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The role of the human resources manager: strategist or conscience of the organisation?

Dorothy Foote and Izabela Robinson

The human resource manager treads a fine line in seeking to reconcile the values of the organisation with professional values about the ethical management of people. This paper seeks to explore this ambiguity. The research findings suggest that the extent to which HR professionals can influence organisational ethics is dependent on the culture and structure of the organisation, as well as on the status and credibility of the HR specialists themselves. In the main there is little evidence that their influence is significant.

Introduction

Increased competitive pressures together with economic and social trends have had a considerable impact on organisations and the management of people within them. Organisational responses to the increased pace of competition and the entry of new competitors in a global economy have included the creation of slimmer and flatter organisational structures, the decentralisation of decision making and the introduction of initiatives aimed at securing improvements in quality and employee flexibility. Organisational change has also affected the role of the personnel/HR manager. Traditionally the role of personnel specialists has been characterised by ambivalence

and ambiguity, reflecting the variety of roles and responsibilities undertaken by the personnel function over the years and the differing perceptions of the role within organisations. The metamorphosis of personnel management into Human Resource Management (HRM) has served to heighten this ambiguity and to underline the variations in the level of acceptance and recognition of personnel specialists.

Definitions of HRM generally involve an integration of employee management with general business management, a shift towards a unitary frame of reference, the assertion of management control and a more individualistic employment relationship. These definitions contain an implicit assumption that employee interests can be identified with those of the organisation, and because

this is the case personnel professionals tread a fine line in seeking to reconcile the values of the organisation with professional values relevant to the ethical management of people.

Our research aims to address this area of ambiguity. It seeks to understand how the personnel/HR role has changed and is changing, and how HR professionals handle the moral dilemmas which arise when organisations use the soft rhetoric of human resource management to sell to employees the hard reality of the quest for competitive advantage (Sisson 1994). This paper is structured as follows: we begin by briefly charting the historical development of the personnel specialist role from the 1970s, highlighting the challenges faced by HR specialists in the 1990s. We go on to explore the extent to which practising HR professionals report having experienced ethical dilemmas in addressing human resource issues within increasingly competitive and insecure business environments. The paper concludes that HR practitioners have faced considerable ethical dilemmas in reconciling the business demands of their organisations with their professional concern for people. However, we found little evidence of their ability to influence organisational ethics, and we found that those who have tried have become victims of their own ethics. We conclude that the inability to influence the ethical climate of organisations is determined by the interaction between the organisation and the individual which is, in turn, dependent on the status, credibility and influence of HR specialists themselves.

Development of the HR role

In 1954, Peter Drucker described personnel management as: 'largely a collection of incidental techniques without much internal cohesion ... (which) puts together and calls "personnel management" all those things that do not deal with the work of people and are not management' (Drucker 1954: 243). Forty years later Rob Kuipers, Chief Executive of DHL, described HRM in similar terms: 'HR is simply a collection of functions ... payroll, basic recruitment, benefit administration, union negotiation, basic training ...

lacking the ability to provide practical, strategic input that chief executives and others can use' (Kuipers 1995: 19).¹

Numerous explanations have been offered for HRM's low status and authority. Much, for example, has been written about the ambiguity of personnel management, the absence of clear role definition and the function's contingent and contextual nature (Legge 1978, 1988, 1995). Likewise, the inability of the HRM function to demonstrate a unique, measurable contribution to organisational goals has contributed to the view that HRM systems have little bearing on key business issues, while HR specialists 'don't get asked to meetings where real decisions are made because most other managers don't think they have earned it' (Kuipers 1995: 19).

HRM can also be seen as a victim of its historical development: its roots are in the Welfare Workers Association and its traditional responsibilities are geared towards the social needs of the employees rather than the needs of business. However, the influence of human resource management as a function has fluctuated over time and in relation to specific issues, frequently as a direct consequence of external factors such as the degree of state intervention in employment matters. Thurley argues that 'it took two world wars, a great deal of labour law and the challenge of a strong labour movement to persuade many boards of companies that they had to have a specialised personnel department' (Thurley 1981: 26). Similarly, Purcell points out that 'the strongest case for an authoritative, central personnel role exists when an interventionist government is in power and legislating across a wide area of employment related issues, matched with powerful trade union leaders who have the ear of government' (Purcell 1982: 4).

During the 1970s, a large volume of labour legislation combined with high levels of labour activity and industrial unrest ensured a high profile for personnel managers, so that few felt the need to justify their contribution to organisational stability and success. In the 1980s however, focus shifted to the demands of an enterprise culture and market led economy as organisations restructured, de-layered and downsized. The

emergence in the 1980s of the concept of Human Resource Management from the writings of US academics (Fombrun, Tichy and Devanna 1984, Beer *et al.* 1985) provided the conceptual basis for the move of personnel management away from its welfare roots to become more business and management oriented. This has served to heighten the ambiguity of the role and generate ongoing debate about the difference between personnel management and human resource management and the contribution which the function could/should make to the achievement of business objectives (Guest 1989, Hendry and Pettigrew 1990, Legge 1995).

Current challenges for HR professionals

The 1990s have seen a continuation of dramatic changes in the structure of work and organisations and in the management of the employment relationship. Downsizing, de-layering and outsourcing, frequently driven by quality initiatives and business process re-engineering, continue as short term responses to market demands and shareholder expectations. At the same time, however, there is an emphasis on employee responsibility, commitment to organisational goals and involvement. As an IPD positional paper suggests, 'Tomorrow's organisations will require values of respect for the individual and trust to be deeply embedded' (IPD 1994: 9) and '... building trust is the only basis on which commitment can be generated' (IPD, 1994: 4).

Rapid and continuing organisational change has direct and fundamental implications for the role of HR professionals within organisations. Whilst some commentators point to new opportunities for HR professionals as providers of specialist consultancy services (Bett 1993), others argue that in its eagerness to follow the boardroom's brief at the expense of its role as the conscience of the organisation, the HRM function is losing status and meaning because it has lost its way (Chater 1993). Even more significant perhaps is the view that HRM literature and practice bypasses the HR manager by focusing on the new-found enthusiasm of chief executives for HRM (Fowler 1987, Storey 1992, Legge 1995).

Hendry (1995: 445) argues that HR professionals currently face two threats to their 'exclusive claim to professional competence.' The first results from organisational re-structuring and decentralisation which has reduced the size of many centralised personnel departments, and diluted the responsibility of personnel specialists as operational responsibilities for activities such as recruitment, selection and training have passed to line managers. The second threat relates to the nature of that professional competence and the need for personnel specialists to become business-literate, commercially aware and able to demonstrate how HRM can 'add value' to the organisation. This approach is reinforced by the current professional education programme for IPD professionals, and is reflected in the following statement by an IPD chief examiner: 'Effective personnel management is not an altruistic vehicle for doing good. Nor should professional practitioners be so people-focused in their values that they distrust – or even actively oppose – some of the competitive strategies that organisations today typically need to adopt in order to survive and prosper ... HR people must create, support, promote and reinforce mechanisms that will help the organisation achieve its mission, vision, strategic goals and objectives' (Johns 1997).

Current trends in HRM practice however, serve to highlight many of the tensions inherent in the original US concept of HRM and its emphasis on a unitary frame of reference, a managerially driven agenda and an individualised approach to the management of the employment relationship. The gap between the rhetoric and reality of HRM is underlined as many organisations continue to erode job security whilst simultaneously making huge demands on employees. 'Initiative overload' is becoming a major source of both individual and organisational stress and there is growing evidence to suggest that increasing work intensification masquerading as empowerment is now resulting in a demotivated, alienated workforce (Legge 1988, 1995, Guest 1990).

All of this has ethical implications. In its consultative document 'Managing People – The Changing Frontiers' (IPM 1993), the IPD specifically comments on the fact that business

arguments overtook ethical issues during the 1980s, and suggests that the experience of HRM will be viewed as more meaningful for employees and of greater benefit to the organisation if it is based on ethical principles. However, even a superficial examination of available evidence suggests that ethical considerations are increasingly being sidelined in a world with an 'add value or perish' mentality. Writing in *The Independent*, Ian Angell comments that 'the lights are going out for whole categories of employment. We are entering an age of hopelessness, an age of resentment, an age of rage. Whole sectors of society who previously felt their future secure can see it slipping away' (Angell 1996). Purcell and Hutchinson categorise so-called 'lean' organisations as 'mean' organisations and suggest that many restructuring initiatives designed to introduce leaner ways of working have failed to improve economic and organisational performance whilst contributing to employee demoralisation, work intensification and loss of autonomy (Purcell and Hutchinson 1996). An Institute of Management survey (1996) reported dramatic increases in management stress levels and the 1997 ACAS report recorded more than double the number of individual rights claims received compared with the 1990 figure. In a survey of over 300 managers in a wide range of organisations, the Industrial Society (1996) identified an 'ethics gap' between what managers preached but consistently failed to practise and suggested that the gap between what managers know is good practice and what they see happening in their organisations is significant and worrying. They argue that directors and managers should lead by example, demonstrating commitment to the organisation's values.

Within this context the ambiguity of the personnel/HRM role is increased even further by the marginalisation of the collective voice in the workplace. Statistics show that union density in 1997 was 30.2% (Labour Research 1997), and that only 37% of all employees were covered by collective bargaining (*Labour Market Trends* 1997). This marginalisation is further reinforced by the WERS 1998 finding of a further contraction of collective industrial relations, with union recognition having fallen successively from 66% in 1984

to 53% in 1990 and 45% in 1998 (Cully *et al.* 1998). The 1990 WIRS survey reported that 'in non-union industrial and commercial organisations ... no alternative models of employee representation let alone a single alternative model had emerged as a substitute for trade union representation' (Millward *et al.* 1992: 365). The 1998 survey confirms trends towards the individualisation of the employment relationship and reports that even within firms with recognition arrangements, management prefers to deal direct with employees than through a union channel (Cully *et al.* 1998: 18). The IPD in its 1998 position paper acknowledges that 'new models of representation are obviously needed to deal with the wide range of situations in which trade unions are not in a position to offer representation' (1998: 9).

However, in the absence of any formal representation mechanism, those employees who see the personnel function as 'internal service providers' (Armstrong 1995: 65) in an organisation which expects its personnel function to operate in a strategist role, may take concerns and problems to the HR professional in the expectation of support in the absence of any formal representation mechanism. The dilemma for the strategically focused HRM professional then centres on the extent to which they can hope to reconcile the needs of both employee and employer. Many commentators have emphasised the HR role as the custodian of organisational values (Armstrong 1995, Torrington and Hall 1995, Sadler 1995) and the concept of values is an integral part of HR activity. Ulrich suggests that in addition to operating as a business partner, a change agent and administrative expert the HR professional should be an 'employee champion'. He suggests that, 'It should be the responsibility of HR people to ensure that employees feel committed to the organisation and are contributing fully. This involves training line managers in how to get the best out of people, consulting on work processes, monitoring employee morale and acting as advocate for the employee point of view' (Ulrich 1998: 38).

The challenge faced by HR professionals today is thus to secure employee commitment within an enterprise culture and the demands of a

market-led economy. The extent to which HR professionals were able to combine their role as employee champion with that of partner in strategy execution, administrative expertise and change agent forms the problematic for this research.

Research design

To recapitulate: our research aim was to identify how the role of the HR specialist has been and is changing in response to contextual factors characterised by increased levels of competition and customer demand, technological, economic and social developments. The research was therefore largely exploratory. Initially we were concerned with identifying whether and how the HR role within organisations was changing in response to external pressures and whether HR professionals were being required to demonstrate a business orientation, a results driven philosophy and customer focus as suggested within the literature. Assuming this to be the case we were concerned with exploring the degree of dissonance experienced by practising HR professionals in balancing the needs of people with the needs of the business. Here we use the term dissonance to convey ambiguity and disparity rather than as a psychological construct.

Accordingly, the research design adopted a grounded, qualitative methodology. A survey questionnaire was used initially to identify changes in the HR role. This was sent to 48 senior HR practitioners in both public and private sector organisations, all of whom had been working in HR for over 10 years, and who were therefore well placed to comment on changes in the orientation of the HR role. Twenty-five responses were received and although the survey sample was too small and selective to generalise on the basis of such findings, responses did confirm trends identified within the literature, and did form a useful basis for more in depth investigation. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 20 senior HR professionals (10 of whom were part of the original survey sample). The interviews were concerned with identifying the degree (if any) of

ambiguity experienced in attempting to balance the needs of people with the needs of the business. The interview protocol was to:

- determine how the individual perceived his/her role within the organisation (or in relation to the organisation);
- identify their personal framework of ethics; and,
- allow participants to describe recent situations where they had faced an ethical dilemma and how they had reacted.

The interviews were not recorded in order not to inhibit the openness and honesty of responses. However, notes were taken during interviews, and examples of situations where HR managers had experienced ethical dilemmas and their responses to these situations were noted. Responses were then categorised according to Carroll's conceptualisation of ethical positions (Carroll 1990).

In the next section we briefly outline contextual factors impacting on the HR role as reported by survey respondents. This information serves to contextualise our observations on ethical issues. Clearly our findings need to be treated with a degree of caution as they represent the views of practising HR professionals who are unlikely to admit readily to a reduction in their influence and scope of responsibility. Nevertheless, they do represent an insight into the thoughts, hopes and concerns of individuals who have been working within the function for a number of years and who have witnessed significant changes in the scope of the HR role and the responsibilities associated with it. Whilst the sample is too small to allow for generalisation about a theoretical framework for ethical decision making within organisations, the findings nevertheless provide an insight into how HR managers deal with ethical situations at the workplace.

Perceptions of the HR role

The following table summarises the range of industries, organisation sizes, job titles and backgrounds of respondents.

Table 1: Background details of respondents

Industry sector	
manufacturing	20%
utilities	8%
transport/distribution	4%
public sector	44%
services	24%
Organisation size	
< 200	12%
200–500	–
> 500	78%
Job title	
HR director	20%
HR manager	48%
other	32%
Years in personnel/HR	
5–10	44%
11–20	44%
20+	16%
Membership of professional body (IPD)	100%

In response to the question of the activity most central to the personnel/HR role, it was possible to identify from respondents' comments features of the four key roles identified by Ulrich (1998: 38) as essential for HR survival and success namely: partner in strategy execution, administrative expert, employee champion and change agent. However, emphasis on the centrality of these roles was uneven. The majority of respondents emphasised the 'partner in business strategy' role and identified a smaller function which was more business oriented, professional, customer focused and devolved. Respondents identified a greater emphasis on the HR function in 'adding value' to the organisation's activities and the widespread use of performance indicators to measure the effectiveness of personnel/HR. The change agent role was also identified as important in developing 'people' solutions aligned to key business objectives. The administrative expert role was seen

as less relevant and a number of respondents commented that administrative aspects of the role had diminished in importance as HR activities had been devolved to line managers.

Of even less relevance was HR's perceived role as employee champion. Only one of our respondents identified this as a key aspect of the HR role commenting that '... delegation of responsibility and financial authority, less consultation with trade unions, personnel being used to 'squeeze' employees more than ever before over hours, overtime, performance pay etc ... I cannot predict, but expect that welfare and consultation will come back into fashion' (Chief Personnel Office, Civil Service). The emphasis on the business strategy role was further reinforced by the competencies identified by respondents as necessary for HR professionals. The most frequently identified competencies required by HR professionals were: business awareness, business expertise, specialist HR expertise, the ability to manage change and flexibility, creativity, and innovation. As one respondent suggested, 'The most importance "competence" will be the ability, capability and flexibility of HR professionals to acquire new competencies. Fixed competence models are no answer to a fast paced business world.' (HR Director, manufacturing).

HRM – the ethical imperatives

Closely allied with the need to develop a strategic business oriented role, however, is the issue of values. Sadler (1995) suggests that organisational values exert an enormous influence on organisational performance and represent a significant determinant of an organisation's long term survival. The HR role is seen as the guardian of core organisational values where these support the organisation's future strategic need (or as an advocate for re-statement where they do not): these values will be translated into action through HR policies and practice in recruitment, selection, development and reward. Organisational values may of course be hard or soft in their orientation, and the experience of HRM is more likely (although not necessarily) to be viewed positively

if its 'underlying principles are ethical' (Legge 1995: 8).

HR's role as the conscience of the organisation has a long pedigree. Lowe observes that '... the genesis of the personnel function and its professional ideology lies to a great extent in its role as the organisation's arbiter of justice and acolyte of benevolence' (Lowe 1992: 151). Hart challenges the current HR preoccupation with demonstrating how it adds value to the business and urges practitioners to guard against the 'illusory promise of enhanced power' which serves to 'consolidate rather than challenge the prevailing (economic, exploitative) business ethic' (Hart 1993). The Personnel Standards Lead Body (1993) do not necessarily see the pursuit of value added and custodian of organisational values as mutually exclusive but nevertheless emphasise the responsibility of the HR director in exercising judgement in supporting executive actions; providing a balancing and opposing force where actions may be cost effective in the short term but damaging to morale and productivity at the time and in the long term.

The economic environment of the 1980s emphasised the need for organisations to become 'lean and mean' and HR managers acted as 'industrial surgeons' dealing with wave after wave of redundancy and cost cutting programmes, determined to prove that they could be as tough, entrepreneurial and responsive to the needs of the market place as their line colleagues. It is certainly the case that the activities of downsizing and de-layering which resulted in lower levels of employment and higher levels of insecurity were implemented by HR people and that personnel managers '... cannot behave like Banquo's ghost and be silently disapproving. What they can do is to argue vigorously in favour of what they see as the best combination of efficiency and justice' (Torrington and Hall 1995: 681).

So how are HR specialists coping with an ethical concern for people, given the realities of organisational life and an appreciation of business imperatives? The issue of ethics elicited a variety of responses from interviewees. In attempting to categorise and explain responses, we found Carroll's (1990) conceptualisation of ethical posi-

tions particularly valuable and have used the framework to categorise responses under three broad headings ranging from the highly ethical to the Nietzsche view of 'ethics as an affliction of the weak.' Carroll's original categories are summarised below:

Name of Principle	Description
categorical imperative	you should not adopt principles of action unless they can, without inconsistency, be adopted by everyone else
professional ethic	you should do only that which can be explained before a committee of your professional peers
might-equals-right ethic	you should take whatever advantage you are strong enough and powerful enough to take
utilitarian principle	you should follow the principle of 'the greatest good for the greatest number'
means-ends ethic	if the ends justify the means, then you should act
disclosure rule	if you are comfortable with an action or decision after asking yourself whether you should mind if all your associates, friends and family were aware of it, then you should act or decide

Category One: Highly Ethical Stance

This we have taken as adherence to principles of 'categorical imperative' and 'professional ethic', translated respectively as; 'you should not adopt principles of action unless they can, without inconsistency, be adopted by everyone else' and 'you should do only that which can be explained before a committee of your professional peers' (Carroll 1990: 60).

Individuals taking such a stance were strongly influenced by the explicitly ethical nature of the organisation and/or a strong personal framework of values, and this was in turn influenced by personality and socialisation factors. An example of the former was a medium sized chemical company established in the late 1940s where shares in the company were handed back to employees thus making them co-owners. The organisation was set up by a Quaker family on the basis that labour should employ capital and that all human beings were equal and thus had equal rights to equal treatment and respect. This philosophy remained enshrined in the company's constitution which established safeguards for the continuation of the enterprise and its principles, and was realised through the operation of a company council. In practice the company council acted as an effective constraint on arbitrary management action and ensured the continuation of the Christian principles and paternalistic style on which the company was founded. Personnel policies were regularly scrutinised and reviewed to check that they supported these principles and values.

An example of an individual taking such an ethical stance was the HR Director of an NHS Trust who resigned her position because the demands being made of her in implementing NHS reforms conflicted with her own personal value system. Whilst she recognised the importance of HR specialists being 'creative, corporate and concerned with budgets and targets' her perception of the required HR role was that of an 'organisational spin doctor', responsible for legitimising management action, skilled at external affairs and implementing the prevailing management ideology without challenging it. She commented, '... what they (Trust Board) needed was a hard nosed negotiator, a career manager, who could do the right things strategically without challenging ... to carry out their dirty work ... which I couldn't do'.

This example illustrates how ethical responsibility for the organisation might be placed explicitly on the HR function, thereby allowing line managers the 'freedom' to absolve themselves of any ethical responsibility for their actions. The

resulting responsibility placed on the HR Director became an intolerable burden. One can question the ethics of this scenario – can any manager pass their ethical responsibilities to another? In this instance, the individual concerned made the decision to resign rather than attempt to work within an unethical environment. Our evidence suggests that such a strong ethical stance is rare amongst HR professionals. This scenario also highlights the risks for HR in attempting to be the 'conscience of the organisation'.

Category Two: Ethics as an Affliction

Respondents within this category represented the 'organisational spin doctor' referred to above. The prevailing principles underpinning this approach included the following; 'you should take whatever advantage you are strong enough and powerful enough to take' (might-equals-right ethic), you should follow the principle of the 'greatest good for the greatest number' (utilitarian ethic) and if the ends justify the means, then you should act (means-ends-ethic)' (Carroll 1990). Equally relevant was the 'stakeholder' view of ethics that management needs to take actions which prioritise the long term interests of stakeholders and the survival of the organisation.

Respondents within this category allied themselves closely with the needs of the business and 'tough love' in its various forms was felt to be a justifiable response to external business pressures. Thus it was acceptable for employees to work harder, longer, under more stressful conditions since this preserved job security. By the same token large scale downsizing and de-layering activities and associated redundancy programmes could be justified as preserving employment for the survivors and ensuring the continued survival of the organisation.

Individuals taking this stance referred to ethics as an expensive luxury; 'ethics is good and nice but we wouldn't be able to work productively if we were ethical' (HR manager, manufacturing company). Likewise it was suggested that personal ethical standards are 'left at the door when you go to work' reinforcing Carr's point that at work

individuals become game players, guided by a different set of ethical guidelines (Carr 1994).

Category Three: Honest Broker

The majority of respondents fell somewhere between the two polarised extremes outlined above. Many of those interviewed attempted to take an independent, neutral, impartial stance in balancing the demands of the bottom line and the interests of employees whilst recognising that many HR issues were not clear cut, right or wrong and that it was important in such situations to '... be true to yourself and your beliefs, you have to be consistent'. (Personnel Manager, Food Processing Company).

The ethical principles underpinning this approach owe much to the 'disclosure' principle; 'if you are comfortable with an action after asking yourself whether you should mind if all your associates, friends and family were aware of it, then you should act or decide' (Carroll op.cit.). But there were likewise elements of a utilitarian and stakeholder dimension in rationalising unpopular or controversial decisions.

Respondents were able to provide many recent examples of situations where they had felt unhappy about the ethics of a situation and for these people much soul searching frequently took place before HR decisions were made. These frequently involved discussions with directors and line managers, possibly resulting in a compromise situation but just as likely leading to the necessity to manage an unethical situation with as much integrity as the HR manager could salvage. Respondents were acutely aware that organisational change and restructuring activities had been driven by financial planning and expediency considerations and had impacted adversely on employees, but few emphasised ethics as a key issue for the future. More prevalent was the view that looking after the needs of employees was likely to become less important than providing support to line managers and directing and influencing business change, suggesting that personnel professionals regard concern with ethics as potentially damaging to their credibility with their line colleagues.

Our interviews covered a range of organisations from the explicitly ethical at one extreme to those which, whilst not explicitly unethical, were quite explicit about the paramount importance attached to the bottom line and the peripheral importance of human resources. The extent to which HR professionals were able to influence organisational ethics was highly contingent upon the culture and structure of the organisation. It was made clear in our interviews that HR professionals are aware of the ethical implications of proposals or decisions and go to considerable lengths to highlight these but at the end of the day their expectations of success are influenced by their knowledge of the organisation and the behaviour of senior managers. Those with a strong ethical approach will not identify with unethical organisations. They will either do their homework before taking up an appointment or they will resign when the culture and management style of the organisation becomes clear and the ethical conflicts become too great.

Conclusion

The personnel/HR role has traditionally been characterised by ambiguity and ambivalence but this has sharpened over time particularly as organisations have attempted to respond to increased competitive pressures. If we imagine this scenario as a continuum between the needs of the business and the needs of employees, the question for HR specialists and their organisations becomes one of where to position the function along the continuum. The quick and easy response would be in the middle, but this would depend on the view taken of the nature of the employment relationship and the balance of power in the employment contract between employer and employee. If this balance is seen as equal then the middle position may well apply. If equality is not accepted, should the role of the HR specialist then be flexible along that continuum depending on the combination of factors which influence the balance of power at a particular point in time? This might suggest that the HR specialist should adopt a role which is orientated towards the weaker end of the con-

tinuum, but current preoccupations with value added and business focus suggest the opposite is actually the case, i.e. the function aligns itself to whichever is the stronger end of the continuum in the same way that strong working relationships were developed with unions throughout the 1970s and early 1980s (Morris and Wood 1991).

Our findings suggest that business demands have caused dilemmas for HR professionals and many equated hard business decisions with unethical practice. We found little evidence that HR professionals have been able to exert much influence on organisational ethics and that those who have tried have become victims of their own ethics. Invariably, the ethical decision making process is determined by the interaction between the organisation and the individual and is subject to a number of constraints. The inability of HR specialists to influence the ethical climate of organisations owes much, according to Drummond and Bain (1994) to their status, credibility and influence, and impacts on the future development of the HR role. However, as Armstrong (1995: 59) suggests, 'If "the way we do things around here" takes little notice of the ethics and values implicit in a humanistic approach to personnel management that focuses on human needs, then clearly this will diminish the importance attached to the personnel function, which could be left with routine administrative duties and staffed by Storey's (1992) so-called handmaidens.'

Notes

1. There remains controversy as to the significance of HRM as a new approach to the management of the employment relationship and as something inherently different from personnel management. This debate is however outside the scope of this paper and we use the terms HRM and personnel management interchangeably as a description of the work of those employed as specialists.

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