

Contemporary Human Resource Management

Text and Cases

7th
Edition



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& Edward Yates



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SEVENTH EDITION

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Written by experts in the field, the seventh edition of this well-established book provides a critical and academically rigorous exploration of the key functions, practices and issues in HRM today.

The first part of *Contemporary Human Resource Management* covers fundamental HRM practices while the second half examines contemporary themes and issues such as technology and climate change. The book contains over 50 thought-provoking case studies, showing you how theory relates to real-world examples.

This substantially revised seventh edition includes three completely new chapters and case studies on:

- Remote working
- New technologies
- Social media

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CASE STUDY 1.1: HRM IN CHINA'S NEW GLOBAL ECONOMY

Tony Dundon and Jenny Chan

Foxconn is one of the largest employers on the planet, with around 1 million workers. The electronics manufacturer has attempted to use robots to replace human workers in China, although it continues to recruit large numbers of short-term agency workers and vocational school student interns to fuel its production needs. It has some 200 subsidiaries around the world, with the bulk of its operations and staff being employed in more than 40 factories across China: in Chengdu, Zhengzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing and Shanghai, among others. Foxconn was founded in 1974 in Taiwan and has grown as a world-leading supply chain transnational corporation. The company makes components and manufactures electronic products that feature in most peoples' everyday lives: iPhones, iPads, iPods, Kindles, computers, smart watches, cameras, games and gaming consoles, and TVs (and more). Foxconn is ranked 20th on the Fortune Global 500 list of top corporations, with annual revenues in excess of US\$215 billion. The term 'factory' can be misleading when the true image of a Foxconn production facility is realised; probably more accurately described as 'a city' or, in company speak, 'a campus'. In Shenzhen city, South China, for example, over 500,000 people lived and worked at the Foxconn site in 2010, when Foxconn built all the iPhones and iPads there, among other electronic products. Many are rural migrant workers who flock to these expansive megacities for employment. And many of these employees live on-site in factory dormitories, with 12 people sharing bunk beds (some have 24 employees in one dorm room).

Of note, because of context factors – financialisation, flexibility, political influence, fragmentation - the Shenzhen facility is transforming itself to a tech and financial hub in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. For example, there has been a rapid relocation of Foxconn and other factories inland (particularly to central and western China, where land is abundant and labour costs lower than that in the coastal region). So, today Foxconn's Shenzhen site employs fewer than 500,000 workers because of pressure from Apple to move Foxconn to Chengdu city, Sichuan province (the iPad city) and Zhengzhou city, Henan province (the iPhone city). The result is that Apple has a tighter and more direct control over Foxconn production.

Dundon, T & Chan, J, (2025). In Wilkinson, A., Dundon, T. & Yates, E. (eds), *Contemporary Human Resource Management: Text and Cases, 7th Edition*, London: Sage (pp. 16-18).
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As a single corporation Foxconn dominates the world market for outsourced electronics, with about 50 per cent of total market share and a client list including some of the most well-known household brands: Apple, IBM, Google, Amazon, Sony, Samsung, Huawei, Xiaomi and many others, who all utilize a global supply chain network of manufacturing firms assembling production in many developing regions of the world.

To be sure, size and scale means that Foxconn provide an extensive array of human resource support systems for staff at these 24-7 day continuous production ‘cities’ in China. The larger sites such as those at Shenzhen (Guangdong province), Chengdu (Sichuan province), and Zhengzhou (Henan province) contain Foxconn’s self-run on-site hospitals, banks, post offices, fire service, and workers can access educational and schooling opportunities. Foxconn has its own University and, along with Apple’s own University, they co-organize business management courses. Indeed, through the company app, employees can access e-learning, with opportunities for some employees to retrain and upskill. There are libraries and sports facilities ranging from soccer fields, swimming pools, tennis and basketball courts. At Foxconn’s Longhua complex in Shenzhen, there is a movie theatre, showing both popular films and corporate videos on business strategy and environmental sustainability. Workers can access supermarkets and restaurants, and even a wedding dress shop on-site for those employees seeking love and marriage. At Foxconn’s iPhone manufacturing plants in the Zhengzhou Airport Economy Zone, nearly 300,000 workers—including on-demand “flexible” laborers and fresh university graduates—are chasing their dreams. It is evident that young workers from rural provinces of China can earn much higher salaries and can expand their skills and career opportunities than in their home villages.

However, considerable criticism has been levelled at Foxconn (and Apple) given reports about harsh working conditions and the way staff are managed. There is a military style work regime because of the suppliers’ subordination to global brands in the buyer-driven commodity chains. For example, when the likes of Apple or Dell issue model updates or launch a new product, production and work pressures intensify for Foxconn employees. Many employees end up working 12-hour shifts during the peak production months, far exceeding the normal 8-hour day as stipulated by law. Supervision has been reported as intensive and intimidating, with workers having to take time-off during low peak periods as a way to circumvent overtime regulations. Evidence points to unsafe working conditions, including fatal explosions at Foxconn’s Chengdu factories, and other risks causing significant distress and health hazards to thousands of employees; for example, inhaling toxic aluminium

dust for those workers polishing the new, shinier and streamlined iPad. In the first five months of 2010 twelve suicides—attempted and achieved—by distraught employees who jumped from factory dormitories at Foxconn’s Shenzhen sites caught the attention of the world media. The company’s response was to install safety netting between buildings. Company management and the trade union offered counselling to employees, without fully acknowledging its management responsibilities or addressing the profound anxiety faced by a young cohort in a highly unequal Chinese society marked by a deep rural-urban divide.

One anonymous employee remarked: “The use of death is simply to testify that we were ever alive at all ... and that while we lived, we had only despair” (Chan, Selden and Pun 2020). Across other Foxconn factories riots and violent altercations have broken out between workers, state police and company security personnel. During the pandemic (2020-2022) Foxconn and other mega-factories encountered frequent lockdowns, while Apple and other global brands prioritized high-speed production in “closed-loop” operations; that is, a self-constructed bubble in which workers were isolated from the outside world to minimize human contact so they would keep working. Nonetheless, workers were infected with the coronavirus and forced to work during the busy months. In Foxconn, the image of people management is literally that of firefighting.

QUESTIONS

1. How do you feel after reading the short Foxconn case study?
2. Which, if any, of the five competing perspectives to HRM in Table 1.2 helps understand the way people are managed at Foxconn?
3. What does the Foxconn case tell us about context issues such as flexibility, outsourcing and work fragmentation discussed in Chapter 1?
4. What responsibilities and influence does, or should, the likes of Apple have over Foxconn’s human resource strategy?

Suggested Further Reading

Chan, J. (2020) ‘Employee Voice in China’, in A. Wilkinson, J. Donaghey, T. Dundon and R.B. Freeman (eds), *Handbook of Research on Employee Voice: Participation and Involvement in the Workplace* (2nd edition). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. pp. 524–39.

Chan, J., Selden, M. and Pun, N. (2020) *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China’s Workers*. London: Pluto Press.

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Chapter 1

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

Tutor Notes / Case Study Guidance

Case study 1.1: HRM in China's new global economy

Tony Dundon and Jenny Chan

The case on Foxconn may be seen as a controversial one: it purposely raises some sensitive issues that business and management type students rarely engage in. It can stimulate discussion if lecturers signal the transnational labour issues and controversies of corporate and state responsibilities up front.

It also often helps to offer prompts to students to start a discussion: if they are familiar with Foxconn, or if they had heard of the company before reading the case. It can help to summarise what Foxconn make, that the Apple (and other electronic) products students use daily are what Foxconn produce on a huge scale. Commenting on some of the core issues can help get ideas flowing (such as: *dormitory living / sleeping conditions for workers; extensive array of HR systems including health services and shops in a city-like facility; but also workers have committed suicide*).

Questions and Suggested areas for discussion

1. How do you feel after reading the short Foxconn case study?

Suggested discussion

The first question purposely looks for personal reflection, which should be easy for students, especially if already given opening prompts suggested above.

2. Which, if any, of the five competing perspectives to HRM in Table 1.2 of Chapter 1 do you think is a better approach to study the way people are managed at Foxconn?

Suggested discussion

In chapter 1 five different perspectives to the study of people management are summarised (in Table 1.2). There is no right or wrong answer. The first matching 'hard' model of HRM, which sees people as a calculative resource to be used like other factors of production, probably best captures a lot about Foxconn. Some student may say Foxconn has a 'softer' HR style given array of welfare or health support policies, although this is debatable. Such policies are themselves highly calculative and the end goal is often higher profit, not the nurturing and development of workers. The radical perspective can be illustrative of the conditions in Foxconn. In this view, some authors

point out HRM is a ruse as the capitalist system is designed to extract surplus from workers effort. This is a way to help explain why Foxconn do what they do, especially when faced with pressures from their client corporations, such as Apple, who constantly seek greater returns from outsourcing production to more flexible providers.

3. What does the Foxconn case tell us about context issues such as flexibility, out-sourcing and work fragmentation issues discussed in Chapter 1?

Suggested discussion

When companies such as Apple or Samsung outsource to the likes of Foxconn, this raises important issues about labour market fragmentation and flexibility, covered in Chapter 1. It often means workers' jobs are less secure when outsourced, and studies summarised in the chapter (e.g. Rubery and others) show flexible job patterns can be highly gendered and disproportionately affect women (who occupy part-time, casual, lower paid type occupations), who may also be migrants of a marginal group. Finally, it can help to ask students to think about how jobs and organisational relationships are fragmented. In the Chapter, fragmentation is discussed in relation to the changing nature of the employee-employer relationship, and who is managing who is often unclear for many workers. Foxconn workers, for example, are not employed by Apple (Foxconn and Apple are two business entities), but often identify and associate with Apple because of what the Foxconn's big "Apple business groups" do and how they work on a daily basis.

4. What responsibilities and influence does or should the likes of Apple have over Foxconn's human resource strategy?

Suggested discussion

Students may not be aware and if they do not find this out themselves, it is worth pointing out that Apple's supplier code of conduct requires its suppliers to "provide safe working conditions, treat workers with dignity and respect, act fairly and ethically, and use environmentally responsible practices wherever they make products or perform services for Apple." To improve the effectiveness of supplier management, Apple has increasingly monitored the conditions at Foxconn and other suppliers by offering 24-hour toll free, direct phone contact numbers such that the aggrieved workers can complain to Apple, including sexual harassment and other kinds of abuses. This is to encourage the affected workers to bypass the factory line managers to report to Apple, thereby enabling it to respond immediately to worker discontents.

Student may develop additional ideas, perhaps questioning whether Apple's responsibility should not be limited to factory inspections or audits. Other ideas could include Apple conducting a more thorough review of its global buying policy, increase the unit price to raise supplier-factory workers' wages, reset delivery schedules to ensure workers' reasonable rest, and collaborate with shop floor management to enhance safety standards. Better ideas might raise issue about Apple (and other tech giants) in terms of a formulating a possible industry-wide approach to eliminate health hazards.

Supplementary Question

Additional thoughts if students already have some familiarity with trade unions, a supplementary question may be posed:

Q: Is democratic unionization on the factory floor a possibility of change?

With reference to the latest version of the Apple Supplier Code of Conduct, “*supplier shall freely allow workers’ lawful rights to associate with others, form, and join organizations of their choice, and bargain collectively, without interference, discrimination, retaliation, or harassment.*”

A point of discussion is a discrepancy between the code and the reality of work conditions, which remains huge. ‘Enterprise-level unions’ are invariably dominated by management and subjected to scrutiny by the party-state in China. Collective bargaining is therefore not at all honoured in supply-chain labor governance. To remedy the problem, Apple and other global buyers should facilitate open nominations and democratic elections, thereby encouraging workers to rebuild their unions at the workplace level.

Strong students may be aware of related issues of unionisation and the lack of employee voice; for example, unionization in Wal-Mart stores and Honda car parts assembly factory were rather short-lived. In terms of leverage change and democratisation, worker leaders can be important conduits and in the process gain valuable organizing experiences, which might be empowering. The force of labour is one of the major sources of social change in repressive work environments such as Foxconn.