

# Line managers in human resource management management essay

[Profession](#), [Manager](#)



## **Abstract**

Restructuring, downsizing, and an increased need to focus on employees for competitive edge are levelled to be among the factors encouraging the devolvement of human resource management to line managers. However, recent research indicates that there is substantial potential for human resource specialists and line managers to share more effectively responsibility for their organisation's human resource activities in business partnerships. The foundation for this is arguably commonality in opinions on the principles and practices of human resource activities. However, line managers and human resource specialists often have dissonant opinions on human resource management.

This paper explores line manager and human resource specialists' perspectives on line manager involvement in human resource management, theoretically and empirically. The primary work comprises a survey of the views of line managers and human resource specialists on devolving a range of human resource activities to line managers in a case organisation, Hilton International's UK hotels, which is seeking to achieve a successful human resource business partnership. Differences between line managers' and human resource specialists' perspectives are found in five aspects: understanding and ownership of the company's service and HR strategy; line manager involvement in and rankings of HR activities; HR specialists' support of line managers; barriers to line managers' involvement in HR activities; and the competence of line managers in HR activities. In addition, a need for more line manager training in human resource activities, together

with addressing line managers' heavy workloads and short term job pressures emerge as highly defined findings. These findings may have resonance for other organisations in devolving human resource management to the line and developing human resource business partnerships.

**Key Words: line managers devolving human resource management**

**human resource business partnerships**

**Background: Research Issue**

Business partnerships whereby human resource (HR) specialists and line managers share an organisation's HR responsibility have recently emerged as the dominant model for HR professionals (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2003). However, it is evident that such partnerships are generally not yet operating as effectively as they could. For the CIPD report on the role of front line managers in people management concludes that 'delivery of HR practices by the line is seen as an area requiring substantial improvement' with HR managers tending to believe that line managers have not fully accepted HR responsibility (CIPD, 2003: 2). A fundamental element of HR business partnership development is arguably commonality in line and HR manager perceptions on the HR function in which line managers are elemental (Larson and Brewster, 2003). Evidence that there is such commonality is conspicuous by its absence. Rather, there is evidence that line managers' and HR specialists' views on HR are generally divergent. The work of Ulrich (1997), Wright et al. (2001), Becker et al. (2001), Harris (2001) and Phelps (2002) on, for example, perceptions of

levels of HR service, all point to this perceptual divergence. As McLean (2004) points out in her case study of line and HR manager perceptions of the importance and performance of the HR function, increasingly academic studies of HR are involving examination of different stakeholder perspectives. Because perceptual divergence may negatively impact on line manager and, ultimately, business performance (Gilbert, 2000; Kearns, 2004), understanding it is important.

This article addresses, theoretically and empirically, stakeholder perspectives of HR in a dimension not covered thus far in academic studies: the issue of line managers' and HR specialists' perceptions on line managers involvement in HR. It analyses the inherent challenges from both line manager and HR specialist perspectives on line managers' involvement in, and ability to deliver, human resource management (HRM) and human resource development (HRD) activities. First, line manager responsibility for HRM and HRD are discussed from theoretical perspectives. Next, primary work conducted in Hilton International's UK hotels on line and HR manager perspectives on line managers in HR is presented. Finally, the key findings and conclusions on the challenges in developing HR business partnerships are offered.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

Relationships between line managers, HRM and HRD are arguably changing (Gibb, 2003) and becoming more fused, despite continuing debate about the focus of HRM (Budhwar, 2000) and scope of HRD (Garavan et al., 1999).

Indeed it is argued that fusing HRM and HRD is essential to ' provide the

necessary synergy for HR to be a truly valued organisational partner' (Ruona and Gibson, 2004: 49). In defining the connections between HRM and HRD, the relationship has been dubbed 'ambiguous and elusive' (Mankin, 2003: 2). The literature on these two areas largely treats HRM and HRD separately; therefore the theory underpinning this paper explores the challenges in line manager responsibility for HRM and HRD in turn.

Since the advent of human resource management (HRM) in the UK in the 1980s there has been some debate about devolving aspects of HRM to line managers (Gennard and Kelly, 1997; Hall and Torrington, 1998). Indeed, the devolving of human resource activities to line managers has received much attention by both academics and practitioners in the UK and Europe over the last decade (Larsen and Brewster, 2003). Various reasons for this devolution have been cited, including restructuring, downsizing, and an increased need to focus on employees for competitive edge (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Renwick, 2000; and Gibb, 2003). Storey (1995), in articulating differences between personnel management and human resource management (HRM), highlights the critical role of line managers in delivering HRM. A recurrent and established feature in discussion on HRM is therefore the 'centre-stage' role for line managers (Renwick, 2003: 262).

As to the benefits of line manager involvement, several researchers assert that line managers assuming some HRM responsibility can positively influence employee commitment and, ultimately, business performance. For example Cunningham and Hyman (1999: 9) highlight the role of line managers in promoting an 'integrative culture of employee management

through line management.’ Thornhill and Saunders (1998) signal the role of line managers in securing employee commitment to quality, while increased productivity has also been asserted as a basis for devolution of HRM (Industrial Relations Survey Employment Review, 1995). A recent Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) report indicates that line managers’ involvement in coaching and guidance, communication and involvement has a positive influence on overall organisational performance (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003). A key finding from this report is that to gain line managers’ commitment to people management requires support from strong organisational values that emphasise the fundamentals of people management and leadership (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003).

Devolving HRM to line managers has, however, been noted as being ‘problematic’ (McGovern et al., 1997: 12). Renwick (2003) posits that the new millennium marked the onset of keen discussion about the challenges surrounding line manager involvement in HRM. Challenges lie not least in the relationship between line managers and HRM specialists (Cunningham and Hyman, 1997), ‘the ability and willingness of line managers to carry out HR tasks properly’ (Renwick and MacNeil, 2002: 407), and line managers’ knowledge of company policies (Bond and Wise, 2003). Hall and Torrington’s (1998) research on the progress of devolution of operational HRM activities and its consequences points to organisations making sustained and deliberate efforts to vest HRM responsibility with line managers. However, ‘the absence of a designated human resource specialist role’ (Thornhill and Saunders, 1998: 474) may have negative effects on strategic integration

and, consequently, organisational commitment, flexibility and quality.

Renwick (2003), drawing on the work of Ulrich (1998) and Jackson and Schuler (2000), identifies that a partnership approach to HR requires the integration of HR activities into the work of line managers and that a real partnership approach requires a 'triad' approach between HR specialists, line managers and employees.

Similarly, the involvement of line managers in HRD has been the subject of academic debate and organisational challenges. In clarifying the role of line managers in HRD, Heraty and Morley (1995) assert that activities surrounding identification of training needs, deciding who should be trained and undertaking direct training either fall within the domain of line managers or in partnership with HR specialists. The aspects of HRD concerned with policy formulation, training plans and advising on strategy are meanwhile more likely to be undertaken by HRD specialists. Gibb (2003) asserts that concerns over increased line manager involvement in HRD are valid in that it may limit the use of specialist resources in HRD. Another issue is that while line managers have been identified as 'one of the key stakeholders with the HRD process' (Heraty and Morley, 1995: 31), difficulties in securing line manager acceptance of HRD responsibilities have been evident (Aston, 1984). Research has identified factors that may enable and inhibit the take-up of line manager responsibility for HRD.

Arguably the most significant enabler of line manager responsibility for HRD is the 'growing body of literature on the emergence and growth of HRD and in particular HRD with a strategic focus' (Garavan et al., 1995: 4). HRD may

be seen as providing the key connection between HRM and business strategy (Garavan et al., 2001). Business-led approaches to HRD can indeed be evidenced (Sparrow and Pettigrew, 1988; Harrison, 1993). For Torraco and Swanson (1995), HRD is not only supportive of, but also central to, business strategy. It is also, as Keep (1989) maintains, central to HRM. Therefore it can be seen that there are important lines to be drawn between HRM, HRD, line managers and business strategy. McCracken and Wallace's (2000) model of the characteristics of strategic HRD indicates that all four of these factors are integral to a strategic human resource development (SHRD) approach being taken. In this model they are expressed as: integration with organisational missions and goals; HRD plans and policies; line manager commitment and involvement; and complementary HRM activities. Within this literature Garavan et al. (1993) and colleagues identify a range of strategic drivers that are moving organisations down the route of integration of HRD activities with strategic goals, including an increased emphasis on quality and change of leadership.

In terms of enabling HRD at an operational level, de Jong et al.'s (1999: 183) research suggests that this is 'a feasible option' providing specific conditions are met in organisations. One significant condition may be the credibility of HRD as an organisational activity in general. For despite the relatively recent interest in, and expansion of, HRD in UK organisations, there seems to be a residual issue of credibility of the training and development function in organisations generally (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2001). Organisational support for line managers in their HRD responsibility is



important too in the facilitation of the devolution of HRD responsibility (Heraty and Morley, 1995), as is senior managers' understanding of training and development issues (de Jong et al., 1999). Trust between line managers and HRD specialists is another important enabler (Garavan et al., 1993). Lastly, as emphasised by de Jong et al. (1999), line managers acting as role models in demonstrating commitment to HRD in their operational tasks may be a powerful enabler of HRD.

On the other hand, a number of barriers to the effective delegation of HRD have been recognised. One potential issue that is conceivably acute in the hotel sector is the pressure of short-term imperatives (Tsui, 1987) that may squeeze out HRD activities for line managers. This factor, in combination with a lack of training in HRD, may minimise the priority of HRD for line managers (Aston, 1984; Brewster and Soderstrom, 1994; de Jong et al. 1999). Untrained line managers may avoid a coaching role due to their discomfort with it (de Jong et al., 1999). Further, where managers do not reflect a belief in HRD in their operational role the impact of HRD is likely to be reduced (de Jong, 1999), the direct converse of reflecting a belief in HRD being an enabler of HRD, as pointed out earlier.

Thus it is apparent that a number of challenges present themselves in devolving HR responsibility to the line in order to develop HR business partnerships. Arguably, the organisational context within which these challenges may be surmounted (or not) is a positive organisational culture, transcending formal and functional requirements, that supports change (Higgins and McAllister, 2004). Organisational culture may be conceived as

the 'essential medium between formal organisational policy and implementation in practice' (Maxwell, 2004; 189). It has both a pervasive nature and behavioural outcomes, as Scholz's (1987; 80) description reflects:

'corporate culture is the implicit, invisible, intrinsic and informal consciousness of the organization which guides the behaviour of the individuals [at work] and which shapes itself out their behaviour.'

In a sense, as Cunningham and Hyman (op. cit) claim, organisational culture may be an adhesive for HR business partnerships as it may support acceptance of devolved HR responsibility. The case organisation examined in this paper, Hilton International hotels, has sought to generate an organisational culture that links their HR activities to their strategic service quality initiative. This requires line managers and HR specialists in hotel units working in partnership to implement and deliver HR activities to employees. The next section of this article explains the methods used by the authors to investigate the views of both line managers and HR specialists on line manager involvement in HR, a key part of HR business relationships.

## **Research Questions and Design**

### **Case Study Background**

The key strategic driver for devolving HR to line managers in the 76 UK based hotels of Hilton International was the development of a worldwide service quality initiative from a UK launch in 2001, following the integration of Hilton and Stakis hotels. This reflects Garavan et al.'s (1993) assertion that increasing emphasis on quality and change of leadership moves

organisations to integrate HRD activities with strategic goals. Integral to the new service concept in Hilton was the linking of all HR activities to the service initiative in an HR policy and employment package called Esprit. Within Hilton, Esprit is portrayed as being a concept directing the way employees are managed and work. It is ' a promise on how our colleagues are treated within the company' (UK HR Vice-President), consisting of a range of HR activities.

Further, HRHHilton perceives Esprit as being fundamentally concerned with instilling a service culture throughout the organisation. In the words of the UK HR Vice-President, it is intended that ' Esprit should live in the hotels and [line] managers should determine recognition rather than it being seen as a Head Office initiative'. Respect, recognition and reward are the key principles of Esprit. They are supported in practical terms by a comprehensive training and reward system which is packaged as a club employees join through achieving levels of training. Another central tenet of Esprit is that line managers in hotels are expected to assume much of the responsibility HRM and HRD activities - together known as HR in Hilton - that support the strategic quality service driver. These activities include selection, training and development, employee motivation and recognition, and performance management. Line managers are provided with support from specialist HR staff at unit and Head Office level. The strategic banner of Esprit is leading the organisation down the route of HR specialist and line managers having to work in partnership to deliver HR activities (Maxwell and Quail, 2002; Maxwell and Watson, 2004). In order to explore perspectives of the

challenges in this partnership, views from both line managers and HR specialists were surveyed by the authors.

The research questions that underpin this article are, from line manager and HR specialist perspectives:

Is there a shared understanding of line manager HR roles and responsibilities?

What are the key mechanisms that support line managers with their HR responsibilities?

What are the barriers that hinder line managers' involvement in HR activities?

In order to explore the research questions, a deductive approach has been taken in developing the questionnaires, with the content being informed by the literature review, a series of semi-structured interviews with the UK HR vice-president of the case organisation, and semi-structured interviews with three hotel HR managers. Both questionnaire formats encompassed nominal, ordinal, ranking and Likert rating scales, and several open-ended questions. Both questionnaires were piloted, on consultation with a regional HR director, a hotel HR manager and an external survey organisation. The key themes in the line managers' questionnaire were understanding and acceptance of Esprit, then exploration of HR activities in relation to involvement in and importance of HR including support mechanisms; barriers; training; level of confidence; and further support. The closing

section of the questionnaire addressed biographical data of respondents. The questionnaire for a census of the HR specialists in Hilton International's UK hotels was developed to parallel the line managers' survey.

The survey population comprises 760 line managers, and 76 HR specialists in Hilton hotels throughout the UK. Following piloting for face validity (Veal, 1997), 10 questionnaires were distributed to each hotel for completion by line managers and one for the HR specialist in each hotel, for completion on a self-selected, self-administered, anonymous basis to address response bias (Mitchell, 1996). The response rate was 43% (328) for line managers and 60% (46) for the HR specialists. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative results. Open-ended question responses were coded into themes to enable these to be presented using percentage response rates. Quantitative responses are supplemented with qualitative statements where appropriate. Some 775 comments were included in the returns on the 11 questions inviting additional comments from line managers and some 258 comments from HR specialists on the ten questions inviting additional comments from them. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data reduction techniques were used. Descriptive statistics, including the non-parametric Mann-Witney test to measure the significance of differences between the opinions of the two constituent groups ( $p < 0.06$  = significant;  $p$  being equal to or less than 0.01 = highly significant), were calculated. The social sciences package of statistics (SPSS) was used for the management of the quantitative data, while the qualitative data was reduced by categorising recurrent themes arising in response to each questions (Miles and

Huberman, 1994). Some direct quotations are included in the findings to illustrate and texturise the collated responses.

The credible volume of primary data generated arguably affords a close analysis of the HR business partnership in Hilton International's UK hotels. Nonetheless, a few potential limitations should be raised. Firstly, the non-random self-selection of the line managers may have led to some response bias, though none has been identified. Secondly, the relative lack of anonymity for the HR specialists may have led to reservations in expression of their opinions. However, the nature of the results suggests otherwise. Possibly the inherent limitation of unique case studies, like Hilton International, in the wholesale transferability of findings is the most significant research limitation.

With the importance of commonality in line manager and HR specialists' on the involvement of line managers in HR, in conjunction with a lack of empirical work addressing the devolvement of HR to line managers in the tourism sector, the primary work is relevant. It may expose some key points in building an effective partnership between line managers and HR specialists that are not only valuable to Hilton but similarly market-orientated organisations. The findings reported next compare line managers' and HR specialists' perspectives on line managers in HR in relation to: the concept and ownership of Esprit; involvement in activities and ranking of the importance of activities; and supports of, and barriers, to HR activity.

## **Empirical Findings**

### Line manager profiles

All 76 hotels in the UK are represented in the sample, with 34% of respondents located in Central and North England, 22% from Scotland and Ireland, 29% South of England and 16% in London. Thirty percent of the sample comprises senior managers, consisting of general managers and deputy managers, 53% are departmental managers, 9% supervisors and 7% (assistant and deputy departmental managers). Two percent of the respondents did not indicate their position in the organisation. Fifty six percent of the respondents have been in their current position for 1-5years, 15% over 5 years and 27 % less than one year. Of those who have been in their current position for less than one year, 39% have been with the organisation for less than one year, representing 10% of the total returns. Forty eight percent of the respondents indicated that they had been with Hilton hotels for 1-5years and a further 38% over 5 years.

### HR manager profiles

All HR managers in Hilton's hotels have the same status and title. There was an even spread of HR manager respondents across the four regions with 26% located in Central & North England, 24% from Scotland and Ireland, 26% South of England and 24% in London. In relation to length of service, 41% of the respondents have been in their current position for 1-5years, 50% over 5 years and 9% less than one year. Of those who have been in their

current position for less than one year, 57% have been with the organisation for less than one year.

## **Understanding of the Esprit HR Strategy**

Before examining views on human resource activities, it is important to ascertain whether there is a shared understanding of the philosophy of the strategic driver of Esprit as it is the foundation of HR activities (Heraty and Morley, 1995; Bond and Wise, 2003). Respondents were able to give multiple responses to the question on their understanding of Esprit within Hilton.

From their majority responses (see Table 1), it is evident that the respondents do not have an understanding of Esprit that is commensurate with the Hilton conception. For the majority of line managers (87%) and HR specialists (72%) perceive Esprit as a club for employees. This majority view is represented across all levels of management, and is not dependent on length of service, age or gender. Only 26% of the line managers indicate that Esprit is a concept directing the way employees work, with a further 14% indicating that it is a way of working practices. In contrast, 57% of the HR specialists view Esprit as a concept directing the way employees work, with a further 43% indicating that it is a way of working practices. The differences across the line managers and HR specialists here are highly significant ( $p = .000$ ). Further, only four line managers and four HR specialists indicated understanding of the concept and values underpinning Esprit in positing additional comments: [Esprit is] 'a belief/ culture system' (HR manager, Scotland) and 'positive enforcement of Hilton as a group in the minds of our employees' (line manager, Scotland).



Table 1 here

## **Ownership of the Esprit HR Strategy**

In a similar vein to the findings on understanding the Esprit strategy, there also appears to be discrepancies regarding ownership of Esprit that may be resonant of line manager willingness to carry out HR activities (Aston, 1984; de Jong et al., 1993; Garavan et al., 1995 and 2001; Renwick and MacNeil, 2002). The general view expressed is that there is multiple-ownership.

Nearly all respondents provided three responses each to the question on this subject, generating a total of 865 responses. However in analysing these based on number of respondents it can be seen that 69% of line-managers and 59% HR specialists consider Esprit to be owned by Hilton, whilst 54% of line managers and 65% of HR specialists indicated that employees own it. Almost two thirds of the line managers consider it to be owned by human resource specialists (30% head office HR and 31% hotel based human resource specialists). Twenty three percent of line managers perceive it to be owned by senior management, compared with 39% of HR specialists. Thirty percent of line managers expressed the view that departmental managers own it and 22% considered Esprit to be owned by the individual hotels. This contrasts with the views of the 61% of HR specialists who perceive that departmental managers own Esprit and 50% who indicated that the individual hotels own it. In the ' other' response allowed for the question on ownership of Esprit, all respondents expressed the view that everyone in the organisation owns Esprit, reflecting the corporate view of ownership. What is starkly evident from this comparison is that HR

specialists perceive that the Esprit strategic driver has multi-ownership more than the line managers. A significance value of 0.15 in the opinions of the HR and line managers on senior manager ownership of Esprit is a significant aspect of perceptual divergence, while divergence on perceptions of individual hotels, hotel HR and departmental managers' ownership of Esprit is highly significant -  $p = 0.000$  - (see Table 2). Moreover, it is again apparent that the general understanding of the HR managers on Esprit ownership is closer than that of the line managers to the formal Hilton position.

Table 2 here

## **Line managers in HR: understanding of roles and responsibilities**

Renwick (2003), drawing on the work of Ulrich (1998) and Jackson and Schuler (2000), identifies that a partnership approach to HR requires the integration of HR activities into the work of line managers. In order to obtain an overview of the range of HR activities undertaken by line managers, both line managers and HR specialists were asked to indicate their views on: the human resource activities in which line managers are actively involved; the level of importance of HR activities in relation to importance to business effectiveness; and ranking of the most important HR activities. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the results.

Table 3 here

The first notable point about the findings tabled above is that while all of the HR respondents opine that line managers are involved in four HR activities - employee selection, motivation and morale of employees; performance appraisal; disciplinary and grievance procedures - there are no activities that all the respondent line managers opine they are involved in. The second notable point is that in every activity the HR managers' perceptions of line manager involvement is greater than the level of involvement as perceived by the line managers. The third conspicuous finding is that there are marked differences in perceptions in the relative value of employee budgeting and forecasting; ensuring HR processes are maintained; rewards and benefits; and performance appraisals. These findings strongly suggest that HR managers believe there is greater line manager involvement in HR activities than the line manager do and, further, some difference in HR priorities exists across the line manager and HR manager groups. In employee selection; motivation and morale of employees; and team briefings and communications, there are broadly similar findings in terms of prioritisation.

Comments made in relation to line managers' involvement in HR activities deepen insight into the respondents' views. Twenty one percent of the line managers took the opportunity to provide additional comments on their role in relation to HR activities. Thirty eight percent of the comments relate to training, encompassing analysing training needs, encouraging employees to participate in training, delivery and evaluation. Communications was mentioned by 14% of the respondents predominantly with HR specialists, communicating HR issues to staff and attending HR meetings. Other

activities mentioned by respondents include: coaching; sickness interviews, teambuilding and payroll management. Complaints regarding workloads and staffing levels were voiced in comments by 10% of the respondents, with 5% complaining about HR support within their hotel and head office. At the same time 9% of the managers were extremely positive about their role in HR activities, as illustrated by the following quotes from two of the managers: ' I feel I have a better/greater opportunity to be more involved within HR because of the hotels and staff itself. It is fantastic not only to be supported by our own team, but the whole ' hotel team' as well;' and ' I get support and encouragement continuously. I run my department as if I was HR – but with the bonus of all the help I need being available – works fantastic' sic.

Additional comments on line managers' HR role were made by HR specialists and relate to ownership of Esprit, with echoes of findings noted earlier. For example, it was recorded that ' managers ' should' have a role in all of the above – in reality however many areas are not currently ' perceived' as their responsibility' (HR manager Central England). Another London based HR specialist indicated that managers also had responsibility for ' their own development, coaching and absence.'

### Support of line managers in HR responsibility

Opinions on a number of features of line manager support in HR were canvassed in the questionnaires. In order to gain an understanding of managers' views on the value of HR, they were asked to rate certain HR performance aspects, with 5 being excellent and 1 being poor. The highest mean score was found in relation to line managers' opinions on the working

relationship with their hotel HR manager (M= 3. 91), indicated as an important factor by Garavan et al. (1999). In contrast, only nine percent of the HR specialists rated the working relationship with managers as excellent, with a further 59% rating it as very good and 26% as good. Overall, the mean score for HR specialists rating of their working relationship with the line managers was very good (M = 3. 69), but slightly less good than the converse view of the relationship.

In relation to specific support given by HR specialist to line managers, all HR managers indicated that they advised on training, with 96% indicating that they also provided support in tracking Esprit membership numbers, administrative support and evaluation of training. In addition, other support activities include coaching and mentoring of managers to help them achieve targets, specifically to ensure that they are up to date and that user-friendly policies are in place. Time management reminders; providing disciplinary advice; recruitment and retention; staff budgeting; conducting appraisals; and measure and recognise results through internal HR audits were also articulated by the HR respondents as support