

A knowledge-intensity-based collaborative community governing mechanism for inter-organisational HR collaborations

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Abstract

Purpose – Studies of inter-organisational relationships have mainly investigated collaborations in the technical domain. There is considerably less research conducted in the field of inter-organisational collaborations in the domain of human resource management (HRM). At the same time, it is acknowledged that inter-organisational collaboration in this domain is relevant for organisations. By focusing on inter-organisational HR collaborations, this study provides insights into how these collaborations are governed, as well as how the mode of governance is explained.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper relies on a quantitative study among 161 Dutch companies that collaborate with each other on HR-related issues. A measure of governance of inter-organisational HR collaboration is developed and applied.

Findings – Organisations tend to apply a mixture of governance mechanisms to govern their inter-organisational HR collaborations. Hence, they apply a collaborative community type of governance to these HR collaborations. The analyses show that the level of knowledge intensity, in particular the extent to which the organisation applies organisational learning practices, explains the use of collaborative community.

Originality/value – First, this study focuses on an under-researched field: inter-organisational HR collaborations. Secondly, the study extends existing insights into the governance of inter-organisational relationships by analysing a novel data set.

Keywords Inter-organisational human resource collaborations, Governance, Collaborative community, Knowledge intensity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Inter-organisational relationships are studied extensively (Powell *et al.*, 1996; Ahuja, 2000; Hardy *et al.*, 2003; Cropper *et al.*, 2008; Lumineau and Oliviera, 2018). Most of these studies focus on inter-organisational collaboration in the technical domain: for example, organisations collaborate to solve issues concerning their production, to develop new goods and services or to share resources with other organisations (Nootboom, 2008; Tomlinson and Fai, 2013; Zahoor and Tabbaa, 2020). Apart from some studies (Gardner, 2005; Grimshaw *et al.*, 2010; Martin-Rios, 2014), research about inter-organisational collaboration to solve issues related to human resource management (HRM) remains scarce (Koster, 2020).

At the same time, there are several reasons to believe that organisations benefit from having ties with other organisations in the HR domain. The first reason is that it is argued that HRM gradually made a shift from an internal focus, which was mainly control-centred, to



an external focus, with a stronger emphasis on development, learning and absorbing external information (Ulrich and Duhlebohn, 2015; Samimi and Sydow, 2021). The second reason is that, just like in the technical domains, organisations may not be able to solve certain issues in isolation. By collaborating with others, they can access external resources and use the knowledge that is available in other organisations. The ongoing knowledge intensification of organisations increases the need and the possibilities for establishing inter-organisational HR collaborations. Furthermore, organisations may seek solutions for mutual problems that they encounter, such as finding qualified personnel (e.g. Koster, 2019), through inter-organisational collaboration. Both the ability and the necessity to collaborate has intensified in recent years. For a large part this is due to technological developments, already taking place before the outbreak of Covid-19, that have been intensified (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020; Contractor, 2021). As a result, organisations became more interdependent on other organisations, for example due to value chain disruptions. This may lead them to strengthen ties with crucial partners (Verbeke, 2020), which can also result in the development of shared HR policies and practices. Furthermore, new technologies such as artificial intelligence are likely to have a lasting impact on HRM (Prikshtat *et al.*, 2021), as they enable crossing organisational boundaries. Hence, organisations may engage in inter-organisational HR collaborations and will probably continue to do so in the future.

Based on the previous notions, it is the question not only to what extent organisations create inter-organisational HR collaborations, but also which governance mechanisms are used to govern these collaborations. The present study theorises this by applying the general literature about the governance of inter-organisational relationships (Gulati and Nickerson, 2008; Cao and Lumineau, 2015; De Pourcq and Verleye, 2021) to inter-organisational HR collaborations. Based on that theory, it is argued that the collaborative community (a mix of governance mechanisms) is a suitable form of governance (Adler, 2001). Next to that, the study aims to explain the use of collaborative community to govern inter-organisational HR collaborations. Here the theoretical focus is on the knowledge intensity of organisations. In that regard, the present study extends prior research linking knowledge intensity with the governance of inter-organisational governance (Gaur *et al.*, 2011). Finally, it is the study's aim to generate insights for managers of organisations by showing which options are available concerning the governance of inter-organisational HR collaborations.

An analysis was carried out of a data set with information from a cross section of organisations in the Netherlands. Around 44% of these organisations indicated to collaborate on HR-related issues. In total, 161 could be included in the analysed to test hypotheses about the governance of these relationships.

Inter-organisational HR collaborations

Before moving to theories concerning the conceptualisation of the governance of inter-organisational human resource collaborations, it is necessary to clarify what constitutes these kinds of relationships between organisations. To begin with, the term "HR collaboration" differs from "collaborative HRM". Whereas the latter term refers to the extent to which the relations between employers and employees within a single organisation are collaborative (Cregan *et al.*, 2021), the former concerns collaboration between employers of different organisations in the field of HRM. Given that HRM is defined as "... the policies and practices used to organize work and employ people" (Boxall and Purcell, 2011, p. 3), organisations can collaborate on every functional field of HRM, related to the HR cycle, such as recruitment, pay, development and the outflow of personnel. Instead of solving these issues on their own, organisations can choose to pool resources to generate mutual benefits with other organisations (Gray, 1985; Huxham, 1996; Koster, 2017).

As already noted, there is some relevant research to take into consideration, namely, research on networks in which knowledge about HRM is shared (Martin-Rios, 2014), multiple

employment (Grimshaw *et al.*, 2010; Smith and McBride, 2021) and HR alliances (Gardner, 2005). Each of these conceptualisations captures an aspect of inter-organisational HR collaborations. While research on knowledge networks investigates inter-organisational collaboration, it is limited in the sense that it focuses more on information sharing and less on solving issues together. This latter point is also captured in the idea of inter-organisational HR collaborations. The concept of multiple employment also reflects connections between organisations. However, in that research, the focus is on employees rather than on employers. Hence, while these employers are connected via employees that work for multiple organisations, it is not necessary that they cooperate with each other. Finally, the concept to HR alliances spans three topics on which organisations collaborate: employee-sharing, training and development, and quasi-internal labour markets. Whereas such alliances are a clear example of inter-organisational collaboration, they are focused on one specific HR domain, namely, employee staffing. Inter-organisational HR collaborations, in contrast, include a wider range of HR domains, namely, all practices and policies to employ people. A final point of distinction that should be made concerns how HRM and inter-organisational relationships are connected. Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to be found here. The first views the HRM practices and policies of organisations as a precondition for their ability to establish external ties, for example, to increase their innovativeness (Kesting *et al.*, 2011). The present study differs, as it does not focus on HRM as a factor affecting these ties, but as the overarching reason to establish ties with other organisations.

Governing inter-organisational HR collaborations

Inter-organisational relationships can be governed through three distinct mechanisms: price (the market), authority (the bureaucracy) or trust (the community) (Adler, 2001; Cao and Lumineau, 2015). For a long time, theoretical discussions centred on the market-bureaucracy distinction. The transaction cost approach (TCA) provided the main theoretical arguments explaining under which conditions organisations would choose bureaucratic control mechanisms or the market mechanism (Williamson, 1975; Hennart, 2008; Cuypers *et al.*, 2021). A particular strength of the TCA is that it offers the conceptual and explanatory framework for the choice between the market (buying or outsourcing based on the price mechanism) versus the bureaucracy (the make-option aimed at integration and hierarchical means of formal control). One of its weaknesses lies in a too simplistic conceptualisation of the different modes of governance, at least in its initial formulation. After the introduction of the market versus hierarchy dichotomy, Ouchi (1980) noted that governance structures can also take the form of a clan, which relies on the trust mechanism. This led Williamson to consider a third option, the hybrid form of governance (Contractor and Lorange, 2002; Hennard, 2008), mixing price and authority, and others to consider network forms of governance as an alternative to prices and authority (Powell, 1990). This shift in thinking creates new ways of looking at collaborations between organisations. First, it opens the dichotomy of markets versus hierarchies, which in terms of collaborations can be seen as a choice between “not collaborating” (as it may be a long stretch to think in terms of collaboration if knowledge, resources and information are simply bought on the market) and “collaborating using bureaucratic control”, by adding the possibility of “collaborating using trust” (see also Howard *et al.*, 2019). Secondly, it creates the option to think about how price, authority and trust relate to each other.

As a result, two positions developed in the literature. The first position holds that organisations choose one of these modes to govern their external relationships. If the market fails, for example because there are high information costs associated with the market transaction, there is a need for using formal, bureaucratic modes of governance (Ouchi, 1980). However, bureaucracies can also fail, and if they do, trust is required (see also Adler, 2001;

Poppo and Zenger, 2002; Coa and Lumineau, 2015). Hence, there is an either/or choice. The underlying reason for this concerns assumptions about trust and control: if the relationship between organisations is based on trust, there is no need for bureaucratic control. And, if trust is lacking, bureaucratic control mechanisms need to be instilled to govern the collaboration. From this it follows that organisations will choose one of the three governance mechanisms (Rediker and Seth, 1995; Huber *et al.*, 2013).

The second position holds that price, authority and trust can be combined. What is more, it is argued that they need to be combined to overcome the downside of each of the mechanisms (Koster, 2018). According to Adler (2001), there are two information problems associated with the knowledge economy: knowledge creation within organisations, giving rise to prisoner's dilemmas; and knowledge creation among organisations, which leads to public good problems. Given that the knowledge economy relies on the production of knowledge and sharing this knowledge, overcoming these issues is of importance for its functioning. Each of the governance mechanisms is not completely fit for doing that: in the market situation there is an under-production of knowledge. Bureaucratic structures are not capable of providing the right control mechanisms, and communities based on blind trust are open to exploitation of the knowledge they create. A different option is therefore to combine these mechanisms to find the right balance between them. Then the market situation can provide incentives to generate knowledge, and bureaucratic control can be balanced with trust in the community to ensure that partners do what is expected from them. According to Adler and Heckscher (2006), this combination of market, hierarchy and trust may transform into a qualitatively new kind of organisational governance, which they term the collaborative community (Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; Obel *et al.*, 2018). Based on the knowledge generated in the field of inter-organisational collaborations, the collaborative community is the preferred option as it overcomes the downside of each of the means of governance. Hence, from that literature it is derived that the collaborative community is best suited for governing inter-organisational HR collaborations.

Explaining the governance of inter-organisational HR collaborations

Whereas there is discussion about the question whether governance structures are based on one of the three modes (price, authority or trust) or that combinations are possible, there is reason to assume that a collaborative community type of governance (combining the three modes) is more likely to be applied if organisations engage in external ties to solve HR-related issues. Joining forces in these areas may be complex and require an exchange of knowledge, which increases the likelihood of hybrid governance including price, authority and trust (Adler, 2001; Koster, 2018). In addition to that, the knowledge intensity of organisations is further expected to influence the choice of governance structure. The more knowledge-intensive the organisation, the more complex the HR issues are expected to be, and thus the higher the chances of applying a mixture of price, authority and trust to the external ties. In what follows, the knowledge intensity of organisations is conceptualised as the stock of knowledge and the use of organisational learning practices.

Stock of knowledge: educational level

The stock of knowledge available in the organisation relates to the type of work that is performed in the organisation. As prior research shows, the more knowledge-intensive that work is, the less organisations rely on formal mechanisms alone by providing autonomy to employees (Van Nordenflyght, 2010; Zardkoohi *et al.*, 2011). The provision of autonomy gives rise to the agency and transaction costs problems identified by Ouchi (1980) and which the clan form of governance seems to overcome. A reason for this is that the behaviour of

knowledge-workers is bound to professional rules and socialisation (Meroño-Cerdan *et al.*, 2007; Trede *et al.*, 2012). On the one hand, this lowers the need to monitor these workers, but besides that, it may be a fitting organisational solution since it is more difficult to monitor them in the first place and it may be necessary for them to have autonomy to do their job. If an organisation provides more autonomy to its workers, the more likely it is that it also applies this to the governance of external relationships. The first hypothesis summarises this link.

- H1.* The collaborative community mechanism for inter-organisational HR collaborations depends upon the stock of knowledge within the organisation.

Organisational learning practices

A different, more dynamic view regarding the knowledge intensity of organisation relates to the use of organisational learning practices (Teece, 2007). In the knowledge economy, production processes are based on information and knowledge, which need to be developed and maintained (Powell and Snellman, 2004). Therefore, as the knowledge intensity of organisations is higher, the ability to learn is more important (Calantone *et al.*, 2002; Teece, 2007; Jimenez-Jimenez and Sanz-Valle, 2008). Learning within organisations is achieved through a combination of (formal) training and (informal) on-the-job-learning (Bishop, 1996). Besides that, organisational learning requires that organisations monitor which skills need to be developed (Koster, 2021). Together with training and on-the-job learning, this constitutes the learning practices of an organisation (Carmeli and Shaffer, 2008).

The governance issues that Adler (2001) identifies mainly concern knowledge-intensive organisations. These organisations are likely to be governed by a mixture of governance mechanisms to generate the required knowledge and manage its operation (Foss, 2007) and the development of collaborative communities to govern inter-organisational ties (Snow *et al.*, 2011; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018). Hence, the hypothesis reads as follows:

- H2.* The collaborative community mechanism for inter-organisational HR collaborations depends upon organisational learning practices.

Data and method

Data collection

An online survey was conducted among a cross-section of Dutch organisations to gather the necessary data for this study. The survey (The Sustaining Employability Employer Survey) contains several questions about the characteristics of the organisations and HRM-related ties with other organisations. Organisations were approached via the Business Panel of Kantar (NIPOBase Business). This panel includes representatives of private and not-for-profit organisations (owners and HR managers) with two or more employees. From this panel, 1,000 representatives of these organisations were invited to participate in this study. In total, 549 of them responded by filling in the online survey. However, since not all organisations collaborate with other organisations, the data set that could be used to test the hypotheses includes fewer organisations. To select these organisations, representatives were asked to indicate whether they collaborate with other organisations on HR-related issues. The extent to which the organisation collaborates with others on HR-related issues was measured as follows. Respondents first read the introduction sentence – “Does your organisation collaborate with other organisations on [...]” – followed by “recruitment and selection”, “training”, “career and development”, “pay” and “outflow”. Each of these questions could be marked with a yes (a value of 1) or a no (a value of 0). Organisations that did not collaborate at all (a score of 0 on the five items) were removed from the data set, since they cannot provide information about the governance of HR collaborations. Hence, the data set consists of

organisations that collaborate on at least one of the HR issues. These analyses include 161 organisations in total.

Measures

Collaborative community. The extent to which the collaboration with other organisations reflects a collaborative community was measured with a set of questions which were developed in accordance with prior research, such as Alder (2001), Poppo and Zenger (2002) and Koster (2018). In total eight questions are formulated to measure how inter-organisational collaboration is governed. Respondent could rate these items on a scale from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (applies completely). Table 1 presents the exact wording of the items.

The structure of these items is analysed. First, a reliability analysis is conducted to assess the interrelationships between the items. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale is 0.74. This indicates that the items can be combined. This variable is created by adding the scores of the items and dividing the total score by 8. The resulting variable is termed *collaborative community*.

In addition to that, a cluster analysis was conducted. This analysis shows that there is a difference between organisations regarding the extent to which their inter-organisational collaboration reflects a collaborative community. This analysis shows that about 53% of the organisations have a high score on each of the 8 items (representing the collaborative community), while the other 47% have relatively low score (indicating that they are not applying the collaborative community type of governance). To capture this aspect of inter-organisational HR collaboration, a dummy variable is constructed. The variable has the value of 0 for the organisations that do not use the collaborative community type of governance, and 1 if the collaboration is governed as a collaborative community. The variable is termed *collaborative community dummy* to distinguish it from the other dependent variable.

Knowledge intensity. Two indicators of knowledge intensity of organisations are included in the analysis. The first indicator is based on the stock of human capital of the organisation. This variable is labelled *educational level*. The variable is measured by asking respondents about the percentage of lower, medium and higher educated workers in the organisation. Hence, the variable consists of three categories. In the analyses, the category “% higher educated” serves as the reference category.

The second indicator of knowledge intensity is labelled *organisational learning practices*. Whether organisations have these practices is measured by asking respondents to rate 4 questions about learning in the organisation on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (does not apply

Collaborative community

- (1) The collaboration is based on a mutual goal that everyone strives for
- (2) The collaboration is based on formal rules
- (3) Existing rules are continuously improved
- (4) The collaboration is based on informal relationships which are aimed at problem-solving
- (5) There is a high level of trust between the partners of the collaboration
- (6) The collaboration is based on joint decision making
- (7) Gains are shared based on the contributions of the partners of the collaboration
- (8) You need to cooperate with others to get access to the necessary knowledge and skills

Organisational learning practices

- (1) The organisation has a yearly budget for the development of personnel
- (2) The organisation uses training
- (3) Whether a training period is required for new workers
- (4) Skill needs are regularly assessed

Table 1.
Measures

at all) to 5 (applies completely). The exact wording of the questions is presented in [Table 1](#). The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75. The variable is calculated by adding the scores on the 4 items by dividing them by 4.

Control variables. The following control variables are added to the analyses. The size of organisation is measured with the number of employees of the organisation. This variable is termed *organisational size*. Next to that, several characteristics of the organisations are included, namely, the *percentage temporary workers*, the *percentage flexible workers* and ageing of the workforce (indicated with the *percentage employees of 55 and older* in the organisation). Finally, the *economic sector* (three sectors are distinguished, namely, raw materials and manufacturing, service sector and the public sector), in which the organisation operates is added as a control variable. This variable is a categorical variable; the service sector serves as the reference category. [Table 2](#) provides an overview of the descriptive statistics of the variables.

Analyses

Two dependent variables are investigated. The variable *collaborative community* ranges from 1 to 5 and can be assessed using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis. The variable *collaborative community dummy* has 2 values, 0 and 1. Therefore, an OLS regression analysis cannot be applied. Instead, this variable is investigated using a logistic regression analysis. Besides this difference in analysis techniques, the models are similar: the control variables are included together with the knowledge-intensity variable to test [Hypotheses 1](#) and [2](#).

Results

The results of the OLS regression analysis and the logistic regression analysis are reported in [Table 3](#). While two different dependent variables are investigated, a more fine-grained measure of collaborative community and a dichotomous one, the results are similar.

[Hypothesis 1](#) states that the stock of human capital that the organisation applies explains the use of collaborative community to govern inter-organisational HR collaborations. There is little support for this hypothesis. Organisations that have more highly educated employees do not differ from those with medium educated employees. They are, however, somewhat more inclined to use the collaborative community than organisations with larger shares of less-educated employees. These differences are only significant at the 5% level. Hence, it is

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Percentage
HRM collaboration	0	1			44
Organisational size	0	1,200	58.62	138.50	
% Temporary employees	0	80	17.16	17.71	
% Flexible employees	0	100	16.70	16.97	
% Employees >50 y.o.	0	100	31.60	24.51	
Raw materials and manufacturing	0	1			18
Services	0	1			63
Public	0	1			19
% Lower educated	0	100	26.54	24.38	
% Medium educated	0	100	44.02	27.77	
% Higher educated	0	100	45.44	44.04	
Organisational learning practices	1	5	3.83	0.72	
Collaborative community	1	5	3.46	0.58	
Collaborative community dummy	0	1			53

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics

Source(s): Sustaining employability employer survey

	Model 1 collaborative community			Model 2 collaborative community dummy			Odds
	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>p</i>	
Constant	2.96	0.32	0.00	-1.98	1.31	0.13	0.14
Organisational size	-0.02	0.03	0.45	-0.05	0.12	0.70	0.96
% Temporary employees	-0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.03	0.01	0.02	0.98
% Flexible employees	0.00	0.00	0.95	0.01	0.01	0.49	1.01
% Employees >50 y.o.	0.00	0.00	0.84	0.00	0.01	0.68	1.00
Sector (service sector is reference)							
Raw materials and manufacturing	0.11	0.12	0.39	0.26	0.48	0.59	1.29
Public	0.03	0.11	0.81	0.42	0.45	0.36	1.52
Educational level (% higher is reference)							
% Lower educated	-0.00	0.00	0.05	-0.02	0.01	0.02	0.98
% Medium educated	0.00	0.00	0.75	0.00	0.01	0.78	1.00
Organisational learning practices	0.20	0.07	0.00	0.81	0.28	0.00	2.25
Adjusted R^2		0.10					
Nagelkerke's R^2					0.20		
<i>N</i>		161			161		

Source(s): Sustaining employability employer survey

Table 3.
Regression analyses

possible to state that the stock of human capital explains a small part of the application of a mixture of governance mechanisms. However, this only applies to the extremes (lower vs higher educated), and the effects are small.

The situation is totally different regarding [Hypothesis 2](#), which stated that the use of the collaborative community to govern inter-organisational HR collaborations is explained by the learning practices of organisations. This hypothesis is fully supported by the analysis. There is a positive and statistically significant relationship between organisational learning practices and collaborative community ($b = 0.20$; $p < 0.001$) as well as between organisational learning practices and the dummy variable measuring whether organisations apply collaborative community governance to inter-organisational HR collaborations ($b = 0.81$; odds ratio = 2.25; $p < 0.001$). Hence, [Hypothesis 2](#) is fully supported.

Regarding the control variables, it is worthwhile to mention that most of the other organisational characteristics do not explain the use of collaborative communities. The only exception is that organisations employing more temporary workers are somewhat less inclined to apply this type of governance.

Conclusions and discussion

Conclusion

The results show that inter-organisational HR collaborations are governed with a mixture of governance mechanisms called collaborative communities. The use of collaborative communities to structure HR collaborations is also more prevalent among organisations in which learning is more important. The results are in line with studies of inter-organisational relations showing stronger support for the idea that the governance mechanisms are complements (e.g. [Cao and Lumineau, 2015](#)) as well as those stating that collaborative communities thrive (or are required) in a knowledge-intensive environment ([Alder, 2001](#); [Koster, 2018](#)).

Discussion and implications for research

While prior research suggests that organisations can establish external ties to solve HR-related issues ([Gardner, 2005](#)), research in this area remained scarce. The present study

shows that these collaborations indeed exist, are managed in a particular way (in the form of collaborative communities) and matter in a particular context (namely, if the organisation is more knowledge-intensive). As such, this research extends the insight of previous studies into inter-organisational collaborations in the technical domain (Nooteboom, 2008; Tomlinson and Fai, 2013; Zahoor and Tabbaa, 2020). Hence, the research shows that applying the knowledge from these areas to the field of HRM can generate new insights. First, it shows that organisations do indeed collaborate with other organisations on HR-related issues. And, secondly, it provides insights into how they do that.

Concerning the way in which inter-organisational HR collaborations are governed, the following can be stated. Whereas several authors have argued that the collaborative community is a suitable governance mechanism for inter-organisational relationships, much of the work conducted in that area is either theoretical (Adler, 2001), focused on a specific case (Snow *et al.*, 2011) or based on simulations (Obel *et al.*, 2018). The present study, in contrast, relies on a survey instrument. Since this survey is generic, it can be applied across different settings and organisations. Hence, in addition to prior research showing that organisations choose a collaborative community to govern their relationships with other organisations, the present analysis indicates how widespread the use of this mechanism is. Furthermore, since the survey instrument is developed and tested in the present study, it can be utilised in other research investigating inter-organisational relationships (HR collaborations as well as other types of inter-organisational collaborations).

Overall, this study contributes to HRM research by focusing on the role of external ties to solve HR-related issues. In that sense, it is a call to HRM researchers to look and think more across organisational boundaries. While traditionally, the human resource policies and practices of organisations are bound to a particular organisation and are studied extensively by HRM researchers, there is a need to be more outward-looking (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). Whereas a large share of human resource studies is implicitly or explicitly grounded in open systems approaches such as contingency theory, with its focus on internal and external fit, it seems that much of the research is based on the idea that external fit can only be achieved by adapting the internal policies and practices to the external environment. What the present research shows is that there is merit in the idea that organisations achieve fit by creating HR-related collaborations with other organisations and not just by applying and renewing their HR functions on their own. Focusing on these collaborations opens a door to a wealth of research concerning how organisations build such alliances, learn from each other and whether these collaborations offer specific advantages to organisations.

Finally, the research shows that the collaborative community is applied by more knowledge-intensive organisations. Theoretically, this is in line with the theoretical expectations about the knowledge economy (Adler, 2001; Powell and Snellman, 2004). There are two interpretations of this finding. On the one hand, knowledge intensity goes along with specific issues in the HR domain that require external knowledge sharing and learning from other organisations. On the other hand, solving the governance issues stemming from collaborations between knowledge-intensive organisations cannot rely on control alone and needs to rely on trust relations as well (Gaur *et al.*, 2011). Given that it can be assumed that the process of knowledge intensification of the economy continues, it is likely that more organisations will be engaged in inter-organisational HR collaboration based on the collaborative community mechanism in the near future.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research has several implications and limitations. The first is that much more research is needed to understand where these HR collaborations come from as well as why organisations choose to govern them in a particular way. In that regard, this study is a first step. Additional

studies are needed to extend our knowledge about how widespread these HR collaborations are and under which conditions they are applied. To a certain extent, this is also a matter of data gathering. International comparative surveys such as the European Company Survey (ECS, 2015) do have information about inter-organisational collaboration. Adding questions about HR collaborations as well as the way in which these and other collaborations are governed is worthwhile. This would also help overcoming another limitation of this study, namely, its focus on a single country. Since the data are from one country, one should be careful with generalising the outcomes to other countries, which may differ in knowledge intensity. In that regard, it should be noted that the Netherlands is an example of a knowledge economy. According to the Global Knowledge Index of 2020 it is on spot 5, behind Switzerland, the US, Finland and Sweden (UNDP and MPRF, 2020). Therefore, while the results cannot directly be transferred to other countries, they indicate what can happen if more countries move in the direction of a knowledge economy. The expectation would be that in these countries, more organisations would choose to create collaborative communities to solve HR-related issues. Of course, future research is required to test that expectation. In the present study, the focus is on organisational characteristics explaining the governance of HR collaborations. Additional research should move in the direction where it is possible to further investigate the characteristics of the collaborations, the collaboration partners, as well as the dynamics taking place within these collaborations, much in the vein of Gardner's (2005) study of HR alliances. That research can to a large extent rely on work that has been conducted in the field of inter-organisational relationships (Lumineau and Oliviera, 2018; De Pourcq and Verleye, 2021), by applying these insights, research methods and theoretical explanations to the field of HRM.

Implications for practice

This research offers two main insights for managers of organisations and those providing advice to organisations. The first practical insight concerns the design of inter-organisational HR collaborations. Apart from the benefits that such collaborations may bring to organisations, the present research provides concrete suggestions on how to structure these collaborations. Based on the information that the organisations give about their experience, the research shows that it is possible to combine different modes of governance (price, authority and trust). The questions that are used to investigate these HR collaborations in this study can also be used to evaluate one's own collaborations. The eight items in Table 1 can be applied to the HR collaborations of organisations by asking questions such as the following: Is this collaboration based on a mutual goal (and is that goal clear to the participating organisations)? Is there a system to ensure that existing rules are improved (and, how well does that system work)? How is the decision-making of this collaboration structured? By ticking the eight boxes, organisations are able to see whether they are missing something in their current collaborations and can use it to structure new collaborations. What this research also shows is that organisations tend to be consistent in their choice of governance structure; they either try to maximise or minimise all three modes of governance. Based on this, it is suggested to organisations involved in inter-organisational HR collaborations to make a choice: either all three modes are applied as well as possible, or they are applied minimally. What does not seem to work is maximising one of the three underlying modes of governance (price, authority and trust).

Secondly, from the finding that the background characteristics of organisations do not matter for the choice of governance, while organisational learning practices do, it follows that organisations can work on the preconditions for establishing collaborative communities to deal with issues in the HR domain. Whereas these background characteristics (workforce composition, organisational size and economic sector) are not easily changed, organisational

practices can be managed. Again, the survey items provide a steppingstone to assess these practices of one's own organisations (or the organisation that one is advising). Asking questions regarding the training of employees, whether there is sufficient budget and whether required skills are regularly assessed, organisations can evaluate how these practices are currently fulfilled and assess what needs to be added or improved. Organisations engaged in HR collaborations or those considering creating such external ties with other organisations are recommended to develop these practices if they are striving for creating collaborative communities to solve issues in the HR domain with other organisations.

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