**Employee experiences of HRM through daily affective events and their effects on perceived event-signalled HRM system strength, expectancy perceptions, and daily work engagement**

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**Abstract**

The importance of events to individual experiences and behaviour within organizational research is increasingly acknowledged. This research examines whether daily positive and negative affective HRM events signal employee perceptions of HRM system strength, which are expected to relate to daily work engagement via clear performance–reward expectancies. Employees completed a daily diary over ten working days and reported positive and negative daily HR events as they arose. Positive HR events associated with higher perceived event-signalled HRM system strength compared with negative HR events, and expectancy perceptions partially mediated the effects of perceived HRM system strength on daily work engagement. The study’s novel contributions include documenting the common occurrence of affective HRM events, identifying such events as an important antecedent to perceived event-signalled HRM system strength, and extending understanding of the daily consequences of perceived HRM system strength by showing how their effects on daily work engagement are mediated by expectancies.

**Keywords**

Perceived HRM system strength, affective events, attributions, expectancy, work engagement, diary

**INTRODUCTION**

How do employees make sense of human resource management (HRM) in their everyday work? Research has examined the signalling effects of high-performance work practices and finds that, rather than passively receiving HR practices, employees make attributions about why certain HR practices exist (Nishi, Lepak & Schneider, 2008; Sanders & Yang, 2015). Emphasising the power of communicating unambiguous messages to employees, Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) HRM system strength theory proposes that when HR systems are strong, that is, high in distinctiveness, consistency and consensus, it creates a ‘strong situation’ (Kelley, 1971) which leads employees to make clear causal attributions about the links between employee performance and rewards. Ostroff and Bowen (2016) distinguish between HRM system strength as a feature of higher-level HRM systems (where their original HRM system strength was situated) and employee *perceived* HRM system strength, which is our focus here and refers to individual-level idiosyncratic perceptions. At the individual employee level, what matters is whether employees subjectively perceive system strength features in their environment, not whether HRM practices are, say, actually aligned at the systems level (Delmotte, Winne & Sels, 2012; Sanders, Dorenbosch & de Reuver, 2008), although the systems level may well shape employee perceptions. Previous research on perceived HRM system strength focuses on employees’ general perceptions of HRM systems (e.g., Bednall, Sanders & Runhaar, 2014; Delmotte et al., 2012; Sanders et al., 2008); here we focus on employee perceptions of everyday HRM events and the extent to which they signal HRM system strength.

The process of employees perceiving a strong HRM system must unfold over time and to some extent reflect how employees react to signals from the HRM system on a daily basis and make attributions. However, previous research has assumed employee perceptions of HRM system strength to be a relatively stable construct (e.g., Katou, Budhwar & Patel, 2014; Sanders & Yang, 2015; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2014) and used theories and research designs consistent with such an assumption, such as associating perceived HRM system strength with attitudes and general tendencies and using survey designs. Research has yet to consider links between perceived HRM system strength and daily personal experiences. This is a major omission as daily experiences are fundamental to triggering attributions (Martinko, Douglas & Harvey, 2006), which underpin how perceived event-signalled HRM system strength affects expectancies and work engagement. Bowen and Ostroff (p. 208, 2004) also note the importance of daily activities in communicating system strength: “The creation of a strong organizational situation requires that situational characteristics be salient and visible throughout much of employees’ daily work routines and activities”.

The extent to which events communicate information about perceived HRM system strength is important in terms of shaping more general employee perceptions of HRM system strength (as experiences of events stack-up to affect more general and enduring beliefs, Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996); however, we argue that events that signal perceived HRM system strength (hereon referred to as perceived event-signalled HRM system strength ) are also important at the daily level, shaping daily work engagement via performance–reward expectancies.

In doing so we contribute to previous research firstly by introducing the importance of events as an antecedent to perceived HRM system strength. Affective events are viewed as a paradigm shift in understanding affect and behaviour at work (Weiss & Beal, 2005) and therefore affective HRM events are important to how employees perceive HRM system strength; however, at present there is no research examining perceived HRM system strength arising from the everyday behaviour of HRM signal senders. We therefore contribute by being one of the very few studies to consider empirically, antecedents to perceived HRM system strength (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015, consider HPWS as an antecedent) and by being the first event-level study to identify daily events as an important antecedent to perceived HRM system strength. We demonstrate that perceived HRM system strength fluctuates within-person over time at the daily level in response to relatively common HRM events. We focus on HRM events salient to employees, where salience was assessed by the event’s valence (i.e., whether it was perceived as positive or negative), using a daily diary research design novel to HRM research.

Our second contribution is to extend understanding of the consequences of perceived event-signalled HRM system strength by testing expectancies at the daily level as an explanation of the link between perceived event-signalled HRM system strength and work engagement. Examining expectancies is important because they are crucial to prominent motivational approaches (such as expectancy theory, self-efficacy, and psychological contracts) and establishing a link to perceived HRM system strength would support the potential explanatory power of perceived HRM system strength. Expectancy theory has been the foundation of previous models of HRM practices (e.g., Guest, 1997; DeNisi & Pritchard, 2006) and clear expectancies are crucial to Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) system strength model as they are assumed to carry the effects of HRM system strength at the individual employee level; however, the role of expectancies is as yet untested. Turning to work engagement, while most perceived HRM system strength research focuses on its consequences at the between-person level to outcomes such as affective commitment (Sanders et al.,2008; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015) and work engagement (Katou, 2013), we consider work engagement at the within-person daily level. Examining at the within-person level is an important distinction because substantial variation in constructs such as work engagement is likely to be at the within-person level and within-person daily work engagement has been found to associate with actual daily task performance (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009).

From a practical perspective, the research highlights the importance of everyday events and their framing, both in conveying HRM system strength to employees and for employee daily work engagement. Managers, especially line managers, have more opportunity to influence the occurrence and framing of everyday events than more organization-wide system features.

**HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

**An event-based approach to perceived HRM system strength**

We argue that employee understanding of HRM system strength (and HRM more generally) arises partly out of sense-making related to HRM events (e.g., HR communications, experiences of HR practices). Weiss and Cropanzano’s seminal Affective Events Theory (1996) highlights the importance of affective events in organizations and how they shape proximal employee emotions, cognition, behaviour and more distal general attitudes. Emphasizing events offers a different paradigm for studying organizations (Weiss & Beal, 2005). Affective events theory is not a precise theory, but intended as a macrostructure within which microprocesses can be organized, such as theories of emotion, cognitive appraisal, attribution, and motivation (Weiss & Beal, 2005). It is a useful overarching framework for the sequence we propose where affective HRM events influence perceived event-signalled HRM system strength, which in turn influence work engagement via expectancies.

Any HR event will communicate information about perceived HRM system strength to a lesser or greater degree, in terms of how an employee perceives the event to communicate information about a practice’s distinctive features, how an employee perceives the event or its subject to apply across work groups (i.e., consensus), and how an employee perceives the event to communicate information that is consistent with previous communications. Our interest is in how employees perceive events to signal HRM system strength; in order to do so we had to find a means to sample important daily HR events (so that participants could be questioned about the event’s connection to HRM system strength features). In line with other researchers of organizational events, our approach to sampling notable HR events was to consider those salient to employees in terms of their valence (whether employees perceived the event as positive or negative). In addition to the salience of an event being a means to capture HR events, we hypothesize here that HRM event valence will relate to perceived event-signalled HRM system strength. There are of course many other ways to conceptualize events, but the basic approach of exploring its valence is a useful starting point, given the primacy of this distinction in previous event-based analyses (e.g., Elfenbein, 2017; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

We focus on the valence of HR affective events (i.e., whether perceived positive or negative) and their associated attributions, reflecting an enduring interest in people’s initial primary cognitive appraisal of whether an event is good or bad for them (Ohly & Schmitt, 2013). Events perceived as neither positive nor negative are of little relevance to personal goals (Lazarus, 1991). Positive and negative affective events motivate employees to make sense of their experiences (Maitlis et al., 2013; Morgeson et al., 2015; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Attribution theory also suggests that unexpected events trigger causal attributions, whereas more routine and ordinary events (i.e., affectively neutral) do not (Weiner, 1985). When positive and negative affective events relate to HRM we similarly expect employees, following Bowen and Ostroff (2004) and attribution theorists more generally, to perceive the event in terms of its distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. If employees were to not perceive events in terms of these attributions, then this would cast serious doubt on the relevance of Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) approach at the event level.

A more probing hypothesis is whether perceived positive HRM events are more likely to promote perceived HRM system strength than negative events. We draw on the emotions as social information model (EASI; van Kleef, 2009) that has as its basic premise that people infer information from their own experienced emotions and other party’s expressed emotions and that this information influences their interaction with the other party. Most applications are in social psychology and consider emotions in interpersonal relationships, but the model has also considered interactions between individuals and parties such as the behaviour of groups and organizations (e.g., van Kleef, 2014). For example, a positive HRM event may signal to employees that the HRM department is, say, trustworthy and cooperative, whereas a negative event may signal they are not. The EASI model elaborates on its premise considerably by, for example, discussing how inferences from emotions depend on individual differences and social-relational factors, but for our purposes here we draw upon its basic premise and argue that positive affective HRM events are more likely than negative HRM events to provide information that lead employees to perceive the event as signalling features of HRM system strength (consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness).

Beginning with the feature of consensus, the wider research on positive events in relationships with peers and organizations (for example, receiving something rather than having something taken away) finds them to associate with support for the object or event, whereas negative events associate with disagreement and conflict (Elfenbein, 2007; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Positive events promote approach behaviour, whereas negative events promote withdrawal (Miner et al, 2005), and positive events are more likely to be shared with others whereas negative events encourage seeing oneself as dissimilar to others (Langston, 1994). These findings all suggest that positive HR events (e.g., receiving training), compared with negative HR events (a poorly conducted performance appraisal), are more likely to signal inclusion, harmony and consensus rather than exclusion, discord and dissensus.

People tend to view positive events as confirming prior beliefs, consistent with their goals, promoting trust in the other, and people in positive moods are more acquiescent and flexible, whereas negative events associate with mistrust, signal a problem/inconsistency, and people in negative moods more vigilantly interrogate information and detect discrepancies (Elfenbein, 2007; Labianca & Brass, 2006; Maitlis et al., 2013; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). These findings suggest that positive HR events, compared with negative HR events, tend to be perceived as an event that signals consistency, which refers to “features that establish consistent relationships over time, people, and contexts” (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 210).

Wider research is less clear as to whether positive events are more or less distinctive than negative events, where perceived distinctiveness refers to employee perceptions of features that “stand out in the environment, thereby capturing attention and arousing interest” (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 208). On the one hand, recipients feel more involved and psychologically close to positive rather than negative events, suggesting positive events are more noticeable (Oreg et al., 2018). On the other hand, negative events may be more distinctive as they signal threat (Maitlis et al., 2013) and following evolutionary arguments people are more primed to respond to threats than non-threatening (i.e., positive) events (Taylor, 1991). However, positive events also broaden people’s focus of attention (under Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, 2001), thereby making people more open and receptive to information. The concepts of approach/avoidance are relevant here too, given that they represent such basic affective responses (Elfenbein, 2007), and suggest employees tend to approach positive events and avoid negative ones. Therefore, employees will more likely attend to and take interest in positive events, that is, find such events distinctive. On balance, the weight of argument supports positive events to be more distinctive, and this is perhaps particularly so when we consider affective HR events as we would expect HR departments to put more effort into making positive HR events distinctive to employees since it serves HR departments’ interests, and be much less interested in prominently communicating bad news.

We therefore expect positive events to associate with higher ratings of the three perceived event-signalled HRM system strength features and considering perceived system strength overall we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1. HRM event valence (i.e., positive / negative HRM events) will associate positively with perceived event-signalled HRM system strength, such that perceived event-signalled HRM system strength will be higher for positive compared with negative HRM events.*

### The relationship between perceived event-signalled HRM system strength and expectancy perceptions

Attributions people make about past events establish expectancies they have for future events (Hull & Medolia, 1991). Kelley’s (1971) covariation model proposes that when people attribute events to have distinctive effects, that are perceived as consistent over time, and when they perceive there would be consensus in how people would respond to the event, these features combine to create a ‘strong situation’, which is where employees have a clear understanding of “what is important and what behaviors are expected and rewarded” (p. 204, Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). These expectations are of a particular kind, in that they specify what kind of behaviours are rewarded and are akin to expectancies. In summary, where employees perceive event-signalled HRM system strength features (i.e., consensus, consistency, distinctiveness) they will perceive a strong situation, which results in clear expectancies.

We now consider how employee perceived event-signalled HRM system strength features of distinctiveness, consistency and consensus facilitate clear expectancies. Perceived event-signalled HRM distinctiveness is evident through the event communicating the visibility, clarity, and relevance of HR practices. Under both psychological contract theory (where employee behaviour is more greatly influenced by explicit employer communications; Conway & Briner, 2005) and social information processing theory (where explicit and public statements more greatly influence social processes; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), clear and visible statements, such as emails, public avowals and explicit communications, establish clear expectations and influence behaviour. For example, performance appraisals will be perceived as more distinctive for employees through activities such as: keeping performance diaries (greater visibility, a feature of distinctiveness); publicly avowed HR communications explaining how appraisals are important to employee goals and rewards (showing relevance, another feature of distinctiveness); and appraisal meetings conducted with managers who have an important bearing on employee careers (conveying legitimacy of authority, also a feature of distinctiveness). Such actions lead employees to develop a clearer understanding of how they should behave and the consequences of their behaviour (i.e., expectancies).

For the second HRM system strength feature of consistency, employees would need to perceive that the event signals “a consistent pattern of instrumentalities across HRM practices, time, and employees that link specific events and effects” (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 210). Expectancies are by definition likelihoods about causes leading to effects, and one of the best predictors of future behaviour and events is perceiving an event as falling within a consistent pattern of previous events (e.g., past behaviour/events predicting future behaviour/events, supported across many behavioural models, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ajzen, 1991). For example, if an employee perceives a manager to deliver positive feedback for displayed initiative, where initiative is perceived as a competency consistently used in the organization for reward and development, then the employee will expect initiative to contribute to their advancement. Employees are thus more likely to perceive clear cause-effect expectancies between behaviours and outcomes when they perceive the event to signal consistent HRM practices.

Turning to employee perceptions of the HRM system strength feature of consensus, when employees perceive HR communications to concur they perceive consensus in the HRM system (Meyer, Dalal & Hermida, 2010). Psychological contract research has demonstrated that employee expectations about effort–reward links are shaped by the extent they perceive HR communications to act in concert with other high-level organizational communications (Guest & Conway, 2002). Events signalling perceived consensus will also support the other HRM system strength dimensions as perceived consensus makes messages more distinctive and signals consistency across key decision makers (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

In summary, we expect HR events that communicate HR system strength to lead to employees developing clearer perceptions of what is expected of them and what they can expect from the organization.

*Hypothesis 2. Perceived event-signalled HRM system strength will associate positively with clear expectancy perceptions.*

**Expectancy perceptions–work engagement**

Work engagement is a form of motivational energy where employees invest physical, cognitive, and affective energy in work performance (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010). Classic motivation theory supports the importance of expectancy perceptions through developing clear effort–reward linkages. Most evidently, expectancy theory research has shown how valence, instrumentality, and expectancy explain work motivation (Van Eerde & Thierry, 1996). Employees will invest effort when they believe they can perform at the required level and expect performance to lead to valued rewards. From a positive psychology perspective, clear expectancies support various forms of psychological capital such as hope, efficacy and optimism (Avey et al., 2010). Goal-setting theory also states that clarity surrounding goal-directed behaviour and its links to rewards will motivate employees to perform (Locke & Latham, 1990).

*Hypothesis 3. Perceived clear expectancies will positively associate with daily work engagement.*

### Expectancies mediate between perceived HRM system strength and work engagement

As perceived event-signalled HRM system strength results in clear expectancies (Hypothesis 2), which in turn contribute to work engagement (Hypothesis 3), expectancies will mediate between perceived HRM system strength and work engagement. Conversely, weakly perceived HRM system strength will result in weak and ambiguous expectancies that lower work engagement.

We also expect perceived event-signalled HRM system strength to directly and positively associate with daily work engagement as it promotes the availability of psychological resources (job demands-resources model, Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and thus directly influences work engagement. Strong HRM attributions instil confidence that psychological resources are available for employees (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009) which contribute to motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Consequently, employees become more engaged in their work as they find it motivating and fulfilling (Schaufeli et al, 2009).

## *Hypothesis 4. Clear expectancy perceptions will partially mediate the positive relationship between perceived event-signalled HRM system strength and daily work engagement.*

## METHOD

### Sample and procedure

The sample was from a London local authority, where participants included customer-facing, administrative, and professional staff, at all organisational levels, in diverse services like education, social care, and the environment. The data was collected in 2011 and the local authority, similar to the entire UK public sector, was expected to make financial savings following the British Government’s 2010 spending review measures (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2010) in response to the global financial crisis. Notwithstanding the need for savings, at the time of the study the organisation undertook a strategic review and change programme centred on themes of transformation, maximising income and value for money. The organisation focused on implementing high performance work practices and achieving higher productivity through change management and employee engagement efforts and communication was central to these efforts. HR strategies and messages were communicated through a combination of corporate, departmental and team briefings, newsletters, emails and one-to-one meetings with line managers.

An email inviting 971 employees resulted in 211 diary study volunteers (response rate = 22%). Participants received a daily email to complete an online questionnaire at the end of their working day for ten working days. Participants completing the diary for less than 3 days were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 173 participants responding on a total of 1,332 days (an average of 8 diary reports per respondent). 146 participants reported 540 events (*M* = 3.70): 133 participants reported 411 positive HR events (*M* = 3.09) and 76 participants reported 129 negative HR events (*M* = 1.70).

Respondents were predominantly female (75%), worked full time (78%) and in non-management roles (74%). The majority (68%) were in the 41-60 age-band, with 9% under 30 years of age, 16% between 30 and 40 years, and 7% over the age of 60. Approximately 17% had tenure of less than 2 years, 17% had 2-5 years, 48% between 6-20 years, and 17% more than 20 years. The diary sample was representative of the wider organization. It had a similar proportion of women compared to the organization’s population (75% versus 79%), and had similar characteristics to an organizational survey (with a 66% response rate) conducted six months before the diary study. For instance, the organizational survey consisted of 77% full-time workers, 75% of workers in non-management roles, and 64% of employees aged between 40 and 59 years.

### MEASURES

Respondents reported their work engagement every day and reported HRM system strength and expectancies only on days when they reported either a positive or negative HR event.

HR event valence (whether event positive or negative)

Participants were asked “Have you experienced a positive or negative event today, relating to HR issues or the application of HR practices at your organization?” This was followed by the response options of “yes, a positive event”, “yes, a negative event”, “no, neither a positive nor negative event”, along with examples such as a corporate, departmental, or team HR event, a communication about HR policies, and experiencing or observing a HR practice. Participants who identified a positive or negative HR event were asked to briefly describe the event in an open response and complete closed responses to describe the event (see Table 1), and to complete all remaining questions in the diary. Examples of reported positive events from open responses included experiencing a well-administered interview process, receiving leadership development, and constructive discussions with the HR department about maternity leave; examples of negative events included having to engage with a practice without any training or advice, poorly managed consultation meetings, and working with a sick staff member who refused to take time off work because of rigid sick leave practices. If participants had experienced more than one event on any given day, then they were instructed to focus on the most significant event to them personally in order to limit reporting demands on participants.

### Perceived event-signalled HRM system strength (event specific)

The scale consisted of 12 items, with 4 items for each of Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) dimensions of HRM distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. Items were developed from the HRM system strength literature and available measures of HRM system strength (e.g., Delmotte, De Winne, & Sels, 2012) and adapted for daily diary use. For each of the three dimensions participants rated the extent positive or negative HR events were distinctive, consistent or demonstrate consensus (1 = “Not at all”, 5 = “To a great extent”). Participants were also given the option of 0 (“Does not apply”). From the 411 employees reporting positive events / 129 reporting negative events, 342 provided information on HRM system strength items / 114 for negative events; the discrepancy was mainly due to employees reporting items to “not apply” (which was treated as missing data; on average, participants answered 9.2 items out of the 12 perceived HRM system strength items).

For the distinctiveness dimension respondents rated the extent the event appeared to: “Confirm that my organization’s HR practices are highly relevant for my goals at work”; “Indicate that my organization has prominent HR practices”; “Show that managers here regard HR practices as highly important”; and, “Demonstrate that the HR service is very influential in my organization”.

For the consistency dimension respondents rated the extent the event appeared to: “Seem consistent with other communications on HR practices”; “Show that my organization’s HR practices are applied consistently”; “Indicate that various HR initiatives complement one another in how they operate”; and, “Demonstrate that conforming to expected standards of behaviour is appreciated in my organization”.

For the consensus dimension, respondents rated the extent the event appeared to: “Confirm what is a commonly agreed view about how people are managed in my organization”; “Show that different teams and departments across my organization share similar views about how people are managed”; “Show that senior managers and HR managers agree about how people are managed in my organization”; and, “Show that overall, senior managers in my organization agree about how employees are managed”.

Pooling positive and negative HR events resulted in a Cronbach alpha of .97. Two measurement models were compared, a one-factor model with all items loading on a single factor and a three-factor model where each item loaded on its intended dimension (with both models having a common single correlated error term to arrive at a good fit). Confirmatory factor analysis revealed that both models were acceptable and had near identical omnibus fit statistics (three-factor model *χ2*= 196, *df* = 50, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .95, TLI = .94; single-factor model *χ2* = 221, *df* = 53, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .95, TLI = .94), although the chi-square difference test indicated the three-factor model as a better fit.

On balance, given that the one-factor and three-factor model had similar fit statistics and HRM system strength dimensions displayed high intercorrelations (*r* = .84 to .86), we proceeded with the more parsimonious one-factor model in analyses.

Clear expectancy perceptions (event specific)

Respondents reported perceived expectancies arising from the HR event. As there is no existing scale to measure daily employee expectancies, we developed items by drawing on Kopelman, Brief and Guzzo’s (1990) elements of climate expectations. Four items were rated on a scale of 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly agree”). The same items were used for both positive and negative HR events. Respondents rated the extent to which the HR event enabled them to understand: “How things work and what matters in your organization”, “The standards you are expected to achieve”, “What methods and procedures you should use in performing your job”, and “Rewards and how they are distributed”. Cronbach’s alpha for all events was .83.

Work engagement (measured daily)

We used the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for measuring state engagement (Breevaart, Bakker, Demerouti, & Hetland, 2012), assessed on a five-point scale (1 = “Strongly disagree”, 5 = “Strongly agree”). The three dimensions of work engagement were measured by three items each. For ‘vigour’, an example item was “Today, I felt bursting with energy”; for ‘dedication’, “Today, I was enthusiastic about my job”; and for ‘absorption’, “Today, I was immersed in my work”. Cronbach alpha =.92 for all HR events.

**Control variables**

Participants reported on items describing the HR event type, initiator and mode of communication (see descriptive findings below and Table 1), where in each case they were presented with a list of options and required to indicate all that apply. The main categories (i.e., where more than 10% of the sample indicated the feature) were coded as dummy variables and controlled for to rule-out other event characteristics.

## ANALYSIS STRATEGY

Reported events were clustered within employees (on average each participant reported 3.7 events), raising the issue that event-specific responses were non-independent, therefore requiring a regression approach that accounts for nested data. Following McNeish and colleagues (2016) we used the population average method of cluster-robust standard errors (CR-SEs), which adjusts regression coefficient standard errors to account for nested data structures. Regressions using CR-SEs is preferred to a multilevel approach that partitions variance into within and between components as it does not require the raft of distributional assumptions associated with multilevel modelling and is particularly suitable when cluster sizes are less than five (McNeish et al., 2016). CR-SEs also provide effect size (standardized regression coefficients) and R2 estimates that are identical to a single level model (McNeish et al., 2016).

Hypotheses were tested on the pooled dataset of positive and negative events. We tested for mediation using the joint significance test (i.e., significant paths between the independent variable and the mediator, and the mediator and the dependent variable after controlling for the independent variable) (MacKinnon et al., 2002). We tested the significance of the indirect effect using Selig and Preacher’s (2008) Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation (MCMAM), which produces indirect effect confidence intervals based on 20,000 simulations.

All models were tested for multicollinearity by examining variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all independent variables; VIFS were all below 2 and therefore well below the standard cut-off of 10 (Levin, Whitener, & Cross, 2006). All variables in regression models were standardized.

## RESULTS

**Descriptive information for HR events**

Prior to presenting tests of hypotheses, we provide a descriptive summary to illustrate the nature of everyday HR events.

Type of HR event

Employees classified events according to a list of five categories (see Table 1). ‘Opportunities to contribute’ featured most prominently in positive HR events (42%) and was the second most frequently reported negative HR event (22%). ‘Abilities’ and ‘motivation’ classifications were also common for positive HR events (26% and 30% respectively). Negative HR events were most frequently classified as relating to employee motivation (33%).

Initiator of the HR event

Participants were presented with a list of options and reported who initiated the event (Table 1). For positive HR events, employees saw themselves as the most likely initiator (30%); employees rarely saw themselves as initiating negative HR events (9%). Directors, senior managers, and particularly line managers initiated both positive (9%, 18%, 29% respectively) and negative HR events (16%, 17%, 23% respectively). The HR function was nearly twice as likely to initiate negative as positive events (16% versus 9%).

**HR event communication**

Participants were presented with a list of options and asked how the event was communicated (Table 1). Positive HR events were most frequently communicated face-to-face by supervisory and personal meetings (26%), emails (20%), team briefings, corporate meetings, and departmental meetings (totalling 23%), and observing incidents in the workplace (6%). Negative HR events were mainly communicated through emails (33%); other modes included observation of incidents in the workplace (12%), personal meetings with the employee (13%), and team briefings and departmental meetings (12%).

(Insert Table 1 here)

**Descriptive statistics, CFAs, scale reliabilities and correlations**

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, zero-order correlations, and scale reliabilities. Confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) supported a measurement model with three distinct factors (i.e., perceived event-signalled HRM system strength, event-specific expectancies, work engagement), which had acceptable fit (*χ2* = 567, *df* = 268, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .94, TLI = .93) and was better across all fit indices than any other one or two factor solutions. The correlations show that positive events, compared with negative, were more likely to convey information about perceived event-signalled HRM system strength, clear expectancies, and associate with higher daily work engagement. Supporting our hypotheses, perceived event-signalled HRM system strength correlated significantly with clear expectancies and work engagement, and expectancies correlated with work engagement.

(Insert Tables 2 and 3 here)

### Tests of hypotheses

Table 3 presents findings relating to hypotheses 1 to 4; Figure 1 provides a summary of the findings. Hypothesis 1 was supported where HRM event valence associated positively with perceived event-signalled HRM system strength (*β* = .29, *p* < .001); in other words, positive HRM events associated with higher ratings compared with negative HRM events. Hypothesis 2 was supported where perceived event-signalled HRM system strength associated positively with clear expectancy perceptions (*β* = .40, *p* < .001). Hypothesis 3 was supported where perceived expectancies positively associated with work engagement (*β* = .20, *p* < .01).

Hypothesis 4 was also supported, where expectancy perceptions partially mediated a positive relationship between perceived event-signalled HRM system strength and daily work engagement. The first condition of mediation – joint significance – was established, where perceived event-signalled HRM system strength related to expectancies (Hypothesis 2) and expectancies to work engagement (Hypothesis 3). The second condition for mediation – indirect effects – was supported where perceived event-signalled HRM system strength had significant indirect effects on daily work engagement via expectancies (indirect effect = .09; 95% CI = [.02, .15]). The mediation was partial because perceived event-signalled HRM system strength retained a significant effect (*β* = .19, *p* < .01) after expectancies were controlled.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

## DISCUSSION

This research presents the first event-driven analysis of perceived HRM system strength (and HRM more generally) using a novel diary research design. HRM event valence (i.e., whether the HRM event was perceived as positive or negative) predicted employees’ perceived event-signalled HRM system strength , which in turn shaped clear expectancies and daily work engagement. HRM events therefore operate similarly to more general kinds of affective events in terms of shaping daily cognition and behaviour (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Previous research finds that perceived HRM system strength affects relatively stable constructs such as employee attitudes and behaviour (e.g., Delmotte et al., 2012); we contribute by being the first to empirically demonstrate that HRM events vary on a daily basis and that the valence of such events inform employee perceptions of event-signalled HRM system strength and work engagement. We also contribute by showing that employee expectancies mediate between event-signalled perceived HRM system strength and daily work engagement at the micro-level, affirming the importance of clear expectancies suggested by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). We structure the discussion around the four contributions of the importance of affective HRM events in terms of their common occurrence, support for the distinction between positive and negative events as shaping perceived event-signalled HRM system strength, the effect of perceived event-signalled HRM system strength on daily work engagement, and its mediation by expectancies.

First, the findings reveal the common occurrence and nature of HRM affective events. Daily HRM affective events occurred 540 out of 1332 days, indicating significant HRM affective events happen about twice a five-day working week. Compared to other kinds of affective work events, this suggests HRM affective events are a fairly common daily event (Ohly & Schmitt, 2013). Respondents reported about three-times as many positive HRM events compared with negative HRM events, consistent with research that positive experiences occur more typically than negative experiences (Miner et al., 2005). Descriptive information obtained from diary data indicate positive events were communicated through personal contact with the employee and were mainly associated with opportunities to contribute. Negative HR events were mainly communicated by emails and primarily related to motivational issues. Line managers and employees tend to initiate positive HR events, with the latter indicating employees’ proactive role in shaping their positive work experiences. Line managers were also cited as most often instigating negative HR events. Research has shown that line managers play an important role influencing employee understanding of HR policies and practices (Piening, Baluch & Ridder, 2014).

Second, we find support for the basic distinction between positive and negative HRM events, which matters because positive events had much stronger effects on perceived event-signalled HRM system strength. Drawing on the main insight from the emotions as social information model (EASI; Van Cleef, 2009), positively-valent interactions with the HR system and its agents appear to convey information that suggest system strength features to employees. The valence of the event is therefore important in and of itself in terms of communicating information to employees, because of the inferences employees make from affective experiences.

That perceived HRM system strength fluctuates over time and varies within-person in response to everyday affective events advances understanding of perceived HRM system strength. It suggests perceived HRM system strength is a more flexible construct, in contrast to all previous HRM system strength research that has viewed it as a construct that varies between-person or between-groups/climates but would not suggest a role for dynamic fluctuation within-person. The extent of within-person variation in perceived HRM system strength indicates it is readily open to change by, for example, line manager implementation (e.g. Nishii & Paluch, 2018; Ryu & Kim, 2013). How managers enact HR practices is regarded as crucial to their effects on employee behaviour, yet this area has been described as very under researched (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). Our specific finding that positive events promote perceived HRM system strength suggests that the affective tone of communicated information and interactions are important to conveying perceived HRM system strength. Research on managers enacting practices (e.g. Nishii & Paluch, 2018) may have fruitful overlaps with research in other areas that look at how people (in our case employees) make judgments in response to environmental cues, and how the positive framing of information (by managers) can make communications more persuasive (Kahneman, 2011). Our findings support positive framing, for example, managers communicating a positive framing that bonuses will be made available to 20% of employees versus a negative framing that bonuses will not be available to 80% of employees.

Third, this is the first study to link perceived HRM system strength to proximal daily outcomes, specifically here daily work engagement and expectancies. Prior research has demonstrated the importance of employee perceived HRM system strength associating with between-person attitudes such as organizational commitment (Sanders et al., 2008) and organizational citizenship behaviour (Frenkel et al., 2012). We contribute to this line of research by showing that event-signalled perceptions of HRM system strength also have effects at the within-person level, relating to daily work engagement. This is important in itself, given how daily fluctuation in work engagement shapes daily behaviour and performance. Event-paradigm researchers argue forcefully that the focus of most organizational research (and previous perceived HRM system strength research) has been on stable constructs such as general global perceptions, attitudes and tendencies, and that this focus is limited as substantial variation in employee motivation and behaviour occurs at the within-person level, where fluctuation is driven by events (Beal et al., 2004). In our data, for example, 49%, 70% and 31% of the variation in event-signalled perceived HRM system strength, expectancies and work engagement respectively occur at the within-person level (see Table 2).

Perceived event-signalled HRM system strength positively associated with clear expectancies.Our research supports at the event level the attributional sense-making suggested by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). When events signal HRM system strength this clarifies expectancies about standards of behaviour and the behaviour–reward linkages. Clear expectancy perceptions play a critical role in linking event-signalled perceived HRM system strength to daily work engagement. The findings underline the importance of expectancies as a construct at the event level that can connect perceived HRM system strength with work engagement.

Fourth, the role of expectancies in mediating between perceived event-signalled HRM system strength and daily work engagement provides a clearer insight into how a ‘strong situation’ created by perceived HRM system strength is cognitively represented in the minds of employees. That expectancies emerged as a significant mediator connects perceived HRM system strength to a wide range of other prominent motivation and behaviour approaches underpinned by expectancies. For instance, expectancies are important to *expectancy theory* and *goal setting theory*, where we would expect effort–performance and performance–reward expectancies to increase work engagement, but also have the potential to affect behaviour and performance more generally. According to *self-efficacy theory* (Bandura, 1977) expectations of personal efficacy are informed by expectations of how behaviour has led to rewards in the past. Clear expectancies may also act as a form of *psychological resources* which positively associates with work engagement and psychological wellbeing more generally (e.g., Avey et al., 2010; Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010). Clear expectancies increase psychological resources that in turn broaden thought-action repertoires (e.g., broaden-and-build theory, Fredrickson, 2001) that have implications for employee creativity. Not all expectancies following events will be acted upon within the daily time frame (i.e., affecting within-day work engagement) and may be deliberated over a longer time frame. As such, expectancies when enforced consistently over time will likely be internalized as implicit promises and contribute to *psychological contract* contents (Conway & Briner, 2005). Expectancies are therefore a valuable explanatory construct that bridges perceived HRM system strength to employee motivation, self-efficacy and beliefs about the employment relationship. Furthermore, managers are likely to be familiar with the language of expectancies and expectations management (Charan, Barton & Carey, 2015) and as such expectancies are a useful vehicle for managers to better understand HRM system strength.

**Limitations and future research**

We examined a basic distinction between positive and negative events. There is however much scope for future research to examine other kinds of HR events, distinctions therein, and their effects. For instance, looking to research on events more generally, events that are framed as being more proximal to individuals in terms of time, physical and social distance (Oreg et al., 2016) may impact perceived HRM system strength due to their relevance. The main characteristics of Morgeson et al.’s (2015) event systems theory, namely, the extent to which events are novel, disruptive and critical, may be particularly significant in shaping, shifting, and confirming perceived HRM system strength.

We captured attributions close to when events occur in a diary study and therefore more accurately than generalised time-insensitive cross-sectional surveys; nevertheless, measurement remains a challenge. Attributions can be more automatic non-conscious processes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and therefore future research should consider implicit measurement methods (Haines & Sumner, 2013). A further limitation is that same day self-reports are subject to common method variance concerns. While self-reports are arguably the most valid way of measuring conscious psychological states, future research should be designed to overcome common method issues such as collecting measures at different times of the day and objective measures of motivation-related behaviour. Collecting measures at different points of the day would also allow testing causal processes; for example, we assumed that event valence affected perceived HRM system strength, however, reverse causality is also possible where features of the event such as its consistency have pleasurable emotional consequences.

We focused on the proximal consequences of HRM events; future research should link these to more distal outcomes, such as those proposed by affective events theory and event system theory, though as yet such links are largely underdeveloped (Weiss & Beal, 2005; Morgeson et al., 2015). Examples of more distal outcomes include individual-level stable attitudes and behavioural tendencies. Future research should explore interrelationships between perceived event-level and individual-level perceptions of HRM system strength (e.g., how do perceptions of system strength events stack-up to form more stable global employee perception of HRM systems). Research could extend to further levels of analysis. Perceived HRM system strength beliefs arising from events and HRM system strength at the organizational-level will likely have a two-way relationship, where systemic features increase the likelihood of certain events and shape their interpretation, and events contribute to reinforcing system features under certain conditions (e.g., see Morgeson et al.’s, 2015, discussion of events–systems linkages).

### Conclusion and practical implications

This study offers a novel event-driven diary study of HRM system strength and has enhanced understanding of the incidence of affective HRM events and their effects on perceived HRM system strength, which in turn influence daily work engagement. The findings demonstrate support for perceived event-signalled HRM system strength at the daily level. Organizations and managers need to give careful thought to how their everyday HR interactions and messages are communicated and create more opportunities for positive HR events through face-to-face communication with employees.

Our findings confirm that employees perceive messages about HRM through everyday events and that such perceptions affect expectancies and daily work engagement. The importance of creating opportunities for positive HR communications and interactions may seem self-evident, but the key implication is that leaders, line managers and HR have to ensure positive events are communicated to emphasise HRM system strength features of distinctiveness, consistency and consensus, as employees are more receptive to perceiving system strength following positive HRM events. HR initiatives that are likely to be viewed positively by employees are therefore occasions organizations should capitalize upon as an opportunity to match the event valence with system strength features. For example, a new flexible benefits scheme noted on a company’s intranet may go unheeded to employees, whereas it will have impact if it is introduced through cascade briefings by senior managers and line managers (consensus), with reasons for implementing the scheme and its relevance for employee goals and rewards (distinctiveness and consistency). The items in our perceived system strength measure offer concrete suggestions for framing events. Through emphasizing HRM system strength perceptions following events, organizations can also expect to clarify expectancies and enhance daily work engagement.

Finally, rather than statements of HR strategy or policy, or even a visible HR function, it is people (especially line managers) who are important in how employees experience the organization’s HRM system on a day-to-day basis. Managers should reflect on how they shape employee interpretations, which is most likely to be through discursive means such as their talk, text, communications and conversations (Maitlis et al., 2013).

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TABLE 1. *Information about the type of HR event*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Percentage of positive HR events | Percentage of negative HR events |
| *Employee perceptions of type of HR event* |  |  |
| Opportunities to contribute | 42% | 22% |
| Motivation | 30% | 33% |
| Abilities | 26% | 11% |
| Terms and conditions | 3% | 9% |
| Restructure | 3% | 11% |
|  |  |  |
| *Employee perceptions of who initiated positive and negative HR events* |  |  |
| Employee | 30% | 9% |
| Line manager | 29% | 23% |
| Senior manager | 18% | 17% |
| Team member | 15% | 16% |
| Director | 9% | 16% |
| HR | 9% | 16% |
| Another team | 5% | 10% |
| The Organization | 3% | 8% |
|  |  |  |
| *Employee perceptions of communication mechanisms for HR events* |  |  |
| Email message | 20% | 33% |
| One-­to-­one supervision | 14% | 8% |
| One­-to-one meeting about anything that affects you as an employee | 12% | 5% |
| Team briefing | 10% | 5% |
| Departmental event/meeting | 9% | 7% |
| Phone-call | 8% | 11% |
| Incident at the workplace | 6% | 12% |
| Attending training session | 4% | 4% |
| Corporate event/meeting | 2% | 0% |
| Departmental/corporate newsletter | 1% | 2% |
| Intranet announcement | 1% | 1% |
| Personal letter | 0% | 3% |

Note*.* Descending rank-ordered according to positive HR events. Base N = 411 positive HR events, 129 negative HR events.

**TABLE 2. *Means, standard deviations, Cronbach alphas, and zero-order correlations between main study variables***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *α* | *Within-person variance*  *(1 - ICC1)* |  | *r* |  |
|  | All events | | Positive events | | Negative events | |  |  | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 1. HR event valence (1=positive, 0 = negative) | .76 | .43 | - | - | - | - | - |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Perceived event-signalled HRM system strength | 3.08 | 1.10 | 3.26 | 1.02 | 2.54 | 1.15 | .97 | .49 | .28 |  |  |
| 3. Clear expectancies | 3.35 | .77 | 3.51 | .65 | 2.84 | .88 | .83 | .70 | .37 | .47 |  |
| 4. Work engagement | 3.43 | .68 | 3.52 | .61 | 3.13 | .80 | .92 | .31 | .25 | .32 | .35 |

**Note.** *N* ranges from 454 to 519 events for all events; all correlations *p* < .001; ICC1 indicates the variability in daily scores attributable to the person-grouping factor and therefore 1 – ICC1 indicates the proportion of variance at the within-person level.

**TABLE 3. *Results from CR-SEs regressions: Predictors of expectancy and work engagement***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | HRM system strength | | Expectancy | | Work engagement | | Work engagement | |
|  | *β* | *t* | *β* | *t* | *β* | *t* | *β* | *t* |
| *Controls* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Event type: Ability | .02 | .37 | .07 | 1.62 | .05 | 1.02 | .04 | .75 |
| Event type: Motivation | .02 | .34 | .05 | .98 | .05 | 1.13 | .04 | .93 |
| Event type: Opportunity to contribute | .00 | .00 | .09\* | 2.23 | .09 | 1.71 | .07 | 1.49 |
| Event initiated by employee | .03 | .52 | .00 | -.03 | -.05 | -.94 | -.05 | -1.02 |
| Event initiated by director | .06 | 1.38 | .05 | 1.16 | -.06 | -1.28 | -.07 | -1.44 |
| Event initiated by snr manager | .07 | 1.32 | -.01 | -.19 | -.07 | -1.46 | -.07 | -1.46 |
| Event initiated by line manager | -.04 | -.80 | .04 | .81 | -.13\* | -2.44 | -.15\*\* | -2.86 |
| Event initiated by team member | .09 | 1.65 | .02 | .39 | -.09 | -1.46 | -.09 | -1.48 |
| Event initiated by HR dept | .10 | 2.17\* | .01 | .22 | -.05 | -1.11 | -.05 | -1.30 |
| Event communicated 1-to-1 supervision | .06 | 1.28 | .03 | 1.08 | .04 | .91 | .03 | .81 |
| Event communicated 1-to-1 meeting | .07 | 1.50 | -.09 | -1.91 | -.01 | -.19 | .01 | .25 |
| Event communicated by email | .06 | 1.22 | -.02 | -.56 | .02 | .51 | .03 | .71 |
| *Predictors I* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| HR event valence (1=positive, 0 = negative) | .29\*\*\* | 4.78 | .25\*\*\* | 4.04 | .17\*\* | 3.03 | .12\* | 2.06 |
| Perceived HRM system strength |  |  | .40\*\*\* | 6.38 | .27\*\*\* | 3.78 | .19\*\* | 2.73 |
| *Predictors II* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Clear expectancies |  |  |  |  |  |  | .20\*\* | 3.15 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *R2 controls* | .04 |  | .07\*\* |  | .05 |  | .05 |  |
| *R2 controls + predictors I* | .12\*\*\* |  | .32\*\*\* |  | .17\*\*\* |  | .17\*\*\* |  |
| *Change R2 predictors I* | .08\*\*\* |  | .25\*\*\* |  | .12\*\*\* |  | .12\*\*\* |  |
| *R2 controls + predictors I & II* |  |  |  |  |  |  | .20\*\*\* |  |
| *Change R2 predictors II* |  |  |  |  |  |  | .03\*\* |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Note.** \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001; standardized regression coefficients from final model; employee *N* = 137; event *N* = 454.

FIGURE 1. *Theoretical model: Summary of findings (standardized coefficients from CR-SEs)*

HR event valence (positive = 1; negative = 0)

Expectancies

Daily work engagement

.19\*\*

.40\*\*\*

.29\*\*\*

.20\*\*\*

**Note.** \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001; standardized regression coefficients; employee *N* = 137; event *N* = 454.

Perceived event-signalled HRM system strength