New directions in the roles and responsibilities of the HRM function

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to introduce the special issue, which brings together five papers exploring the changing anatomy of HRM at organisational level.
Design/methodology/approach – This overarching paper briefly contextualises the theme and introduces the five selected empirical papers.
Findings – The findings in this paper vary according to the core theme of each of the five contributions. The first paper highlights whether the mix of distributed HR activities between the HR department and internal/external agents may be understood to be less a product of contextual influences and more a matter of corporate choice. The second paper establishes that role dissonance is a very real issue for middle managers with HR responsibilities. The third paper unearths the complexities and challenges involved in changing existing HRM procedures and practices in a post-merger scenario. The fourth paper provides an understanding of the management of human resource supply chains and outlines five, empirically derived, generic models of HR outsourcing. The final paper finds that human resource IT diffusion and take-up is primarily fuelled by interpersonal communication and network interactions among potential adopters.
Originality/value – Combined, the papers offer insights on the changing anatomy of the HRM function against the backdrop of a dynamic contemporary organisational landscape and showcase cross-national research on the theme.

Keywords: Human resource management; Human resource strategies.

Introduction
Determining the anatomy and impact of the human resource management function and its associated activities remains an important, if sometimes uncertain, line of inquiry in organisation science. It has been argued (Mayrhofer et al., 2000) that the very nature of the concept of HRM (what we are studying in the field) remains contested, that the levels at which the concept can be applied and the consequent range of studies that will be pursued is unclear and the range and role of the potential actors involved (as objects of investigation in our HRM studies) may vary. These differences result in fundamentally different paradigms for research into the nature, impact and consequences of HRM where different researchers deploy competing models or theories. Indeed, Mayrhofer et al. (2000) argue that it is the difference between paradigms which has led to the confusion noted by many about what should be the focus of investigation (Boxall, 1993; Dyer and Kochan, 1995; Goss, 1994; Martell and Caroll, 1995). This fundamental conceptual debate has direct consequences for the nature and scope of what we investigate and theorise about in HRM and, as a debate, it finds particular resonance in investigations on the contemporary nature of the HR function. Constrained by legacies, harried by change and questioned about its contribution in an exacting business environment, the contemporary nature of the HR function is not especially well documented. In light of the fact that the very profession itself is changing with a growth and expansion of the HR role being matched by a progressively increasing emphasis on professionalisation, so too may the function be changing in parallel taking on different structural

configurations, taking advantage of new technologies and embracing new agendas. While a long wave retrospective view of the history of the function would undoubtedly demonstrate considerable change, more recent developments may be viewed as particularly significant contributors to changing the very essence of the function. As Paauwe (1996, p. 195) noted:

> The assignment of integral management to line managers, the tendency towards decentralisation, and the creation of smaller units imply that the role and position of personnel/human resource staff functions need to be re-considered.

This Special Issue of Personnel Review brings together revised and updated versions of five papers originally presented at the Seventh Conference on International Human Resource Management held at the University of Limerick, Ireland, in June 2003. The five papers in this Special Issue, presented under the theme "New Directions in the Roles and Responsibilities of the HRM Function" examine and depict the changing anatomy of HRM at organisational level. In advance of introducing the selected papers, we briefly set the scene by exploring established traditions and emerging transitions in HR roles and responsibilities evident in the extant literature.

Traditions and transitions in HR roles and responsibilities
Writing on "transitions" in human resource management (HRM) during the closing decades of the last century Sparrow and Hiltrop (1994, pp. 25-26) pointed several key developments, but most especially a detectable shift from traditional and specialist areas of HRM towards a broader concern with the strategic nature and impact of the HR role. In particular this was seen to involve a greater focus on the human resource aspects of changes in organisation culture and structure. Attention too has been drawn to the accumulating evidence on the changing landscape of the HR function and its associated terrain including a greater emphasis on the integration of the human resource function into strategic decision-making, a decentralisation of much activity to line managers, a shift away from a pre-occupation with industrial relations and collective bargaining to other areas of HR activity such as communications, human resource development, workplace learning, career management and human capital accumulation. Concomitantly, we have also witnessed a growth in "atypical" forms of employment, often for reasons of the state of the labour market, on occasion for work-life balance and lifestyle reasons, but always requiring appropriate and buttressing procedures and practices to manage these different employment categories.

What appears to be emerging from these and various other developments is an increasing proliferation of HR approaches at enterprise level with no apparent convergence to any single model of HR types. This of course is not surprising and the proliferation of enterprise level models in response to changing contexts and circumstances has a long pedigree in the academic and practitioner literature. From a US perspective Conner and Ulrich (1996) link the development of the personnel function to the history of business in the US (see also Kaufman, 2003). Since its emergence as a welfare and administration function in the early nineteenth century, the function has adapted to the evolving demands of successive generations. Walker (1999) specifically points to the significance of labour relations in the post New Deal era of the 1940s and 1950s, the focus on societal changes and government compliance in the 1960s and 1970s and the changing workforce demographics of the 1980s and

1990s. The emergence of a strategic role for the more commonly titled Human Resource (HR) function in recent years is well documented in the literature (Ulrich, 1996; Tichy et al., 1984). Without question, the attraction of a strategic role for the HR function is hardly surprising given that if the function could successfully link its HR practices with the organisation's strategic goals then its status should increase (Schuler, 1989). Indeed some went as far as to suggest that HR might become proactive and determine organisational strategy (Purcell, 1995), though it is acknowledged that this HR-Strategy link and the conceptualisation and deployment of the strategy notion in the HR field remains problematic with the consequence that the evidence on the emergence and spread of a substantial strategic role is at best mixed (Brewster et al., 2000). Similarly, in the UK and Ireland, the development of the HR function over recent decades has followed a comparatively clear pattern of historical evolution, characterised by convergence to a prevailing orthodoxy for the HR role. Traditionally, this orthodoxy was based on belief that a key employer concern in workforce management was the establishment and maintenance of stable industrial relations. The main cornerstones of this approach included trade union recognition, collective bargaining and the development of agreed procedures in areas such as disputes, grievance handling and discipline administration. Within this approach, the HR function assumed responsibility for managing relations with the organisation's trade unions. Gunnigle (1998), p. 17) comments on this role thus:

> While more reactive rather than strategic, this industrial relations role was nonetheless significant: it served to both define what personnel work involved and position the personnel management function as a important aspect of the managerial infrastructure.

By the early 1980s the dominance of industrial relations in the personnel/HR role began to unravel. The genesis of such change may be traced to the increasingly competitive nature of product and service markets. For the HR function these changes appear to have heralded a period, which appears to be "devoid of orthodoxy". Rather, what we see emerging is a range of different roles for the HR function, with no one dominant model apparent. Paauwe (1996, p. 227) captures this trend by suggesting that it is now "almost impossible to speak of the personnel function" but rather suggests that contingency approaches are the order of the day with the role, and even the existence, of the personnel/HR function varying according to industrial segment, managerial philosophy, product market performance and so on.

The significant impact of information technology on the role of the HR function also began to emerge at this time. Indeed, as early as the 1960s payroll administration, benefits administration and other applications such as record keeping were some of the earliest business processes to be automated (Martinsons, 1994; Ball, 2001). Since then in attempting to increase administrative efficiency and improve organisational decision making HR has continued to merge new technology with old processes (Lengnick-Hall and Moritz, 2003). The advent of employee self-service HR systems can potentially reduce the administrative burden on HR professionals by allowing employees to complete routine administrative tasks (such as applying for leave or updating personal details) themselves. At its most developed it is argued that e-HR can "liberate the HR function from its operational focus and redirects it towards a more strategic one" (Lengnick-Hall and Moritz, 2003, p. 368).

It has been argued however that these developments amongst others have created a more multifaceted and complex role for the HR function. They have resulted in a number of role-ambiguities, which confront practitioners (Legge, 1995; Friedson, 1994). Indeed this has led Torrington (1998) to argue that HRM may be a set of initials, but that it is not a package like TQM and other management techniques. Rather "it is an aspect of the way in which the personnel contribution is made, and there is no clear, pre-determined formula for what it is or should be" (Torrington, 1998, p. 28). The role ambiguities, which confront HR practitioners are summarised by Caldwell (2003, p. 984) thus:

- Powerlessness or marginality in the managerial decision making process, particularly at a strategic level.
- Difficulty in defining and maintaining the boundaries of their specialist expertise from encroachment or control by managerial intervention.
- Lack of clarity or accountability in specifying the bottom line contribution of the HR function; and finally.
- Tensions in sustaining an ethos of mutuality given the opposing interests of employees and managers.

These ambiguities combined with the relatively low status held by HR professionals in organisations have resulted in them assuming a chameleon like appearance (Hope-Hailey et al., 1997), illustrated in the evolution of the HR role in the US and Europe outlined above, and indeed Caldwell has noted that "Partly as a consequence of these role ambiguities personnel managers have been past masters at reinventing or reinterpreting their role in their efforts to maintain their credibility and status within a changing world of work" (Caldwell, 2003, p. 984). As indicated earlier this debate is not a product of the twenty first century. Writing in the late 1990s and referring specifically to the transition from personnel to human resource management Torrington (1998, p. 36) postulated that there is a "crisis of confidence among personnel specialists … and there always has been" (see, Legge, 1978). He attributes this to the difficulties of measuring the success of HR/personnel specialists, as their success/failure is often the successes/failures of other people. He also points to a crisis of identity because of the function's changing characteristics from personnel to HRM and the impacts of the ambiguity around this change. Finally turning to the strategy versus operational debate he talks of a crisis of direction whereby the traditional operational role of personnel specialists is being replaced by the strategic role of their HR counterparts. Thus the role of the HR function appears to lack theoretical bounding and is considered to constantly be in a state of flux.

Despite this crisis of confidence, or perhaps because of it, the very utility of an established HR function has been questioned. Thus, while the great majority of medium and larger organisations tend to employ a specialist HR function, recent years have seen some questioning of its value and some consideration of the option of managing without a specialist HR function (Paauwe, 1996). As organisations move to "leaner" and "flatter" organisation structures, it is clear that the establishment of a traditional personnel/HR function is no longer a seemingly inevitable consequence of increases in organisation scale. In evaluating the option of managing without a formal personnel/HR function, there appears to be two principal ways of carrying out the HR role, namely:

1. Devolvement of personnel/HR responsibilities to line management (internal devolution).

2. Outsourcing HR activities to external contractors (external devolution).

The first route represents an extension of an ongoing debate about the optimal balance of HR responsibilities between line management and the specialist HR function. Line management have always played a key role in the execution of day-to-day HR activities. However, what is different about the internal devolution argument is the suggestion that line managers should play a greater role in policy development and interpretation, in addition to their traditional role in carrying out HR activities. This theme has developed concurrently with moves towards flatter organisation structures and team working. Undoubtedly this development is important and will lead to a changing division of labour between personnel and line management. However, it is unlikely to lead to a widespread abolition of the HR function.

Possibly a more significant threat to the existence of a formal personnel/HR function is that of outsourcing. The transaction cost model places considerable emphasis on the so-called "make or buy" decision (Gunnigle, 1998). In this model, it is argued that if a particular unit does not make a demonstrable added value contribution to the organisation when compared to outsourcing, then such services should be bought in. Two other factors make HR outsourcing even more attractive. Firstly, from a demand perspective, the trend towards smaller organisation scale combined with a growth of contracted-in labour means that organisations have less "employees" to manage. Second, on the supply side, the proliferation of "management consultants" provides a buoyant source of contracted-in personnel/HR services.

The contributions to this special issue
The five selected empirical papers presented in this Special Issue which represent a mix of the quantitative and the qualitative and the strategic and operational focus on, inter alia, how organisations distribute HR activities among internal and external agents, role dissonance among middle line managers who have significant devolved HR responsibilities, the changing nature of the HR function in a post-merger scenario, outsourcing and in-sourcing in managing HR supply chains and the diffusion of information technology in HR service delivery. Combined, the papers offer insights on the changing anatomy of the HRM function against the backdrop of a dynamic contemporary organisational landscape.

Fundamental to generating understanding of this anatomy is an exposition of who the relevant HR agents are and whether and how they combine and exchange in different ways in the execution of their HR responsibilities. Our first paper by Mireia Valverde and Gerard Ryan of Universitat Rovira i Virgili and Ceferi Soler of ESADE tackles this issue. The authors argue that increasingly HRM is not the sole responsibility of the HR department, but rather a mix of internal and external agents who combine to share HR activities and responsibilities in relatively diverse ways. Despite this emerging development of a partnership of multiple agents acting in consort, the authors note the lack of any sophisticated models of HR agents in the literature suggesting that it is in this regard prescriptive with an emphasis on what different stakeholders should do as opposed to what they actually do. Consequently, they seek to test the proposition on the existence of a unique organisation HR agency model derived from the mix of agents carrying our HR activities in each organisations, and the limits to it, using a survey among Spanish organisations. Using principal component analysis and clustering techniques, the results point to a total of seven

agency mix models as follows: HR as a shared function among internal agents; HR as a shared function led by top management; An agent for each job and a job for each agent; Partial outsourcing of a wide range of HR activities; Outsourcing specialised activities and sharing generalist responsibilities; HR function as the exclusive domain of the HR department; and the HR function as the domain of the HR department supported by the line. Having identified these unique clusters of the distribution of HR activities among internal and external agents, the authors then seek to identify whether there are significant contextual factors influencing the mix of responsibilities. Here, sector, size, structure, technological system, organisational history, employee characteristics, environment, culture and the characteristics of the HR function all failed to reach statistical significance and the proposition that similar types of HR functions would be found in organisations with similar contextual characteristics was not supported. In light of the results the authors discuss whether the judicious mix of distributed HR activities may be understood to be less a product of contextual influences and more a matter of corporate choice.

It was once suggested (Guest, 1987) that if "HRM is to be taken seriously, personnel managers must give it away". Devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers is now seen as something of a defining issue in human resource management and, arising from this, a key concern is how to strike the balance of responsibilities for the management of people between the human resource department and the line managers (Brewster and Holt Larsen, 2000; Heraty and Morley, 1995). Our second paper by Teri McConville of Cranfield University focuses on role dissonance among middle managers as a result of devolved HRM responsibilities. McConville argues that the principle of devolving HRM to line managers has changed the very nature of the personnel function but despite the all pervasive nature of this trend, relatively little attention has been paid to the impact of this devolution on such managers. This paper focuses on the tensions that arise for middle line managers in the public sector context. The public sector context being designedly chosen because recent politically imposed changes in the governance and funding of public services were viewed as giving emphasis to the difficulties and paradoxes of the managerial roles and functions. The author notes that as the nature of the line managers experience has altered in recent years, the devolved HRM responsibilities are just one of several developments that have commanded the attention of line managers. Using a qualitative case study approach of middle line managers in National Health Service hospital trusts, military officers and officers in the fire and rescue service, the findings suggest that middle line managers wanted to be involved in the management of their staff but were frustrated by a lack of autonomy and resources and, in the isolation of their middleness, HRM was seen to exacerbate the tensions in their roles. Many viewed HRM as a natural part of their role, but the administrative aspects of the maintenance of personnel records was viewed as time-consuming. Work and time pressures were evident and many reported the classic "caught in the middle" syndrome, lacking clear role definition, adequate training and resources and support from seniors. The author concludes that role dissonance is a very real issue for the managers studied here.

Our third paper by Ingmar Bjorkman of INSEAD and Anne-Marie Soderberg of the Copenhagen Business School explores the roles played by the HR function in post-merger change processes. Based on interviews with HR Managers and Executives in Nordea, a leading Nordic financial services organisation, the roles played by the HR

function are described and the issues influencing the changing roles played by the HR function in Nordea during the merger process are set down and analysed. The Nordea context is deemed interesting not just for reasons of the scale of the operation, but also because of the cross-border complexity attaching to this merger. The authors note that when the merger was negotiated, the HR function and how it would be re-constituted in the new entity was not discussed. Post the merger the HR function oscillated between a country-based HR function and a cross-border HR function. The authors go on to describe and analyse how the new functional arrangement unfolded and became institutionalised using Ulrich (1996) conceptual model. Thus, the role of HR as an administrative expert, as employee champion, as strategic partner and as change agent are all illustrated and evaluated. Combined the theoretical and empirical effort in this paper portray the complexities and challenges involved in changing existing HRM procedures and practices in a post-merger scenario, something which is doubly nuanced in the case of a cross-border merger.

Our fourth paper from Tom Kosnik, Diana Wong-Ming Ji and Kristine Hoover seeks to make a contribution to our understanding of the management of human resource supply chains. The authors note that organizations struggle with the question of whether HR activities should be provided in-house or whether many of these activities should be outsourced. The paper outlines five, empirically derived, generic models of HR outsourcing (Local Contracting; HR Centralising; Purchasing HR; Non-Staffing Vendors; and Staffing Firm) related to staffing of non-core employees and in so doing provides an insight into the complexities of outsourcing and establishes a means through which different models for making informed strategic decisions may be compared and evaluated. Combined, the insights provided in the paper advance HR research related to strategic decisions concerning the development of organisational knowledge and skills to sustain competitive advantage.

Our final paper From Gary Florkowski and Miguel Olivas-Luján explores the diffusion of information technology in human resource service delivery. Borrowing from the innovations literature and using data from the US, Canada, the UK and Ireland, the authors explore and unearth external, internal and hybrid influences on the diffusion patterns. The cross cultural investigation leads the authors to pose important diffusional questions such as: how much variability may be evident in the take-up on HRIS across countries; are some countries more likely than others to embrace this technology; and what factors influence the diffusion. Based on their models, the authors conclude that human resource IT diffusion and take-up is primarily fuelled by interpersonal communication and network interactions among potential adopters.

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