in the IS is even more apparent when one takes into account the dynamism resulting from unit regrouping in specialized spaces. Research conducted by our team on practices of cooptation among tailors exhibit the following characteristics of HRM. There is a high level of apprentice mobility. Thus, the process of their skill acquisition can be internal (in one unit) or external (in several units). External processes lead to owners' shared responsibilities in apprentice skilling. Employees can be borrowed by a competitor to respond to a specific order. In her study of tailors, Sall (forthcoming) finds such a high number of cases of collaborative efforts among owners, that we may conclude that each unit has to be a learning unit in order to be able to compete.

### **Other contextual factors**

To say that the informal sector, because of its status, is not affected by key institutions of the society, in Senegal, such as the State or labor markets, would be a misrepresentation of reality. According to institutionalism, whether enterprises are direct reflections or responses to prevailing laws and regulations (such is the case of the informal sector), they are part of a larger institutional arrangement that defines them. The informal sector is generally identified from the standpoint of existing laws and regulations (Godfroy, 2011; De Soto, nd).

However, because our analysis of HRM in the informal is based on an integration paradigm, a difference ought to be made in the role of different institutions. From the viewpoint of the IS, while institutions such as the community and its cultures and values can be conceptualized as enabling institutions, the State, the legal system and labor markets, can be considered as obstacles to the management of informal units.

This is so despite efforts made by the State to formulate policies bringing recognition of the IS, and to reduce negative stereotypes attached to informal units. These negative stereotypes still prevail. Godfroy's definition of the IS is an example of the lack of clarity in the identification of the IS. According to him (2011), "economic activity taking place within the informal sector – traditionally defined as activity unregulated by law but governed by custom or personal ties – represents an emerging frontier for management researchers with interests

from alleviating poverty at the bottom of the economic pyramid to entrepreneurship, innovation, or organizational functioning in advanced knowledge economies”. The good thing is that the informal sector is more and more perceived as an opportunity both for policy makers and researchers interested in developmental issues.

Do we have elements for a theory of HRM in the informal sector in Senegal?

## **Discussion**

Theories of HRM are rare. Even definitions of HRM are not frequent. In fact, in the debate on the relationship between HRM and the performance of the firm, one of the critiques made to research on the subject is the absence of a theory of HRM (Guest, 1987). This lack of theory and definition of HRM is even more obvious in Africa. According to Kamoche et al. (2002), “much work remains to be done to strengthen the theoretical underpinnings of HRM and to bring more effective management practices. Human resource issues that have been identified in the emergent literature include the inappropriate use of foreign concepts, a reliance on particularistic practices driven by local institutional and legislative regimes and nepotistic considerations...).”

To our knowledge, the best attempt to explain HRM remains Heneman and al.’ suggestion (1986). They see HRM as a permanent attempt by the firm to find the highest level of coherence between, on one side, jobs, and requirements and gains attached to them, and on the other side, individuals, their capacities and motivation. This conceptualization of HRM is dynamic and inclusive. But still, Heneman and al.’s theorizing is part of normative HRM. They focus on the firm and its internal context, although they do emphasize the impact of the external environment (namely labor markets, the economic, laws and regulations, unions) on the dynamics of HRM in the firm. However, the outcomes are essentially internal. These outcomes are HRM performance or social performance.

Recent debates on HRM and the development of territories are a contribution to an understanding of HRM outcomes beyond the limits of the firm. It is a conscious effort on the part of actors (mainly, the firm, the State and its agencies, and the community and its different forms of direct or indirect representation) to generate the institutional framework necessary to put HRM at the center of local development issues. In this debate, the firm is not perceived as a simple agent of growth, focusing more on itself. It is said to be an agent of development whose obligations include the local space (department, region, town, quarter, etc) where it operates. Of course, this conception of the firm does not simply bring new obligations to it. The firm also takes advantage of positive externalities discussed earlier.

While in the debate on HRM and the development of territories, developmental actions are the result of conscious and organized efforts on the part of different actors, in the case of the IS these actions are almost naturally present in the management of human resources. By recruiting apprentices, informal units create jobs in the local economy. By providing apprentice training that involves professional and moral dimensions, they contribute to the betterment of society. By stimulating entrepreneurship through training, they play a key role in the growth of the private sector, and a dynamic economic environment. Given the fact that

these contributions are probably better realized in specialized spaces, because of the weak resources of individual units, the IS is making a significant managerial statement on the value of collaboration among enterprises even when they operate in the same trade and compete with each other.

In the informal sector, HRM is more about processes than results. It is not about the systematic minimization of transaction costs; empirical data show that processes of socialization for the integration of apprentices are central and part of motivation practices. Thus, HRM in the IS cannot be about the systematic maximization of material gains; it is more about the reinforcement of a tradition and an organizational culture. This may explain why growth objectives are often excluded from owners' explicit agendas.

These elements seem to constitute the foundations of a theory of HRM in the informal sector in Senegal, and perhaps in Africa. In future research, this suggests the need to revisit the use of normative HRM concepts used in our functional equivalent approach. Although the latter allowed to make a point on the existence of HRM in the informal sector, it perhaps leads us to what Kamoche et al. (op.cit.) call « the inappropriate use of foreign concepts.

## **Conclusion**

We do not have yet a theory of HRM in the informal sector in Senegal. But, we do have elements for a theory. Evidence in the content of HRM practices and in its objectives strongly suggest important differences with normative HRM.

We started with a proposition of integration of informal units of production into social processes. The impact of this integration on the management of people in informal units is clear. It is perceptible in recruitment, motivation, compensation, and training processes. Are these processes HRM ones? If yes, what kind of HRM are we dealing with? If not, what is it then?

In this contribution, we tried to avoid the culturalist debate or to make it the basic framework of our investigation, to rely on the facts, i.e. how human resources are managed in informal units of production. Given the small size of the sample, the remaining literature to be covered, and an insufficient use of the literature in Sociology and Economics, there is more work to do on the issue. To move further in our findings, we think that the research question guiding future investigations should be: “what is HRM used for in the informal sector?”, not just “What is HRM in the informal sector?”.

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