

Searching for the H in Human Resource Management

From Personnel Management to HRM, Strategic HRM, High Commitment Management, and the latest incarnation, the Management of Human Capital, the management of people has traversed a long and winding road in search of prescription for how to best configure and harvest people skills and abilities in the organisation. How do contemporary debates and practices within HRM reflect on the notion of the 'human' and human relations?

Mainstream functionalist HRM theory and practice optically indicates the centrality of the person: Witness Pfeffer's (1996) boldly titled *Competitive Advantage Through People*. However, despite language to the contrary, contemporary accounts (Applebaum et al, 2001; Pfeffer, 1996; Schuler and Jackson, 2005) reference a specifically 'thin' form of human relations. In the Strategic HRM literature, a prescriptive 'bundle' of strategies and policies – strategic recruitment, team organising, flexibility, strategic performance management, performance related pay, training and development, knowledge management, 'empowerment' initiatives – foreground the individual, though they rarely discuss people per se. It would seem that the unitarist frame of reference underpinning mainstream HRM is directed towards the desired outcomes of the organisation, apparently to the exclusion of the individual needs and values of the employee.

HRM practice is theorised as having diverged along two lines – Hard (The Michigan School) and Soft (the 'Harvard' Model). However it is true to say that the distinction between the two has weakened in veracity as contemporary HR practice typically deploys elements of both hard and soft models. In simple terms, Hard HRM prioritises rational profit maximising and views the employee as a 'headcount resource' (Legge, 2005b, p. 223), thereby lending itself to core-periphery models and the management of costs through routinising, layering and outsourcing. Simultaneously, occupational restructuring and automation through technology has simplified and eradicated the craft in and quality of many occupations, further increasing the tendency to job displacement. In small contrast, Soft HRM places a higher value on the human resource as a valued asset, and foregrounds their proactive capacity, motivation and commitment based on a unitarist view of reciprocal obligations and mutuality (Barney, 1991; Senge, 2006). Soft HR purports to treat the individual as a whole, with attention to stress, well-being, and family needs, but the underlying instrumental exchange orientation casts these initiatives simply as more effective methods of motivation and control. In a similar vein, a variety of 'people' oriented cultural management practices under the moniker of HCM (high commitment management), are used both to manage difficult motivational contexts, and to (hopefully) heighten employee commitment to and identification with the organisation so that employees might act flexibly and exercise their initiative towards organisational ends. Such 'feeling oriented' practices include for example structured career development plans, involvement initiatives such as quality forums and self managing teams, and/or the creation of 'fun' and attractive places to work. However though all these routes indicate a more plural approach, fieldwork amply demonstrates that the hard and soft aspects of

HRM are analytically inseparable as in combination they have a tendency to rupture with tensions due to the fundamental economic goal at their core.

Despite its intuitive appeal, the conjoining of people management with business strategy in Strategic HRM suffers from a number of problematic underpinning assumptions. Notably, it assumes a very simplistic, one dimensional view of human nature. It assumes that human resource strategy can be managed in a planned way, and shaped to fit the business strategy, counter to the insights that strategy is emergent and messy (Mintzberg and Walters, 1985), and neglects the numerous stakeholders to, and societal, historical, cultural, institutional and even financial influences on, strategic direction (Legge, 2005b, p. 227). Moreover, as Legge points out, it particularly downplays the psychological contracts between the organisation and employee, and where these might diverge. By viewing the employee as an individual resource unit to be optimally configured and managed, these practices conceptually divorce employees from their social context – that is, other relations, other shaping forces and other commitments (even within the workplace). In sum, contemporary HRM practice, and the theory that informs it, is based on a thin view of mutuality.

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