

Qualification: CIPD Diploma in Applied Human Resources

Module Name: Understanding the Contemporary HR Function

Assessment: 5CMHR – I1C1004

Word Count: 3,262

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Date: 28th January 2021

The Function of HR in Contemporary Organisations

Sharon Richards, January 2021

Learning Outcomes

- Understand the role and key objectives of the HR function in contemporary organisations
- Understand different models of delivering HR services
- Understand the role of ethics in HR management and development
- Understand how HR's contribution to the organisation can be evaluated

The purpose and function of HR

‘To support the delivery of the organisation’s strategy and objectives through the effective management of people and performance’

Wilkinson and Taylor (2016)

‘The function of HR has evolved over time moving from administration to practice to strategy’

(Ulrich, 2016).

What is the purpose and function of HR – why does HR exist and what does it do?

HR: the journey so far

Personnel Management

- Dates back to Industrial Revolution
- Focus on transactional activities
- Focus on productivity and efficiency
- Campaign for employee welfare

HR has existed in some form since the 19th century when the development of new manufacturing processes contributed to the growth in industry with new factories employing hundreds of people.

HR began life as an administrative function, termed as Personnel Management. Activities focused on routine transactional tasks such as record-keeping and the payment of wages. Employers then were concerned with increasing efficiency and improving productivity, often incentivised through wage increases.

Working conditions in factories were dangerous with employees expected to work long hours in with few rights. (British Library). Over time, social reformers campaigned for better conditions and support for employees, extending the focus of personnel management to include employee welfare such as medical care and housing (Marchington et al, 2016, p142) For example, in the late 1800's, the Cadbury brothers built houses for their employees and established a college programme for young employees. (Bettelley, 2012).

Human Resources Management

- Employees seen as a resource
- Growth of employee incentives and training & development activities
- Trade Union influence and emergence of Employment Law

During the first half of the 20th century, the welfare state started to emerge in the UK and by the 1950's, people could claim employment insurance, sick pay and state pensions, as well as having access to the National Health Service. (CIPD, 2020b)

Employees were becoming an important resource to the organisation; recruitment and development activities were considered important factors in their retention (Wilkinson and Taylor, 2016b, p23) with the employers focus moving to training and developing staff and introducing more advanced performance appraisal tools.

From the 1960's, trade union prominence meant that employers were spending time negotiating with unions and managing industrial relations with employees. The emergence of employment law meant that organisations needed to invest in specialist expertise to advise on aspects of employment relating to employees' rights at work. (Marchington et al, 2016, p142)

Nationally negotiated Terms and Conditions of employment meant that organisations were tied to ways of working and were restricted in the

development of their own people strategies. (Wilkinson and Taylor, 2016c, p6)

Strategic Human Resources Management

- Transformational change
- Concerned with strategy implementation
- Value of organisational development
- Added value

Over the last 30 years, HR has become a business critical function. Its focus has moved from being largely transactional to playing a key role in determining the success of an organisation through its employees. Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015, p190) describe this change as transformational.

Wilkinson and Taylor (2016d, pp23-24) suggest that it was around 20 years ago that HR began to be seen as having a role in strategy implementation and that as a result, employees were considered to be an asset to the organisation rather than a resource.

HR activities started to become employee-focused and organisations began to think about how HR practices influence the delivery of strategy. Organisational development began to feature in HR practice as organisations started to realise that employee engagement played an important factor in employee motivation and performance.

Both Wilkinson and Taylor and Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015, p190) are clear that HR should add value to an organisation over and above the traditional but necessary administrative tasks. This added value elevates the HR function to that

of strategic HR management with a clear role of developing and delivering business objectives.

‘The core purpose and activities of the HR function evolve in response to developments within the business environment, but do not tend to change radically from one decade to another’
(Wilkinson and Taylor, 2016).

Whilst HR has adapted over the last century in response to changes and developments in the economy, welfare provision, globalisation and technology, the core functions of HR have not changed.

These being:

Staff recruitment and retention

Training and development of employees

Effective performance management

Maximising employee engagement

(Wilkinson and Taylor, 2016a, p22).

HR's role in change management

HR has become an important and influential key player in supporting organisations through change. Wilkinson and Taylor (2016e, pp31-33) refer to change in two forms – 'controllable' and 'uncontrollable'. Whilst HR's response to the controllable aspects of change is in a strategic capacity, a more human response to the emotional impact of change, to the uncontrollable, is necessary.

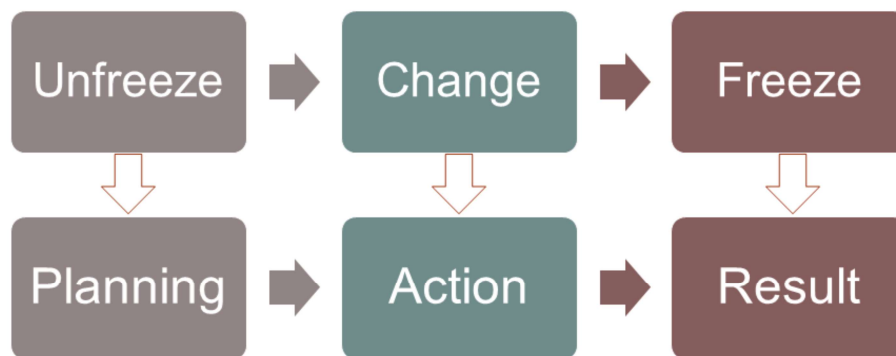
Kübler- Ross '5 stages model'



The Kübler-Ross model (1973) was originally based on people's emotional responses to grief but can also be applied to describe the response stages to change management. There are five stages that people tend to follow when faced with change and uncertainty.

Feelings of resistance and negativity towards change require careful management and HR play an important role in understanding and helping staff to travel through these stages with as little disruption and stress as possible. (Kerley, 2018)

Lewin's Change Management Model



Mindtools

Lewin describes change management in three stages:

Planning or 'unfreezing' – focuses on getting the organisation on board with the change, ensuring that people understand the reason for change and sharing the vision. This usually involves scrutiny of how things are currently done which is often the most problematic and stressful.

Action or 'changing' – people start to adjust, and behaviours thoughts begin to support the idea of a more positive outlook. This stage can take time, and requires careful and extensive communication and engagement with staff to ensure that they remain feeling a part of the organisation throughout the change.

Result or 'refreezing' – change has been accepted and is progressing. The organisation feels in a secure position and clear structures are in place; staff feel more positive and are adapting well to the change.

(Mindtools)

Supporting staff through change requires careful management by HR professionals. Cohen (2016) aligns the HR role to a 'change agent', both in terms of facilitating change with staff but also in respect of playing a strategic role in

the planning and implementing change.

What next for the HR function?

So what's the future for HR? Has HR achieved its optimum role in business?

HR function: what does the future hold?

- Future-proofing & genuine organisational insight (CIPD)
- Outside/Inside perspective (Ulrich & Dulebohn)
 - Understanding business context and external stakeholders
 - Building capabilities
 - Fit-for-purpose operating model

The CIPD report Next Generation HR (2010), suggests that organisations need to become adaptive and flexible to ensure that they remain fit-for-purpose: they need to become 'future-proofed' and have an in-depth understanding of their organisation to be able to foresee and respond to challenges. In their research, the CIPD found that when HR has 'genuine organisational insight', their actions and behaviours are more likely to be effective in supporting the organisation to successfully deliver their objectives.

Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) build on this theme by suggesting that HR should have an 'outside/inside' perspective. That is, that HR has to invest in being a key strategic partner, with a broad and detailed understanding of the business context and external stakeholders, as well as playing an operational role within the organisation. Ulrich and Dulebohn suggest that HR has an important role in the development and management of talent, supporting the organisation to ensure that it builds the capabilities required to be successful.

Furthermore, Ulrich (2016) outlines a number of other criteria that organisations should think about when looking to the future. He suggests that organisations should ensure that their HR operating model is aligned to support the

organisation's needs, that HR practices should be affiliated with stakeholder expectations and standards, and that the value of using HR analytics to measure the impact of HR on the delivery of strategic objectives is understood.

Impact of a pandemic

- HR as a leading function
- Resilient HR
- Case studies

What impact has the Coronavirus pandemic had on the future of HR?

Cave and Bonnar (2020) ask if the pandemic has elevated HR as a leading function. They refer to key HR experts predicting that organisations will need to shift the focus from financial to people, in order to withstand the pressures of the pandemic.

In his reflections, Bersin notes that HR has had to quickly evolve and adapt and essentially become a 'Resilient HR'. Two of the key characteristics of this new resilient HR model include giving permission for local teams to make decisions and to take action and in promoting a responsive and adaptive way of working.

People Management (2020) have shared a number of case studies where employers have been forced to make changes to the way they recruit, manage and look after their employees during the pandemic. Many organisations have moved their recruitment process online, such as VIVID, a UK Housing Association (Short, 2020). Recognising the benefits of this new approach in terms of efficiency and a better candidate experience, VIVID have made the decision that rather than go back, they will continue to build on this model in the future.

HR delivery models

- HR generalists – responsible for all aspects of HR
- HR specialists – responsible for specific functions
- Shared Services – provide routine administrative tasks

Wilkinson and Taylor (2016)

A number of researchers have proposed different models for HR delivery.

Wilkinson and Taylor (2016f, pp24-25) state that there are various means of organising the HR function and the size of the organisation may play a part in determining which model is adopted.

HR generalists deal with all aspects of the HR function, such as recruitment and development activities, developing policy or employee relations. This model often features in smaller organisations or sole practitioners.

Other organisations will adopt a HR specialist model where individuals or teams of specialists are responsible for specific areas of the HR function. For example, resourcing or learning and development.

They also discuss a shared service model, which can be provided in-house, can be outsourced or on a consultancy basis; the latter often in relation to a specific area of business.

Ulrich Model (1998)

- Three-legged stool
 - HR business partners
 - Centres of expertise
 - Shared Service Centres
- Future relevance

Ulrich's model, known as the three-legged stool has been previously regarded as a best practice model for HR delivery (Swift, 2016, p5).

This model outlines three types of complementary HR roles:

The HR business partner - supports the delivery of strategy, using best practice evidence to help the organisation realise its workforce potential, working closely with individuals and teams across the organisation to identify and implement positive change within their business areas. (CIPD, 2020a)

Centres of expertise - organised around a specific HR function, using best practice to develop policy and capabilities in their specific area of expertise, supporting the organisation to deliver organisational objectives.

Shared Service Centres – can facilitate routine and recurring activities, such as payroll or recruitment, across big organisations and serve as a way of creating value for the organisation not only in financial terms but also in terms of efficiency. (Marchington et al, 2016, p157)

Ulrich's model has featured prominently in HR practice for some years, although later research (Marchington, 2016, p149) suggest that Ulrich's model is too rigid to be achievable and Ulrich himself has conceded that the model may now be

outdated.

In its research on HR operating models, the CIPD (2015) concludes that whilst the Ulrich model provides a good foundation, the model will not suit all organisations. Reilly (2017) suggests that the HR model will need to change in response to current and future environmental factors such as technology, changes in workforce demographic and the political landscape.

Other models

- Legge (1978)
- Tyson and Fell (1986)
- Storey (1992)

A number of other HR models have been put forward over the last few decades (Marchington, 2016, p146). These include models by:

Legge (1978) – this model focuses on the strategies for HR managers to be seen as an authority within their organisation.

Tyson and Fell (1986) identified three distinct roles for HR: administrative, contractual and an engineer of HR strategy at a senior level.

Storey (1992) identifies four roles: change agent (influencing culture); adviser (operating at a strategic level supporting HR developments but less visible than a change agent); regulator/internal contractor (operational and liaison role with stakeholders); and, service provider (supporting line managers with HR issues).

Role of Line Managers

- Implementation of HR policy and practices
- Operational HR – absence management, managing performance, welfare etc.
- Impact on employee performance

Whilst HR specialists have the responsibility for developing and sharing policy and practice, line managers have a role in ensuring the appropriate application of such and in managing their own teams. Line managers, with training from HR managers, can take responsibility for more operational and day-to day HR issues, such as absence management, staff development, managing performance and employee welfare, freeing up HR specialists time to focus on more strategic issues. (Wilkinson and Taylor, 2016g, p25-p26).

CIPD (2020c) research, undertaken in partnership with Bath University, suggested that there is a clear link between the employee - line management relationship in terms of engagement. Those staff who had a positive relationship with their line managers tend to be happier and more dedicated to their work which then results in improved performance.

The role of ethics in HR

‘Ethical practice is the application of ethical values in organisational behaviour’ (CIPD)

‘Do as you would be done to’
(Taylor, 2017)

- Unethical practice – Horsemeat scandal
- Corporate Social Responsibility – Co-op

The CIPD describe ethical practice as ‘the application of ethical values in organisational behaviour’. Ethics should run through the whole organisation with policies and practice reflecting the organisation’s values and expected behaviours and treatment of all employees. Taylor (2017) sums up the meaning of ethical behaviour well in his statement that you should ‘do as you would be done to’.

HR practitioners have a duty to ensure that unethical behaviour does not impact on employees, particularly when in making decisions and in ensuring that organisational policies are applied fairly and consistently.

Unethical practice and behaviours can have a harmful impact on organisations. Tesco and Aldi were subject to intense scrutiny during the Horsemeat scandal in 2013. Both supermarkets suffered reputational damage when it emerged that some products labelled as beef were actually horsemeat. (Williams, 2019)

Easyjet received negative press recently with their announcement that as a result of the coronavirus pandemic they were planning on asking staff to take unpaid leave for three months and would not be implementing a planned pay increase. (Leggett, 2020)

Many organisations are now displaying ethics by working towards sustainability in the workplace, communities and wider environment. This is known as Corporate Social Responsibility. The Co-operative are tackling issues that are important to their customers, including climate change, championing health and well-being and supporting Fairtrade as well as donating to communities through a loyalty card scheme.

Evaluating HR's contribution

- HR analytics
- Measuring the impact of policy and practice on performance
- Dimensions of the HR department
- Learning and development

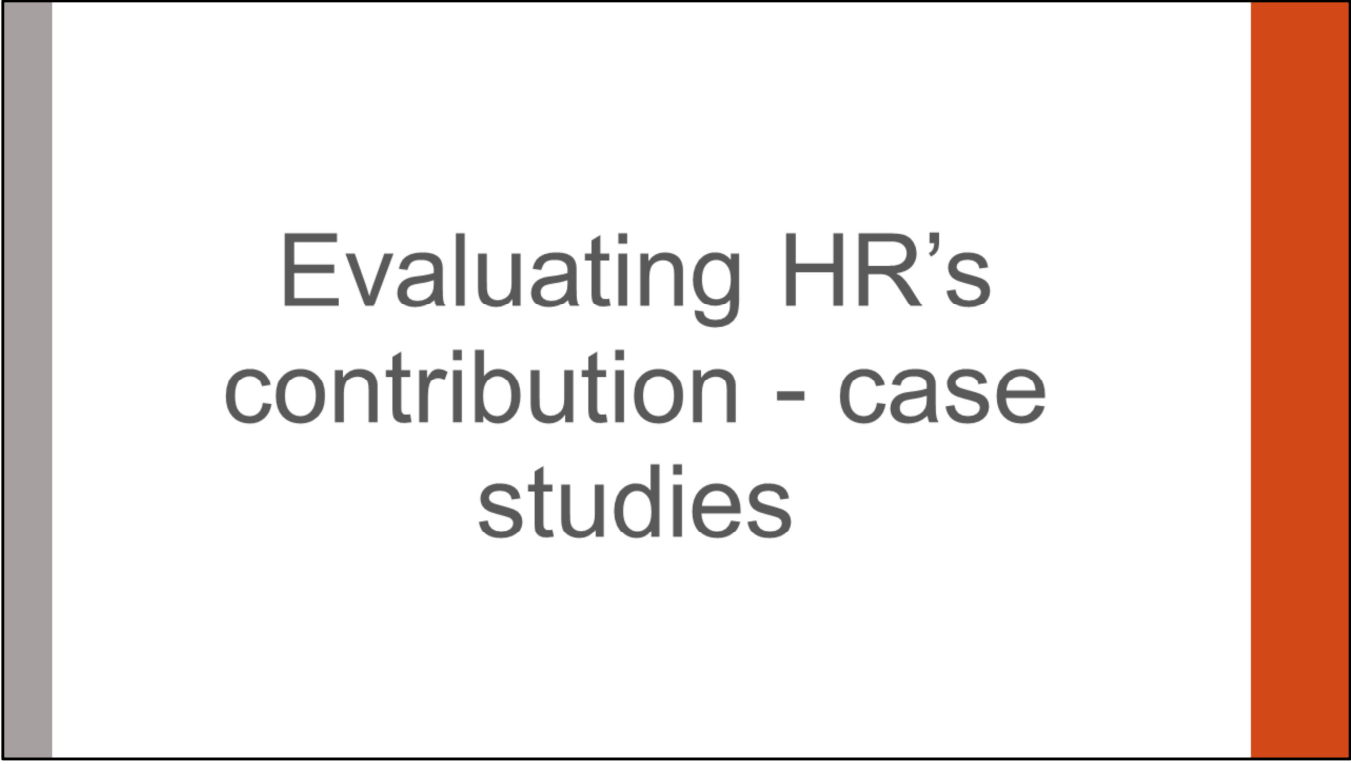
Historically, HR analytics have been used to evaluate HR's contribution to the organisation. Efficiency measurements, such as number of job applications, sickness absence rates or turnover, and key performance indicators, such as time to hire, have been used to assess HR's contribution. Another common tool is the balanced scorecard which can be used to identify and improve internal business functions aligned with the organisation's strategic objectives (Wilkinson and Taylor, 2016h, p30).

There has been limited research to establish how HR contributes to organisational performance. Marchington et al (2016, p164) suggest that it is difficult to measure the impact of HR policy and practice as the implementation of this largely depends on the extent to which Line Managers enact them. They propose that HR influence on performance can be measured through a presence within the strategic governance structure, by seeking views of internal stakeholders, benchmarking with other organisations and through internal evaluation, such as audits.

Grochowski and Ulrich (2017) set out nine dimensions of an effective HR department, which considers aspects of HR performance such as their

reputation, how the department is organised and the effectiveness of HR professionals.

The CIPD (2020d) consider how learning and development can be evaluated in their factsheet through linking key performance indicators back to specific training activities, showing how learning has been used by individuals within their roles and the level to which teams and individuals are engaged with learning.



Evaluating HR's contribution - case studies

- Mortality rate study (West et al, 2006)
- Big Idea study (Purcell et al, 2003)

Uncertain if good HR management
impacts on organisational performance
(Guest, 2011)

The impact of HR on organisational performance has been investigated by a number of researchers.

Michael West et al (2006) conducted research in 61 hospitals in England. Senior executives were asked to complete a questionnaire to ascertain their views on their strategies, policies and practices in terms of HRM and employee engagement, across all staff groups.

Alongside this, an analysis of deaths following surgery, admissions and re-admissions for certain conditions was undertaken. West et al suggested that mortality rates were influenced by a positive HR practices with the key factors being team-working, the appraisal process and learning and development.

There are limitations in this research in terms of the qualitative and subjective nature of the data. Marchington et al (2016, p366) state that research shows that 'there are often substantial gaps between rhetoric used by senior management and the operational reality of HRM at workplace level'.

Research by the CIPD and Bath University (Purcell et al, 2003) looked at the

nature of how HR impacts on performance. This research was conducted over a 6 year period with twelve companies of various sizes and types, including health, retail, financial and technology.

This study advocated the existence of a clear mission, supported by strong values and a positive culture, a 'Big Idea' as critical to success. The 'Big Idea' needs to be a golden thread running through the organisation and present within HR policies and practices. They concluded that their research showed links between effective management of HR policies and practices on good performance outcomes and conversely, negative outcomes as a result of poor practice.

This type of comparative research can present challenges in making legitimate comparisons due to the lack of standardised data available, particularly when comparing a number of diverse organisations.

In his review of the links between HR and performance, Guest (2011) concludes that despite much research on the subject, it is not possible to say with certainty that good HR management impacts on organisational performance.

In summary

- Theories on the function of HR and its evolution.
- HR's contribution to change management and models of change.
- How HR services can be delivered and the role of line managers.
- Why ethical HR is important and examples of ethical and non-ethical practice.
- How HR's contribution to the organisation can be evaluated.
- The link between HR and positive organisational outcomes.

You should now have an understanding of the following aspects of the function of HR in contemporary organisations:

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