

The Effect of Sales and HRM Strategic Alignment on a Corporate Sustainable Competitive Advantage: The Significant Role of the HR Business Partner

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Abstract—This paper aims to examine the effect of strategic alignment of Sales and Human Resources Management (HRM) in creating a corporate sustainable competitive advantage. Our paper notes that a product of such a collaborative/competitive association signifies the organizational consensus on the significance of synthetic, personalized HRM services towards an effective implementation of relational marketing strategies and practices. The paper expands on the significance of the role of the HR business partner as key towards an effective strategic alignment of sales and HRM. The conceptual model was tested to represent the proposed relationships among the related variables. Data were collected from a total of 87 usable questionnaires representing the views of line management of Greek and international firms operating in Greece. The three hypotheses of the study tested were analyzed by SPSS 20 software adopting principal component analysis as an extraction method resulting from a factor analysis. The rotation method applied was varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Finally, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied in analyzing the differences among group means in the sample. The survey embedded a qualitative confirmatory case study, purporting to originate from top management regarding the effect of strategic alignment of sales and HRM upon their competitive advantage.

Our findings proved that without successfully aligning HRM and sales, relational marketing strategy and implementation, services as well as relational quality will be impaired and therefore potential for corporate sustainable competitive advantage will be lost.

Index Terms—Human resources management, HR business partner, relational sales, strategic alignment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Marketing has recently been redefined in terms of services and relationships [1]. According to [1] “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large”.

This definition - which has a relationship, value-delivery process orientation - considers input from a broad cross-section of the Association membership. Marketing is regarded as an 'activity' instead of a 'function' and is positioned broadly within a firm. In their academic work,

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[2]-[6] described the derivation of this definition, defending it on the basis that a service rather than product-focused definition was a more natural and accurate reflection of the primacy of service concepts in contemporary marketing practice.

Both services-marketing and relationship marketing (RM)-make the case that the people responsible for service provision and/or customer-contact are of very significant importance in respect to successful implementation of marketing strategy and therefore to the success of the organization. It's the people and not the abstract concept/entity/branding of the firm, who truly learn about the customers and whom the customers learn about the firm through. It is the people from whom the customer expects (and sometimes gives) loyalty, trust and commitment [7], [8]. To many customers, the firm is its people. Increasing alignment between customers and sales-reps becomes a key component of corporate strategy and therefore the goal of many efforts for change. This intertwining of marketing strategy and process, and people management - within and without the business - justifies closer and further consideration by the business academy.

This paper investigated using literature findings [9]-[13], the present survey representing the views of top rank business executives from Greek and international firms operating in Greece, and the findings of one qualitative confirmatory case study, the effect of Sales and HRM strategic alignment on a corporate sustainable competitive advantage and the significant role of the HR business partner as part of an innovative and relational-oriented HR service system. We consider as significant to provide an interdisciplinary framework of findings discussion echoing the optimum alignment of Sales and HRM. Our contribution resulting from this research study is that without successfully aligning HRM and sales, relational marketing strategy design and implementation, provision and maintenance of competitive services to customers by the sales force as well as relational quality will be impaired, and therefore, potential for corporate competitive advantage lost.

II. THE STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

The inherent proposition of this study is that strategic alignment of business activities such as HRM and sales is a “state of being and a set of actions” [9], referring to the integration of complex service systems, processes and responses to changes in the external environment.

For the purposes of this study, strategic alignment of marketing and HRM has a causal linkage to a sustainable competitive advantage [14], [15].

It is increasingly acknowledged that the basis of long-term organizational success resides in the corporate ability to continuously foster creativity, and realize a positive working environment connected with sophisticated HRM practices [16], [17]. Research has also shown that the levels of certain types of investments in HRM practices can be successfully aligned with organizational strategies to enhance organizational performance [18]-[20], as cited in [17].

Often, the concept of strategic alignment when used in business is referred to as strategic fit [21] indicating the extent to which HR and other management practices are congruent with the overall business strategy and wider environment [22], strategic match [23] or simply the interface between two things [24]. This and surrounding issues have already been the focus of much study and reflection by HR scholars [25], as well as business scholars within the general context of strategic management [26], [27].

Ref. [28] in her model indicated that marketing strategy implementation effectiveness will be influenced by the level of connectedness between marketing and HR as well as by the absence of conflict among business activities.

The relevance of investigating the relational sales-HRM interface is underscored by findings indicating that the people area is the greatest constraint to marketing strategy implementation [29]-[37]. Reference [38] asserts that “the marketing department’s effectiveness depends on how well its personnel are selected, trained, directed, motivated, and evaluated”. Such an argument is most imperative for the interface between sales and HRM, since relational focused sales-reps are the people responsible to implement a corporate marketing strategy.

Ref. [27] note that “any discussion of alignment must concern itself with the goals to be achieved, the performance of the organization against those goals and the process by which it is intended that the goals should be achieved”. They strongly argue that “alignment only exists when there is consensus over process as well as goals” [27].

This paper’s conceptual framework is based on findings [9]-[13], considering the strategic RM and HRM strategic alignment as an indisputable prerequisite towards the design and implementation of a Sales and HRM strategic alignment – a sound service quality system design towards improved corporate performance and a sustainable competitive advantage. RM success is largely dependent on how well the organization manages people both on the outside (customers) and on the inside (front-line service providers). Most fundamentally, excellent services marketing is based on services provision, service provision is based on service providers, and the quality and ability of service providers is a function of HRM [39], [40].

In short, successful implementation of RM requires successful implementation of HR strategies and tactics.

III. RELATIONAL SALES

A noteworthy trend in RM research has been the recognition that the long-term key to success may lie in a relational, trust-based and committed approach to the buyer-seller interaction [41]-[44]. Traditionally, the emphasis in

RM literature was on getting the close, with little thought being given to the means (e.g. the value generating interaction process) by which the sale was obtained, customer expectations of the sales process, or the likelihood that any buyer would be a source of future business [8], [37]. Over the past two decades, there has been a progressive shift from considering customers as passive audiences to appreciating them as active players [45]. This transformation has important implications for RM as perceptions of value shift from value creation through exchange to value creation through use. Co-creating value-in-use in a joint sphere of responsibility [46]-[49] becomes the concern of both the customer and firm and is one that is critical to strengthening customer–firm relationships. Value-in-use seeks the active participation of the customer in resource-sharing and contributing and enhancing relational outcomes.

Ref. [50] and [51] comment positively on the increasing significance of the relationship development between the seller and the buyer even after the “sale is over” and the charisma of the seller to enhance and maintain the process.

Authors [44], [52], [53] argue that if sales-reps are to meet future challenges, they need to adopt the perspective of the true, dedicated business professional and employ a customer-oriented approach employing truthful, non-manipulative tactics, which satisfy the long-term needs of both the customer and the selling firm.

Implicit in the sales management literature, [51], [54] have assumed that sales-reps primarily think of themselves as occupying a sales role. There is academic research demonstrating varying levels of role ambiguity and clarity [55], which when coupled with empirical studies illustrating differences among levels of the selling and customer orientations of sales-reps [37], [39], [48], [51] suggest that sales-reps may see themselves less homogeneously than previously assumed. The role identity is the way in which sales-reps define and view themselves in a given task role [29], [30]. For example, sales-reps may see themselves as taskmasters, or even field specialists. Each of these identities guides salesperson actions because people seek activities that are consistent with how they view themselves [30].

In the sales literature two natural sales-reps role identities emerge. One is that of a sales consultant and another that of a technical specialist. Sales consultants view their role as that of “a relationship manager aiming to help customers with challenges across all dimensions of their business, with the goal of providing solutions and creating collaborative relationships” [54]. Following this relational business approach, sales literature moves away from the sale of individual products in favor of solutions - customized bundles of goods, services, and intellectual property [56], [57]. Ideally, these combined goods/services solutions synergistically increase the value delivered to buyers, establish barriers to competitors within existing accounts, and create new growth opportunities via product and market extensions [58].

In comparison to the relational oriented sales role identity, [54] define a technical specialist as “a salesperson who relies on their particular product/service knowledge to solve customer problems”. In relying on their own technical

skills, technical specialists may be more inclined to overlook the talent of other organizational members dispersed across the selling organization. In contrast, sales consultants see their role as solving customer problems regardless of where the needed expertise might be found. Further, the relational focus of sales consultants enables discovery of unmet customer needs and opportunities; whereas, the technical specialists' focus on current technical problems may limit the identification of ways in which to help customers in the long run [54].

IV. HUMAN RESOURCES SYSTEMS

Researching the rationale, on how and why relational sales-reps play a critical role in effective RM strategy implementation, it is significant to acknowledge that people management (HRM) is now becoming more "sensitive, personalized, context-dependent and cannot be managed through a set of predefined techniques" [59]. For the benefit of this study, we consider that HRM is today an activity that needs to be equally strategic than plainly operational, business-focused, explicitly internal as well as external customer-focused, cost efficient, innovative and structured to respond to rapidly demanding corporate priorities. It is through this prism that HRM is a value-adding process due to its potential for creating organizational competitiveness [10], [11], [60]-[62]. The addition of value by HRM is based on the creation of a sustainable competitive advantage enabling an organization to compete on performance issues over an extended period. "By ensuring that an organization changes, learns, moves, and acts faster, HR contributes to the bottom line" [60]. Scholars such as [63] and [64] note that value-adding HRM develop high performance, complex and innovative systems enhancing front-line service employee competences, commitment, and productivity.

Similarly, studies of the same nature contend that organizations adopting high performance systems will have better operational as well as financial performance [65], [66]. Research has also shown that the levels of certain types of investments in effective HR practices can be successfully aligned with organizational strategies to enhance organizational performance [18]-[20], as cited in [17].

Ref. [67] further state that the main role of innovative HRM systems is being a strategic partner by aligning its policies with business strategy. In this attempt, the tools available to the function are productivity and goal-achievement measurement, development of performance standards, and linking rewards to appraisal. Overall, profitability, efficiency, productivity, fame and competitiveness become criteria of success [68].

The concept of HR business partnering as a contributing link in an effective and efficient HRM system, emerged in the mid-1990's as a solution to the multiple corporate needs, complex, diverse, hard to handle operational structures involving a plethora of corporate Mergers and Acquisitions (M&A's), leading to talents' attrition, resulting in significant waste of financial and human resources. The HR-Business partner role was one of several key HR roles, which [61] proposes in HR literature. This role becomes progressively key for a sustainable development of a value-

adding HR activity. The role involves working closely with business leaders on operational excellence, effective and efficient processes, functional innovation and professional foresight. Most indicatively, the role requires that the HR professional have a clear understanding of how HR fits with and matches the organization's mission and strategy as well as an understanding of basic business processes [55].

Ref. [10], [62] in their modification of the HR roles model introduced six roles (i.e. coach, architect, builder, facilitator, leader, and conscience) in the academic discussion. HR professionals are then expected to operate in six competence domains as credible activists, cultural steward, talent manager/organizational designer, strategic architect, business ally, and operational executor. Despite being one of the most frequently cited and used models among HR academics and practitioners [68]-[70], there is often an overlap across these roles, especially in relation to role ambiguity and role conflict. Equally, HR practitioners in roles other than strategic partner adopt a strategic focus [68], [70]-[75]. Reference [10] add to the discussion of role model applicability by introducing the concept of HR players instead of partners.

Considering further the integration of HRM with organizational strategic decision-making processes, it has been argued that representation on the Board of Directors or at the senior committee level is critical if HR managers are to have appropriate input into strategic decisions [76]. Such representation has also been considered important in the development of internally consistent and strategically focused HRM practices.

HRM and line management need to systematically listen and actively communicate with sales on a one-to-one basis. Thereby, they become aware and act upon the ways and means of adjusting business systems and processes dealing with the implementation of business strategies through the various operating channels. This last part deals with an increased concern of as to how much business knowledge, both formal and tacit, HR people need to ensure they are effective in a strategic business partner role [77].

Partly because of the disputes over HR competencies and roles, the implementation of the HR partner role has rarely followed a single model, and there is growing concern regarding the efficacy of the more generic and context-independent competency frameworks propounded by advocates of business partnering [10], [78].

This paper expands on the role, skills and competences of the HR business partner as a strong, key link of a personalized, extrovert and relational HR system towards the effective implementation of sustainable RM practices by relational associates for a sustained service excellence culture [50], [79].

Similar HRM practices are aiming at peoples' socialization [80]-[82] through strategic organizational activity interaction. They pointer to employees the strategic service focus of the organization's climate and can reinforce the deeper layers of organizational service culture. Broadly speaking, definitions of culture, center on "shared values and beliefs of how things should be and how things are" [83]. Service-oriented organizational culture focusses on the social and psychological context in which people, in our case relational sales-reps co-create and co-implement value

with customers [2]-[5] within a complex service design. This exact service design is a multidisciplinary field that involves marketing, HR systems and resources, operations, organizational structure, and technology disciplines [50], [84].

Following such a holistic approach, service design orchestrates service elements such as the physical environment, people (customers and employees), and service delivery process to help customers co-create their desired experiences [32], [84]-[86]. From an experience-oriented perspective, service design and management can be viewed as “orchestrating an integrated series of clues that collectively meet or exceed people’s emotional needs and expectations” [86]. This relational focus becomes ultimately important to consider in the often technically-oriented field of service science [79], [83]. Contributing to the concept of people-organization fit (e.g. organizational job, culture embeddedness), [87] claimed that the people make the place that is, organizations are nothing more than the collective

attributes of the people who participate in them as cited in [16]. This paper is considering the need for a holistic, integrated, value-adding approach into product/service markets. It aims at investigating the effect of Sales and HRM strategic alignment as key upon the development of organizational value and corporate growth.

V. METHODOLOGY

This survey presents Greek middle & upper-line management’s perceptions and understanding regarding the effect of sales and HRM strategic alignment in developing a sustainable competitive advantage. Moreover, the role of the HR strategic partner was examined as key towards the design and implementation of Sales and HRM strategic and operational alignment.

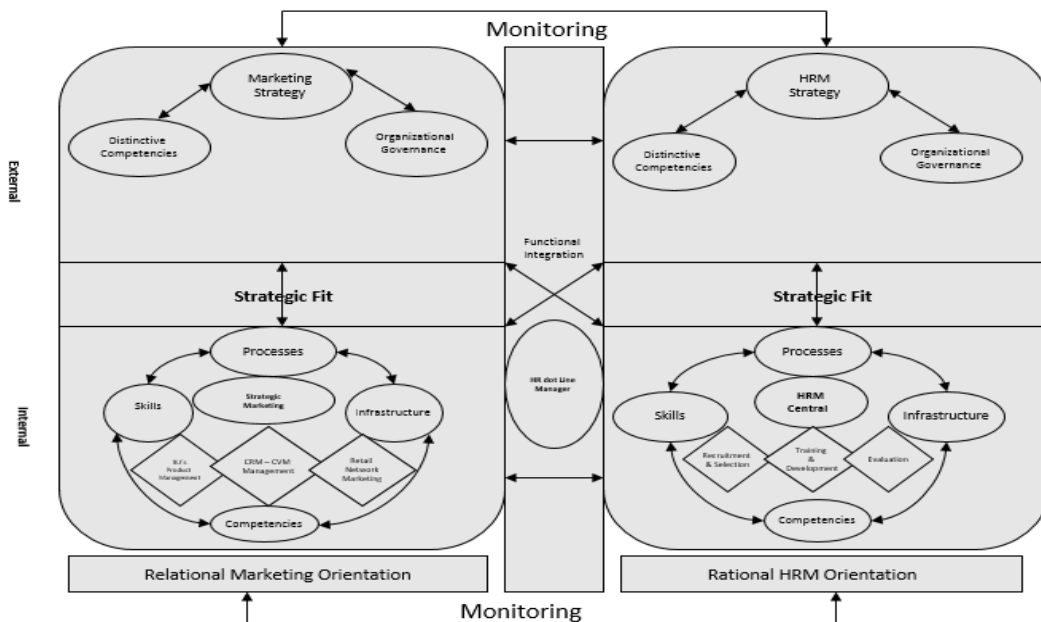


Fig. 1a. The conceptual framework / Aligning RM and HRM / Phase A – Integration.

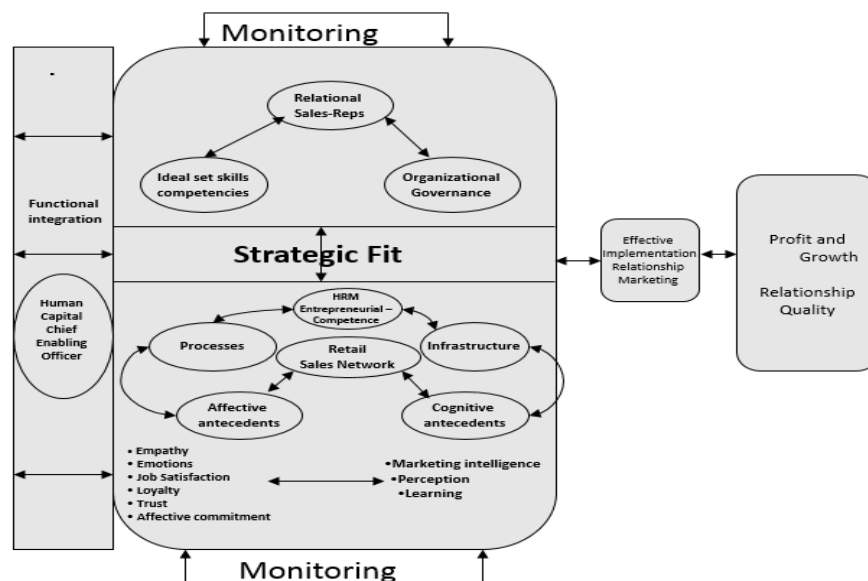


Fig. 1b. The conceptual framework / Aligning RM and HRM / Phase B – Interaction.

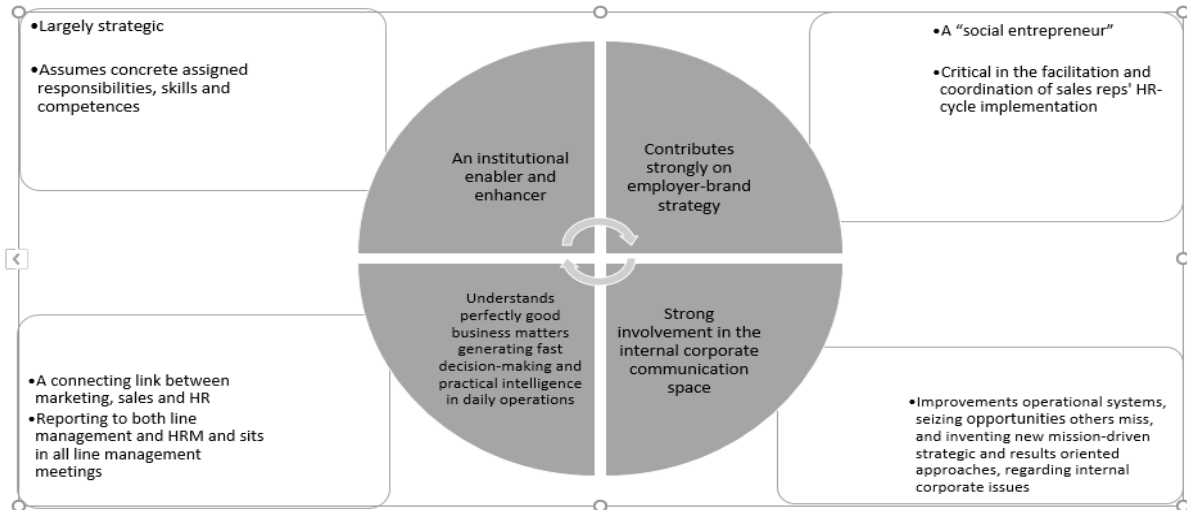


Fig. 2. The HR business partner, an optimum set of roles, skills & competencies.

One HR for all
The farmer, the employees, the managers, the Executive leaders
A relational-oriented operating model



Fig. 3a. The HRM operating model.

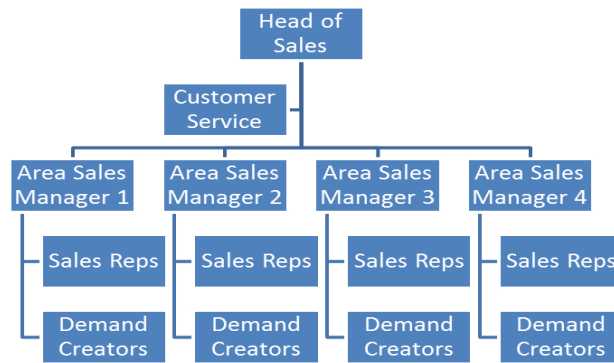


Fig. 3b. The sales operating model source: Agribusiness corporate data.

In our research approach, we decided to test a published conceptual model (see Figs. 1-2) applying a structured, undisguised questionnaire. Initially, we used as the basis for the development of our research survey design the case study findings; insights accruing from the Greek top management of a major international agricultural firm (see Figs. 4-5).

Our population was 292 ($N=292$) local and international business firms currently doing business in Greece and listed in published corporate directories such as the Greek People Management Association (GPMA) and ICAP stock-listed firms' directories. Following the initial subgroups selection, a random sample was selected, and all members of the

subgroup were e-mailed and later mailed the questionnaire [88]. There are limitations to this methodology since "cluster sampling results in relatively imprecise samples" [88].

We divided the population into clearly defined subgroups-clusters for reasons of decreasing research expenses. The industries which were represented in our sample were broad incorporating information technology, Insurance, banks & financial services firms, retailers and wholesalers, consumer product manufacturers, telecommunications, shipping, travel and tourism as well as heavy industry. More explicitly, we included in our selection variables reflecting on our intent to randomly

select geographically dispersed - all over the country - both local and international organizations, operating in various business markets/industries.

Our research aim was to collect a percentage of reliable and valid responses from the 292 original recipients of the questionnaire, a goal that it was accomplished to a degree due to the heavy schedule and roles of the top management status of the respondents under question.

The first group of the questionnaires' recipients was formed by HR directors. They were the management responsible for the design, development and implementation of HR systems in each firm, each market/industry. The second group of the questionnaires' recipients was formed by marketing & sales managers (commercial management) of each participating organization. They were the management responsible to design, develop and implement marketing and sales practices. The third group of the questionnaires' recipients was formed by top management, executive level individuals (Managing Directors, Presidents, and CEOs). They were the people responsible to lead, direct and manage participating organizations.

VI. THE QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

Our survey questionnaire was composed of 51 questions. They were clearly separated into four different sections dealing with our research questions / research hypotheses. The first section of the questionnaire covered demographic data such as: age, gender, level of education, professional area, position in the company, total number of years in present organization, total number of years of business work experience and previous positions of the respondents if any. The second section of the questionnaire covered business data including competitive status of the responding firms' participants in terms of sales and profits assumed over the last three years. The third section of the questionnaire addressed sales and HRM organizational alignment issues and corresponded to the first research question. The fourth and final section of the questionnaire addressed the role of the HR business partner as key towards an effective organizational HR and sales alignment. Clearly, the

respondents' answers were based on their corporate perceptions or broad business experience and knowledge according to their higher education studies. The fourth set of questions which were presented and further analyzed, corresponded to the second research question of the survey. The turnout of the survey was eighty-seven (87) completed questionnaires representing 30% of the total population (see Table I). The data collection was completed by the end of June 2016. In our data collection process, we used multi-item scales, validated in previous quantitative research, to measure the main constructs. As such, we adopted five-point Likert-type scales (1: strongly disagree – 5: strongly agree) for all items measuring the main constructs. We used SPSS 20 software for our analysis. More analytically, the investigators in accepting the three hypotheses as significant or not, applied factor analysis using as an extraction method the principal component analysis. Finally, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied in analyzing the differences among group means in the sample. The survey embedded a qualitative confirmatory case study among selected highly management officials.

Research questions:

This research study investigates:

1. The effect of Sales and HRM strategic alignment in developing a sustainable competitive advantage;
2. The role of the HR-Business partner towards the development of organizational value and corporate growth

Research hypotheses:

- H1: The strategic alignment of Sales and HRM produces a sustainable competitive advantage for an organization;
- H2: The adoption and development of innovative HRM systems, processes and practices are important for effective Sales performance implementation;
- H3: The HR strategic partner role is a key factor in effectively accomplishing strategic alignment between Sales and HRM.

TABLE I: GENDER BY DEPARTMENT

			Department			Total
			HR	Sales	GM	
Gender	Male	Count	12	28	15	55
		% within Department	50,0%	65,1%	75,0%	63,2%
	Female	Count	12	15	5	32
		% within Department	50,0%	34,9%	25,0%	36,8%
Total	Count		24	43	20	87
	% within Department		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

VII. THE RELATIONAL SALES AND HRM OPERATING MODEL – A CASE STUDY

In starting this survey, we applied a qualitative approach, questioning the executive leaders of a major, global

agribusiness organization of their perspectives regarding the effect of sales and HRM strategic alignment upon a sustainable competitive advantage and the significant role of the HR strategic partner in their industry and scope of business.

The managing officials of the firm indicated that their company's strategy as growing through customer-focused innovation in every aspect of their business model. They expressed their strong passion for their external and internal customers; those were the farmers who grow the world's food and their RM officers who implement their relational business practices.

The global agribusiness sales and HRM model (see Figs. 4-5) were developed around a territorial (area) business approach incorporating relational-focused demand creators and technical-experts. Sales force was strategically aligned to HRM in implementing an indisputable relational operating model towards all prevailing stakeholders. The executive leader of the firm referred on the model's design and implementation parameters:

"We have a focused business system for all of our key stakeholders of our organization. They are the farmers, our employees, our managers, our executive leaders. Our relational business system aims at imbuing excellence and quality services, on an international level. For this reason, we employ in our HRM operating model (see Fig. 4), global HR business services (HBS) with a strong e-coefficient. For example, the organization employs an online portal referring explicitly to our HRM practices. In addition, we employ an HR services desk, in close cooperation to sales and marketing that satisfies routine HR requests and enquiries (e.g. payroll issues).

These global HBS are integrated with territorial – local centers of HR experts (e.g. reward managers). These are the HR experts responsible to design and implement the entire HR-cycle on a territorial basis (South East Europe). Our HR service system design further develops getting integrated with the territorial strategic HR business partners (SBPs). In our model, SBPs had a clear role towards the implementation of HR strategies and plans. They strongly link to our sales force being sales-consultants for agribusiness solutions to farmers. We enjoy that their role is critical towards the effective implementation at a local level of our global HR processes" [Executive Leader].

The top management of the agribusiness organization through the adoption of this business model aimed at satisfying operational excellence, effective and efficient processes on products and innovative services and hence providing functional innovation and professional foresight among the centers of HR experts and HR partners. The management was fully convinced that sales and HRM have a common understanding of business matters that is serving both internal as well as external customers in an innovative, relational approach. In their business model, the sound and effective strategic alignment of Sales and HRM produced a sustainable competitive advantage for the firm. The adoption and development of innovative HRM systems, processes and practices were key towards effective Sales performance implementation; and finally, the HR business partner role was paramount in effectively accomplishing strategic alignment between Sales and HRM.

VIII. QUANTITATIVE DATA RESULTS

In the demographics section of the survey (see Table I),

the investigators observed a rather unequal distribution of sexes which is explained by the assumption that top management as well as line management of organizations in Greece is significantly male dominant.

The sample age distribution indicated a mature (Mean = 42, 17 years), largely experienced population (Mean = 17, 74 years of experience) primarily due to their top and line management status. The survey respondents were working in the same organization for an extended amount of time (Mean=8, 55 years) and were employed in the current job position for more than five years (Mean = 5, 13 years) practically implying that they were progressively moving upwards, getting promotions. This is obviously the case if the change in position indicates promotion or diversification.

The respondents' job function/position status within their organizations was consistent with their level of higher education since everybody in the sample had University level education with marketing, general business administration / MBA and HR representing the higher percentages reflecting on a group of respondents being in decision-making positions that could certainly influence the advancement of business operations.

In the second section of the survey, respondents were asked about their current and prevailing organizational data, incorporating sales and profit performance of their firms versus their competitors over the last three years. Respondents strongly confirmed that their companies were either leading, or one of the largest firms in the country, and to a large percentage part of an international organization. There were also a proportionate percentage of Greek local firms represented in the sample. When the participants were asked whether their organization was more profitable than its competitors over the last three years, 42% replied that they were leaders in their sector, 15% replied that they had the same performance, 12% respondent negatively and 13% did not provide any information. The same applies regarding sales and profit performance over the last year.

IX. DISCUSSION

Regarding the first hypothesis (see Tables II-III) we observe, based on the factor analysis, that the responses reflect on the significance of HR and sales alignment as paramount factors towards an effective implementation of RM strategy, services as well as relational quality. All three prove strong components of a corporate sustainable advantage (factor 1). Factor 1 includes all questions referring to the contribution of marketing sales and HR alignment towards corporate sustainability with loadings mostly higher than 0.5. Factor 5 reflects the perception of all corporate stakeholders as being significant of customer contact employees (primarily sales-reps and customer service employees) in providing strong customer experience, an embedded service quality thus developing a competitive advantage for their organizations in the respective industries and markets. Respondents appreciated sales-reps with a strong technical product capacity, but the relational focus is also a strategic business approach that they would equally focus on (factor 6).

TABLE II: ROTATED FACTOR MATRIX: SORTED FORM OF VARIABLES LOADINGS

Variables	Loadings
Factor 1	
Marketing, Sales and HR work are aligned in motivating sales reps	0.806
Marketing, Sales and HR communicate on sales reps performance issues	0.791
Marketing, Sales and HR exchange information on sales reps' performance	0.775
Marketing, Sales and HR are aligned in serving best customer needs	0.759
Marketing, Sales and HR have a similar strategic direction on customer issues	0.670
Marketing, Sales and HR use similar metrics for sales reps' performance	0.618
Senior management encourages Marketing, Sales and HR cooperation	0.511
Factor 2	
Marketing management record sales reps' performance	0.705
Sales management records sales reps' performance	0.693
Organization systematically trains sales reps over relational issues	0.646
Continuously foster creativity and realize positive working environment	0.571
Factor 3	
The sales reps are adequately trained in delivering relational practices	0.769
Organization rewards sales reps based on creative standards performance appraisal	0.651
The sales reps are well-informed by the marketing department on all products	0.592
Factor 4	
Innovation in systems is key in sales performance success	0.833
Delivering service quality is top priority	0.579
Great importance on satisfying customers	0.384
Factor 5	
Most important employees: Customer Service Reps	0.827
Most important employees: Sales Reps	0.691
Factor 6	
Technical product knowledge is critical for sales	0.859
Most important employees: Multimedia Contact Center Agents	0.602

Notes: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

TABLE III: TOTAL VARIANCE EXPLAINED

Factor	Initial Eigenvalue			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	7.465	35.547	35.547	4.480	21.331	21.331
2	1.732	8.247	43.794	2.571	12.242	33.573
3	1.580	7.524	51.318	2.308	10.990	44.563
4	1.335	6.359	57.678	1.921	9.150	53.713
5	1.128	5.370	63.047	1.531	7.291	61.004
6	1.004	4.780	67.827	1.433	6.824	67.827

Notes: Total Number of Variables: 21. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Clearly, as customers become more sophisticated and better-informed, the sales process is much less about selling a product and much more about creating a relationship. However, does local firms' management appreciate, recruit, select and further train and evaluate a "technical product sales-specialist" in improving their sales performance and revenue maximization or a "sales-consultant" with an indisputable relational identity status? Meta-analytic research on RM indicates the critical role of the individual sales-rep's relationship with the customer in achieving positive sales outcomes [42], [43]. Further, [54]

emphatically add regarding the role identity of sales-reps "given the dominant RM paradigm and the continuing emphasis on relationship selling in business practice, higher-performing salespeople will view themselves more as sales consultants (relational focus), whereas lower performers will view themselves more as technical specialists (technical focus)".

Regarding the second and third hypotheses, respondents provided their views on a set of questions regarding the significance of the HR business partner, as part of extrovert, people-centric, innovative HRM systems, processes and

practices. We need to note that respondents replied to the questionnaire based on their current organizational infrastructure or their broad business experience / knowledge. Their answers reflect on the second research question, as noted in the research methodology section of this paper. Moreover, and based on the respondents' views, the HR Business partner was present as an HR role in half of the firms of the sample. According to ANOVA analysis (see Table IV), there are no significant differences between the three groups regarding the roles' business acumen and strong contribution on employer / brand strategy (the first being marginally insignificant). Regarding the question whether the HR business partner has concrete skills and competences, there are significant differences between the three groups with a mean score of HR group significantly

higher than the other two groups. This was expected since the HR group believes that they play a vital role in organizational matters. Respondents agreed that the role is critical in the facilitation and coordination of sales-reps' HR-cycle (recruitment, selection, training, development and appraisal of relational focus sales-reps) design and implementation. These are the operational and administrative part of the role ensuring optimization of corporate strategic plans. The respondents agreed that it is part of the role providing social support and socially engage with sales-reps in creating proximity between line management and the relational sales-reps ensuring optimum resolution of their personal issues, thus developing their affective commitment to the organization (see Fig. 3).

TABLE IV: DESCRIPTIVES AND UNIVARIATE F TESTS

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	CV,%	Min	Max.	F Test (Sign.)
The HR-Business partner has concrete skills and competences	HR	24	4.25	0.608	14.3%	3	5	3.773 (0.027)
	Sales	37	3.68	0.944	25.7%	1	5	
	GM	18	3.89	0.676	17.4%	3	5	
	Total	79	3.90	0.826	21.2%	1	5	
The HR-Business partner understands perfectly well business matters	HR	24	4.13	0.850	20.6%	2	5	3,075 (0.052)
	Sales	37	3.62	1.114	30.8%	1	5	
	GM	18	3.44	0.705	20.5%	2	4	
	Total	79	3.73	0.983	26.4%	1	5	
The HR-Business partner contributes strongly on Employer – Brand strategy	HR	24	4.00	0.722	18.1%	3	5	2,632 (0.079)
	Sales	37	3.51	1.146	32.6%	1	5	
	GM	17	3.41	0.618	18.1%	2	4	
	Total	78	3.64	0.953	26.2%	1	5	

X. CONCLUSIONS

This paper investigated using findings [9]-[13], the present quantitative survey involving top management, employees in various industries, as well as the findings of a qualitative case in Greece, the effect of Sales and HRM strategic alignment on a corporate sustainable competitive advantage and the significant role of the HR Strategic Partner as part of a personalized, extrovert and relational oriented HR system. In this respect, we considered as significant to provide an interdisciplinary framework of findings discussion echoing the optimum alignment of Sales and HRM business activities. The implications of sales and HRM alignment were analyzed in our findings based on the framework of complex service systems, internal and external relationships excellence, and the key role played by relational type of sales-reps as quality service providers. Our contribution resulting from this research study is that without successfully aligning HRM and sales, relational marketing strategy design and implementation, provision and maintenance of competitive services to customers by

the sales force as well as relational quality will be impaired, and therefore, potential for corporate competitive advantage lost. In the business world today, sales converge with marketing to take on greater strategic significance to the organization. The vital role of sales as a strategic function of market-orientated organizations has been previously identified in the literature [89], [90].

There is a growing body of research linking sales strategy and marketing strategy. Thus, we see research highlighting the importance of aligning marketing strategy and sales objectives [91]; how collaboration between marketing and sales enhances business performance [92] and [93]. These are often approaches led by marketing strategy, in which sales strategy is linked indirectly to business strategy. Further, [46] identify the overcoming of functional boundaries and (often) the development of cross-functional teams as important facets of customer focused organizations.

In this sense, research directly linking sales strategy to HRM or business strategy is less common. Rare exceptions include [90], who argue for the strategic role of sales; and [94] who identify the need for sales strategies to fluctuate with overall company strategy, with success reliant on senior sales managers being well-informed about business

strategies and given the resources to match company objectives. In our view, effective sales management is multi-dimensional, evolving around complex, performance-oriented service systems, and dynamic business processes.

Our research findings noted that an organizational shift towards quality services/RM orientation has equally significant implications for the design and implementation of innovative, people-centered HRM systems. HRM is in fact a people-centered business activity. The new business trends require HRM to be a dynamic, extrovert activity systematically close to a portfolio of a relational oriented sales force. This can happen with the optimal adoption and embedment in the HRM structure of an equally extrovert, relational HR business partner role. The specific role attributes based on our findings (see Fig. 3) is suggested to be largely strategic, assuming concrete assigned responsibilities and employing a specific set of skills and competences. On this ground, the role improves operational systems, seizes opportunities others miss and invents new-mission driven strategic and results oriented approaches. The role turns out being an institutional business enabler and enhancer, contributing on the development and enhancement of the employer-brand strategy, with an undeniable social entrepreneur status, as well as with rising business acumen serving as a connecting link between HRM and Sales.

The investigators equally focused on the optimum administrative / operational skills and competences of the HR business partner role. Findings proved that the role is a transitional link between marketing, sales and HRM, reporting to both line management and HRM. The role sits in line management meetings and as such has the organizational capacity to understand business, generating fast decision-making and practical intelligence in daily operations. This is an issue of substantial improvement of a relational HR structure. Moreover, and as noted in the initial case study discussion, the role serves as a link between global business units' services and territorial centers of HR expertise facilitating the alignment of people strategy with corporate business plans. Following the findings of this study, HRM and sales are to be considered on adjacent and parallel paths to a common business destination and those explanations and understanding of human actions, interactions, hierarchy, power, negotiation, training, interdepartmental communication, will be of increasing relevance and significance to the design and implementation of relational marketing management. Without such an adaptation in HRM strategies and practices, an indisputable RM strategy cannot be designed or implemented by the sales-reps.

XI. LIMITATIONS

This research study has provided useful signposts and the basis for further research. It contains several limitations possibly reducing its effectiveness. The paper was based on a limited percentage of respondents primarily because the HR respondents were comparatively less to top and commercial management who participated in this study. This influences generalizability of the study's outcomes. Optimally, additional studies may be carried out with

several organizations to confirm or refute these findings. Considering the data collection process, we also considered numerous constraints since data accessibility was an issue simply because respondents were at higher top rank employment status and seniority positions in their firms. This produced several constraints regarding their time, accessibility and availability. In this direction, we approached firms and respondents with several follow-up practices incorporating numerous time-consuming approaches.

XII. FUTURE RESEARCH

This research indicates that a relational strategic orientation and a positive senior management attitude towards Sales and HRM alignment plays a direct role in influencing internal factors, which in turn allow greater collaboration between HRM and Sales. Senior management attitudes towards coordination, collaboration may also influence the creation of an appropriate interdepartmental culture. Future research could develop the effect of the adoption of innovative HR systems design on corporate financial performance standards. Does for example, the initiation of a complex and innovative RM, sales and HR system design ultimately produces financial corporate sustainability? The answer is to be developed in a potential publication.

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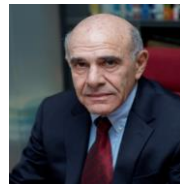
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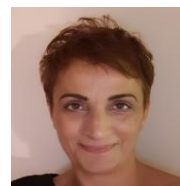
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