

Pros and cons of devolving hr roles



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Table 1: Pros and Cons of Devolving HR roles to Line Managers](#) \n \t
2. [Pros](#) \n \t
3. [Cons](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Human Resource Management (HRM) has become more global and strategic and hence of higher importance to any organisation. Although many companies have recognised it, few are practicing many things in order to make their management of human resources more effective especially working more closely with the line managers.

The success of an organization depends heavily on effective Human Resource Management practices and the competency of its human resources. Excellent companies recognize that human resources are their number one asset. This is true in the dynamic organization or industry. Therefore, employees must be adequately trained and retrained to ensure that their knowledge, skill and competency remain relevant and useful. It is a fact that the primary concern of an organization is its variability and hence its efficiency.

One of the most distinguished management scientist, Tom Peters mentions in his book, " In Search of Excellence" using Hewlett Packard (HP) as a successful organisation that has implemented good use of line managers using HRM functions to become successful. He states, " Although most top managements assert that their companies care for their people, the

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excellent companies are distinguished by the intensity and pervasiveness of this concern". He continues to describe this by giving various examples which are interesting to consider.

According to him, eighteen out of twenty HP executives that were interviewed spontaneously claimed that the success of their company depends on the company's people-oriented philosophy. It is called the " HP Way". It is the tradition of treating every individual with consideration and respect and recognising personal achievements. Dave (co-founder Packard) also believes in this philosophy. The dignity and worth of the individual is a very important part.

A philosophy that has been a driving force in the organisation's success is, " First there should be highly capable, innovative people throughout the organisation... second, the organisation should have objectives and leadership which generate enthusiasm at all levels". People in important management positions should not only be enthusiastic themselves, they should be selected for their ability to stimulate enthusiasm among their associates. The introduction to the revised corporate objective statement concludes: " Hewlett-Packard should not have a tight, military-type organisation, but rather ... give people the freedom to work toward overall objectives in ways they determine best for their own areas of responsibility."

In short, the most extraordinary trait at HP is uniformity of commitment, the consistency of approach and attitude. Wherever you go in the HP empire, you find people talking product quality, feeling proud of their division's

achievements in that area. HP People at all levels show boundless energy and enthusiasm (In search of Excellence Page 242 -246)

To summarise, the philosophy behind this example is that the excellent companies emphasise the philosophy that says, in effect, “ respect the individual”, “ make people winners”, “ let them stand out”, “ treat people as adults” (In search of Excellence Page 277)

Many researches in the recent years have highlighted the importance of line managers within HR processes. They carry out various duties of HR functions especially recruitment and selection and undoubtedly play a significant role in guaranteeing that employees are motivated, productive, competent and parallel with the business strategy as well as making sure that the organisation complies with the relevant laws and regulations.

A line manager is responsible for an employee or a work group to a higher level of management line who is generally in the lower layer of the management hierarchy and the employees who report to him/her do not themselves have any managerial responsibility. One may find that occasionally a line manager may not have formal management education because he/she is generally promoted from within. The common management duties of a line manager may include as follows:

People management

Measuring operational performance

Organising work allocation and rotas

Monitoring work processes

Dealing with customer/clients

Line managers can play an important role and can assist the process of the revitalisation of an organisation with enhanced customer focus and staff performance. They ensure employees are motivated, productive and competent, and aligned behind the business strategy. They are also vitally important in making sure that the organisation complies with relevant laws and regulations.

The people and performance research carried out for the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) by a team at Bath University (Hutchinson, 2003) found that the line managers played a vital role in terms of implementing and enacting HR policies and practices. They found that where employees feel positive about their relationship with their line managers they are more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction, commitment and loyalty which are associated with higher levels of performance or discretionary behaviour. Discretionary behaviour is defined as that which goes beyond the requirement of the job to give extra performance which can boost the bottom line. Line managers also play the strongest part in structuring people's actual experience of doing a job.

According to an online survey of 121 organisations, collectively employing almost a quarter of a million people, shows that four in five (80.2%) organisations have devolved responsibilities such as managing flexible working requests and handling grievance and disciplinary procedures to line managers over the past few years. And two in three predict the role of line

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managers will take on even more HR functions over the next few years.

(Williams, 2008)

Also, another interesting finding was that the line managers claimed to be satisfied with the HR responsibilities that have been devolved to them and are keen to take on activities that relate explicitly to the development of their team. Most line managers report working closely with their HR counterparts and see the configuration moving towards a partnership. The line managers' main concern is that a lack of support from HR during the delivery of the service can detract from the overall effectiveness. They also note that junior level line managers are likely to feel less supported by HR and comment that it is merely their high level position that drives the HR-line partnership in their situations. (Susan Whittaker, 2003).

The role of line managers in both public and private organisations has changed quite significantly in recent years. The line managers have been allocated more responsibilities and are accountable not only for budgeting and allocating of resources, but most importantly for people management issues as per Hoogenboorn & Brewster (1992.). According to some sources such as Storey (1992: 190), he argues that line managers may well " be playing a far more central role in labour management" than HR personnel. Whereas another source, Hales (2005) traces the greater involvement of line managers in HR issues to two developments. He argues that the line managers have been taking on the role of a ' coach' , ' conductor' or a ' leader' of a highly motivated team as a result of the spread of Human Resource Management and the adoption of more participative forms of

management concerned with securing high performance through commitment rather than control.

Human Resource Devolvement has led to line managers acquiring middle management functions and becoming “ mini-general managers” accompanied by the loss of supervisory functions downwards to work teams. It is hence more appropriate for line managers to take responsibility for people development since they operate alongside the people they manage and therefore it is argued that that their reactions are more immediate and appropriate (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). Indeed, across Europe, Larsen and Brewster (2003: 229) suggest, “ there is now a widespread drive to give line managers more responsibility for the management of their staff and to reduce the extent to which personnel or HR departments control or restrict line management autonomy in this area.”

Initial research indicates some positive support for line manager HR involvement. Hutchinson and Purcell (2003) found that line manager involvement in coaching, guidance and communication positively influences organisational performance. Likewise, a case study of line manager involvement in HR in the NHS by Currie and Proctor (2001) found that line managers are important contributors to strategic change when provided with discretion in implementing HR strategies within their own work groups.

Whittaker and Marchington (2003) maintain that line managers increasingly welcome HR responsibilities and are prepared to take them on as they add variation and challenge to their work. Gibb (2003) argues that requiring line managers to be more involved in the HR issues may also lead to a

transformation of managers own attitudes towards HR, organisational change and thus a transformation of human relations at work (Gibb, 2003). By increasing line manager involvement in HR, it is argued that better workplace conditions will result as line managers have better understanding than specialists of the type and range of interventions needed. In this pursuit, line managers are assisted by more effective and user-friendly human resource information systems, new technologies and Human Resource call centres, making it possible for line managers to handle some HR work without the assistance of Human Resource Department.

It is seen that a speedy resolution of conflicts and lower rate of employee turnover is possible by moving Human Resources responsibilities closer to employees through line managers. Indeed, providing greater authority to line managers and encouraging greater initiative taking may address a long-standing criticism levelled at HR departments; namely a lack of appreciation of the immediacy of the line manager's problems (Harris, L, Doughty, D. & Kirk, S. (2002).

According to Maxwell and Watson (2006), business partnerships between HR specialists and line managers have emerged as the dominant model for Human Resources operations within organisations. Similarly, Ulrich (2005) outlines the role of HR Strategic Partners as working alongside line managers to help them reach their goals by crafting strategies to maximise productivity through alignment of corporate resources to these goals.

We can hence understand that devolving HR responsibilities to line managers offers a number of benefits to organisations. A greater freedom to

HR specialists to engage with strategic issues is provided enabling them to forge closer relationships with line managers and a partnership model towards managing employees is developed. Similarly, line managers understand and appreciate the complex nature of dealing with the employee issues and become more encouraged and involved in everyday workplace management tasks.

However, line managers have pointed various issues concerning HR involvement despite the above mentioned benefits of participating in HR activities. It will obviously increase their workload by getting involved in HR tasks. Increased workload leads to feelings of incompetence among line managers and reluctance to take responsibility for devolved HR activities. Indeed, this has led to feelings amongst some line managers of being “dumped upon” (Renwick 2003: 265) or “pushed upon to take new HR responsibilities” (Harris, L, Doughty, D. & Kirk, S. (2002):) due to a climate of fear and mistrust driven by HR. The experience and ability of line managers to take responsibility for HR issues may present a major barrier to devolvement. Both Whittaker and Marchington (2003) and Hailey, V. H., Farndale, E. & Truss, C. (2005) suggest that line managers’ skills and competence in HR practices may be limited and a lack of training in this area will undoubtedly affect a line managers’ overall effectiveness. Incapability and misunderstanding of HR practices on the part of line managers will prevent the organisation from developing a strong learning culture (McCracken and Wallace, 2000) with McGovern et al. (1997) arguing that a lack of training may lead to inconsistencies in implementing organisational HR policies potentially exposing the organisation to lawsuits and

employment tribunals. Their research though, indicates that management development is not a priority for the top management and reliance on the notion of “ trial-and-error” is prevalent in organisations. Furthermore, the failure of organisations to take a long-term developmental view is exposed by a reluctance to set aside a specific budget for training and the belief that management development is the individual’s responsibility.

Many line managers get under pressure to meet operational targets, and often struggle to fulfil their people management duties. This is partly because they are not equipped with the tools, skills and knowledge they need to be effective. As a result, managers sometimes effectively abdicate responsibility for aspects of people management. A commonly used phrase is “ that’s HR’s job” often tends to be heard a lot in many companies - whether relating to employee development, managing an individual’s performance or dealing with absenteeism issues.

Recent research involving nearly 3, 000 employers by the Work Foundation and the Institute for Employment Studies found that organisations with a comprehensive, structured approach to people management, covering areas such as recruitment, development plans and employee appraisals, perform better than those without, as indicated by higher profits per employee, higher profit margins and ultimately higher productivity.

Sometimes it’s easy to be critical of managers, but often they’re not properly equipped to be effective. Investment in management training requires clearly set-down policies and procedures. There appears to be lack of clear guidance and easily accessible information, it’s not surprising that many line

managers' response when an issue arises is either to pick up the phone to HR or to ignore the problem and hope it would go away or transfer responsibility to someone else.

It is interesting but to be fair to line managers, sometimes part of the problem may also lie with the HR department itself. For all the talk about wanting to devolve more responsibility to the line, in practice HR professionals are sometimes reluctant to trust line managers to manage. They are unwilling to give managers the tools and information they need to do the job effectively: after all, knowledge is power, and by being the gatekeepers of all information relating to employees, policies and processes, HR may feel that it has power. This is clearly not in the long-term interests of the HR function.

HR teams must realise that if they are to fulfil their potential and be true partners to the business, then they need to trust their managers with the day-to-day stuff. This doesn't mean being unsupportive but continued support to line managers to assist them with responsibility for the way that people are managed. It does mean defining strategies and policies and then putting in place the frameworks and the systems that enable managers to take accountability for the day-to-day execution - but in a controlled, informed and effective way.

Line managers must aim to be more accountable whereas HR professionals being more strategic could assist when working together. Better solutions are needed to support key people management processes and it's likely that intelligent use of technology is likely to represent at least part of the answer.

Technology-based services offer organisations the potential to give much greater support to their line managers, but in a highly cost-effective way. Line managers can be given tools to walk them through common processes, access to comprehensive information about their employees, guidance on how to manage effectively, and prompts when tasks or actions are due – all accessed via a single web-based service.

In view of the above, making line managers responsible for the delivery of HR can be complex. Line managers may not possess the required skills needed to implement HR initiatives and may feel ill-equipped or insufficiently trained to accept responsibility for day-to-day HR tasks. Devolving HR responsibilities may also represent a lack of appreciation of the workloads, time pressures and overall priorities of line managers threatening the overall standards of HR delivery across the organisation and diminishing the value of HR.

It is found that getting line managers involved in HR tasks is a step towards achieving a more strategic, value-added approach to managing employees. Line managers play an important position in the organisational hierarchy and can directly affect the quality of front-line services. It will greatly increase the existing pressures of excess workload and the need to deliver on short-term priorities by devolving line managers with HR responsibilities. It will also mean the requirement of display of a higher level of HR competency by the line managers which calls for the need for high-quality training programmes for line managers to ensure that they feel confident in discharging their new HR responsibilities. Such training may help organisations avoid costly litigation and damage to their public reputation.

HR professionals must engage with line managers and develop a partnership to bring about a speedier resolution to workplace conflicts by allowing line managers to seek guidance and advice whenever required thereby making line managers more responsible for HR.

Table 1: Pros and Cons of Devolving HR roles to Line Managers

Pros

Cons

Increase speed of decision -making

Line management responsibility for people issues

Local management accountability

Potential cost savings

Strategic role for central HR/IR

Short lines of communication

Lack of time to perform HR duties

Increase in line manager's workload

Additional costs of training managers

Increase in grievances/tribunal cases

Potential for HR/IR to be marginalized

People management not considered to be part of the line manager's job

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