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# The Role of Human Resources Flexibility in Strategic Thinking of Strategic Level Military Officers of Sri Lanka Air Force

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of human resources flexibility on strategic thinking among strategic level officers in the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF). Given the dynamic and uncertain nature of modern military and strategic environments, the study highlights the critical role of flexible human capital management in fostering effective strategic thinking. The research adopts a quantitative approach to assess various dimensions of human resources flexibility , including behavioral, skill, and task flexibility. The population considered for this research was the officers currently serving Sri Lanka Air Force in the rank of Wing Commander and above. Data were gathered through a questionnaires and were analyzed using Smart PLS software. The findings reveal that flexible human resources significantly enhance the capacity of SLAF officers to develop innovative and responsive strategies, thereby improving organizational effectiveness. The study highlights that behavioral flexibility enables officers to adapt to diverse scenarios, while skill flexibility ensures continuous learning and adaptation to new challenges. Task flexibility further supports efficient resource allocation and role versatility, contributing to overall strategic agility. The paper concludes that human resources flexibility is essential for military organizations to navigate complex security landscapes and maintain operational readiness. It suggests that fostering an organizational culture that promotes continuous learning, adaptability, and proactive problem-solving is crucial for sustaining strategic advantage. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of human resources flexibility on strategic outcomes in military contexts. The findings have broader implications for policy development and strategic management within defence sectors throughout the world.

**KEYWORDS:** Human Resources Flexibility,Sstrategic Thinking, MilitarySstrategy, Sri Lanka Air Force, Organizational Adaptability.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the modern digital era, individuals, organizations, and states are exposed to an overwhelming and rapid influx of changes, which have led to confusion and a reduction of capacity for making intelligent and adaptable decisions, as noted by Toffler and Toffler (1995). Under such context, the design and creation of a good strategy have become crucial for organizations, a point emphasized by Benito-Ostolaza and Sanchis-Llopis (2014). The process known as strategic thinking entails establishing a structure and internal dynamics that enable organizations to continually challenge external environmental changes. This capacity allows them to predict changes and transformations in the environment well in advance and to select appropriate strategies to address them.

This new thinking in the age of transformation emphasizes that a new intellectual model based on continuous changes must replace the old intellectual model of strategic planning, as discussed by Gibson (2007). According to the theoretical foundations of the strategic planning process, the study of internal and external variables is based on current conditions, as Rezaeian et al. (2014) assert. Thereby, this approach entails choosing the path to reach future goals based on the present conditions, despite the fact that current conditions may not persist, and thus organizations face strategic plans that are constantly becoming obsolete.

Creating a strategy requires managers and individuals who have learned to think differently and create value for customers, an idea introduced by Boone (2001). However, this requires making human resources flexible, meaning the unique ability of organizations to appropriately and timely face and respond to competitive and dynamic environments, as Lopez (1994) points out. Employers in the third wave of the knowledge revolution need men and women who can accept more responsibility, better understand the connection of their work with others, and handle more tasks to mitigate the risk of future shock and confront major transformations, as Toffler (1980) suggests.

Within this perspective, it is often believed that individuals and their thinking capacities play a significant role in empowering organizations to appropriately respond to uncertainty and environmental complexity, as highlighted by Martínez-Sánchez et al. (2014). Flexibility in human resources, through the development of human capital capabilities, better equipping of employees, facilitating management processes, and enabling employee adaptation to environmental changes, fosters and facilitates access to strategic options within organizations,

a point stressed by Abbasi et al. (2014). This is the ultimate goal of strategic thinking.

Among various organizations and institutions, the armed forces play a crucial role in providing the groundwork for economic, social, political, and cultural advancements, especially in the face of ambiguities in future warfare, according to Eftekhari and Dowlatabadi (2009). The uncertainties and complexities of future wars, stemming from multiple revolutions in the military domain, have altered security parameters, compelling countries to consider the waging of wars, as Farjizadeh and Soufi (2010) observe.

Within this framework, and by understanding and grasping the complexities, uncertainties, and non-linear changes in developments, the armed forces of Sri Lanka during the humanitarian operations managed to foresee and identify enemy plans, as evidenced by their success in changing the conditions on the battlefield. Therefore, considering the importance and position of strategic thinking in the defence and military domains, strengthening and institutionalizing this capability is essential, a point reinforced by Kaviani et al. (2018).

Rahmansarshat and Kafcheh (2008) highlight that strategic thinking is influenced by individual, group, and organizational factors. Similarly, Joon Moon (2013) finds that key elements of strategic thinking at the individual level are influenced by internal factors like organizational culture and structure. Factors such as encouragement of creativity, goal-setting alignment, and stakeholder expertise utilization are vital for successful strategic thinking, as Ardakan et al. (2018) emphasize. Information systems, communications, leadership, and resource allocation further enhance strategic thinking in the oil industry, according to Mobarakiyan (2012).

Strategic thinking in the military has been extensively explored, with Hunter and Gang Pope (1993) attributing the term to military origins. Shahali and Valioun (2016) argue that innovative military strategies lead to superiority in current and potential threats. The Industrial College of the Armed Forces (2001) presents models that divide strategic thinking into leadership and cognition components. According to Kaviani et al. (2018), organizational intelligence is a significant factor affecting strategic thinking, particularly in military intelligence units.

Bjørnstad and Frederick (2013) note that flexibility has emerged as a critical factor for organizational continuity in complex environments. Flexibility, seen as an adaptive capability of employees, is essential for responding to changing conditions, as highlighted by Beltrán-Martín et al. (2008). Wright and Snell (1998)

assert that behavioural flexibility, where employees adjust behaviour in varying scenarios, strengthens an organization's adaptability. Skill flexibility, which refers to the rapid acquisition of new skills, is also emphasized by Naqvi et al. (2012) as crucial for evolving job responsibilities.

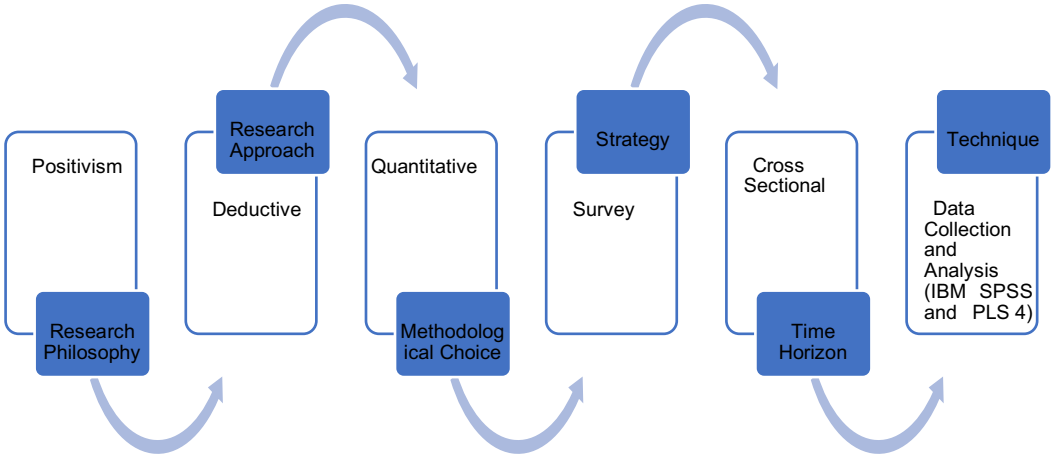
Liedtka (1998) discusses five pillars of strategic thinking: systemic perspective, intent focus, intelligent opportunism, thinking in time, and hypothesis-driven approach. Similarly, Hamel characterizes strategic thinking as artistic and creativity driven. Goldman (2005) introduced components like conceptual and future-oriented thinking. Meshbaki et al. (2008) argue that organizational culture significantly impacts strategic thinking, fostering an environment conducive to creativity and strategic management.

Goldman and Scott (2022) emphasize that leadership development programs focused on strategic thinking help build critical analysis skills. The importance of cognitive flexibility in managing strategic uncertainty is discussed by Herrmann and Nadkarni (2020), while Roberson (2021) suggests that diversity within leadership teams enhances strategic adaptability in global markets.

**Methodology**

To gather data regarding the dependent variable (strategic thinking), a questionnaire consisting of 16 questions was developed based on Joon Moon's model and the organization's objectives, validated by 10 experts and specialists in the defence field. Based on their feedback (face validity), 4 questions were subsequently removed. The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was calculated as 0.851.

**Figure 1:** Research Design

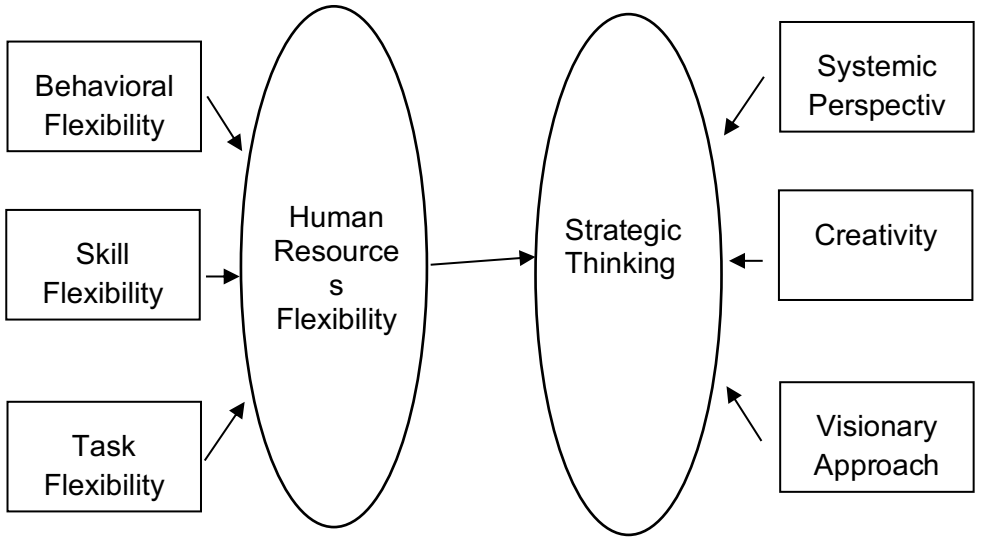



**Source:** Developed by the Author

**Conceptual Model of Research**

Ensuring security in any country requires the creation of appropriate defence and military strategies based on national policies, internal capabilities, as well as potential and actual threats and opportunities in the international environment. This necessitates the institutionalization of strategic thinking in the defence and security domain. Therefore, identifying and enhancing the factors influencing strategic thinking is essential for strengthening this fundamental capability within military institutions. In this study, following a review of research background and based on previous research recommendations (Kaviani et al., 2018; Bjørnstad, and Frederick, 2013), the role and position of human resources in the excellence and success of Sri Lanka Air Force, strategic thinking as the dependent variable, and the flexibility of human resources as the independent variable are identified and their relationship is examined based on the conceptual model depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** Conceptual Model of the Research




**Source:** Kaviani et al., 2018; Bjørnstad, and Frederick, 2013

Regarding the independent variable, data were collected using a 12-item questionnaire on human resource flexibility developed by Wright and Snell, which includes components of task flexibility, behavioural flexibility, and skill-based flexibility. This questionnaire was validated by 6 experts and specialists in the research field, and its reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.798. Both questionnaires were validated for their appropriateness to the research structure using exploratory factor analysis.

The population considered was the strategic level Officers of Sri Lanka Air Force in the rank of Wing Commander and above (520 as at 2024). Hence a sample of 222 was considered out of the population of 520 in the 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 5%. Simple random sampling technique was utilized to derive the sample. The questionnaire was administered with google forms.

Data analysis and examining relationships between variables were performed using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling (SEM) under Smart PLS 4 and IBM SPSS software.

The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between human resource flexibility and strategic thinking within organizations. Specifically, it aims to analyse how different forms of human resource flexibility—behavioural, skill, and task flexibility—individually and collectively impact the ability of organizations to

engage in effective strategic thinking. The study seeks to identify the mechanisms through which these dimensions of flexibility enhance strategic decision-making, adaptability, and long-term planning, ultimately contributing to the organization's capacity to navigate complex and dynamic environments. Through this analysis, the research will provide insights into how fostering flexibility in human resources can be a strategic asset for organizations aiming to improve their strategic capabilities. The Hypothesis of the research are as follows.

**Hypothesis**

H: Human resource flexibility has a positive impact on strategic thinking.

**Sub-hypotheses:**

H1: Behavioural flexibility has a positive impact on strategic thinking.

H2: Skill flexibility has a positive impact on strategic thinking.

H3: Task flexibility has a positive impact on strategic thinking.

## Data Analysis

**Factor Analysis**

In this study, to ensure the adequacy of questionnaire items with research constructs, the KMO test, Bartlett's test, and exploratory factor analysis were employed. The validity of each question

**Table 1:** Content Validity of Strategic Thinking Questionnaire Using Exploratory Factor Analysis

| KMO and Bartlett's Test | Factor Structure |
|---|---|
| 0.891 | Systemic Attitude |
| 0.762 | Creativity |
| 0.793 | Visionary Perspective |

**Source:** Developed by the author

**Table 2:** Content Validity of Human Resource Flexibility Questionnaire Using Exploratory Factor Analysis

| KMO and Bartlett's Test | Factor Structure |
|---|---|
| 0.756 | Behavioral Flexibility |
| 0.764 | Skill Flexibility |
| 0.803 | Task Flexibility |

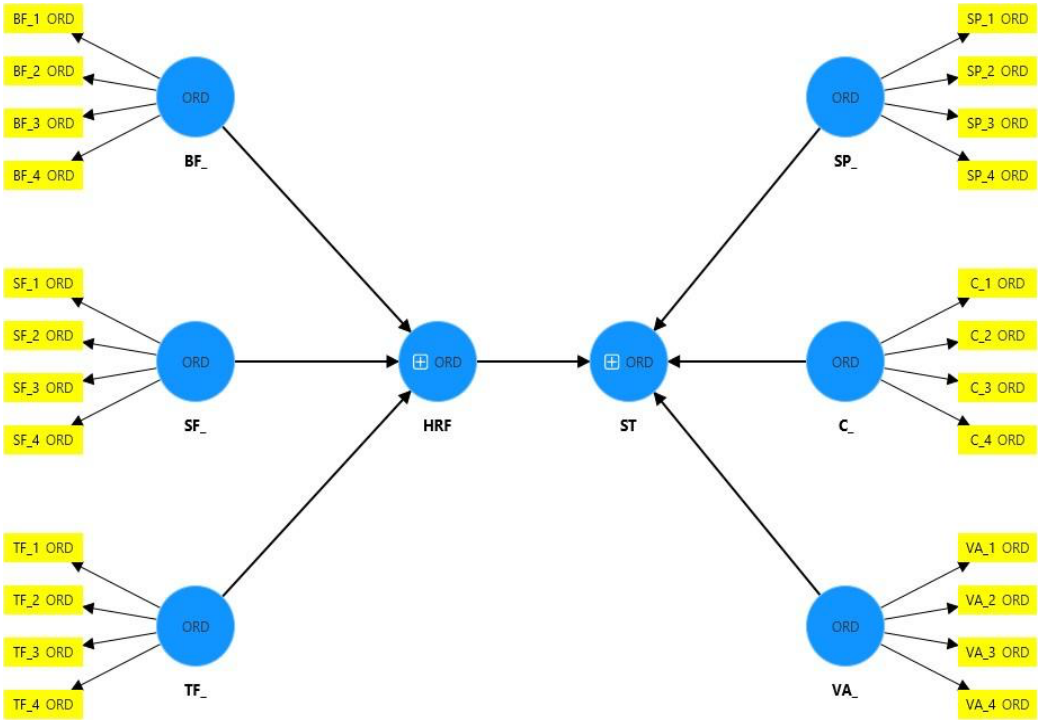
**Source:** Developed by the Author

Tables 1 and 2 present Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measures and Bartlett's Test results for different constructs in factor analysis. For the first set of values (0.756 for Behavioural Flexibility, 0.764 for Skill Flexibility, and 0.803 for Task Flexibility), the KMO values indicate moderate to high suitability for factor analysis, suggesting that the variables measuring behavioural, skill, and task flexibility correlate well enough to support a coherent factor structure. In the second set (0.891 for Systemic Attitude, 0.762 for Creativity, and 0.793 for Visionary Perspective), higher KMO values for systemic attitude suggest strong internal correlations among its variables, indicating a robust factor structure. However, moderate KMO values for creativity and visionary perspective imply that while variables within these constructs correlate reasonably well, there may be some variability or overlap that could benefit from further refinement or inclusion of additional variables to strengthen their factor structures.

**Evaluation and Interpretation of the Conceptual Model**

Figure 3 depicts the conceptual model of the research along with path coefficients and model fit indices, as generated by Smart PLS software. The fit indices below the figure indicate a good fit of the model with the data.

**Figure 3:** SEM model for Smart PLS 4 data analysis




**Source:** Developed by the Author

Among the dimensions of Human Resource Flexibility, Task Flexibility with a path coefficient of 0.834 plays the most significant role, while Skill Flexibility with a path coefficient of 0.703 has the least impact on explaining Human Resource Flexibility. Among the dimensions of Strategic Thinking, Systemic Perspective has a greater role in explaining Organizational Agility compared to the rest.

### Evaluation of Model Fit and Research Hypotheses

Tables 4 and 5 summarize the key fit indices, indicating that the model fits the data adequately.

**Table 3:** Standardized Path Coefficients

| | Original sample (O) | Sample mean (M) | Standard deviation (STDEV) | T statistics (\|O/STDEV\|) | P values |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BF_ -> HRF | 0.715 | 0.705 | 0.015 | 4.323 | 0 |
| C_ -> ST | 0.719 | 0.713 | 0.022 | 5.371 | 0 |
| SF_ -> HRF | 0.703 | 0.695 | 0.025 | 5.424 | 0 |
| SP_ -> ST | 0.805 | 0.786 | 0.026 | 7.298 | 0 |
| TF_ -> HRF | 0.834 | 0.853 | 0.019 | 5.357 | 0 |
| VA_ -> ST | 0.447 | 0.436 | 0.011 | 4.021 | 0 |

**Source:** Developed by the Author

**Table 4:** Structural Model Fit Indices of the Research

| | Saturated model | Estimated model |
|---|---|---|
| SRMR | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| d_ULS | 4.552 | 4.552 |
| d_G | 5.969 | 5.705 |
| Chi-square | 1.21 | 1.21 |
| NFI | 0.95 | 0.95 |

**Source:** Developed by the Author

The table presents various fit indices comparing a saturated model, which represents a model with perfect fit, and an estimated model, derived from structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis. Both models show a consistent fit across several metrics: Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) indicates minimal discrepancy between observed and predicted correlations, with both models achieving an excellent fit (0.03). Unweighted Least Squares Discrepancy (d_ULS) similarly shows no difference between the models, with both at 4.552, suggesting they reproduce observed covariance matrices equally

well. Bentler's Comparative Fit Index (d_G) shows a slightly lower value for the estimated model (5.705 vs. 5.969 for the saturated model), implying slightly better fit of the estimated model compared to the perfect fit model. Chi-square values are identical (1.21), indicating both models fit the covariance structure equally well, albeit sensitive to sample size. Normed Fit Index (NFI) is high and consistent (0.95), indicating both models fit well relative to a baseline model. Overall, the findings suggest that while the estimated model slightly improves upon the perfect fit model in terms of some fit indices, both models generally provide a robust representation of the data with high consistency across multiple evaluation metrics.

**Table 5:** Path coefficients of the determinants of Human resources flexibility

| Path Coefficient | Interpretation |
|---|---|
| 0.715 | Behavioural Flexibility significantly influences Human Resource Flexibility. |
| 0.834 | Task Flexibility has a significant influence on Human Resource Flexibility. |
| 0.703 | Skill Flexibility significantly affects Organizational Human Resource Flexibility. |

**Source:** Developed by the Author

These findings indicate that all hypotheses are supported, affirming the relationships proposed in the conceptual model. The path coefficients indicate significant positive relationships between various forms of flexibility and Human Resource Flexibility. Behavioural Flexibility (0.715), Task Flexibility (0.834), and Skill Flexibility (0.703) all show strong influences on organizational HR flexibility. These findings suggest that organizations benefit from employees who can adapt their behaviour, tasks, and skills, enabling them to effectively manage human resources in dynamic environments.

**Table 6:** Main Hypothesis of the Research with Path Coefficients and Statistical Significance

| Main Hypothesis | Path Coefficient | p-value | T-statistic | Coefficient of Determination | Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Human Resource Flexibility -> Strategic Thinking | 0.896 | 0 | 5.87 | 0.85 | Strongly supports significant influence |

**Source:** Developed by the Author

Based on the results in Table 6, with 95% confidence, it can be stated that Human Resource Flexibility has a positive and significant effect on Strategic Thinking in the organization. Additionally, according to the coefficient of determination, the Human Resource Flexibility variable has predicted 89% of the variance in Strategic Thinking in the target organization. Meanwhile, Table 7 presents the findings of the confirmatory factor analysis using structural equation modelling for testing the secondary hypotheses of the study.

**Table 7:** Findings from Structural Equation Modelling in Testing Secondary Hypotheses of the Research

| Secondary Hypothesis | Standardized Coefficient | Significance Level | Results |
|---|---|---|---|
| Behavioral Flexibility (BF) -> Strategic Thinking | 0.894 | 0.001 | Supported |
| Skill Flexibility (SF) -> Strategic Thinking | 0.842 | 0.001 | Supported |
| Task Flexibility (TF) -> Strategic Thinking | 0.774 | 0.005 | Supported |

**Source:** Developed by the Author

The results confirm the support for all secondary hypotheses of the study. In other words, with 95% confidence, it can be concluded that Behavioural Flexibility, Skill Flexibility, and Task Flexibility each have a positive impact on Strategic Thinking.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Military organizations are typically engaged in environments with rapid changes where stability may come at a low cost or may not be achievable at all, as Bjørnstad and Frederick (2013) discuss. In such conditions, merely observing the strategic environment continuously and identifying and understanding potential and actual threats and opportunities can lead organizations to their ultimate goal of achieving security.

This study examined the relationship between human resource flexibility and strategic thinking among the strategic level of the Sri Lanka Air Force. A strategic thinking approach can be considered essential in achieving sustainable competitive advantage, where flexible human resources can play a crucial role. Based on the results of the main hypothesis testing, it can be stated that human resource flexibility can enhance strategic thinking. Despite the lack of scientific exploration of this relationship in the military context, the findings align with previous studies on the subject matter, as noted by Kaviani et al. (2017) and Úbeda-García et al. (2016).

The findings of the research indicate that human resource flexibility improves multi-skills, decision-making abilities, problem-solving capabilities in response to changing conditions, adaptation to new circumstances, and continuous learning capabilities. This holistic view helps organizations adapt to environmental changes. Furthermore, the implementation of military unit agile transformation plans is crucial. These plans include diversifying employees' skills, delegating decision-making authority for different levels of authority and specific conditions, and reducing communication hierarchies, as discussed by Esmizadeh and Bashir (2014).

Moreover, findings from the secondary hypotheses demonstrate a positive relationship between behavioural, skill, and task flexibilities with strategic thinking. This suggests that flexibility enables individuals with diverse skills to perform effectively in various situations and enhances their capacity to understand environmental complexities, thereby increasing their tolerance for heterogeneous behaviours, a point made by Esmizadeh and Bashir (2014). This issue is vital given the job and occupational characteristics in the defence sector.

Considering the research results, it appears that human resource flexibility should be regarded as a suitable strategy for the Sri Lanka Air Force in facing turbulent and complex environments. However, achieving this requires nurturing and maintaining capable employees, investing in training, balancing work-life and

family life, updating employees' knowledge and skills, and creating motivation and capacity in human resources for leveraging opportunities, as Úbeda-García et al. (2016) emphasize. Alongside these factors, fundamental changes in organizational structuring, job classification, and salary systems within the armed forces are essential requirements that must be considered for human resource flexibility. For instance, in organizations striving for internal operational flexibility and rapid responsiveness to conditions, traditional job-based systems are ineffective compared to competency-based systems that emphasize multiple skills or necessary competencies and employees' abilities to undertake diverse tasks in different teams, as Bamberger et al. (2015) discuss.

In the sphere of behavioural flexibility, providing conditions for facing significant and unprecedented situations, enhancing risk-taking capabilities, self-confidence, and creating necessary frameworks for the flourishing of employees' potential abilities will lead to their effective performance in various situations. In other words, developing behavioural codes, encouraging compliance in different situations, and considering concurrent behaviours with discretion for suitable roles will contribute to achieving flexibility in resources, as Armstrong (2016) suggests. Given the complexity of conditions and the risks of organizational advancement, this issue must be prioritized within strategic human resource management plans more than ever before. Moreover, some researchers believe that improving task flexibility enables organizations to achieve strategic alignment and adapt to environmental changes.

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, creating a comprehensive picture and creative perspectives of future battlefields in the strategic thinking process, especially within military units, necessitates actions, training, and exercises that require special attention. Since any information in different fields and specialties can impact the fulfilment of military organizations' tasks and missions, all military personnel must be proficient in tactical and technical skills. Another notable point is that enhancing strategic thinking capacities and human resource flexibility in military units requires the utilization of simulation software for future wars and theories such as game theory for training to enhance employees' understanding and insight, as Armstrong (2016) also notes. While real operations complement theoretical training, motivational factors, strong determination, and appropriate psychological and spiritual conditions are crucial for voluntary engagement in challenging fields. Utilizing ideological discussions and social capital can be instrumental in this regard. Understanding the worldviews and philosophical beliefs of potential and actual enemies can significantly influence predicting their future actions and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of combat forces.

Therefore, familiarity with the philosophical and ideological doctrines of enemies is vital for military units.

Recent research underscores the critical role of human resource flexibility in enhancing strategic thinking within military organizations. Nguyen et al. (2022) found that increased flexibility in human resources significantly improves decision-making and adaptability, crucial for responding to dynamic threats and opportunities. Their study highlights that flexible human resources contribute to better strategic alignment and organizational performance, aligning with the findings that human resource flexibility enhances strategic thinking.

Moreover, recent advancements in training methodologies support the development of strategic thinking through simulation and scenario-based exercises. Patel et al. (2024) demonstrated that simulation-based training enhances strategic decision-making and operational readiness, providing practical insights into managing complex and unpredictable situations. This finding supports the recommendation to incorporate advanced training technologies to foster strategic thinking and adaptability within military units.

Additionally, Kumar and Singh (2023) emphasized the shift towards competency-based systems in dynamic environments, which aligns with our recommendation for diversifying skills and reducing communication hierarchies. Their research indicates that competency-based approaches, which focus on multiple skills and diverse task capabilities, are more effective than traditional job-based systems in supporting organizational flexibility and responsiveness.

These recent studies reinforce the importance of integrating human resource flexibility and innovative training methods to enhance strategic thinking and operational effectiveness in military settings. Thereby, future research should continue to explore these areas and consider additional factors, such as intellectual capital and psychological empowerment, to further understand their impact on strategic thinking. Furthermore, paying special attention to individual training alongside group training and knowledge sharing is essential for military institutions and needs to be included in their planning. Considering the conditions and characteristics of the target organization, the generalization of the current study's results to different societies should be done with careful consideration of various aspects. Moreover, since this study only considers human resource flexibility as an explanatory variable for strategic thinking, it appears that other variables such as intellectual capital and psychological empowerment of military personnel can also explain changes in strategic thinking within the Sri Lanka Air Force, which should be investigated in future research.

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