



The Pro-Active Role of HR Managers - An Analytical Study

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with what HR professionals do and how they do it, bearing in mind the comment of Boxall and Purcell (2003) that 'HRM does not belong to HR specialists'. HRM belongs to line managers and the people they manage - the stakeholders in people management.

This chapter starts with an analysis of the basic roles and activities of HR professionals and of the various models of these roles. A number of issues that affect the role of HR people are then explored; these comprise gaining support and commitment, role ambiguity, role conflict, ethics, and professionalism. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the competencies required by HR practitioners.

1. INTRODUCTION

The roles of HR practitioners vary widely according to the extent to which they are generalist (eg, HR director or HR manager), or specialist (eg, head of learning and development, head of talent management, or head of reward), the level at which they work (strategic, executive or administrative) the needs of the organization, the context within which they work and their own capabilities.

The role can be proactive, reactive or a mixture of both. At a strategic level, HR people take on a proactive role. Research conducted by Hoque and Moon (2001) established that: 'The growing number of specialists using the HR title are well qualified, are more likely to be involved in strategic decision-making processes and are most likely to be found in workplaces within which sophisticated methods and techniques have been adopted.' As such, they act as business partners, develop integrated HR strategies, intervene, innovate, operate as internal consultants and volunteer guidance on matters concerning upholding core values, ethical principles and the achievement of consistency. They focus on business issues and working with line managers to deliver performance targets.

In some situations they play a mainly reactive role. They spend much of their time doing what they are told or asked to do. They provide the administrative systems required by management. This is what Storey (1992a) refers to as the non-interventionary role, in which HR people merely provide a service to meet the demands of management and front-line managers. The various roles are described in more detail below.

2. ANALYSIS

As strategists, HR professionals address major long-term organizational issues concerning the management and development of people and the employment relationship. They are guided by the business plans of the organization but they also contribute to the formulation of those business plans. This is achieved by ensuring that top managers focus on the human resource implications of the plans. HR strategists persuade top managers that they must develop business strategies that make the best use of the core competences of the organization's human resources. They emphasize, in the words of Hendry and Pettigrew (1986), that people are a strategic resource for the achievement of competitive advantage.

In their proactive role, HR practitioners are well placed to observe and analyse what is happening in and to their organizations as it affects the employment of people, and intervene accordingly. Following this analysis, they produce diagnoses that identify opportunities and threats and the causes of problems. They propose innovations in the light of these diagnoses that may be concerned with organizational processes such as interaction between departments and people, teamwork, structural

change and the impact of new technology and methods of working, or HR processes such as resourcing, employee development or reward. As innovators they have to be experts in change management.

The danger, according to Marchington (1995a), is that HR people may go in for ‘impression management’ - aiming to make an impact on senior managers and colleagues through publicizing high-profile innovations. HR specialists who aim to draw attention to themselves simply by promoting the latest flavour of the month, irrespective of its relevance or practicality, are falling into the trap that Drucker (1955), anticipating Marchington by 40 years, described as follows:

The constant worry of all personnel administrators is their inability to prove that they are making a contribution to the enterprise. Their preoccupation is with the search for a ‘gimmick’ that will impress their management colleagues.

- *Transformational change* - a major change that has a dramatic effect on HR policy and practice across the whole organization.
- *Incremental change* - gradual adjustments of HR policy and practices that affect single activities or multiple functions.
- *HR vision* - a set of values and beliefs that affirm the legitimacy of the HR function as strategic business partner.
- *HR expertise* - the knowledge and skills that define the unique contribution the HR professional can make to effective people management.

Across these dimensions, the change agent roles that Caldwell suggests can be carried out by HR professionals are those of change champions, change adapters, change consultants and change synergists.

Gratton (2000) stresses the need for HR practitioners to: ‘Understand the state of the company, the extent of the embedding of processes and structures throughout the organization, and the behaviour and attitudes of individual employees’. She believes that ‘The challenge is to implement the ideas’ and the solution is to ‘build a guiding coalition by involving line managers’, which means ‘creating issue-based cross-functional action teams that will initially make recommendations and later move into action’. This approach ‘builds the capacity to change’.

The following are 10 guidelines for HR innovators and change agents:

- Be clear on what has to be achieved and why.
- Ensure that what you do fits the strategy, culture and circumstances of the organization.
- Don’t follow fashion - do your own thing.
- Keep it simple - over-complexity is a common reason for failure.
- Don’t rush - it will take longer than you think.
- Don’t try to do too much at once - an incremental approach is generally best.
- Assess resource requirements and costs.
- Pay close attention to project planning and management.
- Remember that the success of the innovation rests as much on the effectiveness of the process of implementation (line manager buy-in and skills are crucial) as it does on the quality of the concept, if not more so.
- Pay close attention to change management - communicate, involve and train.

As internal consultants, HR practitioners function like external management consultants, working alongside their colleagues - their clients - in analysing problems, diagnosing issues and proposing solutions. They will be involved in the development of HR processes or systems and in ‘process consulting’. The latter deals with process areas such as organization, team building and objective setting.

As monitors of the application of HR policies and procedures and the extent to which the organization’s values relating to people management are upheld, HR practitioners have a delicate, indeed a difficult, role to play. They are not there to ‘police’ what line managers do but it is still

necessary to ensure that the policies and procedures are implemented with a reasonable degree of consistency. This role as described by Storey (1992a) can mean that HR specialists can act as 'regulators' who are 'managers of discontent' involved in formulating and monitoring employment rules. The monitoring role is particularly important with regard to employment legislation. HR practitioners have to ensure that policies and procedures comply with the legislation and that they are implemented correctly by line managers.

Although the tendency is to devolve more responsibility for HR matters to line managers, the latter cannot be given total freedom to flout company policy or to contravene the provisions of employment, equal opportunity and health and safety legislation. A balance has to be struck between freedom, consistency and legal obligations.

HR practitioners may act as the guardians of the organization's values concerning people. They point out when behaviour conflicts with those values or where proposed actions would be inconsistent with them. In a sense, their roles require them to act as the 'conscience' of management - a necessary role but not an easy one to play.

A number of models classifying types of roles have been produced, as summarized below. These simplify the complex roles that HR professionals often have to play which, in different contexts or times, may change considerably or may mean adopting varied approaches to meet altering circumstances. They are therefore not universal but they do provide some insight into the different ways in which HR specialists operate.

Two types of HR managers are described in this model: 1) *Conformist innovators* who go along with their organization's ends and adjust their means to achieve them. Their expertise is used as a source of professional power to improve the position of their departments. 2) *Deviant innovators* who attempt to change this means/ends relationship by gaining acceptance for a different set of criteria for the evaluation of organizational success and their contribution to it.

1. *The clerk of works* - all authority for action is vested in line managers. HR policies are formed or created after the actions that led to the need. Policies are not integral to the business and are short term and *ad hoc*. Authority is vested in line managers and HR activities are largely routine - employment and day-to-day administration.
2. *The contracts manager* - policies are well established, often implicit, with a heavy industrial relations emphasis, possibly derived from an employers association. The HR department will use fairly sophisticated systems, especially in the field of employee relations. The HR manager is likely to be a professional or very experienced in industrial relations. He or she will not be on the board and, although having some authority to 'police' the implementation of policies, acts mainly in an interpretative, not a creative or innovative, role.
3. *The architect* - explicit HR policies exist as part of the corporate strategy. Human resource planning and development are important concepts and a long-term view is taken. Systems tend to be sophisticated. The head of the HR function is probably on the board and his or her power is derived from professionalism and perceived contribution to the business.

Although insightful and relevant at the time this model does not express the complexities of the HR role as later ones do.

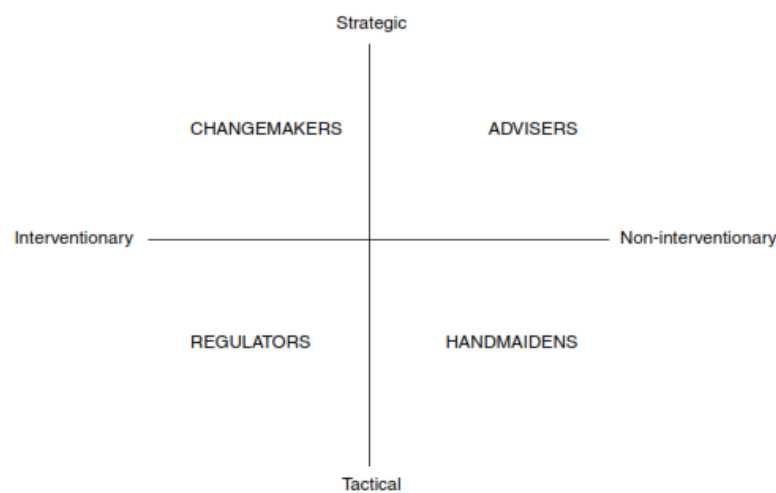
The four types of practitioner identified by Monks following research in 97 organizations in Ireland extended those developed by Tyson and Fell:

- *Traditional/administrative* - in this model the personnel practitioners have mainly a support role with the focus on administrative matters, record-keeping and adherence to rules and regulations.
- *Traditional/industrial relations* - personnel practitioners concentrate on industrial relations, giving their other functions lower priority.
- *Innovative/professional* - personnel specialists are professional and expert. They aim to remove traditional practices and replace them with improved human resource planning, recruitment and development, and reward policies and practices.

- *Innovative/sophisticated* - personnel specialists are on the board, take part in integrating HR and business strategies, and are recognized as making an important contribution to organizational success. They develop and deliver sophisticated services in each of the main HR areas.

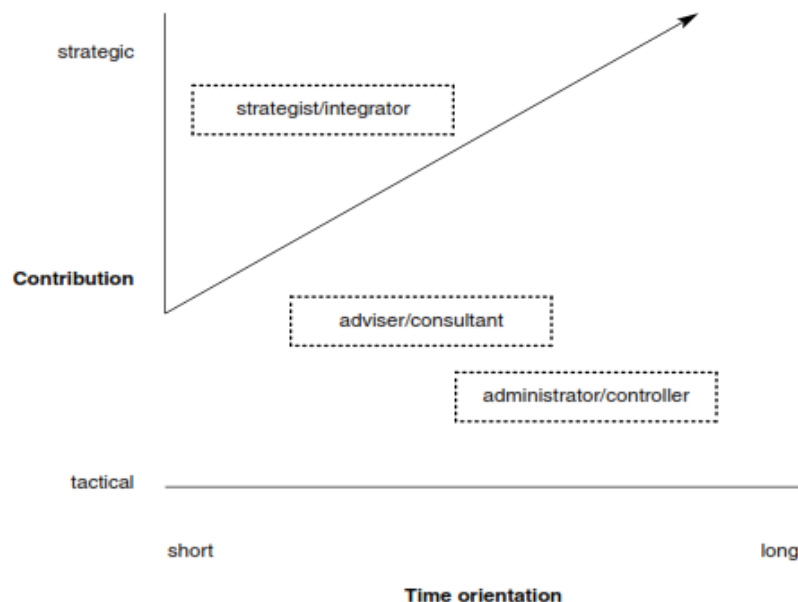
Storey’s model suggests a two-dimensional map: interventionary/non-interventionary and strategic/tactical, as illustrated in Figure 4.1. From this he identifies four roles:

- *Change masters* (interventionary/strategic), which is close to the HRM model.
- *Advisers* (non-interventionary/strategic) who act as internal consultants, leaving much of HR practice to line managers.
- *Regulators* (interventionary/tactical) who are ‘managers of discontent’ concerned with formulating and monitoring employment rules.
- *Handmaidens* (non-interventionary/tactical) who merely provide a service to meet the demands of line managers.



Types of Personnel Management

The different roles that practitioners can play as described by Reilly are illustrated in Figure 4.2. He suggests that it is the ‘strategist/integrator’ who is most likely to make the longest-term strategic contribution. The ‘administrator/controller’ is likely to make a largely tactical short-term contribution, while the ‘adviser/consultant’ falls between the two.



The changing role of the HR practitioner

In 1997 Dave Ulrich produced his model in which he suggested that as champions of competitiveness in creating and delivering value, HR professionals carry out the roles of strategic partners, administrative experts, employee champions and change agents. The response to this formulation concentrated on the business partner role. Ulrich, in conjunction with Brockbank, reformulated the 1997 model in 2005, listing the following roles:

- *Employee advocate* - focuses on the needs of today's employees through listening, understanding and empathizing.
- *Human capital developer* - in the role of managing and developing human capital (individuals and teams), focuses on preparing employees to be successful in the future.
- *Functional expert* - concerned with the HR practices that are central to HR value, acting with insight on the basis of the body of knowledge they possess. Some are delivered through administrative efficiency (such as technology or process design), and others through policies, menus and interventions. Necessary to distinguish between the foundation HR practices - recruitment, learning and development, rewards, etc - and the emerging HR practices such as communications, work process and organization design, and executive leadership development.
- *Strategic partner* - consists of multiple dimensions: business expert, change agent, strategic HR planner, knowledge manager and consultant, combining them to align HR systems to help accomplish the organization's vision and mission, helping managers to get things done, and disseminating learning across the organization.
- *Leader* - leading the HR function, collaborating with other functions and providing leadership to them, setting and enhancing the standards for strategic thinking and ensuring corporate governance.

Ulrich and Brockbank (2005b) explained that the revised formulation is in response to the changes in HR roles they have observed recently. They commented on the importance of the employee advocate role, noting that HR professionals spend on average about 19 per cent of their time on employee relations issues and that caring for, listening to and responding to employees remains a centrepiece of HR work. They noted that as a profession, HR possesses a body of knowledge that allows HR people to act with insight. Functional expertise enables them to create menus of choice for their business and thus identify options that are consistent with business needs rather than those that are merely ones they are able to provide. The additional heading of 'human capital developer' was introduced because of the increased emphasis on viewing people as critical assets and to recognize the significance of HR's role in developing the workforce. The concept of strategic partner remains broadly the same as before, but the additional heading of 'HR leader' has been introduced to highlight the importance of leadership by HR specialists of their own function - 'before they can develop other leaders, HR professionals must exhibit the leadership skills they expect in others'. The 2005 Ulrich and Brockbank model focuses on the multifaceted role of HR people. It serves to correct the impression that Ulrich was simply focusing on them as business partners. This has had the unfortunate effect of implying that that was their only worthwhile function and has led to undue emphasis on this aspect of their role, important though it is, rather than a significant service delivery role. However, Ulrich cannot be blamed for this. In 1998 he gave equal emphasis to the need for administrative efficiency.

HR practitioners mainly get results by persuasion based on credibility and expertise. As Guest and Hoque (1994) note: 'By exerting influence, HR managers help to shape the framework of HR policy and practice.' Although line managers may make the day-to-day decisions, influencing skills are necessary for HR specialists. But there is a constant danger of HR professionals being so overcome by the beauty and truth of their bright idea that they expect everyone else - management and employees alike - to fall for it immediately. This is not how it is. Management and employees can create blockages and barriers and their support and commitment needs to be gained, which is not always easy.

Managers will block or erect barriers to what the HR function believes to be progress if they are not persuaded that it will benefit both the organization and themselves at an acceptable cost (money and their time and trouble).

Employees will block or set up barriers to 'progress' or innovations if they feel they conflict with their own interests. They are likely, with reason, to be cynical about protestations that what is good for the organization will always be good for them.

The support of top management is achievable by processes of marketing the HR function and persuasion. Boards and senior managers, like anyone else, are more likely to be persuaded to take a course of action if:

- it can be demonstrated that it will meet both the needs of the organization and their own personal needs;
- the proposal is based on a persuasive and realistic business case that spells out the benefits and the costs and, as far as possible, is justified either in added value terms (ie the income generated by the proposal will significantly exceed the cost of implementing it), and/or on the basis of a return on investment (ie the cost of the investment, say in training, is justified by the financial returns in such terms as increased productivity);
- there is proof that the innovation has already worked well within the organization (perhaps as a pilot scheme) or represents 'good practice', which is likely to be transferable to the organization;
- it can be shown that the proposal will increase the business's competitive edge, for example enlarging the skill base or multi-skilling to ensure that it can achieve competitive advantage through innovation and/or reducing time-to-market;
- it can be implemented without too much trouble, for example not taking up a lot of managers' time, or not meeting with strong opposition from line managers, employees or trade unions (it is as well to check the likely reaction before launching a proposal);
- it will add to the reputation of the company by showing that it is a 'world class' organization, ie what it does is as good as, if not better than, the world leaders in the sector in which the business operates (a promise that publicity will be achieved through articles in professional journals, press releases and conference presentations, will help);
- it will enhance the 'employer brand' of the company by making it a 'best place to work'; the proposal is brief, to the point and well argued - it should take no more than five minutes to present orally and should be summarized in writing on the proverbial one side of one sheet of paper (supplementary details can be included in appendices).

This can sometimes be more difficult than gaining the support of top management. Front line managers can be cynical or realistic about innovation - they have seen it all before and/or they believe it won't work (sometimes with good reason). Innovations pushed down from the top can easily fail.

Gaining line management support requires providing an answer to the question, 'What's in it for me?' in terms of how the innovation will help them to achieve better results without imposing unacceptable additional burdens on them. New employment practices that take up precious time and involve paperwork will be treated with particular suspicion. Many line managers, often from bitter experience, resent the bureaucracy that can surround and, indeed, engulf systems favoured by HR people, such as traditional performance appraisal schemes.

Obtaining support requires market research and networking - getting around to talk to managers about their needs and testing new ideas to obtain reactions. The aim is to build up a body of information that will indicate approaches that are likely to be most acceptable, and therefore will most probably work, or at least to suggest areas where particular efforts will need to be made to persuade and educate line management. It is also useful to form 'strategic alliances' with influential managers who are enthusiastic about the innovation and will not only lend it vocal support but will also co-operate in pilot-testing it.

On the principle that 'nothing succeeds like success', support for new HR practices can often be achieved by demonstrating that it has worked well elsewhere in the organization.

Gaining commitment will be easier if managers have been consulted and know that their opinions have been listened to and acted upon. It is even better to involve them as members of project teams or task forces in developing the new process or system. This is the way to achieve ownership and therefore commitment.

When it comes to new employment practices, employees generally react in exactly the same way as managers: they will tend to resist change, wanting to know, 'What's in it for us?' They also want to know the hidden agenda - why is the company really wanting to introduce a performance management process? Will it simply be used as a means of gaining evidence for disciplinary proceedings? Or is it even going to provide the information required to select people for redundancy? As far as possible this kind of question needs to be answered in advance.

Sounding out employee opinion can be conducted through attitude surveys or focus groups. The latter method involves getting groups of people together to discuss (to 'focus' on) various issues and propositions. A well-run focus group can generate valid information on employees' feelings about and reaction to an initiative.

Employee commitment is also more likely if they are kept well informed of what is proposed, why it has been proposed and how it will affect them. It will be further enhanced if they participate in the development of the new employment practice and if they know that their contributions have been welcomed and acted upon.

HR specialists are concerned with ethical standards in three ways: their conduct as professionals, the values that govern their behaviour, and the ethical standards of their firms.

The CIPD Code of Professional Conduct states that:

In the public interest and in the pursuit of its objects, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development is committed to the highest possible standards of professional conduct and competency. To this end members:

- are required to exercise integrity, honesty, diligence and appropriate behaviour in all their business, professional and related personal activities;
- must act within the law and must not encourage, assist or act in collusion with employees, employers or others who may be engaged in unlawful conduct.

HR professionals are part of management. They are not there to act as surrogate representatives of the interests of employees. But there will be occasions when in their professional capacity HR specialists should speak out and oppose plans or actions that are clearly at variance with the values of the organization. And they should do their best to influence changes in those values where they feel they are necessary. They must not tolerate injustice or inequality of opportunity. If redundancies are inevitable as a result of business-led 'slimming down' or 'taking costs out of the business' processes, they must ensure that the organization takes whatever steps it can to mitigate detrimental effects by, for example, relying primarily on natural wastage and voluntary redundancy or, if people have to go involuntarily, doing whatever they can to help them find other jobs (outplacement).

HR specialists may often find themselves acting within a support function in a hard-nosed, entrepreneurial environment. But this does not mean that they can remain unconcerned about developing and helping to uphold the core values of the organization in line with their own values on how people should be managed. These may not always be reconcilable, and if this is strongly the case, the HR professional may have to make a choice on whether he or she can remain with the organization.

More and more companies are, rightly, developing and publishing value statements and codes of ethics. The focus on such codes was encouraged by the Cadbury Report on corporate governance, which in 1992 recommended that companies should adopt one.

An ethics code may include the guiding principles the organization follows in conducting its business and relating to its stakeholders - employees, customers, shareholders (or other providers of finance), suppliers, and society in general. A code will also summarize the ethical standards expected of employees. These may include conflicts of interest, the giving and receiving of gifts, confidentiality, environmental pollution, health and safety, equal opportunities, managing diversity, sexual harassment, moonlighting and political activity.

As suggested by Pickard (1995), HR practitioners can contribute to enhancing awareness of ethical issues by:

- deploying professional expertise to develop and communicate an ethics policy and field the

response to it, holding training sessions to help people think through the issues and monitoring the policy;

- contributing to the formation of company strategy, especially touching on mission and values;
- setting an example through professional conduct, on issues such as fairness, equal treatment and confidentiality.

If the term is used loosely, HR specialists are ‘professional’ because they display expertise in doing their work. A professional occupation such as medicine or law could, however, be defined as one that gives members of its association exclusive rights to practise their profession. A profession is not so much an occupation as a means of controlling an occupation. Human resource management is obviously not in this category.

The nature of professional work was best defined by the Hayes Committee (1972) as follows:

Work done by the professional is usually distinguished by its reference to a framework of fundamental concepts linked with experience rather than by impromptu reaction to events or the application of laid down procedures. Such a high level of distinctive competence reflects the skilful application of specialized education, training and experience. This should be accompanied by a sense of responsibility and an acceptance of recognized standards.

A ‘profession’ may be identified on the basis of the following criteria:

- skills based on theoretical knowledge;
- the provision of training and education;
- a test of the competence of members administered by a professional body;
- a formal professional organization that has the power to regulate entry to the profession;
- a professional code of conduct.

By these standards an institution such as the CIPD carries out most of the functions of a professional body.

Another approach to the definition of a profession is to emphasize the service ethic - the professional is there to serve others. This, however, leads to confusion when applied to HR specialists. Whom do they serve? The organization and its values, or the people in the organization and their needs? (Organizational values and personal needs do not necessarily coincide.) As Tyson and Fell (1986) have commented:

In recent years the personnel manager seems to be encouraged to make the line manager his (sic) client, while trying simultaneously to represent wider social standards, and to possess a sense of service to employees. This results in confusion and difficulty for the personnel executive.

In the face of this difficulty, the question has to be asked, why bother? The answer was suggested by Watson (1977), who asserted that the adoption of a professional image by personnel managers is a strategic response to their felt lack of authority. They are in an ambiguous situation and sometimes feel they need all the help they can get to clarify and, indeed, strengthen their authority and influence.

If a profession is defined rigidly as a body of people who possess a particular area of competence, who control entry so that only members of the association can practise in that area, who unequivocally adopt the ‘service ethic’ and who are recognized by themselves and others as belonging to a profession, then HR practitioners are not strictly working in a profession. This is the case even when a professional institution like the CIPD exists with the objective of acting as a professional body in the full sense of the word, an aim that it does its best to fulfil.

On the basis of their research, Guest and Horwood (1981) expressed their doubts about the professional model of personnel management as follows:

The (research) data also highlights the range of career types in personnel management. Given the diversity of personnel roles and organizational contexts, this is surely something to be welcomed. It is tempting but wrong to view personnel managers as homogeneous. Their different backgrounds and fields of operations raise doubts about the value of a professional model and of any attempt to view personnel problems as amenable to solution through a primary focus on professionalism.

3. CONCLUSION

However, a broader definition of professionalism as the practice of specific skills based upon a defined body of knowledge in accordance with recognized standards of behaviour would entitle the practice of HRM to be regarded as a profession.

The debate continues, but it is an academic one. What matters is that HR ‘professionals’ need expertise and have to use it responsibly. In other words, they should act professionally but do not have to be members of a professional association to do so. Such associations, however, have an important part to play in setting and improving professional standards.

If this definition is accepted, then those who do practise specific HRM skills based upon a defined body of knowledge in accordance with recognized standards of behaviour can be regarded as members of a profession.

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