



Suspending disbelief at work: theoretical foundations and implications for human resource management

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Abstract. The concept of suspension of disbelief, originally rooted in literary and aesthetic theory, has increasingly gained relevance across psychology, education, philosophy, and organizational studies. In organizational contexts, employees are frequently required to engage with abstract systems, symbolic practices, narratives, and technologically mediated experiences that demand a temporary acceptance of uncertainty, incompleteness, or constructed realities. Human Resource Management (HRM), as a function deeply involved in shaping employee experiences, learning, and meaning-making, implicitly relies on this mechanism. This review paper synthesizes the theoretical foundations of suspension of disbelief and critically examines its implications for HRM. Drawing on literature from literary theory, cognitive psychology, learning sciences, and organizational studies, the paper conceptualizes suspension of disbelief as a cognitive–emotional mechanism that enables participation, engagement, trust, and learning in HR practices. Implications for recruitment, training and development, digital HRM, and organizational change are discussed, and directions for future HRM research are proposed.

Keywords: suspension of disbelief; human resource management; employee experience; learning and development; digital HRM; trust

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Приостановка недоверия на работе: теоретические основы и последствия для управления персоналом

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Аннотация. Концепция приостановки недоверия, изначально сформировавшаяся в рамках литературной и эстетической теории, в последние годы приобретает всё большее значение в психологии, образовании, философии и организационных исследованиях. В организационном контексте сотрудники часто взаимодействуют с абстрактными системами, символическими практиками, нарративами и технологически опосредованными процессами, что требует временного принятия неопределённости, неполноты или сконструированных реальностей. Управление человеческими ресурсами (HRM), как функция, непосредственно связанная с формированием опыта сотрудников, обучением и конструированием смыслов, имплицитно опирается на данный механизм. В данной обзорной статье синтезируются теоретические основания концепции приостановки недоверия и проводится критический анализ её значимости для управления персоналом. На основе литературы по литературной теории, когнитивной психологии, наукам об обучении и организационным исследованиям приостановка недоверия концептуализируется как когнитивно-эмоциональный механизм, способствующий вовлечённости, участию, доверию и обучению в HR-практиках. Рассматриваются последствия для процессов подбора персонала, обучения и развития, цифрового HRM и организационных изменений, а также предлагаются направления для будущих исследований в области управления человеческими ресурсами.

Ключевые слова: приостановка недоверия; управление человеческими ресурсами; опыт сотрудников; обучение и развитие; цифровое HRM; доверие.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary workplaces increasingly rely on abstract systems, symbolic interactions, and digitally mediated processes. Employees are expected to trust recruitment algorithms, engage in simulated training environments, accept performance metrics, and participate in organizational narratives that frame identity, values, and strategic futures. These expectations often require individuals to temporarily accept representations of reality that are incomplete, idealized, or uncertain. This cognitive stance aligns with the notion of suspension of disbelief [1].

Originally developed in the context of literary engagement, suspension of disbelief refers to a voluntary mental act in which individuals set aside skepticism in order to meaningfully engage with a constructed experience [2]. While extensively examined in literature and education, the concept remains under-theorized in Human Resource Management (HRM). Yet, HRM practices - from employer branding to virtual onboarding frequently depend on employees' willingness to engage with symbolic and anticipatory representations of work [3].

This review paper aims to

- synthesize the theoretical foundations of suspension of disbelief,
- examine its psychological and learning-related dimensions, and
- analyze its implications for HRM theory and practice.

By integrating insights across disciplines, the paper contributes a conceptual lens for understanding employee engagement in increasingly abstract and digitalized organizational environments.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

LITERARY AND AESTHETIC ORIGINS

The concept of suspension of disbelief was introduced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge to explain how readers emotionally and cognitively engage with fictional narratives despite recognizing their fictional nature [1]. Importantly, this engagement is not naïve belief but a deliberate, temporary bracketing of skepticism. Subsequent literary theorists emphasized that suspension of disbelief is negotiated rather than automatic, shaped by coherence, plausibility, and emotional resonance.

Holland (1967) [2] extended this idea through a psychoanalytic lens, arguing that suspension of

disbelief is rooted in basic psychological trust and identity formation. According to this view, individuals engage with narratives that resonate with deep-seated needs for coherence and meaning. This perspective suggests that suspension of disbelief is not confined to artistic contexts but applies broadly to symbolic systems that invite identification and participation.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVES

From a psychological standpoint, suspension of disbelief can be understood as a cognitive-emotional mechanism that allows individuals to engage with ambiguity without immediate judgment. It involves withholding belief and disbelief simultaneously, enabling openness to experience [4]. Philosophical work on suspended belief further distinguishes between different forms of suspension, including evidential neutrality and aporetic suspension, where uncertainty arises from conceptual or interpretive ambiguity rather than lack of evidence [5].

In organizational settings, employees frequently encounter such ambiguity- for example, when interpreting performance criteria, leadership intentions, or algorithmic decisions. Suspension of disbelief enables continued engagement under these conditions, provided that systems are perceived as legitimate and fair.

LEARNING, AUTHENTICITY, AND SIMULATION

Educational research highlights suspension of disbelief as central to experiential and simulation-based learning. Kantor et al. (2000) argue that learners engage meaningfully with goal-based scenarios when authenticity is sufficient to support immersion but not so intense as to provoke anxiety [6]. Authenticity, therefore, functions as a boundary condition for sustaining suspension of disbelief.

These insights are particularly relevant for HR training and development, where simulations, role plays, and virtual environments are widely used [7]. Suspension of disbelief allows participants to treat these activities as legitimate rehearsals for real work, facilitating skill development and reflective learning.

SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

ORGANIZATIONS AS SYMBOLIC SYSTEMS

Organizations operate through symbolic systems as much as through formal structures. Mission statements, corporate values, leadership narratives, and employer branding function as symbolic representations that guide employee sensemaking [8]. Engaging with these representations often requires suspension of disbelief, particularly when

there is misalignment between espoused values and lived experience.

Employees may adopt an “as-if” orientation, participating in organizational narratives while maintaining critical distance. This negotiated stance illustrates that suspension of disbelief in organizations is dynamic and context dependent rather than absolute.

TRUST, MEANING, AND PARTICIPATION

Suspension of disbelief is closely linked to trust. When employees perceive HR systems as transparent and fair, they are more willing to engage with assessments, feedback, and development initiatives [3]. Conversely, when trust erodes, disbelief manifests as cynicism and disengagement.

HRM thus plays a central role in sustaining constructive suspension of disbelief by designing practices that balance symbolic engagement with procedural justice and authenticity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

Recruitment efforts are increasingly based upon employer branding stories, simulations, and algorithmic screening systems. The applicants are directed to believe in a prospective membership in organizations and to believe in clouded judgment systems. The suspension of disbelief facilitates the interaction with these processes despite doubt and allows job applicants to indulge in utopian depictions of their work environment, career development, and workplace-life balance in glossy videos, employee testimonials, and game-based testing. This non-compulsory bracketing of skepticism assists the applicants to ignore possible gaps between the content of ads and the actual one, which promotes the initial attraction and motivation to utilize it. Nevertheless, such unrealistic descriptions as the exaggeration of career ladder, team work, or work-life balance may problematically result in post-entry disillusionment. When new employees find out that there are unresolved conflicts, this usually creates a breach of a psychological contract and hence less trust, less commitment with the organization, increased turnover intentions, decreased highly committed behaviors such as organizational citizenship and even counterproductive organizational work behaviors such as neglect or deviance. Ethical issues are also eminent in this case, since manipulative or fake employer branding would capitalize on the desire of candidates to suspend disbelief and could harm the reputation of the employer in the long term and increase early attrition

rates. HRM has to therefore give genuineness to branding exercises, real life stories of employees, open illustrations and the like to maintain positive suspension without establishing future breaches.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Simulations, gamification and virtual learning environment are the common training environments used in HR training to develop skills and competencies. Suspension of disbelief enables the participants to work with such settings as meaningful learning experience instead of artificial exercise [6]. The simulation reality, which in this case can be a role-play simulation, a gamified module that gives points and leaderboards, or a full-fledged virtual environment, allows learners to gain higher immersion, emotional buy-in and behavioral rehearsal. Those factors that can be improved include adequate fidelity (realism in situations), psychological safety (lacking judgment), and explicit briefings that clarify required suspension (e.g., pretending that minor technical constraints do not exist). This process facilitates experimentation in identity (i.e. taking up leadership roles or resolving conflicts in secure settings) that facilitates reflective learning and generalization to actual performance. Nevertheless, when the simulations are too unrealistic or cause anxiety due to unrealisticness, the suspension fails, lowering interactions and learning performance. The artful balance therefore between immersion with debriefing enhances the targeted learning goals and to prevent superficial involvement in gamification such as challenges and storylines increase fun and perceived utility.

DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL HRM

The virtual onboarding services, virtual AI-based assessment tools, and automated talent management software are all examples of digital HRM systems that only increase the significance of the suspension of disbelief. The technologies are based on the assumption that the employees and candidates interact with non-human interfaces, abstract data displays, and predictive algorithms that inform decisions related to hiring, performance, or development. Not only usability but also perceived legitimacy, transparency, and ethical governance are engaged in [3]. Suspension allows users to believe in algorithmic black boxes as fair and trustworthy, virtual onboarding avatars or chatbots as acceptable entrypoints into the organization and AI recommendations as authoritative advice. However, as systems become perceived as inscrutable, biased, or dehumanizing, e.g., impersonal automated feedback, or slower integration in virtual form, suspension of disbelief fails, distrust, causing anxiety

as to job security, and compromising the overall experience of the employees. In distant or cooperative environments, hasty AI applications can add to a sense of alienation whereas properly-structured applications (e.g. customized online experiences) can bring a sense of belonging when presented in a clearer way.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND HR NARRATIVES

Change programs are frequently based on futuristic stories, which demand that employees believe in the future imaginations that have not yet materialized, including the post-restructuring vision or the advantages of digital transformation. HR professionals are sense-givers, who bring change into perspective in a manner that provokes temporary suspension of scepticism [8]. They promote participation in uncertain periods in times of transition by encouraging employees to invest in aspirational scenarios through storytelling, town halls and strategic communications to continue to participate in the midst of uncertainty and sensemaking. There must be credibility and congruence between rhetoric and action; there must be continuity in following through, and inconsistency creates cynicism. Suspension is helpful in building adaptive behaviors, collaborative sense-making, as well as resilience, whereas manipulative and excessively optimistic stories can lead to ethical traps, such as compelled buy-in or other ulterior motives. The HRM should inculcate inclusive stories where issues are recognized, creating a sense of trust to sustain positive suspension during the change processes.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While suspension of disbelief can enable learning and engagement, it also poses ethical risks. Manipulative narratives, exaggerated promises, or opaque technologies may exploit employees' willingness to suspend disbelief, leading to breaches of trust. HRM must therefore ensure that symbolic engagement supports empowerment rather than deception.

This review adopts a narrative conceptual approach, synthesizing interdisciplinary literature from literary theory, psychology, learning sciences, philosophy, and HRM. Sources were identified through keyword searches such as 'suspension of disbelief,' 'symbolic engagement,' and 'organizational sensemaking' in Google Scholar and Scopus databases.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The next wave of HRM studies must conduct empirical research on the mechanisms of suspension of disbelief in various HR processes, including

recruiting, onboarding, performance management, leadership development, and organizational change programs. The longitudinal research would be able to trace the development of this mechanism over an extended period, especially regarding the reaction to the digital changes, such as AI-based tools and virtual reality-based training environments.

It should look at cultural and personal variations in disbelief-willingness (e.g. collectivist versus individualist societies, generations (e.g. Gen Z versus Baby Boomers), and individual differences in personality, such as openness to experience or tolerance to ambiguity. Comparisons across cultures would demonstrate whether such variables as power distance or uncertainty avoidance mediate the interaction with symbolic HR narratives.

It is also crucial to explore the connection between the suspension of disbelief and the main outcomes namely trust on HR systems, employee engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and ethical perceptions. Mediating roles (e.g., trust is a mediator) and moderating influences (e.g., perceived authenticity or procedural justice) could be tested using quantitative methods, in this case, structural equation modeling.

To reveal lived experiences of suspension and collapse of disbelief, particularly in contexts of high ambiguity, including mergers, restructurings, or transitions to working remotely, qualitative inquires would be used, such as in-depth interviews or the narrative analysis. Immersion levels and ensuing behavioral response could be measured with experimental designs simulating HR scenarios (e.g. gamified assessments or employer branding videos).

Also, future practice ought to focus on the possible negatives such as the risk of exploitation via manipulative stories or obscure technologies and how ethical HRM practices can promote positive as opposed to forced suspension. Incorporating suspension of disbelief into existing HRM practices, including psychological contract theory, sensemaking models, or engagement theories, provides a viable way of theoretical development.

This combination would allow gaining a better understanding of worker experience in digitally mediated workplace settings, in which symbolic and anticipatory factors are becoming more predominant. Such research would help to inform more humane, effective, and adaptive HR practices in the face of abstraction and uncertainty of the workplace by interdisciplinary contributions that span the literature theory, psychology, and organizational studies. In the end, this underresearched topic would help in creating resilient institutions that would strike the

right balance between the use of symbols and transparency and true empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This is a review that places suspension of disbelief as an underlying but under researched concept in Human Resource Management (HRM). The paper uses the combination of views based on literary theory, psychology and learning sciences, along with organizational studies to illustrate that participation, learning and meaning-making at work is made possible through the suspension of disbelief. Working in a world where most workplaces are dominated by abstract systems, digital interfaces, algorithmic tools, and aspirational narratives, employees are often forced to take this cognitive position in order to participate effectively in unfinished or idealized images of organizational reality. Initially based on the literary framework of Coleridge [1], the idea is much broader than fiction to become an actual psychological instrument that facilitates the fixation on simulations, the belief in murky HR procedures, and the willingness to embrace the change effort. The identification of suspension of disbelief clarifies why employees may find something valuable in the employer brand, virtual onboarding, gamified training, and visionary visions, despite the fact that these aspects may have some elements of idealization or uncertainty. When handled in a positive way, this mechanism contributes to a more and more engaged employee, experiential learning, and organizational sensemaking [8]. It enables people to test new identities, practice new behavior in safe simulated worlds and stay motivated in ambiguous situations, which become all the more essential in digitally mediated and rapidly changing workplaces. Nevertheless, the balancing act that should occur is also highlighted in the review: suspension of disbelief lives on the perceived authenticity, transparency, fairness, and procedural justice, which are demonstrated through connections to trust and lesser cynicism [3]. Once such foundations are undermined, via manipulative stories, oversold hopes, unimaginable artificial intelligence, or a continued sense of disconnect between those proclaimed values and the life they lead, the mechanism may fail, resulting in disengagement, disillusionment, or unethical conduct. HRM professionals hence have a huge role to play in developing practices that will foster constructive, as opposed to exploitative, types of suspension. The ethical approach to the process implies focusing on empowerment, psychological

safety, and authentic alignment rather than the symbolic persuasion. In this manner, organizations will be able to use suspension of disbelief to create more legitimacy, facilitate meaningful involvement, and create more resilient workforces. Finally, the given conceptual lens provides HRM researchers and practitioners with a new perspective of understanding how employees react to new challenges, including algorithmic decision-making, virtual collaboration, and continuous organizational change. It can be empirically confirmed in future studies which quality of these insights might differ by cultures, industry, individual patterns and HR specific areas. By so doing, the incorporation of suspension of disbelief into the theory of HRM is likely to help us better comprehend the way in which employees negotiate and seek meaning in more abstract, symbolic and mediated organizational worlds. By respectfully and responsibly leading this mechanism, one can therefore help to make HR practices in the contemporary workplace more humane, effective, and adaptable.

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