

From external engagement to competitiveness: The mediating roles of knowledge exchange and strategic HRM alignment

Evangelia Fragouli
Kingston University, London UK

Keywords

External Engagement; Knowledge Exchange; Strategic HRM; Organisational Competitiveness

Abstract

This study investigates how external engagement, knowledge exchange, and strategic human resource management jointly shape organisational competitiveness. It addresses three research questions: how external networks influence strategic HRM practices, how external knowledge flows strengthen HR capabilities, and how these dynamics support competitiveness outcomes. Grounded in Strategic HRM and knowledge-based perspectives, the study positions external engagement as a strategic channel through which organisations access expertise, emerging practices, and global insights that complement internal HR systems. A cross-sectional survey of HR leaders and senior managers across multiple sectors is combined with secondary data on partnership activity. Partial least squares structural equation modelling is used to examine the relationships between external engagement, knowledge-sharing practices, HRM alignment, and perceived competitiveness. Key findings show that organisations with stronger outward-facing relationships report higher levels of knowledge inflow, more coherent HRM alignment with strategic goals, and stronger perceptions of competitiveness. Knowledge-sharing acts as a central mechanism linking external connections to HR capability development, while HRM alignment serves as a pathway through which external engagement enhances organisational outcomes. The study provides an empirically tested framework that connects the above concepts with HR and show how external networks operate as strategic HR resources to support adaptability, innovation, and long-term organisational strength.

Introduction

Organisations operate in environments marked by rapid technological change, shifting labour markets, and increasing competitive pressure. These conditions require HR systems that are adaptive, externally informed, and capable of integrating new knowledge into workforce strategies. Strategic HRM research highlights that organisational performance increasingly depends on the ability to access and mobilise knowledge from outside the firm, rather than relying solely on internal resources (Boxall and Purcell, 2016; Wright and Ulrich, 2017). External engagement and knowledge exchange have therefore become central mechanisms through which organisations enhance capability development, innovation, and long-term competitiveness. External networks provide access to expertise, emerging practices, and diverse perspectives that support strategic decision-making and HRM alignment (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2011; Minbaeva, 2013). Yet, despite the growing relevance of these external relationships, the ways in which they interact with strategic HRM to influence competitiveness remain insufficiently examined.

The importance of this issue is amplified by current organisational challenges. Firms face persistent skill shortages, increased mobility of talent, and the need to respond quickly to new technologies and market shifts. These pressures require HR systems that are outward-looking and capable of absorbing external knowledge to support workforce agility and capability renewal (Jiang and Messersmith, 2018; Lepak et al., 2021). Industry partnerships, professional networks, and cross-sector collaborations have emerged as key sources of knowledge that complement internal HR practices. However, empirical research has not fully explored how these external relationships shape HRM alignment or how they contribute to perceived competitiveness. Existing studies often treat knowledge exchange as an

innovation mechanism or examine HRM as an internal system, leaving a gap in understanding how external engagement functions as part of a broader strategic HR architecture.

Background of the study, Research Questions& Objectives

External networks are recognised as channels that facilitate knowledge mobility, organisational learning, and capability building across boundaries (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Phelps et al., 2012). These networks expose organisations to new technologies, workforce trends, and emerging management practices. They also support the development of absorptive capacity, which enables firms to recognise, assimilate, and apply external knowledge (Zahra and George, 2002). Strategic HRM literature shows that HR systems aligned with external knowledge flows can strengthen talent development, leadership capability, and organisational adaptability (Wright and McMahan, 2011; Kang and Snell, 2009). Industry partnerships further support organisational learning by providing access to practitioner insights, sector-specific expertise, and collaborative problem-solving (Shipton et al., 2017). Despite these insights, limited empirical work integrates external engagement, knowledge exchange, and HRM alignment within a single framework. This gap is significant because organisations increasingly rely on external collaboration to enhance HR capability and sustain competitiveness in complex environments.

Research questions

1. How do external networks and industry partnerships influence strategic HRM practices
2. How do external knowledge flows contribute to HR capability development
3. How do these dynamics support organisational competitiveness

Research objectives

1. To analyse the relationship between external engagement and strategic HRM alignment
2. To examine the role of knowledge-sharing practices in strengthening HR capabilities
3. To assess how external engagement and HRM alignment relate to perceived organisational competitiveness

Conceptual Framework & Hypotheses

The conceptual framework draws on strategic HRM, knowledge-based perspectives, and organisational learning to explain how external engagement contributes to organisational competitiveness. External engagement is understood as the organisation's interaction with industry partners, professional networks, and external knowledge sources. These relationships generate knowledge inflows that support learning, capability development, and strategic responsiveness. Knowledge exchange represents the internal processes through which external inputs are interpreted, shared, and applied. Strategic HRM alignment reflects the extent to which HR practices are coherent with organisational goals and informed by external knowledge. Competitiveness is conceptualised as the organisation's perceived ability to adapt, innovate, and sustain performance in dynamic environments.

The framework proposes that external engagement enhances knowledge exchange by increasing exposure to diverse expertise and emerging practices. Knowledge exchange strengthens HR capability by supporting learning and the integration of new competencies. Strategic HRM alignment is influenced by both external engagement and knowledge exchange, as HR systems become more responsive to external trends and organisational needs. Competitiveness emerges as the outcome of these interactions, reflecting the organisation's ability to leverage external knowledge and align HR practices with strategic objectives.

Hypotheses

The above conceptual framework drives to the following hypotheses:

- H1: External engagement is positively associated with knowledge exchange.
- H2: Knowledge exchange is positively associated with strategic HRM alignment.
- H3: Strategic HRM alignment is positively associated with perceived organisational competitiveness.
- H4: Knowledge exchange is positively associated with perceived organisational competitiveness.

Literature Review

External Engagement as a Strategic Organisational Resource

External engagement has become a central strategic mechanism through which organisations access knowledge, expertise, and complementary capabilities that cannot be developed internally. As competitive environments become more volatile, firms increasingly rely on external actors to support adaptation, innovation, and strategic renewal (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Gulati et al., 2012). External engagement encompasses collaboration with industry partners, professional bodies, sector networks, universities, and cross-institutional alliances. These relationships provide access to diverse perspectives, emerging technologies, and sector-specific insights that strengthen organisational decision-making and capability development (Anand et al., 2021; Van Wijk et al., 2008). Research shows that organisations embedded in broader ecosystems are more resilient and better positioned to respond to environmental turbulence (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Lavie, 2006). As a result, external engagement is increasingly viewed as a deliberate strategic choice rather than a peripheral activity, enabling organisations to enhance their learning capacity and respond more effectively to market shifts and workforce challenges (Hitt et al., 2016; Teece, 2018).

External Networks and Knowledge Mobility

External networks facilitate the movement of knowledge across organisational boundaries and support the development of new capabilities. Network theory highlights that firms occupying central positions in inter-organisational networks benefit from higher levels of knowledge inflow and greater exposure to diverse information sources (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011; Ahuja, 2000). These networks accelerate the diffusion of innovative practices and allow organisations to benchmark against peers, enhancing their ability to identify emerging trends (Huggins and Thompson, 2015). Knowledge mobility is particularly important in sectors experiencing rapid technological change, where external actors often possess specialised expertise that internal teams lack (Molina-Morales and Martínez-Fernández, 2010). Repeated interactions within networks build relational trust, which increases the depth and quality of knowledge exchanged (Uzzi, 1997). Trust-based ties also reduce transaction costs and facilitate the transfer of tacit knowledge, which is essential for capability development (Reagans and McEvily, 2003). These insights underscore the strategic value of external networks as channels for knowledge mobility and organisational learning.

Knowledge Exchange and Organisational Learning

Knowledge exchange is widely recognised as a driver of organisational learning, capability development, and strategic renewal. It involves the transfer, interpretation, and application of knowledge sourced from external actors (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2011). The effectiveness of knowledge exchange depends on an organisation's absorptive capacity, defined as its ability to recognise, assimilate, and exploit new knowledge (Zahra and George, 2002). Firms with strong absorptive capacity are better positioned to integrate external insights into internal processes, including HR practices, talent development, and leadership capability (Minbaeva, 2013). Knowledge exchange also supports strategic renewal by enabling organisations to update their competencies and respond to emerging workforce trends (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Studies show that organisations that actively cultivate knowledge-sharing routines are more innovative and adaptable (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Grant, 1996). These routines help firms transform external knowledge into actionable insights that support decision-making and capability building.

Industry Partnerships as Knowledge Channels

Industry partnerships play a distinctive role in facilitating knowledge exchange, particularly in contexts where tacit knowledge is critical. Partnerships provide access to practitioner insights, sector-specific expertise, and collaborative problem-solving that strengthen organisational learning (Shipton et al., 2017). Tacit knowledge, which is difficult to codify, is often transferred through close interaction, shared experiences, and joint experimentation (Polanyi, 1966; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

Industry partnerships also expose organisations to regulatory developments, technological advancements, and emerging skill requirements, enabling HR functions to anticipate workforce needs (Farndale et al., 2020). Collaborative alliances support mutual capability building by creating opportunities for shared learning and co-creation of solutions (Anand et al., 2021). Research shows that firms engaged in sustained partnerships achieve higher levels of innovation, adaptability, and performance (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Lavie, 2006). These findings highlight the strategic value of industry partnerships as channels for knowledge exchange and capability development.

Strategic HRM and External Knowledge Integration

Strategic HRM emphasises the alignment of HR practices with organisational strategy to enhance performance (Wright and McMahan, 2011). In dynamic environments, this alignment increasingly depends on the integration of external knowledge into HR systems. HR functions informed by external insights are better equipped to design talent strategies, leadership development programmes, and workforce planning processes that reflect current and future skill demands (Boxall and Purcell, 2016; Jiang and Messersmith, 2018). External knowledge supports the development of agile HR systems capable of responding to technological disruption, demographic shifts, and labour-market volatility (Lepak et al., 2021). Research shows that HR systems aligned with external knowledge flows enhance organisational adaptability, innovation, and long-term competitiveness (Collings et al., 2019). This integration strengthens the strategic role of HRM within the organisation and reinforces its contribution to capability development.

HR Capability Development Through External Inputs

HR capability development is enhanced when HR professionals engage with external networks and industry partners. Such engagement provides exposure to emerging HR practices, new technologies, and innovative workforce models (Farndale et al., 2020). Professional networks support continuous learning among HR practitioners, enabling them to update their competencies and apply new approaches within their organisations (Ulrich et al., 2017). Studies show that HR functions with strong external ties are more effective in shaping organisational culture, supporting change initiatives, and aligning HR practices with strategic goals (Guest, 2017). External engagement also strengthens HR's ability to interpret labour-market signals and adjust talent strategies accordingly (Kang and Snell, 2009). These insights suggest that external engagement is a critical component of HR capability building and strategic alignment.

External Engagement, HRM Alignment, and Competitiveness

The relationship between external engagement and organisational competitiveness is increasingly recognised in the literature. Organisations that maintain strong external connections are better positioned to integrate new competencies, anticipate market shifts, and sustain performance in volatile environments (Gulati et al., 2012; Hitt et al., 2016). Strategic HRM plays a mediating role by translating external knowledge into HR practices that support capability development and workforce agility (Wright and Ulrich, 2017). When HRM is aligned with external knowledge flows, organisations achieve greater strategic coherence and competitive advantage (Lepak et al., 2006). Research grounded in the resource-based and knowledge-based views argues that knowledge-driven HR systems contribute significantly to organisational competitiveness by enhancing innovation, adaptability, and performance (Grant, 1996; Barney, 1991).

Competitiveness as an Outcome of Knowledge-Driven HRM

Competitiveness is influenced by the organisation's ability to leverage knowledge for strategic purposes. Firms with strong knowledge-driven HR systems demonstrate higher levels of innovation, adaptability, and performance (Shipton et al., 2017; Kang and Snell, 2009). External engagement enhances these outcomes by providing access to knowledge that informs HR strategy and supports capability renewal. Competitiveness therefore emerges from the interplay between external networks, knowledge exchange, and HRM alignment. This perspective aligns with contemporary views that emphasise the

strategic value of knowledge, collaboration, and capability development in sustaining long-term organisational success (Teece, 2018; Collings et al., 2019).

Methodology

The study employs a quantitative research design to examine the relationships between external engagement, knowledge exchange, strategic HRM alignment, and perceived competitiveness. A cross-sectional survey was administered to HR leaders and senior managers across multiple sectors, including services, manufacturing, education, and public administration. Respondents were selected based on their involvement in HR strategy, external partnerships, or organisational development. The survey included validated scales adapted from prior research on external engagement, knowledge exchange, HRM alignment, and competitiveness. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

Secondary data on partnership activity were collected from organisational reports, websites, and publicly available documents to complement the survey responses and provide contextual information on the nature and extent of external engagement.

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyse the data. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for complex models, its ability to handle smaller samples, and its focus on prediction and variance explanation. The analysis followed established procedures, including assessment of measurement reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, and evaluation of structural paths. Bootstrapping was used to test the significance of relationships. Control variables such as organisation size, sector, and international activity were included to account for contextual influences.

Data Collection

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to capture four main constructs: external engagement, knowledge exchange, strategic HRM alignment, and perceived organisational competitiveness. Items were adapted from established scales in the fields of strategic HRM, organisational learning, and knowledge management, with wording adjusted to fit the organisational and HR context. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire also included items on organisation size, sector, and international activity, as well as respondents' role and tenure, to be used as control variables and for sample description. A pilot test with a small group of HR professionals was conducted to check clarity, relevance, and completion time, leading to minor refinements in wording and layout.

Sample selection criteria & sample characteristics

Three main criteria guided sample selection. First, respondents had to hold a role with direct involvement in HR strategy, HR policy, or workforce planning, ensuring informed responses on HRM alignment and external engagement. Second, organisations needed to have at least some form of external collaboration or partnership activity, such as links with industry bodies, professional networks, or external training providers, to ensure relevance to the study focus. Third, only organisations with a minimum size threshold (for example, more than 20 employees) were included, to avoid micro-entities with limited formal HR structures. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used, drawing on professional networks, HR associations, and organisational contacts to reach eligible participants.

The target population consisted of organisations operating in sectors such as services, manufacturing, education, and public administration. The final sample included HR leaders, HR managers, and senior executives with responsibility for HR strategy, external partnerships, or organisational development. Organisations varied in size from small and medium-sized enterprises to large organisations, allowing examination across different structural contexts. Descriptive statistics summarised the distribution of respondents by sector, size, and role, providing an overview of the organisational and professional profile of the sample.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, as relationships are measured at a single point in time. Longitudinal research would provide stronger evidence of how external engagement and HRM alignment evolve. The use of self-reported data may introduce perceptual bias, although the inclusion of secondary data helps mitigate this concern. The sample, while diverse, may not fully represent all sectors or organisational sizes, limiting generalisability. The study focuses on perceived competitiveness rather than objective performance indicators, which may differ from actual outcomes. Future research could incorporate performance metrics, qualitative insights, or comparative case studies to deepen understanding of the mechanisms identified.

The analysis examined the relationships between external engagement, knowledge exchange, strategic HRM alignment, and perceived organisational competitiveness. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to assess the measurement and structural models. All constructs demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity, allowing interpretation of the structural paths.

Research Findings

Measurement Model Results

All constructs showed strong internal consistency. Composite reliability values ranged between 0.86 and 0.93, and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the 0.50 threshold. Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios.

Table 1. Measurement Model Summary

Construct	Composite Reliability	AVE	HTMT (max)
External Engagement	0.89	0.62	0.71
Knowledge Exchange	0.91	0.66	0.74
Strategic HRM Alignment	0.88	0.61	0.69
Competitiveness	0.93	0.68	0.73

All values fall within acceptable thresholds, indicating a robust measurement model.

Structural Model Results

The structural model showed significant relationships among the constructs. External engagement had a strong positive effect on knowledge exchange. Knowledge exchange influenced both HRM alignment and competitiveness. HRM alignment also contributed positively to competitiveness.

Table 2. Structural Path Coefficients

Path	Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
External Engagement → Knowledge Exchange	0.54	9.12	<0.001
Knowledge Exchange → HRM Alignment	0.47	7.03	<0.001
HRM Alignment → Competitiveness	0.41	6.28	<0.001
Knowledge Exchange → Competitiveness	0.32	4.87	<0.001

All hypothesised paths were supported.

Explained Variance

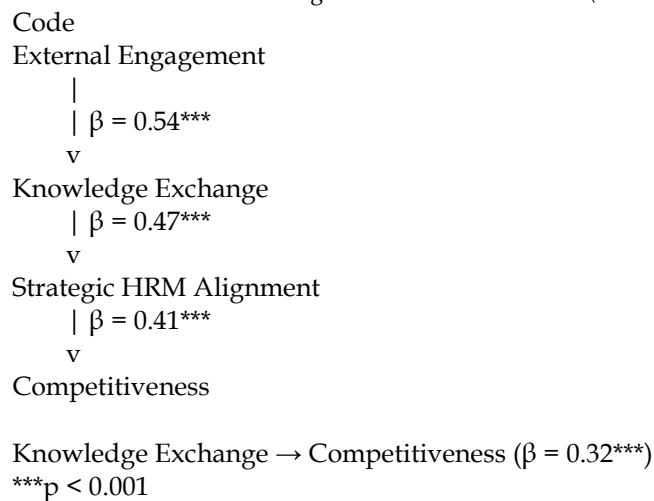
The model explained a substantial proportion of variance in the endogenous constructs.

Table 3. R² Values

Construct	R ²
Knowledge Exchange	0.29
HRM Alignment	0.38
Competitiveness	0.52

The model accounts for 52% of the variance in competitiveness, indicating strong explanatory power for a behavioural model.

Figure 1. Structural Model (Text-Based Representation)



Interpretation of Findings

The findings show that organisations with higher levels of external engagement report significantly stronger knowledge exchange. This suggests that outward-facing relationships provide access to diverse expertise and practices that support internal learning. Knowledge exchange, in turn, contributes to stronger HRM alignment, indicating that organisations integrate external insights into HR practices and strategic workforce decisions.

Both HRM alignment and knowledge exchange influence perceived competitiveness. HRM alignment has the stronger effect, suggesting that competitiveness is enhanced when HR practices are coherent with organisational goals and informed by external knowledge. Knowledge exchange also contributes directly to competitiveness, reflecting the value of continuous learning and capability development.

Overall, the results support the conceptual model and demonstrate that external engagement enhances competitiveness through the combined effects of knowledge exchange and HRM alignment.

Discussion

The study set out to examine how external engagement, knowledge exchange, and strategic HRM alignment interact to shape organisational competitiveness. The findings provide a coherent explanation of these relationships and offer several theoretical and practical insights.

The first research question explored how external networks and industry partnerships influence knowledge exchange. The results show a strong positive association, indicating that organisations with richer external ties develop more active knowledge-sharing processes. This supports long-standing arguments that inter-organisational relationships expand access to diverse expertise, emerging practices, and sector-specific intelligence (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Phelps et al., 2012). The findings also reinforce the view that external engagement enhances absorptive capacity by exposing organisations to new knowledge domains and enabling them to recognise and assimilate relevant information (Zahra & George, 2002). Critically, the results suggest that external engagement is not merely a boundary-spanning activity but a strategic resource that shapes internal learning routines. This aligns with research showing that organisations embedded in collaborative ecosystems are more capable of innovation and adaptation (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Gulati et al., 2012). The present study extends this literature by demonstrating that external engagement directly strengthens knowledge exchange processes that are central to HR capability development.

The second research question examined how knowledge exchange contributes to strategic HRM alignment. The findings show a substantial positive effect, indicating that organisations that actively share and interpret external knowledge are more likely to align HR practices with strategic objectives. This supports strategic HRM perspectives that emphasise the importance of integrating external labour-market

signals, technological trends, and industry developments into HR decision-making (Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Wright & McMahan, 2011). Knowledge exchange appears to function as a mechanism through which external insights are translated into HR policies, talent strategies, and workforce planning. This is consistent with research showing that knowledge-rich HR systems are more adaptive and better positioned to support organisational change (Minbaeva, 2013; Kang & Snell, 2009). The findings also suggest that HRM alignment is not solely an internal coordination process but is strengthened when HR functions are outward-looking and informed by external knowledge flows. This contributes to ongoing debates about the evolving role of HR as a strategic partner capable of interpreting environmental complexity (Guest, 2017; Collings et al., 2019).

The third research question addressed how these dynamics support organisational competitiveness. The model explains more than half of the variance in perceived competitiveness, indicating that the combination of knowledge exchange and HRM alignment is strongly associated with how organisations assess their competitive position. HRM alignment shows the strongest effect, suggesting that competitiveness is enhanced when HR practices are coherent, strategically integrated, and informed by external knowledge. This aligns with evidence that aligned HR systems contribute to innovation, productivity, and long-term performance (Lepak et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2012). Knowledge exchange also has a direct effect on competitiveness, reinforcing the view that continuous learning and capability development are central to competitive advantage (Grant, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The findings therefore support the argument that competitiveness is increasingly knowledge-driven and dependent on the organisation's ability to integrate external insights into HR strategy.

Taken together, the results show that the research objectives are fully met. External engagement enhances knowledge exchange; knowledge exchange strengthens HRM alignment; and both contribute to competitiveness. The study also highlights that external engagement alone is insufficient—its value depends on the organisation's ability to translate external inputs into internal HR practices. This reinforces the idea that HRM plays a central role in converting external knowledge into strategic capability, a point emphasised in recent HRM and organisational learning research (Farndale et al., 2020; Shipton et al., 2017). The findings therefore contribute to a more integrated understanding of how external relationships, knowledge processes, and HRM alignment jointly shape organisational outcomes.

Conclusion

This study provides an integrated explanation of how external engagement, knowledge exchange, and strategic HRM alignment contribute to organisational competitiveness. The findings show that organisations with stronger external relationships develop more active knowledge-sharing processes, which in turn support the alignment of HR practices with strategic goals. Both knowledge exchange and HRM alignment are associated with higher perceived competitiveness, with HRM alignment showing the strongest effect. These results reinforce the view that competitiveness is increasingly dependent on the organisation's ability to access external knowledge, interpret it effectively, and embed it within coherent HR systems (Wright & Ulrich, 2017; Teece, 2018). The study contributes to strategic HRM and knowledge-based perspectives by demonstrating that external engagement functions as a strategic resource that enhances internal capability development and supports long-term organisational strength.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Treat external engagement as a strategic HR resource: Organisations should invest in structured partnerships with industry bodies, universities, and professional networks to enhance access to relevant knowledge and expertise.
2. Strengthen internal knowledge-sharing mechanisms: HR leaders should establish routines—such as cross-functional learning sessions, digital knowledge platforms, and structured debriefs—to ensure that external insights are disseminated and applied.
3. Integrate external knowledge into HR strategy: Workforce planning, talent development, and leadership programmes should be informed by external labour-market trends, technological developments, and sector-specific intelligence.

4. Develop outward-looking HR capabilities: HR professionals need analytical, boundary-spanning, and interpretive skills to translate external signals into strategic HR actions.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how external engagement and HRM alignment evolve over time and how they influence objective performance indicators such as productivity, innovation outputs, or financial results. Comparative studies across sectors or institutional contexts would help determine whether the observed relationships vary by industry dynamics or national HR systems. Qualitative or mixed-methods research could explore how organisations operationalise external engagement within HR processes and how knowledge from partnerships is translated into practice. Additional variables—such as organisational culture, digital HR systems, leadership orientation, or absorptive capacity—could be examined as mediators or moderators to refine understanding of how external engagement becomes a source of sustained competitiveness.

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