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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Fragmenting work: Theoretical contributions and insights for a future of work research and policy agenda

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## Abstract

Mick Marchington's highly innovative research and writings on 'Fragmenting Work' have transformed our understanding of organisations, human resource management (HRM) and the world of work. He led a series of in-depth case studies of networked organisations—including airport operations, supply chains, multi-client call centres, public-private partnerships and information technology outsourcing—and argued for the significance of inter-organisational networks in directly informing HRM theory and also shaping HRM practice. The resulting highly cited body of published work captured and further developed Mick's intellectual interests in pluralism and complexity in relation to HRM theory. In this article, we reflect on Mick's theoretical contributions and also consider how core theoretical insights derived from the Fragmenting Work research programme can be applied to new questions about the future of work concerning digital platforms, career ladders and global supply chains.

## KEYWORDS

careers, digital platforms, employee voice, institutional framework, outsourcing

**Abbreviations:** GSC, global supply chain; HRM, human resource management; IT, information technology.

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## Practitioner notes

### What is currently known?

- Mick Marchington's theoretical contributions on 'fragmenting work' have changed our understanding of the design and operationalisation of human resource management (HRM).
- In a variety of organisational forms, including outsourcing, partnerships and multi-employer sites, HRM practice has benefited from real empirical insights gained from detailed case study analysis.
- Mick's writings on this topic always emphasised the value of improved HRM practice for delivering a better environment and improved working conditions for workers at all levels of the organisation.

### What this paper adds?

- This paper describes three major theoretical contributions arising from the 'Fragmenting Work' research: pluralism and complexity, HRM and inter-organisational analysis, and worker voice.
- It also identifies how Mick's theoretical insights can be applied to new research questions concerning the future of work, specifically regarding digital platforms, career ladders and global supply chains.

### The implications for practitioners?

- It is important to continuously frame organisations as having a collection of different and also often divergent and conflicting interests—between managers and workers in the same organisation, among managers across contracting organisations and between managers and workers across contracting organisations.
- Context matters—the nature and changing shape of relations between contracting organisations depends on product market rules, sector regulations and labour market conditions, among others. In other words, managers may seek high trusting relations with a partner organisation but may need supportive institutional arrangements.
- The ability to design and implement HRM practices for worker commitment, skill development, career paths and worker voice depends on understanding the relationships with partner organisations (suppliers, subcontractors and so on)
- Planning for the 'future of work', specifically concerning work on digital platforms, changing career pathways or global supply chains, can benefit from a deeper understanding of inter-organisational relations and the consequences for HRM theory and practice.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Mick Marchington's highly innovative research and writings on 'Fragmenting Work' have transformed our understanding of organisations, human resource management (HRM) and the world of work. Mick's thinking on this topic began in the early 2000s when he coordinated a major UK Economic and Social Research Council programme on 'New organisational forms and employment' and led a series of in-depth qualitative case studies of networked organisations, with a follow-up project funded by the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development. This established a strong evidence base for a raft of major publications that critically analysed the interdependencies between forms of inter-organisational relations, economic and institutional context, HRM practice, and working conditions. Like all his work, Mick's writings about Fragmenting Work were consistently rich in both his intellectual efforts to draw out implications for the extant Organisation Studies and HRM literature and his pluralist ambition to make the world of work a fairer and more just place.

This article describes three major contributions to theory development arising from the rich empirical evidence associated with Mick's Fragmenting Work research programme. These concern pluralism and complexity, HRM and

inter-organisational relations, and worker voice. It then identifies how Mick's theoretical insights can be applied to new research questions concerning the future of work, specifically regarding digital platform work, career progression at work and corporate social responsibility.

## 2 | PLURALISM: BRINGING COMPLEXITY AND CONTEXT INTO ORGANISATIONAL ANALYSIS

A core and consistent element in Mick's academic work was his commitment to pluralism and consequent rejection of the unitarist bias that has oft been a feature of the field of HRM. Not that Mick had much patience with simplistic critiques of HRM that dismissed the whole subject area on the basis of these unitarist tendencies; for Mick, organisations had to be managed and everyone in work was affected by the way they were managed so that HRM clearly constituted a topic worth studying. Adopting a pluralist stance made the whole subject both more complex but also more interesting.

His pluralist perspective had a profound impact on how he approached the theoretical analysis of inter-organisational relations. First, instead of theorising organisations as unitary bodies that acted with one voice and mind to establish and implement a unified strategy and hold one set of values and beliefs, Mick considered all organisations to have a collection of different and also often divergent interests that add to the complexities of how inter-organisational relations operated in practice. He argued that,

[a unitarist viewpoint] *implicitly assumes that senior managers are omnipotent, omniscient and unified in their approaches, and individuals at lower levels in the hierarchy merely implement strategies without deviation* (Marchington & Vincent, 2004, p. 1030).

Second, his pluralism was always evident in his persistent theoretical emphasis on the importance of voice, participation and representation including within inter-organisational employment settings. There are multiple kinds of inter-organisational settings, each generating particular challenges for the management and exercise of worker voice within and between organisations in the network. Examples considered in the Fragmenting Work research programme included long-term public private partnerships (covering outsourced cleaning and catering services, as well as housing benefit administration), multi-client call centre services, multi-employer airport operations, manufacturing supply chains and information technology (IT) outsourcing. As we describe below, the empirical evidence from these diverse network settings further challenged theoretical assumptions that the employing organisation enjoyed sole HRM control to shape worker voice and raised new questions about the capacity of workers to organise their collective voice in a context of fractured and disconnected institutional and inter-organisational spaces (Marchington et al., 2005).

Third, for Mick, not all business or productive activities should or could be driven by a simple market or profit-making logic; this allowed in the first instance for theoretical consideration of sustainable variations in national institutions and associated ways of operating that reflected differences in nations' histories and values. Hence, again in contrast to much of the Organisation Studies and HRM literature, Mick's analyses were not based on an implied simple ideal model of a regulatory system and organisational values that bore a strikingly close resemblance to the United States labour market. Pluralism required a rejection of anthropomorphising organisations as unitary actors but also allowed for the historical embedding of different values and objectives in organisational practices and the resulting culture.

The consequence of this pluralistic theoretical approach was the adding of complexities into organisational analysis. This means including more conflict and more variety of outcomes than is possible within a unitarist analysis that treats organisations as speaking with a unified voice and operating according to similar behavioural objectives and value systems.

These complexities are captured in Figure 1, which was originally presented in the book *Fragmenting Work* (Marchington, Grimshaw et al., 2005, p. 17). By showing internal divisions within each organisation there is an explosion of the range of possible lines of communication, conflict and collaboration in the inter-organisational network. These could take place between managers across organisational boundaries, which is the most common level of analysis of inter-organisational relations in Organisation Studies and HRM literature where trust relations are assumed to be formed or broken through inter-management relations alone. However, inter-organisational contracting also often involves cross organisational control of the labour process (the diagonal lines in Figure 1). For example, workers asked to 'go the extra mile' by the client have to weigh up the risks of not providing the client with the service they are demanding with the extra costs to their own employer that this service might require. There is also scope for collaboration across workforce groups outside of management control simply in order to get the jobs done in the most effective way, even if this means finding ways around barriers that emerge because of employment by different organisations.

This diagram also allows for the theoretical analysis of how power relations may influence the distribution of gains from such collaborations: for example, manager to manager collaborations may provide mutual gains for both sets of managers but without benefits for either's workforces, while an alternative outcome could be one dominant organisation delivering benefits to both managers and their workforce but at the expense of both managers and workers in the less powerful organisation (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2005). These examples indicate the importance of bargaining power, workforce representation and voice. Again Mick eschewed a simple labour-capital model of voice and representation. Responding in part to Heery et al.'s (2001) early call to investigate forms of trade unionism and worker representation that go 'beyond the enterprise', Mick was interested in exploring the complexities of representation and considering why in some cases opportunities were taken up to develop solidarity with outsourced workers, for example, while in others the union made few efforts to organise outsourced workers even where they had previously had members (see below).

To further understand this complexity, Mick assigned great theoretical importance to the role of context. He rejected the notion of generalisable strategies for organisations with apparently similar characteristics because of their location in different national and sectoral contexts and differences due to the specific organisation's current and historical context. A key theoretical contribution, therefore, was his framework for exploring and understanding what he called 'embedding inter-organisational relations'. Elaborating on case-study insights from the *Fragmenting Work* research programme, Mick compared and contrasted the way different institutional factors shaped the development of arms-length or obligational contractual relationships (after Sako, 1992), including their changing character via processes of learning (Marchington & Vincent, 2004). In his illustrative analysis of the supply chain of a multinational chemical company, he pointed to the role of the UK Chemicals Industries Association which established strong voluntary codes within the industry, shaping inter-organisational relationships by promoting high trust and mutual dependency. As such, even though the client organisation enjoyed a power advantage over its suppliers, it did not

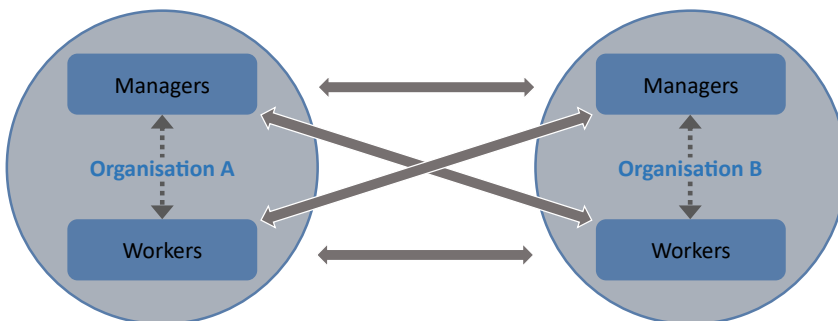


FIGURE 1 Inter-organisational relations: crossing borders and hierarchies [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

always wield its power to cut prices thanks to institutionalised norms of cooperative behaviour (Marchington & Vincent, 2004).

Such institutionalised norms of cooperative behaviour took on a different hue in Mick's analyses of public-private partnerships where, in the UK environment, the more powerful private sector, for-profit organisations are able to cream the benefits from inter-organisational contracts. As is still true today, the public services outsourcing market at the time of the *Fragmenting Work* research was dominated by a few large service providers while the technical expertise needed to effectively monitor these contracts was diminishing within the public sector. Public services outsourcing was encouraged by the central government due to the apparent ability of the private sector to make the delivery of public services cheaper and more effective. As such, the institutionalised norms supported contracts that first and foremost delivered cost savings—via a combination of 'market discipline' and price benchmarking, as well as the repackaging of financial loans by private sector consortia of outsourcing firms (Pollock et al., 2002). However, differences in organisational objectives and the values espoused by both managers and workers were found to transcend the much-touted commonalities of interest between the public sector and private sector providers. As with most contracts for outsourced services, in practice, the private employers relied heavily on the expertise of staff transferred from the public sector. Yet these staff were now required to prioritise profits over the dedication to public service that for many had motivated their choice of an occupation in the first place (Hebson et al., 2003; see below). Thus by denying differences between a not-for-profit and a for-profit organisation the 'new public management' model became part of the wider emergence of a unitarist vision of how economies and organisations function.

More generally, therefore, Mick's insistence on pluralism and context contributed to inter-disciplinary theory building by arguing that where high trust inter-organisational relations are embedded in a country's social norms and institutions (for example laws that protect the weaker partner to a contract or trade bodies that promote health and safety in an industry), high trust collaborations could be achieved more readily (see, also, Grimshaw & Miozzo, 2009; Lane & Bachmann, 1997). Put another way, Mick's work also demonstrated that it may be futile for managers to seek to establish cooperative, high trusting contractual relations without both supportive institutional arrangements and buttressing from higher levels within the contracting organisations. The lessons for theory, with respect to organisational analysis and HRM, are to consider multiple levels of influence, especially organisational and institutional levels (across sectors and countries), and to recognise the complexity and variety of management practices and management-worker relations both within and between organisations.

### 3 | BRINGING INTER-ORGANISATIONAL ANALYSIS INTO HRM

A second, and perhaps the most significant, contribution of Mick's *Fragmenting Work* research concerns the implications for HRM theory (and practice) owing to a novel re-interpretation of many of the people management issues through the lens of inter-organisational networks. Mainstream HRM literature is often nested within the framework of a single employing organisation with bounded HRM responsibilities and clarity of scope to design and implement their HRM strategy and practice (Marchington et al., 2011). However, inter-organisational networks are a fundamental (and arguably increasing) feature of many organisations, whether forged through outsourcing, partnerships or subcontracting arrangements, and often deliver business functions on multi-employer sites. As Mick's work demonstrated, such networks create considerable complexity for theory and empirical analysis of HRM.

First, with respect to theoretical approaches to how HRM might improve productivity or organisational performance, Mick revisited the widely cited studies pointing to the importance of *alignment* (between HRM and business goals), *integration* (internal fit for example between pay and recruitment policies) and *consistency* (with respect to workers' perception of fair treatment) in the context of a multi-employer network (Marchington et al., 2011). The reasoning (as illustrated in Figure 1) was that in networks, employees tend to be exposed to more than one set of HR practices, directly or indirectly, and have direct links and relationships with workers employed by other organisations within the network. Drawing out the theoretical implications from the extensive *Fragmenting Work* case-study

material, Mick pointed to a variety of new factors and tensions that enabled and hindered alignment, integration and consistency, with consequences for performance (op. cit.). For example, norms of alignment were seemingly embedded in a mega-outsourcing contract for IT services with IT employees wanting to 'put ourselves in the client's shoes', but came somewhat undone under pressure to cost for additional services to meet the client's ever-changing needs. Also, a multi-employer events site had considerably different HR policies across organisations and experienced multiple challenges, including for example, issues such as whether or not to open up vacancies to workers across the network. Problems of consistency were experienced in a public-private partnership where the contractor was enforcing performance management policies more strictly than the public sector client. As such, while there may be many good reasons for organisations to engage in collaboration,

*... each network needs to be analysed carefully and systematically to examine its potential benefits and shortcomings. ... there is no simple way to achieve alignment, integration and consistency in network environments... employers need to cope with higher levels of ambiguity and complexity than is apparent within the single employer framework (Marchington et al., 2011, pp. 332-3).*

Second, Mick focussed on the different ways network thinking raised theoretical questions for core HRM policies. Inter-organisational networks generate complexity for workers in relation to their employment status, who controls and commands their labour, and importantly, if their legal employer has (sufficient) power to influence their work organisation, skills development and deployment, and other employment outcomes. In his *Fragmenting Work* writings, Mick paid special attention to two HRM policies, those of fostering worker commitment to the organisation and the development of worker skills and careers.

Concerning workforce commitment, in a multi-employer site of production/services delivery, the employee may, under certain circumstances, display greater commitment to the client organisation to which they provide the services. Reasons for this switch in commitment and identity vary. It may be because the employee believes the client has a better reputation or because it offers better prospects for permanent employment or a more rewarding and fulfilling career. A typical example of this scenario from the *Fragmenting Work* data involved passenger-handling agents at the multi-employer airport who were employed by a ground-handling company to provide services to prestigious airlines. Many agents saw their work as a stepping-stone to a better job (reputationally and materially) with a different company at the airport, creating significant retention problems for the handling company. This posed serious implications for the employer as employee identity, commitment and loyalty are critical HR outcomes considered necessary to enhance organisational performance (Cooke et al., 2005; Marchington et al., 2009).

Relatedly, disruptions to longstanding psychological contracts brought about by outsourcing or new public-private partnerships were also at the centre of Mick's theoretical analysis of changing and fluid worker identities and patterns of commitment. Mick gave voice to these divided allegiances and how workers reconciled them over time. In a case study of a public-private partnership, the contractual transfer of large numbers of public sector workers to the private sector partner resulted in these workers expressing mixed feelings towards the public sector hospital—loyalty because it was their ex-employer (and many workers had served many years), but also resentment for breaking the psychological contract based on a 'job for life'. Moreover, despite coming under new management by the private sector contractor, these transferred workers blamed the hospital for the increased pressure of work and monitoring, since they understood that their new employer would be subject to contract penalties imposed by the hospital when their performance fell below standard (Grimshaw et al., 2010; Hebson et al., 2003). A similar set of contradictions was evident in another public-private partnership case study of housing benefits administration. Low-trust contractual relations between the local authority and private contractor led to a performance-based culture which intensified work, lessened autonomy and reduced discretion in the day-to-day working lives of housing benefits case workers. Case workers provided numerous examples of how their authority and ability to use their own judgement on the basis of previous experience and knowledge had been taken away by the contractual conditions which stated only local authority staff could make a decision about a housing benefit claim. In both case studies, Mick gave 'theoretical

voice' to the new forms of identities workers were creating, which focussed on 'the service' for clients and patients rather than workers' loyalty to the client (their ex-employer), or indeed to their new private-sector employer (Hebson et al., 2003; Marchington et al., 2003).

Another focus was on the complexities of developing an employer's training and skill development policy. The research grappled with the problems for existing theory in light of evidence that an employing organisation faced conflicting challenges - on the one hand, how to design a coherent training and development policy, with accompanying reward packages, to support its own business strategy and workforce needs, while on the other hand, how to align these policies with the competing and varied HRM and business goals of client and supplier partners in its networks to create alignment and consistency of skill needs? (Marchington et al., 2011). One option or requirement may be to work in partnership with a supplier or client, but this involved closely overlapping people management responsibilities. Detailed analysis of case studies displaying highly collaborative and high trust network relationships underpinned substantive theoretical insights concerning the role of management capability building, sustained over time, for positive inter-organisational working for skills. In practice, this required considerable learning of new tools such as shared skill standards, integrated and inclusive training provision and coordinated career pathways that could generate mutual benefits of 'boundaryless careers' (Marchington, Carroll et al., 2009). Such complex management challenges for integration call for different ways of theorising and configuring the HR function (Rubery et al., 2002), as well as adapting the HR architecture framework proposed in the mainstream strategic HRM literature (e.g. Lepak & Snell, 1998).

#### 4 | THE CHALLENGES FOR WORKER VOICE

Always central to Mick's outlook was the goal of improving fairness at work and the quality of the employment relationship. He brought his longstanding preoccupation with worker voice and fairness to understand the impact of blurring organisational boundaries on workers' experiences of work. He was particularly interested in how workers' voices were increasingly marginalised by complex contractual relationships. As we discussed above, the employing organisation does not enjoy sole HRM control in the context of an inter-organisational network. The same theoretical reasoning applies even more forcefully to workers' capacity to organise their collective voice. Whether represented by trade unions or not, workers employed in organisational networks face a fracturing and puncturing of the institutional space to organise, represent and defend their interests. This especially applies to workers at the lower end of value chains, rendering them with limited bargaining power, which in turn undermines their quality of work outcomes (Marchington et al., 2005; Marchington & Timming, 2010).

In our *Fragmenting Work* research, Mick explored the multitude of ways that worker voice and worker representation was undermined in multi-employer sites. He denoted the variety of circumstances (since again Mick was theoretically alert to specificity and contingency) with the labels of 'disenfranchised voice', 'fractured voice', 'fragmented voice' and 'disconnected voice' (Marchington et al., 2005). The airport case was particularly illustrative of 'fragmented voice'; the interests of workers had become divided and worker voice fragmented despite high union density. Mick's analysis here was sensitive to the historical context of the airport, where a legacy of union militancy combined with new competitive legislation had led to a new employment system which relied on contracting and re-contracting to achieve cost-cutting and financial gains. The creation of a baggage-handling subsidiary owned by the airport itself with lower terms and conditions competed against the existing handling company and, combined with new private-sector agencies, led to the creation of a three-tier system of wages and employment conditions. Unions were forced to accept market rates for new hires while other union members remained on original airport terms and conditions. New recruits blamed the union for failing to prevent them from being employed on inferior market conditions and agency workers felt excluded from representation, while union representatives inevitably looked after those who worked for their employer. In this context, there was little chance that a coherent and unified worker voice could develop across the airport, as workers were placed in direct competition with each other even among members



of the same union. These are the standard dilemmas for trade unions, between supporting the vested interests of members versus pursuing the sword of justice and solidarity (Flanders, 1975), but they become even more complex when played out across interlinked organisations that were both competitors and collaborators operating in a low trust environment.

In non-union, multi-employer and multi-client sites, worker voice was even more marginalised. Mick's analysis of the customer service, multi-client and multi-employer call centre case study (labelled 'disconnected voice') revealed the different working conditions and contracts for those employed by agencies and those by the employer, even though both sets of workers were often working for the same client. Working-time arrangements and terms and conditions varied across contracts which meant that recognition of collective identity and interests did not materialise.

Mick also examined agency workers' struggles to make their increasingly marginalised voice heard by legally elusive employers. For supply teachers working for teacher supply agencies, opportunities to exercise voice were 'fractured': they could not claim parity of remuneration with permanently employed teachers; short placements made it difficult to build trusting relations with other union members at schools (and could wreck chances of a permanent position); and some permanent teachers resented what they perceived as an unwelcome ethos and attitude among many supply teachers. As Mick put it:

*In short, while workers employed by some organisations in the network might have clearly defined channels for voice in order to articulate their grievances and protect their conditions, those employed on precarious contracts across organizational boundaries lack the collective strength to make their voice heard (Marchington et al., 2005, p. 260).*

In sum, Mick's research showed how longstanding employment conditions and identities could be powerfully disrupted by changing organisational forms, which in turn often fractured, disconnected or fragmented worker voices. In doing so, his work provided the much-needed theoretical and evidential base that recognised (and promoted) the benefits of fairness (or procedural justice) in these changing organisational forms (Rubery et al., 2009). He showed that contractual relationships that did not foster collaboration and trust served to marginalise voices and were unfair to those weakest in the employment relationship, and he also recognised the failures of trade unions in protecting them (Marchington et al., 2005). But he further recognised that transactional relationships were detrimental to the multiple stakeholders in the employment relationship, including employers. In looking back at this case-study material now, more than 15 years later, it is hard not to be struck by a sense that if only some of these organisations had had Mick as their union representative, or their manager, or indeed their contract negotiator—as he could have happily fulfilled all roles—then the voices of multiple stakeholders would have been heard with gains for both organisational performance and worker justice.

## 5 | WHAT THEORETICAL INSIGHTS FOR A FUTURE OF WORK RESEARCH AGENDA?

Mick's theoretical contributions from the Fragmenting Work research programme resonate strongly with an inter-disciplinary research agenda on the future of work, with strong potential to shape HRM policy and practice for a more inclusive world of work. In this section, we identify three contemporary research areas where theoretical insights from Fragmenting Work can enrich our analysis and prescriptions for a fairer world of work: digital platform work; career ladders; and global supply chains and corporate social responsibility.

## 5.1 | Fragmented digital platform work

Core theoretical insights, which Mick derived from his Fragmenting Work research, lie at the heart of the current digital work debates. These include questions concerning who the employer is, how to disentangle the performance and cost objectives of the client and platform company, the conflicting responsibilities of platform workers, and the HRM boundaries of platform company responsibility in a given institutional context. In a parallel manner to the non-digital, inter-organisational network context of Fragmenting Work, The organisation of digital platform work, both online and location-based, is not only challenging established notions of the employment relationship and the accompanying regulatory forms, but also providing new opportunities for organisations in all sectors of the economy to externalise tasks to platforms, thereby directly contributing to a further fragmenting of work (ILO, 2021).

For example, there is considerable debate about whether or not a platform company can be defined as an employer with consequences for the employment status of digital platform workers and their access to employment and social security protections (ILO, 2021; Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Most recently, there have been court cases involving Uber drivers<sup>1</sup> and food delivery riders in China (Wang & Cooke, 2021) with different court decisions on the employment status of the workers concerned. Aside from whether the digital platforms are the 'legal' employer or not, a central issue for HRM theory is how the workers are managed, controlled and motivated to remain on the job at the point of production/service provision through the use of digital technology to allocate work to the workers and monitor their performance in real time and through 'managing by algorithm' to maximise efficiency and therefore profit. This relatively new practice '*is disrupting and reordering the regulation of work and employment [and] may lead to organisational and institutional experimentation*' (Lévesque et al., 2020, p. 647).

Meanwhile, these internet platform workers are exposed to legal uncertainty as many countries have not yet developed new legislation to regulate this form of employment. In countries where the laws are seemingly favourable to workers by classifying them as employees, such protections may also prove to be disadvantageous to some extent. For instance, in March 2020 the French Supreme Court ruled an Uber driver to be an employee of the platform.<sup>2</sup> However, due to Covid-19, some drivers in France were concerned that they would be unable to earn income in other activities after becoming Uber 'employees' and preferred to keep their 'self-employed' status.<sup>3</sup> The more general point for theory is the need to model HRM in a way that encompasses workers outside the boundaries of the standard employment relationship, potentially by incorporating a network or ecosystem viewpoint (Cross & Swart, 2022).

The precarious nature of much digital platform work also exposes workers to health and safety risks. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that platform workers were more often than not excluded from sickness benefits and health insurance because of their employment status. Several platform companies did begin to offer sick pay and some government income protection programs were extended to platform workers. However, a global survey found only half of the platforms offered some sick pay protection, and even then typically set strict eligibility criteria (FairWork, 2020).

Furthermore, the use by platform companies (and their clients) of digital data to inform HRM practices can lead to work intensification and render workers vulnerable to unfair dismissal when performance targets are not met, as seen in the Amazon case (Lecher, 2019). Paralleling Mick's interest in fair processes of performance management in networks characterised by blurred boundaries of management control, the latest research on digital labour is revealing major ambiguities from the perspective of organisational performance (clients and platform companies) and worker experience. New research investigates the relative influence of platform business strategy, algorithmic rules and client specifications in shaping workers' individual reputations (whether by performance, portfolio of past work, skill and experience, or punctuality) and points to adverse consequences for worker experiences and precarity (Pulignano et al., 2021). Moreover, workers registered with digital platforms often lack a formal grievance mechanism when their work is rejected (by the client or the algorithm). They may be unable to independently develop or rebuild their reputation (or shape how it is perceived) and mostly experience relatively constrained autonomy over their work tasks and scheduling (ILO, 2021; Pulignano et al., 2021).

These seemingly universal findings are raising new theoretical questions about the apparent 'dis-embeddedness' of platform work in diverse societal contexts (Wood et al., 2019), although important national and sectoral differences

in platform strategies and employment outcomes are still observed. With regard to further theory development, this suggests, in line with Mick's Fragmenting Work arguments, that the degree to which actors can draw upon the 'power resources' (see Jaehrling et al., 2018) of the surrounding institutional architecture in shaping network forms and platform strategies, by sector and country, still matters (see Behrendt et al., 2019; Elbert & Negri, 2021; Nemkova et al., 2019).

## 5.2 | Fragmenting career ladders

A second notable consequence of fragmenting work is the curtailing or destruction of progression ladders within single bounded organisations. In terms of its theoretical insight, this highlights the significance of *vertical segmentation*, where lower-skilled jobs are hived off into separate organisations offering very flat opportunities for progression, and *horizontal segmentation*, where some specialist areas are hived off. The former scenario is likely to result in reduced career opportunities, while the latter could expand opportunities, for example, where IT workers are outsourced or offshored from a non-IT company and transferred into a large IT company (Grimshaw & Miozzo, 2009; Kuruvilla & Ranganathan, 2010). The key response to the fragmentation of career structures has been to argue for individuals to manage their own employability and career development (e.g. Tupper & Ellis, 2020), associated with theorising on career portfolios and boundaryless careers. But in practice, they can only do this if employers change their attitudes and practices to enable individuals to cross not only organisational but also occupational and life stage boundaries.

This means opening up progression opportunities across the whole inter-organisational network. This requires two stages: first the opening up of recruitment to people with more varied careers and at more varied life stages (through for example stronger enforcement of age discrimination legislation); and second the promotion of training and development opportunities at all levels within the organisations. Mick in his last major article (Marchington, 2015) was in fact scathing about the increasing focus on talent management, restricted to a tiny minority of individuals at the top of the organisation. This approach stood in contrast to Mick's preferred option of nurturing a wider range of talents that might actually contribute to improvement in quality of work and outcomes at all stages in the production system and also enable progression at more flexible speeds and from more diverse backgrounds—including by educational pathway (skill level and age), stage of family formation and migration into the host country (as economic migrants or refugees), among others (Hirst et al., 2021; Kramer et al., 2022).

From this perspective there is, therefore, a need for action to reverse this shrinkage of training and development opportunities. Personal training accounts, funded by the state, could help in this regard but as with the UK's apprenticeship levy it may be necessary to develop wider initiatives and rewards to reverse decades of limited investment in the talents of the wider workforce. Green and Henseke (2019), for example, point to a long-term decline in training with no sign of enhanced training quality, while Benassi et al. (2021) argue the UK's evolution of a fragmented 'quasi-market' for vocational training produces a 'comparative institutional disadvantage' compared to countries like Germany or Italy in terms of skill development opportunities for small and medium-sized firms. These trends have been exacerbated by the growth of fragmentation and outsourcing that encourage employers to believe that responsibility for progression, training and development can also be outsourced; note the increasing number of so-called 'ed tech' companies, such as Gloat, Workday, Talent Guard and others. Yet in practice, this passing the buck with respect to staff development only reinforces the major skills and training deficit in the UK economy and hinders upwards labour mobility and advancement.

## 5.3 | Global supply chains

Global supply chain (GSC) research has developed an analytical framework that overlaps very closely with the core theoretical insights from the Fragmenting Work research. These relate in particular to the need to explore the inter-dependencies of business and HRM strategies of lead and supplier firms, the associated inter-organisational dynamics, the attention to local and market context, and, in much of the GSC research, a concern for identifying fairer business practices and improved employment outcomes.

For example, in a recent very useful typology, Reinecke and Posthuma (2019) show that positive examples of lead GSC business practices involve 'integrated upgrading', where lead firms support upgrading among suppliers in the form of training, health and safety or production organisation. Negative examples, on the other hand, are characterised as 'truncated development' or 'oppositional development', in which a lead firm's economic gains are won at the expense of adverse outcomes for the supplier, whether poor working conditions or environmental externalities. As with the Fragmenting Work research, inter-organisational power imbalances are key to this stream of research (e.g. Davis et al., 2018), as is uneven access to financial and regulatory resources in host and home countries which can hinder incentives for lead firms to do the right thing for workers in supplier firms (Anner, 2019). While Fragmenting Work ideas are therefore nicely reflected in GSC research, there is also opportunity for future HRM empirical enquiry and theorising to adapt some of the GSC theoretical and empirical insights to domestic patterns of networked organisations to better understand the implications for HRM and employment.

More generally, and reflecting Mick's theoretical insights from Fragmenting Work, new research on international HRM in today's highly globalised environment entails striking a balance between a theoretical focus on productivity gains and on procedural justice through effective worker voice. New theoretical ideas are highly relevant, including rethinking the social situatedness of powerful economic actors; in their recent framing of international HRM, Edwards et al. (2021) direct our attention to the way global norms concerning employment organisation are continuously shaped and contested through interactions of 'globalising actors' involving issues of collective identity, social skills and conflicting goals. Reflecting today's shifting global norms, it seems that the following key questions should be considered by policy makers, employing organisations and researchers in reconceptualising the theoretical and policy framework of work and employment relations in GSCs:

- What are the policy combinations at national and pan-national levels that can accommodate (competing) demands of workers' protections versus economic development?
- What roles should key institutional actors play in creating value via global supply chains, while mitigating harm to workers and society more broadly, by creating an inclusive future of decent work for sustainable development? In particular, how should workers' organisations represent their workers across organisational and national boundaries? What bargaining approach and framework can they adopt, and how should membership of a 'tripartite plus' model of negotiation be governed?
- How can the business/management research community respond to these developments through research scholarship, policy advocacy and industry engagement?

Indeed, there is emerging evidence that organisations have been able to adopt human-centred international HRM practices, although this is by no means a common trend (Rogovsky & Cooke, 2021). In a globalised economy with complex forms of organisational networks, international HRM research could be more informative and fruitful by embracing a broader theoretical framework of analysis (see, also, Vincent et al., 2020).

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

It has been an enjoyable and valuable exercise both to reflect on Mick's original contributions to understanding the character and consequences of a world of fragmenting work and to forge links with new future of work research where the perspective of blurred organisational boundaries and disordered hierarchies remains central to research on digital platforms, career ladders and global supply chains. The Fragmenting Work research programme, which Mick led, made significant theoretical and empirical contributions to the HRM literature. Drawing on first-hand empirical evidence from airport operations, chemical industry supply chains, multi-client call centres, temporary work agencies and public-private partnerships in hospitals, housing benefits administration and IT services, this research argued

for the significance of inter-organisational networks in directly shaping HRM theory and HRM practice. The resulting body of published work captures the roles of clients and suppliers, contingent upon their relative power in the network relationship, in influencing the formulation and implementation of the HRM practices of the employing organisation, with significant implications for those employed under various conditions. As business outsourcing and subcontracting is still a common practice in organisations, and increasingly conducted on a global scale for many, the risks of badly managed work and/or precarious work associated with networked business relationships make it even more critical for organisations to adopt an HRM system that is coordinated, inclusive and resilient for the future of work.

We conclude by noting that Mick's insights were driven by a core philosophy that privileged ideas of collective worker agency, pluralism, complexity and institutional embeddedness. This inevitably made for a relatively complex and context-contingent theoretical analysis and explanation, which was not always in keeping with the simplified management fads of the day. Moreover, theoretical complexity is what tended to surface from Mick's preferred method of research, namely in-depth case studies. Mick insisted on interviewing people across all levels and parts of the organisational networks - how else to capture plurality of experiences? We also know from interviewing alongside him that he encouraged feedback from interviewees (perhaps a way of respecting agency) and that we all benefited from his charismatic ability to sustain very long-lasting relationships with organisations and individuals which helped provide historical context and an understanding of the legacies of past decisions and conditions. So the opportunity to learn from Mick's philosophy and his research practice in 'the field' was hugely important for us, especially those among us at a formative stage of our careers during the Fragmenting Work research period. We enjoyed immensely our experience working together with Mick in his research team and would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude for his generosity and respectful attention to our viewpoints and theoretical interests as colleagues and friends. We miss him a great deal.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares they have no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For example, in the UK (*Uber BV v Aslam* 2021 UKSC 5) and France (Arrêt n°374 du 4 Mars 2020 (19–13.316) - Cour de cassation - Chambre sociale).
- <sup>2</sup> See the case Arrêt n°374 du 4 Mars 2020 (19–13.316) - Cour de cassation - Chambre sociale (France).
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.europe1.fr/emissions/L-edito-eco2/uber-une-decision-de-la-cour-de-cassation-qui-devrait-faire-jurisprudence-3953408>.

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