

Chapter 1

A Survey of the Literature on Human Capital– Intensive Firms: A Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to provide a survey of the academic research dedicated to human capital-intensive firms (HCIF) both at a theoretical and empirical level. The authors conduct a thematic inventory of the published works in this area to assess the dynamism of the field research and provide an exploratory analysis. They develop a bibliometric analysis based on the three widely used databases (Econlit, Science Direct, and Wiley) over the time period 1992-2018. From a cluster analysis, the chapter draws a portrait of HCIF based on the highlighted distinctive features. It also gets more information on the scope of existing research and the issues, limits, and prospects involved.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7426-2.ch001

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, human capital has been identified indisputably as the single most important resource for the productive activity of firms (Myers, 1999; Roberts and Van den Steen, 2000; Rajan and Zingales, 2001; Qian, 2003; Burton-Jones and Spender, 2011). It is widely recognised that the capacity of most modern firms to generate wealth depends on the knowledge and skills of their employees and on the ability of organisations to combine them efficiently (Blair, 1995). Employees add value to firms' innovation strategies based on their skills and talents and, according to Moavenzadeh et al. (2012), human capital is one of the essential factors that will shape the future of competition among firms, and among countries. In this respect, human capital is the bedrock of firms' competitive advantage and their functioning and activities (Coff, 1997, 1999; Lepak and Snell, 1999; Kraaijenbrink, 2011). How is human capital defined? What are its particularities and what organisational effects can it generate? Why do some firms use it so intensively in the context of their productive activities?

Human Capital-Intensive Firms (HCIF) are an interesting object for study because they demonstrate the extension to the firm's boundaries and also the transformations to and complexity of productive organisations in today's globalised economies which are inducing an evolution in economic and managerial theories. Nevertheless, HCIF also reflect both a reality and a concept that are yet ill-defined, since the recent literature would suggest that they appear to refer to several different aspects. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to identify as clearly as possible the research on HCIF, to evaluate its theoretical structure and, thus, to determine its rhetorical and prospective significance. The authors conduct a thematic inventory of the work in this area in order to assess the dynamism of this research and provide an exploratory bibliometric analysis. This is challenging empirically, and according to the authors, is the first research to focus precisely on the genesis of the concept of HCIF. So far, study of HCIF has given rise to heterogeneous works around a number of different themes. The analysis in this chapter allows the authors to portray HCIF based on their different aspects, as well as the different theoretical perspectives exploited and depth of their analysis. This examination of HCIF dataset should shed light on three main research themes, the scope of existing research, and the issues, limits and prospects involved. The chapter concludes by discussing the significance and limitations of the present study.

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