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HR Strategies

Key concepts and terms

- High commitment management
- High performance management
- HR strategy
- High involvement management
- Horizontal fit
- Vertical fit

Learning outcomes

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also understand:

- The purpose of HR strategy
- Specific HR strategy areas
- How HR strategy is formulated
- How the vertical integration of business and HR strategies is achieved
- How HR strategies can be set out
- General HR strategy areas
- The criteria for a successful HR strategy
- The fundamental questions on the development of HR strategy
- How horizontal fit (bundling) is achieved
- How HR strategies can be implemented

Introduction

As described in Chapter 2, strategic HRM is a mindset that leads to strategic actions and reactions, either in the form of overall or specific HR strategies or strategic behaviour on the part of HR professionals. This chapter focuses on HR strategies and answers the following questions: What are HR strategies? What are the main types of overall HR strategies? What are the main areas in which specific HR strategies are developed? What are the criteria for an effective HR strategy? How should HR strategies be developed? How should HR strategies be implemented?

What are HR strategies?

HR strategies set out what the organization intends to do about its human resource management policies and practices and how they should be integrated with the business strategy and each other. They are described by Dyer and Reeves (1995) as ‘internally consistent bundles of human resource practices’. Richardson and Thompson (1999) suggest that:

A strategy, whether it is an HR strategy or any other kind of management strategy must have two key elements: there must be strategic objectives (ie things the strategy is supposed to achieve), and there must be a plan of action (ie the means by which it is proposed that the objectives will be met).

The purpose of HR strategies is to articulate what an organization intends to do about its human resource management policies and practices now and in the longer term, bearing in mind the dictum of Fombrun *et al* (1984) that business and managers should perform well in the present to succeed in the future. HR strategies aim to meet both business and human needs in the organization.

HR strategies may set out intentions and provide a sense of purpose and direction, but they are not just long-term plans. As Gratton (2000) commented: ‘There is no great strategy, only great execution.’

Because all organizations are different, all HR strategies are different. There is no such thing as a standard strategy and research into HR strategy conducted by Armstrong and Long (1994) and Armstrong and Baron (2002) revealed many variations. Some strategies are simply very general declarations of intent. Others go into much more detail. But two basic types of HR strategies can be identified; these are: 1) general strategies such as high-performance working, and 2) specific strategies relating to the different aspects of human resource management such as learning and development and reward.

General HR strategies

General strategies describe the overall system or bundle of complementary HR practices that the organization proposes to adopt or puts into effect in order to improve organizational performance. The three main approaches are summarized below.

1. High-performance management

High-performance management or high-performance working aims to make an impact on the performance of the organization in such areas as productivity, quality, levels of customer service, growth and profits. High-performance management practices include rigorous recruitment and selection procedures, extensive and relevant training and management development activities, incentive pay systems and performance management processes.

These practices are often called ‘high-performance work systems’ (HPWS) which, as defined by Appelbaum *et al* (2000), comprise practices that can facilitate employee involvement, skill enhancement and motivation. Thompson and Heron (2005) refer to them as ‘high-performance work organization practices’ which, they say, ‘consist of work practices that invest in the skills and abilities of employees, design work in ways that enable employee collaboration in problem solving and provide incentives to motivate workers to use their discretionary effort’. This term is more frequently used than either high-commitment management or high-involvement management, although there is a degree of overlap between these approaches and an HPWS and the terms ‘high performance’ and ‘high commitment’ are sometimes used interchangeably.

2. High-commitment management

One of the defining characteristics of HRM is its emphasis on the importance of enhancing mutual commitment (Walton, 1985b). High-commitment management has been described by Wood (1996) as: ‘A form of management which is aimed at eliciting a commitment so that behaviour is primarily self-regulated rather than controlled by sanctions and pressures external to the individual, and relations within the organization are based on high levels of trust.’

The following definitions expand these statements.

High commitment management defined, Wood (1999)

High-commitment management is generally characterized as entailing, a) a particular orientation on the part of employers to their employees, based on an underlying conception of them as assets to be developed rather than as disposable factors of production, and b) the combined use of certain personnel practices, such as job redesign, job flexibility, problem-solving groups, team working and minimal status differences.

Approaches to achieving high commitment, Beer *et al* (1984) and Walton (1985b)

- The development of career ladders and emphasis on trainability and commitment as highly valued characteristics of employees at all levels in the organization.
- A high level of functional flexibility with the abandonment of potentially rigid job descriptions.
- The reduction of hierarchies and the ending of status differentials.
- A heavy reliance on team structure for disseminating information (team briefing), structuring work (team working) and problem solving (quality circles).

Wood and Albanese (1995) added to this list:

- job design as something management consciously does in order to provide jobs that have a considerable level of intrinsic satisfaction;
- a policy of no compulsory lay-offs or redundancies and permanent employment guarantees with the possible use of temporary workers to cushion fluctuations in the demand for labour;
- new forms of assessment and payment systems and, more specifically, merit pay and profit sharing;
- a high involvement of employees in the management of quality.

As defined above, there are many similarities between high-performance and high-commitment management. In fact, there is much common ground between the practices included in all of these approaches as Sung and Ashton (2005) comment.

Comparison of approaches, Sung and Ashton (2005)

In some cases high performance work practices are called ‘high commitment practices’ (Walton, 1985a) or ‘high involvement management’ (Lawler, 1986). More recently they have been termed ‘high performance organizations’ (Lawler *et al*, 1998) or ‘high-involvement’ work practices (Wood *et al*, 2001). Whilst these studies are referring to the same general phenomena the use of different ‘labels’ has undoubtedly added to the confusion.

However, a study of the literature shows that the most frequently used term is ‘high-performance management’, which is why in this book it is given more detailed consideration in Chapter 12.

3. High-involvement management

As defined by Benson *et al* (2006): ‘High-involvement work practices are a specific set of human resource practices that focus on employee decision making, power, access to information, training and incentives.’ The term ‘high involvement’ was used by Lawler (1986) to describe management systems based on commitment and involvement, as opposed to the old bureaucratic model based on control. The underlying hypothesis is that employees will increase their involvement with the company if they are given the opportunity to control and understand their work. He claimed that high-involvement practices worked well because they acted as a synergy and had a multiplicative effect. This approach involves treating employees as partners in the enterprise whose interests are respected and who have a voice on matters that concern them. It is concerned with communication and involvement. The aim is to create a climate in which a continuing dialogue between managers and the members of their teams takes place in order to define expectations and share information on the organization’s mission, values and objectives. This establishes mutual understanding of what is to be achieved and a framework for managing and developing people to ensure that it will be achieved.

The practices included in a high-involvement system have sometimes expanded beyond this original concept and included high-performance practices. For example, as noted above, high-performance practices usually include relevant training and incentive pay systems. Sung and Ashton (2005) include high-involvement practices as one of the three broad areas of a high-performance work system (the other two being human resource practices and reward and commitment practices).

Examples of general HR strategies

A local authority

As expressed by the chief executive of this borough council, their HR strategy is about:

having a very strong focus on the overall effectiveness of the organization, its direction and how it's performing; there is commitment to, and belief in, and respect for individuals, and I think that these are very important factors.

A public utility

The only HR strategy you really need is the tangible expression of values and the implementation of values... unless you get the human resource values right you can forget all the rest. (Managing Director)

A manufacturing company

The HR strategy is to stimulate changes on a broad front aimed ultimately at achieving competitive advantage through the efforts of our people. In an industry of fast followers, those who learn quickest will be the winners. (HR Director)

A retail stores group

The biggest challenge will be to maintain (our) competitive advantage and to do that we need to maintain and continue to attract very high calibre people. The key differentiator on anything any company does is fundamentally the people, and I think that people tend to forget that they are the most important asset. Money is easy to get hold of, good people are not. All we do in terms of training and manpower planning is directly linked to business improvement. (Managing Director)

Specific HR strategies

Specific HR strategies set out what the organization intends to do in areas such as:

- Human capital management – obtaining, analysing and reporting on data that inform the direction of value-adding people management, strategic, investment and operational decisions.
- Corporate social responsibility – a commitment to managing the business ethically in order to make a positive impact on society and the environment.

- Organization development – the planning and implementation of programmes designed to enhance the effectiveness with which an organization functions and responds to change.
- Engagement – the development and implementation of policies designed to increase the level of employees' engagement with their work and the organization.
- Knowledge management – creating, acquiring, capturing, sharing and using knowledge to enhance learning and performance.
- Resourcing – attracting and retaining high quality people.
- Talent management – how the organization ensures that it has the talented people it needs to achieve success.
- Learning and development – providing an environment in which employees are encouraged to learn and develop.
- Reward – defining what the organization wants to do in the longer term to develop and implement reward policies, practices and processes that will further the achievement of its business goals and meet the needs of its stakeholders.
- Employee relations – defining the intentions of the organization about what needs to be done and what needs to be changed in the ways in which the organization manages its relationships with employees and their trade unions.
- Employee well-being – meeting the needs of employees for a healthy, safe and supportive work environment.

Criteria for an effective HR strategy

An effective HR strategy is one that works in the sense that it achieves what it sets out to achieve. Its particular requirements are set out below.

Criteria for an effective HR strategy

- It will satisfy business needs.
- It is founded on detailed analysis and study, not just wishful thinking.
- It can be turned into actionable programmes that anticipate implementation requirements and problems.
- It is coherent and integrated, being composed of components that fit with and support each other.

- It takes account of the needs of line managers and employees generally as well as those of the organization and its other stakeholders. As Boxall and Purcell (2003) emphasize: 'HR planning should aim to meet the needs of the key stakeholder groups involved in people management in the firm.'

How should HR strategies be formulated?

SOURCE REVIEW

Propositions about the formulation of HR strategy, Boxall (1993)

- The strategy formation process is complex, and excessively rationalistic models that advocate formalistic linkages between strategic planning and HR planning are not particularly helpful to our understanding of it.
- Business strategy may be an important influence on HR strategy but it is only one of several factors.
- Implicit (if not explicit) in the mix of factors that influence the shape of HR strategies is a set of historical compromises and trade-offs from stakeholders.

Strategic options and choices

The process of formulating HR strategies involves generating strategic HRM options and then making appropriate strategic choices. It has been noted by Cappelli (1999) that: 'The choice of practices that an employer pursues is heavily contingent on a number of factors at the organizational level, including their own business and production strategies, support of HR policies, and cooperative labour relations.' The process of developing HR strategies involves the adoption of a contingent approach in generating strategic HRM options and then making appropriate strategic choices. There is seldom if ever one right way forward.

'Inside-out' and 'outside-in' approaches to formulating HR strategies

Research conducted by Wright *et al* (2004) identified two approaches that can be adopted by HR to strategy formulation: the inside-out approach and the outside-in approach. They made the following observations about the HR-strategy linkage:

At the extreme, the ‘inside-out’ approach begins with the status quo HR function (in terms of skills, processes, technologies, etc) and then attempts (with varying degrees of success) to identify linkages to the business (usually through focusing on ‘people issues’), making minor adjustments to HR activities along the way... On the other hand, a few firms have made a paradynamic shift to build their HR strategies from the starting point of the business. Within these ‘outside-in’ HR functions, the starting point is the business, including the customer, competitor and business issues they face. The HR strategy then derives directly from these challenges to create real solutions and add real value.

They suggested that ‘the most advanced linkage was the “integrative” linkage in which the senior HR executive was part of the top management team, and was able to sit at the table and contribute during development of the business strategy.’

In reality HR strategies are more likely to flow from business strategies, which will be dominated by product/market and financial considerations. But there is still room for HR to make a useful, even essential contribution at the stage when business strategies are conceived, for example, by focusing on resource issues. This contribution may be more significant if strategy formulation is an emergent or evolutionary process – HR strategic issues will then be dealt with as they arise during the course of formulating and implementing the corporate strategy.

Issues in developing HR strategies

Five fundamental questions that need to be asked in developing HR strategies have been posed by Becker and Huselid (1998):

1. What are the firm’s strategic objectives?
2. How are these translated into unit objectives?
3. What do unit managers consider are the ‘performance drivers’ of those objectives?
4. How do the skills, motivation and structure of the firm’s workforce influence these performance drivers?
5. How does the HR system influence the skills, motivation and structure of the workforce?

But many different routes may be followed when formulating HR strategies – there is no one right way. On the basis of their research in 30 well-known companies, Tyson and Witcher (1994) commented that: ‘The different approaches to strategy formation reflect different ways to manage change and different ways to bring the people part of the business into line with business goals.’

In developing HR strategies, process may be as important as content. Tyson and Witcher (1994) also noted from their research that: ‘The process of formulating HR strategy was often as

important as the content of the strategy ultimately agreed. It was argued that by working through strategic issues and highlighting points of tension, new ideas emerged and a consensus over goals was found.’

There are two key issues to be addressed in developing HR strategies: achieving vertical fit or integration and achieving horizontal fit or integration (bundling).

I. Achieving vertical fit – integrating business and HR strategies

Wright and Snell (1998) suggest that seeking fit requires knowledge of the business strategy, knowledge of the skills and behaviour necessary to implement the strategy, knowledge of the HRM practices necessary to elicit those skills and behaviours, and the ability quickly to develop and implement the desired system of HRM practices.

When considering how to integrate business and HR strategies it should be remembered that business and HR issues influence each other and in turn influence corporate and business unit strategies. It is also necessary to note that in establishing these links, account must be taken of the fact that strategies for change have also to be integrated with changes in the external and internal environments. Fit may exist at a point in time but circumstances will change and fit no longer exists. An excessive pursuit of ‘fit’ with the status quo will inhibit the flexibility of approach that is essential in turbulent conditions.

An illustration of how HR strategies could fit vertically with one or other of the competitive strategies listed by Porter (1985) is given in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Achieving vertical fit between HR and business strategies

HR strategy	Competitive strategy		
	Achieve competitive advantage through innovation	Achieve competitive advantage through quality	Achieve competitive advantage through cost-leadership
Resourcing	Recruit and retain high quality people with innovative skills and a good track record in innovation	Use sophisticated selection procedures to recruit people who are likely to deliver quality and high levels of customer service	Develop core/periphery employment structures; recruit people who are likely to add value; if unavoidable, plan and manage downsizing humanely

Table 3.1 *continued*

HR strategy	Competitive strategy		
	Achieve competitive advantage through innovation	Achieve competitive advantage through quality	Achieve competitive advantage through cost-leadership
Learning and development	Develop strategic capability and provide encouragement and facilities for enhancing innovative skills and enhancing the intellectual capital of the organization	Encourage the development of a learning organization, develop and implement knowledge management processes, support total quality and customer care initiatives with focused training	Provide training designed to improve productivity; inaugurate just-in-time training which is closely linked to immediate business needs and can generate measurable improvements in cost-effectiveness
Reward	Provide financial incentives and rewards and recognition for successful innovations	Link rewards to quality performance and the achievement of high standards of customer service	Review all reward practices to ensure that they provide value for money and do not lead to unnecessary expenditure

The factors that can make the achievement of good vertical fit difficult are:

- The business strategy may not be clearly defined – it could be in an emergent or evolutionary state, which would mean that there would be little or nothing with which to fit the HR strategy.
- Even if the business strategy is clear, it may be difficult to determine precisely how HR strategies could help in specific ways to support the achievement of particular business objectives – a good business case can only be made if it can be demonstrated that there will be a measurable link between the HR strategy and business performance in the area concerned.
- Even if there is a link, HR specialists do not always have the strategic capability to make the connection – they need to be able to see the big picture, understand the business drivers and appreciate how HR policies and practices can impact on them.

- Barriers exist between top management and HR – the former may not be receptive because they don't believe this is necessary and HR is not capable of persuading them that they should listen, or HR lacks access to top management on strategic issues, or HR lacks credibility with top management as a function that knows anything about the business or should even have anything to do with the business.

It is up to HR practitioners in their strategic role to overcome these problems by getting to know what the business is aiming to do and what drives it (this should be possible even when strategies are 'emergent'), understanding just how HR practices make an impact, and achieving access to strategic business decision making by demonstrating their credibility as an integral part of the management of the business.

2. Achieving horizontal fit (bundling)

Horizontal fit or integration is achieved when the various HR strategies cohere and are mutually supporting. This can be attained by the process of 'bundling', which is carried out by first identifying appropriate HR practices; second, assessing how the items in the bundle can be linked together so that they become mutually reinforcing; and finally drawing up programmes for the development of these practices, paying particular attention to the links between them.

The use of high-performance, high-involvement or high-commitment systems as described earlier in this chapter is an integrating process. The essence of these systems is that they each consist of a set of complementary work practices that are developed and maintained as a whole. Other integrating activities or processes are talent management, performance management and the use of competencies.

The factors that inhibit the achievement of horizontal fit are difficulties in:

- deciding which bundles are likely to be best;
- actually linking practices together – it is always easier to deal with one practice at a time;
- managing the interdependencies between different parts of a bundle;
- convincing top management and line managers that bundling will benefit the organization and them.

These can be overcome by dedicated HR professionals, but it is hard work.

Setting out the strategy

There is no standard model of how an HR strategy should be set out; it all depends on the circumstances of the organization. But the typical areas that may be covered in a written strategy are set out below.

Typical areas that may be covered in a written HR strategy

- Basic considerations – business needs in terms of the key elements of the business strategy; environmental factors and analysis (SWOT/PESTLE) and cultural factors – possible helps or hindrances to implementation.
- Content – details of the proposed HR strategy.
- Rationale – the business case for the strategy against the background of business needs and environmental/cultural factors.
- Implementation plan – an action programme, definitions of responsibilities and resource requirements and arrangements for communication, consultation, involvement and training.
- Costs and benefits analysis – an assessment of the resource implications of the plan (costs, people and facilities) and the benefits that will accrue, for the organization as a whole, for line managers and for individual employees. (So far as possible these benefits should be quantified in terms of added value or return on investment.)

Implementing HR strategies

All too often, 80 per cent of the time spent on strategic management is devoted to designing strategies and only 20 per cent is spent on planning their implementation. It should be the other way round. It is necessary to plan with implementation in mind.

Because strategies tend to be expressed as abstractions, they must be translated into programmes with clearly stated objectives and deliverables. It is necessary to avoid saying, in effect: 'We need to get from here to there but we don't care how.' Getting strategies into action is not easy. Too often, strategists act like Mr Pecksmith who was compared by Dickens (1843) to 'a direction-post which is always telling the way to a place and never goes there'.

The term 'strategic HRM' has been devalued in some quarters; sometimes to mean no more than a few generalized ideas about HR policies, at other times to describe a short-term plan, for example, to increase the retention rate of graduates. It must be emphasized that HR strategies are not just programmes, policies, or plans concerning HR issues that the HR department happens to feel are important. Piecemeal initiatives do not constitute strategy.

The problem with strategic HRM as noted by Gratton *et al* (1999) is that too often there is a gap between what the strategy states will be achieved and what actually happens to it. The

factors they identified as contributing to creating this say/do gap between the strategy as designed and the strategy as implemented include:

- the tendency of employees in diverse organizations only to accept initiatives they perceive to be relevant to their own areas;
- the tendency of long-serving employees to cling to the status quo;
- complex or ambiguous initiatives may not be understood by employees or will be perceived differently by them, especially in large, diverse organizations;
- it is more difficult to gain acceptance of non-routine initiatives;
- employees will be hostile to initiatives if they are believed to be in conflict with the organization's identity, eg downsizing in a culture of 'job-for-life';
- the initiative is seen as a threat;
- inconsistencies between corporate strategies and values;
- the extent to which senior management is trusted;
- the perceived fairness of the initiative;
- the extent to which existing processes could help to embed the initiative;
- a bureaucratic culture, which leads to inertia.

Barriers to the implementation of HR strategies

Each of the factors listed by Gratton *et al* (1999) can create barriers to the successful implementation of HR strategies. Other major barriers include failure to understand the strategic needs of the business, inadequate assessment of the environmental and cultural factors that affect the content of the strategies, and the development of ill-conceived and irrelevant initiatives, possibly because they are current fads or because there has been an ill-digested analysis of best practice that does not fit the organization's requirements. These problems are compounded when insufficient attention is paid to practical implementation problems, the important role of line managers in implementing strategies, and the need to have established supporting processes for the initiative (eg, performance management to support performance pay).

Approaches to implementation

An implementation programme that overcomes these barriers needs to be based on:

- a rigorous preliminary analysis of the strategic needs of the business and how the strategy will help to meet them;

- a communication programme that spells out what the strategy is, what it is expected to achieve and how it is to be introduced;
- the involvement of those who will be concerned with the strategy, eg line managers, in identifying implementation problems and how they should be dealt with;
- the preparation of action plans that indicate who does what and when;
- project managing the implementation in a way that ensures that the action plans are achieved.

HR strategies – key learning points

Purpose of HR strategy

To articulate what an organization intends to do about its human resource management policies and practices now and in the longer term.

General HR strategy areas

High-performance management, high-commitment management and high-involvement management

Specific HR strategy areas

Human capital management, corporate social responsibility, organization development, engagement, knowledge management, employee resourcing, talent management, learning and development, reward, employee relations, and employee well-being.

Criteria for an effective HR strategy

- satisfies business needs;
- founded on detailed analysis and study;
- can be turned into actionable programmes;

- is coherent and integrated;
- takes account of the needs of line managers and employees generally as well as those of the organization and its other stakeholders.

Fundamental questions on the development of HR strategy

- What are the firm's strategic objectives and how are these translated into unit objectives?
- What are the 'performance drivers' of those objectives and how do the skills, motivation and structure of the firm's workforce influence these performance drivers?
- How does the HR system influence the skills, motivation and structure of the workforce?

How the vertical integration of business and HR strategies is achieved

Understand what the business is aiming to do and what drives it, and how HR practices make an impact on these drivers.

HR strategies – key learning points (continued)

How horizontal fit (bundling) is achieved

Identify appropriate HR practices, assess how these items can be bundled together so that they become mutually reinforcing, and draw up programmes for the development of these practices, paying particular attention to the links between them.

How HR strategies can be set out

The format will vary but may typically be set out under the following headings:

- Basic considerations.
- Content.
- Rationale.
- Implementation plan.

- Costs and benefits analysis.

How HR strategies can be implemented

- Analyse business needs and how the HR strategy will help to meet them.
- Communicate full information on the strategy and what it is expected to achieve.
- Involve those concerned in identifying implementation problems and how they should be dealt with.
- Prepare action plans.
- Plan and execute a programme of project management that ensures that the action plans are achieved.

Questions

1. Critically evaluate the following statement by Lester Digman (1990): 'Since most strategic decisions are event-driven rather than programmed they are unplanned. Accordingly they should be seen in terms of preferences, choices and matches rather than exercises in applied logic.'
2. You have been asked to write an article for your CIPD branch newsletter on 'What are the main characteristics of an HR strategy?' You have also been asked to include examples from your own organization or a published article or book. Draft an outline of the article.
3. A colleague says to you: 'It's all very well talking about integrated HR strategy but what does it mean for us?' Reply.

Questions (continued)

4. Prepare a presentation for your fellow students on ‘What makes a good HR strategy?’ Illustrate with examples.
5. You have received an e-mail from your boss, the HR director, with the message: ‘We hear a lot about integrating the HR strategy with the business strategy but what does this mean? What are the problems in doing it? How do we overcome these problems?’ Reply.
6. Thompson and Harley (2007) wrote that the move has not been to abandon control in favour of commitment (cf Walton, 1985a) but towards the introduction of softer controls, ie ‘towards practices intended to generate commitment through a combination of culture-led changes and delegation of authority’. Soft controls are presented as a package of high-commitment practices. To what extent is this picture of high-commitment practices as manipulative true?

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