

# The Role of the HR Practitioner

## Key concepts and terms

- Business partner
- Continuous professional development
- Employee advocate
- Impression management
- Process consulting
- The HR thinking performer role
- Conformist innovators
- Deviant innovators
- Evidence-based management
- Organizational capability
- Strategic partner
- Value-added approach

## Learning outcomes

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

- The basic role of HR practitioners
- The strategic role
- The change agent role
- The service provision role
- Models of HR roles
- Gaining support from line managers
- Professionalism
- HR effectiveness
- Continuous professional development
- The business partner role
- The strategic activities of HR practitioners
- The internal consultancy role
- The guardian of values role
- Gaining buy-in from top management
- Ethical considerations
- Ambiguities and conflict in the role
- HR competencies

## Introduction

This chapter is concerned with what HR professionals do and how they do it, bearing in mind the comment of Boxall and Purcell (2003) that ‘HRM does not belong to HR specialists’. HRM also belongs to the line managers who get results through people.

This chapter starts with an analysis of the basic role of HR professionals (and then deals with the business partner role, the strategic role, the change agent role, the internal consultant role and the service delivery role). It continues with descriptions of the various models of the HR role. A number of issues that affect the role of HR people are then explored; these comprise gaining support and commitment, role ambiguity, role conflict, ethics, and professionalism. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the qualities and competencies required by HR practitioners.

## The basic role

The roles of HR practitioners vary widely according to the extent to which they are generalist (eg, HR director, HR manager, business partner), or specialist (eg, head of learning and development, head of talent management, head of reward), the level at which they work (strategic, executive or administrative), the needs of the organization, the context within which they work and their own capabilities.

Roles can be proactive, reactive or a mixture of both. At a strategic level, HR people take on a proactive role. Research conducted by Hoque and Noon (2001) established that: ‘The growing number of specialists using the HR title are well qualified, are more likely to be involved in strategic decision-making processes and are most likely to be found in workplaces within which sophisticated methods and techniques have been adopted.’ As such, they act as business partners, develop integrated HR strategies, intervene, innovate, operate as internal consultants and volunteer guidance on matters concerning upholding core values, ethical principles and the achievement of consistency. They focus on business issues and working with line managers to deliver performance targets. They contribute to improving organizational capability – the capacity of the organization to perform effectively and thus reach its goals. They act as change agents and internal consultants, as discussed later in this chapter.

In some situations they play a mainly reactive role. They spend much of their time doing what they are told or asked to do, responding to requests for services or advice. They provide the administrative systems required by management. This is what Storey (1992a) refers to as the non-interventionary role, in which HR people merely provide a service to meet the demands of management and front line managers. But many HR practitioners are involved in service delivery and the importance of this aspect of their work should not be underestimated. Service delivery includes transactional activities such as recruitment, training and advisory services.

Finally, HR practitioners are, or should be, concerned with upholding the ethical values of their firm. These aspects of their role are also examined below.

### **The four roles of HR professionals, Ulrich (1998)**

1. Managing strategic human resources.
2. Managing employee contribution.
3. Managing transformation and change.
4. Managing HR infrastructures to support line managers.

The extent to which HR specialists were carrying out these roles was researched by Guest and King (2004) who found that there was little emphasis on the first three. Instead, the focus appeared to be placed on managing infrastructures.

## **The business partner role**

The concept of HR practitioners as business partners has become very popular. In essence, the concept is that, as business partners, HR specialists share responsibility with their line management colleagues for the success of the enterprise and get involved with them in implementing business strategy and running the business. They are often 'embedded' in business units or departments.

This concept was first mooted in 1985 by Shaun Tyson. He used the term 'business manager' rather than 'business partner' but it is much the same. He stated that personnel specialists carrying out this role integrate their activities closely with management and ensure that they serve a long-term strategic purpose. They have the capacity to identify business opportunities, to see the broad picture and to understand how their role can help to achieve the company's business objectives. They anticipate needs, act flexibly and are proactive. This is a clear case of a prophet not being honoured in their own country. In 1998, 13 years later, Dave Ulrich seized the HR community's imagination with his similar concept of the HR executive as a 'strategic partner'.

In describing his strategic partner model, Ulrich maintained that as champions of competitiveness in creating value, HR executives can deliver excellence by becoming partners with

senior and line managers in strategy execution, helping to improve planning from the conference room to the marketplace and impelling and guiding serious discussion of how the company should be organized to carry out its strategy. He suggested that HR should join forces with operating managers in systematically assessing the importance of any new initiatives they propose and obtaining answers to the following questions: Which ones are really aligned with strategy implementation? Which ones should receive immediate attention and which can wait? Which ones, in short, are truly linked to business results?

As business partners HR practitioners work closely with their line management colleagues. They are aware of business strategies and the opportunities and threats facing the organization. They are capable of analysing organizational strengths and weaknesses and diagnosing the issues facing the enterprise and their human resource implications. They know about the critical success factors that will create competitive advantage and they adopt a 'value added' approach when making a convincing business case for innovations.

The term 'value added' looms large in the concept of the HR business partner. In accounting language, where the phrase originated, added value is defined as the value added to the cost of raw materials and bought-in parts by the process of production and distribution. In HR speak, a value added approach means creating value through HR initiatives that make a significant contribution to organizational success.

Strictly speaking, added value is measured by the extent to which the value of that contribution exceeds its cost or generates a return on investment. But the term is often used more generally to signify the business-oriented approach HR professionals are expected to adopt and how it contributes to the creation of value by the firm. Adding value is about improving performance and results – getting more out of an activity than was put into it. Francis and Keegan (2006) report the following comment from a recruitment consultant, which illustrates how the term has become popular: 'Most HR professionals will now have "value added" stamped on their foreheads, because they are always being asked to think in terms of the business objectives and how what they do supports the business objectives and the business plan.'

However, it can be argued that too much has been made of the business partner model. Perhaps it is preferable to emphasize that the role of HR professionals is to be part of the business rather than merely being partners. Tim Miller, Group HR Director of Standard Chartered Bank, as reported by Smethurst (2005), dislikes the term:

*'Give me a break!' he says. 'It's so demeaning. How many people in marketing or finance have to say they are a partner in the business? Why do we have to think that we're not an intimate part of the business, just like sales, manufacturing and engineering? I detest and loathe the term and I won't use it.'*

Another leading Group HR Director, Alex Wilson of BT as reported by Pickard (2005), is equally hostile. He says:

*The term worries me to death. HR has to be an integral and fundamental part of developing the strategy of the business. I don't even like the term 'close to the business' because, like 'business partner' it implies we are working alongside our line management colleagues but on a separate track, rather than people management being an integral part of the business.*

There is also the danger of over-emphasizing the glamorous albeit important role of business or strategic partner at the expense of the service delivery aspect of the HR specialist's role. As an HR specialist commented to Caldwell (2004): 'My credibility depends on running an extremely efficient and cost-effective administrative machine... If I don't get that right, and consistently, then you can forget about any big ideas.' Another person interviewed during Caldwell's research referred to personnel people as 'reactive pragmatists', a view which in many organizations is in accord with reality. And Syrett (2006) commented that: 'Whatever strategic aspirations senior HR practitioners have, they will amount to nothing if the function they represent cannot deliver the essential transactional services their internal line clients require.'

The problem of the over-emphasis on the business partner role has been influenced by the erroneous belief that Ulrich was simply focusing on HR executives as business partners. This has had the unfortunate effect of implying that it was their only worthwhile function. However, Ulrich cannot be blamed for this. In 1998 he gave equal emphasis to the need for HR people to be administrative experts, employee champions and change agents, and this was confirmed in a revised model (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005a).

## The strategic role of HR specialists

There may be some reservations about the focus on the business partner role but there is a universal chorus of approval for the notion that HR professionals need to be strategic, although not everyone is clear about what being strategic means. This is therefore defined below.

The strategic role of HR specialists varies according to whether they are operating at strategic levels (as HR directors or heads of the HR function, heads of centres of expertise or key HR functions, and strategic business partners) or at a transactional level (as an HR officer, adviser or assistant delivering basic HR services such as recruitment or training, or working in an HR shared service centre).

### *The strategic roles of HR specialists*

- To formulate and implement in conjunction with their management colleagues forward-looking HR strategies that are aligned to business objectives and integrated with one another.

- To contribute to the development of business strategies. In doing so they adopt an ‘outside-in’ approach as described by Wright *et al* (2004) in which the starting point is the business, including the customer, competitor and business issues it faces. The HR strategy then derives directly from these challenges to create real solutions and add real value.
- They work alongside their line management colleagues to provide on an every-day basis continuous support to the implementation of the business or operational strategy of the organization, function or unit.

To carry out these roles, they need to:

- understand the strategic goals of the organization or unit and appreciate the business imperatives and performance drivers relative to these goals;
- comprehend how sustainable competitive advantage can be obtained through the human capital of the organization or unit and know how HR practices can contribute to the achievement of strategic goals;
- contribute to the development for the business of a clear vision and a set of integrated values;
- ensure that senior management understands the HR implications of its business strategy;
- be aware of the broader context (the competitive environment and the business, economic, social and legal factors that affect it) in which the organization operates;
- understand the kinds of employee behaviour required successfully to execute the business strategy;
- think in terms of the bigger and longer-term picture of where HR should go and how it should get there;
- be capable of making a powerful business case for any proposals on the development of HR strategies;
- act as a change agent in developing the organization and its culture and as an internal consultant in advising on what needs to be done and how to do it (these two aspects of the strategic role are considered at the end of this section);
- understand how the ethical dimensions of HR policy and practice fit into the present and future picture;
- believe in and practice evidence-based management (recommendations on strategy and its implementation are always backed up by hard data).

## The strategic contribution of HR advisers or assistants

The role of HR advisers or assistants is primarily that of delivering effective HR services within their function or as a member of an HR service centre. While they will not be responsible for the formulation of HR strategies they may contribute to them within their own speciality. They will need to understand the business goals of the departments or managers for whom they provide services in order to ensure that these services support the achievement of those goals.

### Strategic activities

Strategic activities consist of formulating HR strategies as described in Chapter 3 and providing continuous support to line managers in implementing their business or operational strategies. They involve being proactive in identifying issues that can be addressed through major or relatively minor HR initiatives. Examples of the sort of issues that may need to be dealt with are poor performance or productivity, low quality, inadequate levels of service to customers, recruitment and selection failures, skills shortages, poor retention rates (high levels of labour turnover), high levels of absenteeism, high levels of accidents, occupational health problems and too many disputes or grievances. In all these and many other problem areas a strategic approach involves:

- understanding the business or operational strategy and appreciating the performance drivers required to implement it;
- analysing how the issue is affecting those drivers;
- diagnosing the causes of any problems;
- identifying possible actions and reviewing them in conjunction with line management and employees to select the preferred option;
- preparing a proposal to deal with the issue, including a business case setting out the benefits against the costs;
- developing and implementing the new or revised policy or practice taking into account the following guidelines.

#### *Guidelines for HR innovations*

- Be clear on what has to be achieved and why.
- Ensure that what you do fits the strategy, culture and circumstances of the organization.

- Don't follow fashion – do your own thing as long as it is relevant and fits the organization's needs.
- Keep it simple – over-complexity is a common reason for failure.
- Don't rush – it will take longer than you think.
- Don't try to do too much at once – an incremental approach is generally best.
- Assess resource requirements and costs.
- Pay close attention to project planning and management.
- Remember that the success of the innovation rests as much on the effectiveness of the process of implementation (line manager buy-in and skills are crucial) as it does on the quality of the concept, if not more so.
- Pay close attention to change management approaches – communicate, involve and train.

## The change agent role

The implementation of strategy means that HR specialists have to act as change agents, facilitating change by providing advice and support on its introduction and management. Caldwell (2001) categorizes HR change agents in four dimensions.

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#### HR specialists as change agents – the four dimensions, Caldwell (2001)

1. Transformational change – a major change that has a dramatic effect on HR policy and practice across the whole organization.
2. Incremental change – gradual adjustments of HR policy and practices that affect single activities or multiple functions.
3. HR vision – a set of values and beliefs that affirm the legitimacy of the HR function as a strategic business partner.
4. HR expertise – the knowledge and skills that define the unique contribution the HR professional can make to effective people management.

Change management processes and the role of HR in managing change and transformation are given more detailed consideration in Chapter 25.

## The internal consultancy role

As internal consultants, HR practitioners function like external management consultants, working alongside their colleagues – their clients – in analysing problems, diagnosing issues and proposing solutions. They will be involved in the development of HR processes or systems and in ‘process consulting’. The latter deals with process areas such as organization, team building and objective setting.

## The service delivery role

The basic role of HR specialists is to deliver services to internal customers. These include management, line managers, team leaders and employees. The services may be general, covering all aspects of HRM or services may only be provided in one or two areas by specialists. The focus may be on the requirements of management (eg, resourcing), or it may extend to all employees (eg, health and safety).

The aims are to provide effective services that meet the needs of the business, its management and its employees and to administer them efficiently.

## Guidance and advice

The services delivered by HR people comprise both the transactional services such as recruitment and training, and the provision of guidance and advice to management. At the highest level, this will include recommendations on HR strategies that have been evidence-based, ie developed by processes of analysis of the facts followed by diagnosis to address strategic issues arising from business needs and human, organizational or environmental factors. They will also provide advice on issues concerning culture change and approaches to the improvement of process capability – the ability of the organization to get things done through people. The aim will be to achieve human resource process advantage (Boxall, 1996, 1999), which is the competitive advantage achieved by organizations when they have better HR processes and practices than their rivals.

Guidance will be given to managers to ensure that consistent decisions are made on such matters as performance ratings, pay increases and disciplinary actions. At all levels, guidance may be provided on HR policies and procedures and the implications of employment legislation. In the latter area, HR practitioners are concerned with compliance – ensuring that legal requirements are met.

A balance has to be struck between the amount of freedom that can be devolved to line managers and the need to be consistent and meet social and legal obligations.

## The guardian of values role

HR practitioners may act as the guardians of the organization's values and ethical standards concerning people. They point out when behaviour conflicts with those values or where proposed actions will be inconsistent with them. In a sense, their roles require them to act as the 'conscience' of management – a necessary role but not an easy one to play. Ulrich (1998) called this the 'employee champion' role.

## Models of HR roles

A number of models classifying the types of roles played by HR specialists have been produced, as summarized below. These simplify the complex roles that HR professionals often have to play which, in different contexts or times, may change considerably or may mean adopting varied approaches to meet altering circumstances. They are therefore not universal but they do provide some insight into the different ways in which HR specialists operate.

### Karen Legge (1978)

Two types of HR managers are described in this model. 1) Conformist innovators, who go along with their organization's ends and adjust their means to achieve them. Their expertise is used as a source of professional power to improve the position of their departments. 2) Deviant innovators, who attempt to change this means/ends relationship by gaining acceptance for a different set of criteria for the evaluation of organizational success and their contribution to it.

### The Tyson and Fell (1986) model

This is the classic model that describes three types of practitioner:

1. The clerk of works – all authority for action is vested in line managers. HR policies are formed or created after the actions that created the need. Policies are not integral to the business and are short term and ad hoc. Authority is vested in line managers and HR activities are largely routine – employment and day-to-day administration.
2. The contracts manager – policies are well established, often implicit, with a heavy industrial relations emphasis, possibly derived from an employer's association. The HR department will use fairly sophisticated systems, especially in the field of employee relations. The HR manager is likely to be a professional or very experienced in industrial relations. He or she will not be on the board and, although having some authority to 'police' the implementation of policies, acts mainly in an interpretative, not a creative or innovative, role.

3. The architect – explicit HR policies exist as part of the corporate strategy. Human resource planning and development are important concepts and a long-term view is taken. Systems tend to be sophisticated. The head of the HR function is probably on the board and his or her power is derived from professionalism and perceived contribution to the business.

Although relevant at the time this model does not express the complexities of the HR role as later ones do, and the emphasis on industrial relations in the contracts manager role no longer accords with the realities of industrial relations in the 21st century.

### Kathleen Monks (1992)

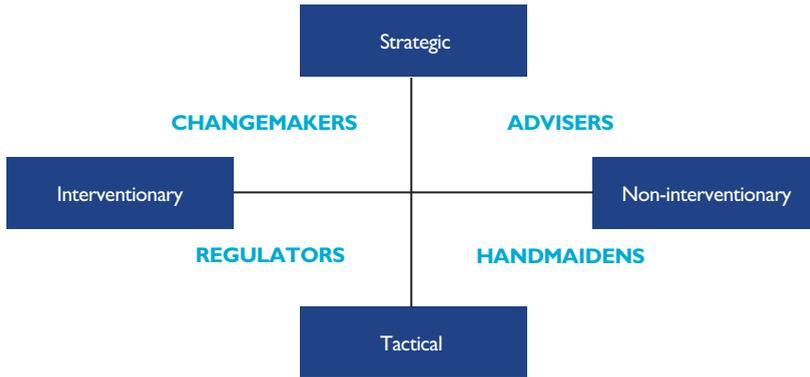
The four types of practitioner identified by Kathleen Monks following research in 97 organizations in Ireland extended those developed by Tyson and Fell:

1. Traditional/administrative – in this model the personnel practitioners have mainly a support role with the focus on administrative matters, record keeping and adherence to rules and regulations.
2. Traditional/industrial relations – personnel practitioners concentrate on industrial relations, giving their other functions lower priority.
3. Innovative/professional – personnel specialists are professional and expert. They aim to remove traditional practices and replace them with improved human resource planning, recruitment, human resource development and reward policies and practices.
4. Innovative/sophisticated – personnel specialists are on the board, take part in integrating HR and business strategies, and are recognized as making an important contribution to organizational success. They develop and deliver sophisticated services in each of the main HR areas.

### John Storey (1992b)

Storey's model suggests a two-dimensional map: interventionary/non-interventionary and strategic/tactical, as illustrated in Figure 6.1. From this he identifies four roles:

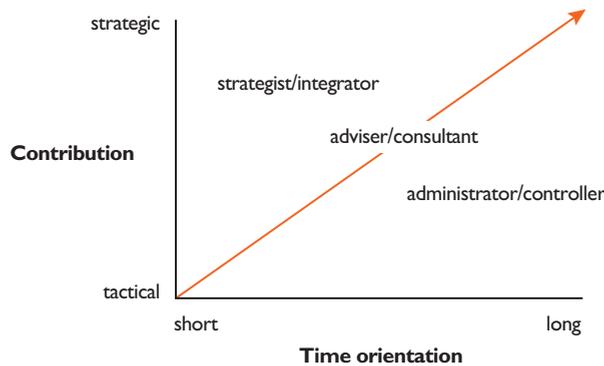
1. Change makers (interventionary/strategic), which is close to the HRM model.
2. Advisers (non-interventionary/strategic) who act as internal consultants, leaving much of HR practice to line managers
3. Regulators (interventionary/tactical) who are 'managers of discontent' concerned with formulating and monitoring employment rules.
4. Handmaidens (non-interventionary/tactical) who merely provide a service to meet the demands of line managers.



**Figure 6.1** The John Storey model of personnel management  
 (Source: Storey, 1992b)

### Peter Reilly (2000)

The different roles that practitioners can play as described by Reilly are illustrated in Figure 6.2. He suggests that it is the ‘strategist/integrator’ that is most likely to make the longest-term strategic contribution. The ‘administrator/controller’ is likely to make a largely tactical short-term contribution, while the ‘adviser/consultant’ falls between the two.



**Figure 6.2** The Peter Reilly model of HR  
 (Source: Reilly, 2000)

### Dave Ulrich and Wayne Brockbank (2005a and 2005b)

In 1998 Dave Ulrich produced his model in which he suggested that as champions of competitiveness in creating and delivering value, HR professionals carry out the roles of strategic partners, administrative experts, employee champions and change agents. The response to this

formulation concentrated on the business partner role. Ulrich in conjunction with Wayne Brockbank reformulated the 1998 model in 2005, listing the following roles:

- Employee advocate – focuses on the needs of today’s employees through listening, understanding and empathizing.
- Human capital developer – in the role of managing and developing human capital (individuals and teams), focuses on preparing employees to be successful in the future.
- Functional expert – concerned with the HR practices that are central to HR value, acting with insight on the basis of the body of knowledge they possess. Some are delivered through administrative efficiency (such as technology or process design), and others through policies, menus and interventions. Necessary to distinguish between the foundation HR practices – recruitment, learning and development, rewards, etc – and the emerging HR practices such as communication, work process and organization design, and executive leadership development.
- Strategic partner – consists of multiple dimensions: business expert, change agent, strategic HR planner, knowledge manager and consultant, combining them to align HR systems to help accomplish the organization’s vision and mission, helping managers to get things done, and disseminating learning across the organization.
- Leader – leading the HR function, collaborating with other functions and providing leadership to them, setting and enhancing the standards for strategic thinking and ensuring corporate governance.

Ulrich and Brockbank (2005b) explained that the revised formulation was in response to the changes in HR roles they have observed recently. They commented on the importance of the employee advocate role, noting that HR professionals spend on average about 19 per cent of their time on employee relations issues. They explained that as a profession, HR possesses a body of knowledge that allows HR people to act with insight. Functional expertise enables them to create menus of choice for their business and thus identify options that are consistent with business needs rather than merely those they are able to provide. The additional heading of ‘human capital developer’ was introduced because of the increased emphasis on viewing people as critical assets and to recognize the significance of HR’s role in developing the workforce. The concept of strategic partner remains broadly the same as before but the additional heading of ‘HR leader’ was introduced to highlight the importance of leadership by HR specialists of their own function – ‘before they can develop other leaders, HR professionals must exhibit the leadership skills they expect in others’.

## Gaining support and commitment

HR practitioners mainly get results by persuasion based on credibility and expertise. Management and employees can create blockages and barriers and their support and commitment needs to be gained, which is not always easy. As Guest and Hoque (1994) note: ‘By exerting influence, HR managers help to shape the framework of HR policy and practice.’ Line managers may make the day-to-day decisions, therefore influencing skills are necessary for HR specialists.

But there is a constant danger of HR professionals being so overcome by the beauty and truth of their bright ideas that they expect everyone else – management and employees alike – to fall for them immediately. Sometimes, as pointed out by Marchington (1995), HR people may go in for ‘impression management’ – aiming to make an impact on senior managers and colleagues through publicizing high profile innovations. HR specialists who aim to draw attention to themselves simply by promoting the latest flavour of the month, irrespective of its relevance or practicality, are falling into the trap that Peter Drucker, anticipating Marchington, described as follows.

### SOURCE REVIEW

#### What personnel administrators worry about, Drucker (1995)

The constant worry of all personnel administrators is their inability to prove that they are making a contribution to the enterprise. Their preoccupation is with the search for a ‘gimmick’ which will impress their management colleagues.

## Blockages and barriers within management

Managers will block or erect barriers to what the HR function believes to be progress if they are not persuaded that it will benefit both the organization and themselves at an acceptable cost (money and their time and trouble).

## Blockages and barriers from employees

Employees will block or set up barriers to 'progress' or innovations if they feel they conflict with their own interests. They are likely, with reason, to be cynical about protestations that what is good for the organization will always be good for them.

## Getting buy-in from top management

Buy-in from top management is achievable by processes of marketing the HR function and persuasion. Boards and senior managers, like anyone else, are more likely to be persuaded to take a course of action if their support is gained in the ways described below.

### *Gaining support from top management*

- Demonstrate that the proposal will meet both the needs of the organization and their own personal needs.
- Base the proposal on a compelling and realistic business case that spells out the benefits and the costs and, as far as possible, is justified either in added value terms (ie the income generated by the proposal will significantly exceed the cost of implementing it), and/or on the basis of a return on investment (ie the cost of the investment, say in training, is justified by the financial returns in such terms as increased productivity).
- Prove that the innovation has already worked well within the organization (perhaps as a pilot scheme) or represents 'good practice' (it has worked well elsewhere), which is likely to be transferable to the organization.
- Show that the proposal will increase the business's competitive edge, for example enlarging the skill base or multi-skilling to ensure that it can achieve competitive advantage through innovation and/or reducing time-to-market.
- Specify how the proposal can be implemented without too much trouble, for example not taking up a lot of managers' time, or not meeting with strong opposition from line managers, employees or trade unions (it is as well to check the likely reaction before launching a proposal).
- Indicate that the innovation will add to the reputation of the company by showing that it is a 'world class' organization, ie what it does is as good as, if not better than, the world leaders in the sector in which the business operates (a promise that publicity will be achieved through articles in professional journals, press releases and conference presentations will help).

- Emphasize that the innovation will enhance the ‘employer brand’ of the company by making it a ‘best place to work’.
- Ensure that the proposal is brief, to the point and well argued – it should take no more than five minutes to present orally and should be summarized in writing on the proverbial one side of one sheet of paper (supplementary details can be included in appendices).

## Gaining the support and commitment of line management

This can sometimes be more difficult than gaining the support of top management. Line managers can be cynical or realistic about innovation – they have seen it all before and/or they believe it won’t work (sometimes with good reason). Innovations pushed down from the top can easily fail.

Gaining line management support requires providing an answer to the question, ‘What’s in it for me?’ Managers need to be convinced that the innovation will help them to achieve better results without imposing unacceptable additional burdens on them. New or revised employment practices that take up precious time and involve paperwork will be treated with particular suspicion. Many line managers, often from bitter experience, resent the bureaucracy that can surround and, indeed, engulf the over-engineered systems favoured by some HR people, such as traditional performance appraisal schemes.

Obtaining support requires market research and networking – getting around to talk to managers about their needs and testing new ideas to obtain reactions. The aim is to build up a body of information that will indicate approaches that are likely to be most acceptable, and therefore will most probably work, or at least to suggest areas where particular efforts will need to be made to persuade and educate line management. It is also useful to form ‘strategic alliances’ with influential managers who are enthusiastic about the innovation and will not only lend it vocal support but will also cooperate in pilot-testing it. On the principle that ‘nothing succeeds like success’, support for new HR practices can often be achieved by demonstrating that it has worked well elsewhere in the organization.

Gaining commitment will be easier if managers know that they have been consulted and that their opinions have been listened to and acted upon. It is even better to involve them as members of project teams or task forces in developing the new process or system. This is the way to achieve ownership and therefore commitment.

## Gaining the support and commitment of employees

When it comes to new employment practices, employees often react in the same way as managers. They will tend to resist change, wanting to know ‘What’s in it for us?’ They also want to know the hidden agenda – ‘Why does the company really want to introduce a performance management process? Will it simply be used as a means of gaining evidence for disciplinary proceedings? Or is it even going to provide the information required to select people for redundancy?’ As far as possible this kind of question needs to be answered in advance.

Employee commitment is also more likely if they are kept well-informed of what is proposed, why it has been proposed and how it will affect them. It will be further enhanced if they participate in the development of the new employment practice and if they know that their contributions have been welcomed and acted upon.

## Ethical considerations

HR specialists are concerned with ethical standards in two ways: their conduct and values as professionals, and the ethical standards of their firms.

### Professional conduct

The CIPD Code of Professional Conduct states that:

*In the public interest and in the pursuit of its objects, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development is committed to the highest possible standards of professional conduct and competency. To this end members:*

- *are required to exercise integrity, honesty, diligence and appropriate behaviour in all their business, professional and related personal activities;*
- *must act within the law and must not encourage, assist or act in collusion with employees, employers or others who may be engaged in unlawful conduct.*

### Professional ethical standards

As explained by Farnham (2008), professional ethics are the moral principles and values governing professional behaviour. The ethical principles of the HR profession imply that HR specialists need to take account of the dignity and rights of employees when taking employment decisions. These include having clear, fair terms and conditions of employment, healthy and safe working conditions, fair remuneration, promoting equal opportunities and employment diversity, encouraging employees to develop their skills, and not discriminating or harassing

employees. The ethical frameworks for judging HR practices are basic rights, organizational justice, respecting individuals, and community of purpose. There are many instances where these principles conflict with organizational objectives. These include HR issues such as flexibility, work intensification, use of some sophisticated HR techniques such as performance-related pay and socialization programmes, and activities promoting closer managerial monitoring of employee performance.

HR professionals are part of management. But there will be occasions when in their professional capacity HR specialists should speak out against plans or actions that are not in accord with management's ethical standards or values. And they should do their best to promote ethical standards and influence changes in core values where they feel they are necessary. They must not tolerate injustice or inequality of opportunity. If redundancies are inevitable as a result of business-led 'slimming down' or 'taking costs out of the business' processes, they should ensure that the organization takes whatever steps it can to mitigate detrimental effects by, for example, relying primarily on natural wastage and voluntary redundancy or, if people have to go involuntarily, doing whatever they can to help them find other jobs (outplacement).

HR specialists may often find themselves in a hard-nosed, entrepreneurial environment. But this does not mean that they can remain unconcerned about developing and helping to uphold the core values of the organization in line with their own values on the ethical principles that govern how people should be managed. These may not always be reconcilable, and if this is strongly the case, the HR professional may have to make a choice on whether he or she can remain with the organization.

## **Professionalism in human resource management**

If the term is used loosely, HR specialists are 'professional' when they display expertise in doing their work and act responsibly. A professional occupation such as medicine or law could, however, be defined as one that gives members of its association exclusive rights to practise their profession. A profession in this context is not so much an occupation as a means of controlling an occupation. Human resource management is obviously not in this category.

The nature of professional work was defined by the Hayes Committee (1972) as follows.

**The nature of professional work, Hayes Committee (1972)**

Work done by the professional is usually distinguished by its reference to a framework of fundamental concepts linked with experience rather than by impromptu reaction to events or the application of laid down procedures. Such a high level of distinctive competence reflects the skilful application of specialized education, training and experience. This should be accompanied by a sense of responsibility and an acceptance of recognized standards.

By these standards an institution such as the CIPD carries out all the functions of a professional body except that of giving its members the exclusive right to practice.

A later analysis was produced by Fletcher (2004), who stated that a professional ethos is characterized by the following ingredients:

- the opportunity to display high levels of autonomy;
- the ability to apply some independence of judgement;
- self-discipline and adherence to some aspirational performance standards;
- the possession of specialized knowledge and skills;
- power and status based on expertise;
- operating, and being guided by, a code of ethics;
- allegiance to a professional body.

## Ambiguities in the role of HR practitioners

The activities and roles of HR specialists and the demands made upon them as described above appear to be quite clear cut but, in Thurley's (1981) words, HR practitioners can be 'specialists in ambiguity'. There are a number of reasons for this, as discussed below, but as Watson (1977) emphasized, much management activity is typically messy and ambiguous.

Three ambiguities in the role were highlighted by Legge (1978). First, there is an ambiguity in the overlap between personnel management as a set of activities for all managers, and as a specialist function. This may arise because the role of HR practitioners is ill-defined (they are unsure of where they stand), their status is not fully recognized, or top management and line

managers have equivocal views about their value to the organization. Second, ambiguity occurs because it is often difficult to define success in personnel management, to determine who or what was responsible for success or failure and to identify the unique contributions of the personnel function. Third, personnel managers sit in an uncomfortable position where they are seen as part of management but also have a special relationship to, and responsibility for, the workers. The research conducted by Guest and King (2004), which involved interviews with 48 executives from 18 organizations, established that the first two ambiguities listed by Legge still existed, but the third one has become less of an issue because of the more clear-cut alignment of HR with management.

Ambiguity in the role of HR people can result in confusion between ideals and reality. Tyson and Fell (1986) see a contrast between the ideologies and actual realities of organizational life to which HR managers, 'as organization men or women', have to conform. This ambiguity is reflected in the comments that have been made about the role of the HR function. For example, Mackay and Torrington (1986) suggested that: 'Personnel management is never identified with management interests, as it becomes ineffective when not able to understand and articulate the aspirations of the work force.'

In complete contrast, Tyson and Fell (1986) believe that:

*Classical personnel management has not been granted a position in decision-making circles because it has frequently not earned one. It has not been concerned with the totality of the organization but often with issues which have not only been parochial but esoteric to boot.*

Ambiguity continues in the age of Ulrich. As Hope-Hailey *et al* (2005) point out: 'Ulrich highlighted that HR professionals must be both strategic and operational, yet the potential role conflict this could engender was not addressed.' Caldwell (2004) reached the following conclusions on the basis of his research.

#### **Summary of conclusions on the role of HR practitioners, Caldwell (2004)**

There is the issue of 'powerlessness' or the marginality of HR practitioners in management decision-making processes, especially at a strategic level. The HR function has an inward-looking tendency to identify professional expertise mainly with administrative concerns over who controls HR activities, rather than questions of HR practices or who has responsibility for implementing HR policy.

## Conflict in the HR contribution

One of the questions HR practitioners sometimes have to ask themselves is ‘Who is the client – the company or the employee?’ HR professionals may have to walk a fine line between serving the company that pays their salary and looking after the interests of employees. They may be involved in counselling employees over work problems. This can only be carried out successfully if the employee trusts the HR practitioner to maintain confidentiality. But something might be revealed that is of interest to management and this places the counsellor in a dilemma – to betray or not to betray the trust? There is no pat answer to this question, but the existence of a code of professional conduct, a set of values and a company ethical code can provide guidance.

HR specialists, as Thurley (1981) put it, often ‘work against the grain’. Their values may be different from those of line managers and this is a potential cause of conflict. But conflict is inevitable in organizations that are pluralistic societies, the members of which have different frames of reference and interests, particularly self-interest. Management may have their own priorities: ‘increase shareholder value’, ‘keep the City happy’, ‘innovate’, ‘get the work done’. Employees might have a completely different set: ‘pay me well and equitably’, ‘give me security’, ‘provide good working conditions’, ‘treat me fairly’. HR specialists may find themselves somewhere in the middle.

Conflicts in the HR contribution can arise in the following ways:

- A clash of values – line managers may simply regard their workers as factors of production to be used, exploited and dispensed with in accordance with organizational imperatives.
- Different priorities – management’s priority may be to add value – make more out of less – and if this involves getting rid of people that’s too bad. HR people may recognize the need to add value but not at the expense of employees.
- Freedom versus control – line managers may want the freedom to get on with things their own way, interpreting company policies to meet their needs; and the thrust for devolution has encouraged such feelings. But HR specialists will be concerned about the achievement of a consistent and equitable approach to managing people and implementing HR policies. They will also be concerned with the attainment of a proper degree of compliance to employment and health and safety law. They may be given the responsibility for exercising control, and conflict is likely if they use this authority too rigidly.
- Disputes – if unions are recognized, HR specialists may be involved in conflict during the process of resolution. Even when there are no unions, there may be conflict with individuals or groups of employees about the settlement of grievances.

As Follett (1924) wrote, there is the possibility that conflict can be creative if an integrative approach is used to settle it. This means clarifying priorities, policies and roles, using agreed procedures to deal with grievances and disputes, bringing differences of interpretation out into the open and achieving consensus through a solution that recognizes the interests of both parties – a win–win process. Resolving conflict by the sheer exercise of power (win–lose) will only lead to further conflict. Resolving conflict by compromise may lead to both parties being dissatisfied (lose–lose).

## The qualities required by HR professionals

Ulrich (1997a) stated that it was necessary to shift the focus of what HR people do to what they deliver. Gratton (2000) stressed the need for HR practitioners to: ‘Understand the state of the company, the extent of the embedding of processes and structures throughout the organization, and the behaviour and attitudes of individual employees.’ She believes that ‘The challenge is to implement the ideas’ and the solution is to ‘build a guiding coalition by involving line managers’, which means ‘creating issue-based cross-functional action teams that will initially make recommendations and later move into action’. This approach ‘builds the capacity to change’.

### What effective HR practitioners do

Effective HR practitioners:

- Operate strategically – they have the ability to see the big picture and take, and implement, a strategic and coherent view of the whole range of HR policies, processes and practices in relation to the business as a whole; they ensure that their innovations and services are aligned to business needs and priorities while taking account of the needs of employees and other stakeholders.
- Have the capability to facilitate change, initiating it when necessary and acting as a stabilizing force in situations where change would be damaging (this is considered in more detail in Chapter 25).
- Appreciate organizational and individual needs; against a background of their knowledge of organizational behaviour, they understand how organizations function and the factors affecting individual motivation and commitment, they are capable of analysing and diagnosing the people requirements of the organization and proposing and implementing appropriate action.
- Are business-like – they have to demonstrate that they can make value-added contributions.
- Are persuasive – they present the proposals and recommendations emerging from their interventions persuasively, making out a compelling business case; innovations and

ideas are sold to management on the basis of the practical and, wherever possible, measurable benefits that will result from their implementation (it is not the idea itself that is saleable but the result it can achieve).

- Use an ‘evidence-based management’ approach (as defined by Rousseau, 2006: ‘Evidence-based management means translating principles based on best evidence into organizational practices. Through evidence-based management, practising managers develop into experts informed by social science and organizational research’).
- Deliver their services efficiently and effectively.

### Competencies for HR professionals

Two broad competencies for HR professionals were identified by Huselid *et al* (1997): first, professional HR capabilities relating to the delivery of traditional HRM activities such as recruiting, selection and compensation, and second, business-related competencies reflecting an understanding of the business and the implementation of competitive strategy. A competency framework is set out in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1** Competency framework for HR professionals

<p><b>Business awareness</b></p>	<p>Understands: (1) the business environment, the competitive pressures the organization faces and the impact of external events on organizational policies and practices, (2) the drivers of high performance and the business strategy, (3) the business’s key activities and processes and how these affect business strategies, (4) how HR policies and practices impact on business performance, and puts this to good use</p>
<p><b>Strategic capability</b></p>	<p>(1) Seeks involvement in business strategy formulation and contributes to the development of the strategy, (2) contributes to the development for the business of a clear vision and a set of integrated values, (3) develops and implements coherent HR strategies which are aligned to the business strategy and integrated with one another, (4) works closely with line management to support the achievement of corporate, unit or functional strategies, (5) understands the importance of human capital measurement, introduces measurement systems and ensures that good use is made of them</p>
<p><b>Organizational effectiveness</b></p>	<p>(1) Contributes to the analysis and diagnosis of people issues and proposes practical solutions, (2) helps to develop resource capability by ensuring that the business has the skilled, committed and engaged workforce it needs, (3) helps to develop process capability by influencing the design of work systems to make the best use of people, (4) pursues an ‘added value’ approach to innovation and service delivery</p>

Table 6.1 *continued*

<b>Capacity as an internal consultant</b>	(1) Carries out the analysis and diagnosis of people issues and proposes practical solutions, (2) adopts interventionist style to meet client needs, acts as catalyst, facilitator and expert as required, (3) uses process consultancy approaches to resolve people problems, (4) coaches clients to deal with their own problems, transfers skills
<b>Effective service delivery</b>	(1) Anticipates requirements and sets up and operates appropriate services, (2) provides efficient and cost-effective services in each HR area; (3) responds promptly and efficiently to requests for HR services, help and advice, (4) promotes the empowerment of line managers to make HR decisions but provides guidance as required
<b>Acts in the interests of employees</b>	Takes action to advance and protect the interests and well-being of employees
<b>Continuous professional development</b>	(1) Continually develops professional knowledge and skills, (2) benchmarks good HR practice, (3) keeps in touch with new HR concepts, practices and techniques, (4) keeps up-to-date with HR research and its practical implications

## HR competency areas

Research conducted at the University of Michigan Business School (Brockbank *et al*, 1999) established the key competency areas (domains) and their components; these are set out in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Key competency areas

<b>Competency domain</b>	<b>Components</b>
1. Personal credibility	Live the firm's values, maintain relationships founded on trust, act with an 'attitude' (a point of view about how the business can win, backing up opinion with evidence)
2. Ability to manage change	Drive change: ability to diagnose problems, build relationships with clients, articulate a vision, set a leadership agenda, solve problems, and implement goals.
3. Ability to manage culture	Act as 'keepers of the culture', identify the culture required to meet the firm's business strategy, frame culture in a way that excites employees, translates desired culture into specific behaviours, encourages executives to behave consistently with the desired culture

Table 6.2 *continued*

Competency domain	Components
4. Delivery of human resource practices	Expert in speciality, able to deliver state-of-the-art innovative HR practices in such areas as recruitment, employee development, compensation and communication
5. Understanding of the business	Strategy, organization, competitors, finance, marketing, sales, operations and IT

(Source: Brockbank et al, 1999)

## Developing competence through evidence-based management

Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) provided the following advice to HR professionals on developing their competence through evidence-based management:

- Use data to identify where the greatest improvement opportunities are. This will help the organization to understand what their real, as distinct from their assumed, problems are and what is causing them.
- Know what the literature says about HR practices and use that knowledge to design more effective ways of doing things.
- Run experiments and gather information on how well things are working, building up a spirit of inquiry and learning, and a commitment to gathering data and doing the necessary analysis to make decisions based on fact. This approach can be contrasted with acting on hunches, or ‘... on belief, ideology, casual benchmarking, what they want or hope for, what they have done in the past, what they seem to be good or experienced in doing’.
- Have a commitment to acting upon such data in order to design more effective HR systems and processes and to ensure that those that already exist do no harm to those who use them or are affected by their use.
- Develop the right mindset – embracing learning and enquiry and tolerating failure – your own as well as that of others.

## HR professionals as ‘thinking performers’

The CIPD (2005a) has stated that:

*All personnel and development specialists must be thinking performers. That is, their central task is to be knowledgeable and competent in their various fields and to be able*

*to move beyond compliance to provide a critique of organizational policies and procedures and to advise on how organizations should develop in the future.*

This concept can be interpreted as meaning that HR professionals have to think carefully about what they are doing in the context of their organization and within the framework of a recognized body of knowledge, and they have to perform effectively in the sense of delivering advice, guidance and services that will help the organization to achieve its strategic goals.

Legge (1995) made a similar point when she referred to HRM as a process of ‘thinking pragmatism’. Harrison (2007) commented that the ‘thinking performer’ philosophy focuses on the ways in which HR fields of activity should link to produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, on strategic awareness and on evidence-based practice. The emphasis is on holistic thinking, on contextualization and on best fit rather than best practice.

Ulrich (1997a) cites the need for HR practice to be guided by HR theory as follows.

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### The need for HR theory, Ulrich (1997a)

To make HR practices more than isolated acts managers and HR professionals must master the theory behind HR work; they need to be able to explain conceptually how and why HR practices lead to their outcomes... Regardless of the preferred theory, managers and HR professionals should extract from it a higher level of reasoning for their day-to-day work and thus better explain why their work accomplishes its goals.

## Continuous professional development

As defined by the CIPD, continuous professional development (CPD) is the process that enables the integration of learning with work in ways relevant to the learner, is self-directed and contributes to the learner’s development needs. The benefits to individuals include becoming better learners, profiting from learning opportunities, managing self-development, helping career advancement, and improving professional standing. The benefits to organizations include better contributions by individuals to organizational goals and objectives, improved performance for the organization, and the ability to help others learn and develop themselves to enhance their work performance and their organizational commitment.

CPD for individual HR professionals is about lifelong development. For the organization it is concerned with improving organizational capability and is linked with the concepts of knowledge management (see Chapter 12) and the learning organization (see Chapter 40).

## Role of the HR practitioner – key learning points

### **The basic role of HR practitioners**

The role varies considerably but it is basically about providing advice, guidance and services on all matters affecting people.

### **The business partner role**

As business partners HR specialists share responsibility with their line management colleagues for the success of the enterprise and get involved with them in implementing business strategy and running the business.

### **The strategic role**

To a) formulate and implement forward-looking HR strategies that are aligned to business objectives and integrated with one another; b) contribute to the development of business strategies; and c) work alongside their line management colleagues to provide on an everyday basis continuous support to the implementation of the strategy of the organization, function or unit.

### **The strategic activities of HR practitioners**

Strategic activities consist of formulating HR strategies and providing continuous support to line managers in implementing their business or operational strategies. They involve being proactive in identifying issues that can be addressed through major or relatively minor HR initiatives.

### **The change agent role**

HR specialists act as change agents, facilitating change by providing advice and support on its introduction and management.

### **The internal consultancy role**

As internal consultants, HR practitioners work alongside their colleagues – their clients – in analysing problems, diagnosing issues and proposing solutions.

### **The service provision role**

The basic role of HR specialists is that of providing services to internal customers. The services may be general, covering all aspects of HRM, or services may only be provided in one or two areas.

### **The guardian of values role**

HR practitioners may act as the guardians of the organization's values and ethical standards concerning people. They point out when behaviour conflicts with those values or where proposed actions will be inconsistent with them.

### **Models of HR roles**

A number of models of HR roles exist. One of the best known ones was devised by Tyson and Fell (1986), which listed three roles: the clerk of works (mainly administrative), the contracts manager (more sophisticated with

## Role of the HR practitioner – key learning points (continued)

an employee relations focus) and the architect (strategic/innovative). The other is by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005a and b), which identified four roles: employee advocate, human capital developer, functional expert and strategic partner.

### Gaining support from top management

- Demonstrate that the proposal will meet organizational needs.
- Base the proposal on a compelling and realistic business case that shows that the innovation will increase the business's competitive edge.
- Prove that the innovation has already worked well within the organization (in a pilot scheme) or elsewhere.
- Specify how the proposal can be implemented without too much trouble.
- Indicate that the innovation will add to the reputation of the company.
- Emphasize that the innovation will enhance the 'employer brand' of the company.
- Ensure that the proposal is brief, to the point and well argued.

### Gaining support from line managers

Managers need to be convinced that the innovation helps them to achieve better

results without imposing unacceptable additional burdens on them.

### Ethical considerations

HR specialists should speak out against plans or actions that are not in accord with management's ethical standards or values.

### Professionalism

HR specialists are professional when they display expertise in doing their work and act responsibly.

### Ambiguities and conflict in the role

HR practitioners have to be 'specialists in ambiguity'. Conflict may arise because of a clash of values, different priorities and the need for HR to exercise a measure of control over the people management activities of managers.

### HR effectiveness

Effective HR practitioners operate strategically, facilitate change, understand organizational and individual needs, are business-like and persuasive, and deliver their services efficiently and effectively.

### HR competencies

The main competencies required by HR professionals are: business awareness, strategic capability, organizational effectiveness, capacity as an internal consultant, effective service delivery, acting in the interests of employees and continuous professional development.

## Questions

1. Tim Miller, Group Head of HR, Standard Chartered Bank, as reported by Jane Pickard (2005) said that: 'HR is about helping managers to manage people and I want them to be engaged in building performance through people and involved in the cost of people as well. Of course, they have to understand HR processes, performance management and reward and so on. But it's how they configure and embed their products and make them part of the business that matters.' Comment on this statement against the background of the business partner concept.
2. HR professionals become strategic partners when they participate in the process of defining the business strategy, when they ask questions that move the strategy to action and when they design HR practices that align with the business (Ulrich, 1997a). What evidence is available from research that this is happening today?
3. Raymond Caldwell made the following somewhat dispiriting comment in 2004 on the basis of his research: 'Overall there is the issue of "powerlessness" or the marginality of personnel practitioners in management decision-making processes, especially at a strategic level. Closely related to this is the relative inability of the personnel function to maintain or defend the experience of their specialist expertise from encroachment or control by managerial intervention. In addition, there are issues of lack of clarity or accountability in specifying the goals, business outcomes, or the contribution of the personnel function, especially when compared to other management functions.' Drawing on other research and your own experience, comment on the validity of this assertion. If there is something in it, what can be done?
4. What do you think of the following remarks made by an HR director interviewed by Guest and King in their research published in 2004? 'One of the problems for any HR function is the separation between the tactical stuff and the strategic stuff and I guess that I am now at a level where I ought to be – I hesitate to use the word; it is so over-used – but I ought to be being strategic; the reality is that 70 per cent of my job is tactical. And by the way if I didn't do it I wouldn't have any credibility.'

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