Do line managers' have 'linking pin' in HR roles?

Mohamed Ayyub Hassan, Dr. Nur Naha Abu Mansor, Wan Mohd Zawawi Wan Abdul Rahman, Beni Widarman Yus Kelana

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (Malaysia)

ayyub_hassan@yahoo.com, nurnaha@utm.my, zawawi@utm.my, beni@utm.my

Abstract

Purpose: The present article aims to identify the possible line managers' involvement factors in human resource (HR) initiatives and its 'linking pin' to the HR roles. In this regard, few factors have been considered pertinent to line managers' involvement factors in HR initiatives which are desire, self-efficacy, and HR support. Whereas, the considered dimensions of HR roles reviewed are strategic partner, change agent, employee champion, and administrative expert.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper intends to provide a conceptual review of the past literature in the areas of HR roles and line managers and further justify the proposed conceptual framework that will move this work further.

Findings: The review also showed that HR devolution to line managers will boost line managers' participation and responsibility to practice HR roles at the workplace.

Research limitations/implications: The main limitation of this review is no empirical evidence provided by the authors to support the literature of the article. All the provided literature is written based on the findings gained from the previous studies.

Practical implications: Line managers' involvement in HR Initiatives can increase the competency diversity among line manager. This in turn can help the organization to operate at high efficiency.

Originality/value: There is a notable lack of research conducted to identify line managers' involvement in HR. Therefore, this article contributes to the literature on the relationship between line managers and HR roles.

Keywords: Line manager, Human Resource initiatives, Human Resource roles, Human Resource devolution

Jel Codes: M12

1. Introduction

The importance of line managers in human resource (HR) initiatives has been debated for over twenty years (Martins, 2007). The role of line managers or middle managers has also changed from controlling workers to leading employees, provide revenue, and improve productivity (Ramachandra, Mansor & Idris, 2011; Ramachandra, Mansor & Mohamed, 2011). This situation leads to emphasize several terms as team leader and front-line managers, compared to use of the term supervisor, although the term 'supervisor' is still widely used until today (Ramachandra, Mansor & Idris, 2011; Ramachandra, Mansor & Mohamed, 2011; Siugzdinien, 2008).

Nowadays, line managers' roles has restructured in the public sector and their extensive involvement in the decision making process of human resources gained attention due to the demand for greater customer service and renewal of commercial value (McGuire, Stoner & Mylona, 2008). Involvement of line managers in the delivery of activities and the role of human resources can also help to achieve a more strategic approach in value-added employee management (Panagiotakopoulos, 2011; McCracken & Wallace, 2000). Yet not much research has been done on the relationship between line managers and HR roles in actual work environment (Siugzdinien, 2008).

While much attention is given to the development of HR policies, at the same time, the implementation of all policies in the workplace should also be given equal emphasis and attention. To ensure this successful practice, some previous researchers have tried to use a metaphor to describe the line managers' relationship on human resource strategy (Panagiotakopoulos, 2011; Inyang, 2010; McGuire et al., 2008). For example, the concept of 'linking pins' in describing the initiative to realize the strategy of line managers in human resources in research conducted in the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom (Currie & Procter, 2001). The metaphor 'linking pin' brings to the introduction of a new role line managers act as strategic partners. In other words, line managers have the responsibility to bridge the gap between HR strategy and development of employees.

2. Line Managers Issues in Human Resources

Line managers play an important role in practicing HR initiatives, because they are the responsible managers for implementing HR practices in the production of products or the provision of services (Qadeer, Shafique & Rehman, 2011; Watson, Maxwell & Farquhason, 2007). HR initiatives such as training have always been considered as one of line managers' job (Papalexandris & Panayotopoulou, 2005). Line managers are also expected to create a synergy between human, financial and physical with the allocation of time, money, and energy to enhance the development of their subordinate (Larsen & Brewster, 2003).

Previous researchers have contributed in the design of effective HR practices, but the implementation is still limited (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Effectiveness of HR activities not only depend on the quality of HR practices, but also on the success of its implementation (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Gratton & Truss, 2003). Though considered effective HR practices, HR systems may still not be effective. This is due to line managers' inability to implement HR initiatives and what factors affect them at work (Panagiotakopoulos, 2011). Line managers must also act as a leader, enabler, and facilitator in a way to create an environment where employees can develop their potentials (Martins, 2009).

This is contrary to the concept of 'partnership', which has been widely discussed since the term 'strategic HR' was adopted (McCracken & Wallace, 2000). The concept of 'partnership' explains that to be an employee champion, line managers and management should not act in isolation, but must work together and respect one another (Ulrich, 1997). This is because; line managers are management representatives and are responsible for implementing HR practices in an organization. Therefore, it is significant to include line managers in the strategic development of the organization (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005).

2.1. Line Manager Involvement Factors in HR Initiatives

The line managers' involvement factors in HR initiatives can be seen in the devolution of the HR function to line managers (Watson et al., 2007). There are three factors that are evaluated, which are the relationship with HR specialists, organizational support, and commitment of line managers. This study also found that the factor with the highest mean associated with the relationship on HR specialists. This is not a new discovery; since many previous studies have enlisted the support of the HR department which is necessary to ensure the devolution of the HR functions to be more effectively accomplished. This results, clearly supports the importance of the relationship between HR and line managers (Bos-Nehles, 2010; Hunter & Renwick, 2008; Hutchison & Purcell, 2007; Larsen & Brewster, 2003).

Apart from the factors mentioned above, the line managers' barrier to be involved in HR activities can also be evaluated as a driving force in a positive perspective (Bos-Nehles, 2010). For example, HR support can be described as a strong support received by the line managers from HR professionals and HR department that lead to positive results; and lack of support can be an obstacle to the devolution of HR functions (Ramachandra, Mansor & Idris, 2011; Bos-Nehles, 2010). There are five barriers factors which are associated with the line manager involvement in HR initiatives discussed in the literature before. The first factor is the line managers' desires in implementing HR initiatives at the workplace are caused by personal motivation and whatever incentives they receive to perform their task (Bos-Nehles, 2010).

While the second factor is the line managers' capacity which is related to their overloaded tasks, they may not have sufficient time to carry out the responsibilities of human resources functions due to the capacity problems. The third factor is the efficiency of the line managers at the work place (Bandura, 1994). Efficiency operationalised in this paper is the skills and knowledge that enable line managers to carry out their task (Audryanah, 2007). However, compared with the efficiency, 'self-efficacy' is probably a more appropriate term to use (Ramachandra, Mansor & Idris, 2011; Ramachandra, Mansor & Mohamed, 2011). Self-efficacy is defined as success in implementing given responsibility to produce good results (Audryanah, 2007). The fourth factor is the HR support which is related to the support received by the line managers from the HR department or upper management (Hutchison & Purcell, 2007; Larsen & Brewster, 2003).

Indeed, policies and procedures were used to measure the role conflict in HR document management provided by the organization. This is because the line managers are usually less clear of their responsibility and authority of the HR functions especially when it is not documented (Bos-Nehles, 2010). Among the discussed five factors, three factors have repeated features in previous studies. These include 'desire' (McGuire et al., 2008; Martins, 2007) 'efficiency / self-efficacy' (Elinger & Bostrom, 2002; Harris, Doughty & Kirk, 2002) and 'HR support' (Hunter & Renwick, 2008; Hutchison & Purcell, 2007; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Larsen & Brewster, 2003).

2.2. Multiple Roles Model of HR Management

Dave Ulrich has proposed four key HR roles to be fulfilled by the HR champions to make the partnership becomes a reality (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Ulrich (1997) explained that both line managers and HR professionals are HR champions. The authors also acknowledged that HR not only are responsible for the HR Department, but also involves the

whole entity of HR in the context of the wider community (see Figure 1). Human community consists of dedicated individuals throughout the organization that leverages HR practices to create and integrate the organization's ability and leads the creation of value and delivers results obtained by the organization (Ulrich, 1997).

Ulrich (Ulrich, 1997) explains the concept of "HR Champions" as the expansion of human community based on multiple sharing formulas. This concept is usually accomplished by the line managers. At the same time, they also have responsibilities for the HR communities. While HR professionals bring extensive HR roles to be practiced in the organization (Ramachandra, Mansor & Mohamed, 2011; Bos-Nehles, 2010). Meanwhile, professional staff brings technical expertise in accordance with the field as well as their respective functions. Stakeholders are responsible to advise or perform routine work. Overall, the HR community bring added value to the organization (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005).

To understand the line managers' functions, it is important to understand the HR roles. Figure 1 shows the four main parties interested in HR activities, while Figure 2 depicts the roles that affect them. Ulrich (1997) suggests that HR champions (or the stakeholders in managing HR) are as individuals linked in the four major roles as shown in Figure 2. The two axes represent the focus and activities of HR champion. These activities involve the management (people and systems) to managing employees.
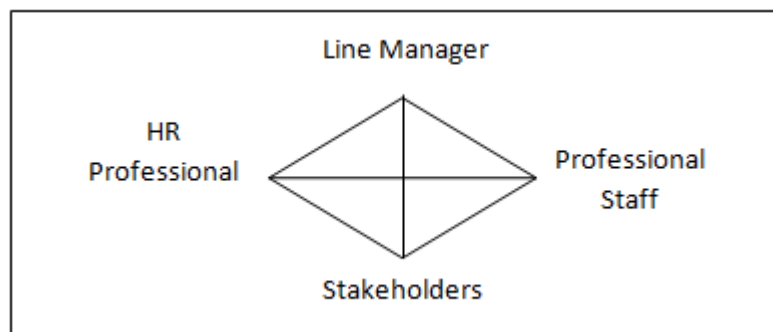

Figure 1. Human Resources Community - A Series of Partnerships (Ulrich, 1997)
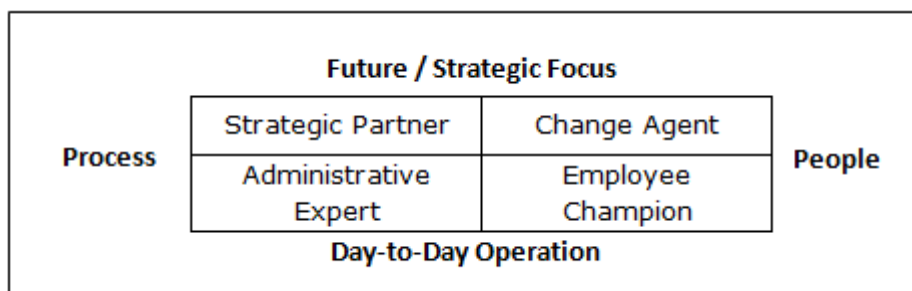

Figure 2. Multiple Roles Model of HR Management (Ulrich, 1997)

2.2.1. Strategic Partner

The role of a strategic partner focused on aligning HR strategies and practices with business strategy (Panagiotakopoulos, 2011; McGuire et al., 2008). Line managers act as a strategic partner in ensuring the success of the business strategy. To fulfill this role, line managers need to improve the ability to implement business strategies (McGuire et al., 2008; Bandura, 1994). This was agreed by Choi and Ismail (2009), which explained that strategic HR is owned, directed, and used by line managers to make effective HR strategy. This is the implication of the involvement of line managers in decision making in HR activities or initiatives.

Ideas about the term 'ownership' exists when it involves the sharing of HR professionals, to make decisions and give opinions on matters of HR, and not just follow the directions (Renwick & MacNeil, 2002). As a partner, this theory explains that they are fully involved in policy formulation and implementation (Panagiotakopoulos, 2011). Typically, strategic partners are expected to contribute their skills and knowledge in the discussion. This concept also suggests that each partner is a professional and as such, they are expected to give the same opinion with the proposed line managers or HR professionals. They can also disagree when HR professionals tell them to do something wrong (Larsen & Brewster, 2003).

Therefore, this role is based on the results that the organization must be able to implement the proposed corporate strategy based on HR function through cooperation by senior managers and line managers in focusing the entire organization to ensure the organization requirements are met (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Furthermore, Rasmussen, Andersen and Haworth (2010) have expressed the view that the devolution in HR management functions to line managers is believed to be a way to make employee / staff management to be more strategic, allowing managers to have more time to focus on more strategic issues and to look for relevance in the larger organization context of the HR management through the involvement of line managers. Some researchers also acknowledged the role of line managers as strategic partners when they get involved and contribute in policy and procedure development activities and implement policies that have been put into practice (Ramachandra, Mansor & Mohamed, 2011; Choi & Ismail, 2009; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005)

2.2.2. Administrative Expert

Organizational infrastructure creation is the role of HR (traditional). The second role, administrative experts or function specialists are assigned to ensure that the process of HR (traditional) such as managing and training employees conducted efficiently and effectively (Panagiotakopoulos, 2011; Ramachandra, Mansor & Mohamed, 2011). According to

Lemmergaard (2008), a number of HR practices implemented through administrative efficiency (using technology), and through the policies and expansion of the role of "administrative expert or function specialist". Ulrich (1997) goes on to explain that the administrative experts is always looking for unnecessary costs, increase efficiency, and always look for new ways to do the job better. According to researchers, line managers play a limited role in the management infrastructure in an organization. However, line managers are also said to play a role in supporting HR re-engineering processes (Bos-Nehles, 2010; Ulrich, 1997).

Holbeche (2009) has defined HR engineering as a process to evaluate how a job is done and how a process can be improved. This process should have a great potential for improvement and cost savings initiatives. However, technology plays a very large role in the transformation of HR, especially in the role of an organization's infrastructure management (Ramachandra, Mansor & Mohamed, 2011; Holbeche, 2009). So, no surprise if today's organizations need to develop new strategies and support systems such as Human Resource Information System (HRIS) software to ensure that human activities are implemented effectively (Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006). This could explain why line managers are considered as playing a limited role in this aspect.

However, some scholars do not agree with the notion that line managers has reduced their role in managing the organization's infrastructure. For example, Renwick & MacNeil (2002) states that the use of the organization's intranet and the Internet enable line managers to handle the work without the help of the human resources department of human resources. Consequently, organizations tend to substitute human resources administrative staff with new technology by taking advantage of the cost benefits (staff reduction). But the result shows that, it tends to increase the line managers involvement to ensure technology is well managed (Papalexandris & Panayotopoulou, 2005).

These contradict findings reveal research gaps that need attention by future researchers. This is because only the HR specialists considered having knowledge and expertise on matters relating to HR functions such as recruitment, staffing, and performance evaluation (Lemmergaard, 2008). But emerging technologies seem to facilitate the devolution process from the administrative expert and HR specialists to the line managers.

2.2.3. Employee Champion

Ulrich (1997) described the line managers' role as a HR champion is through line mangers involvement in day-to-day problems, performing HR work related issues and understanding the needs of employees. Metaphor for the HR roles is known as the 'employee champion'.

Employee champion normally will spend time with employees, train and encourage managers in other departments to do the same (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Later, this role has been split into two, the workers advocates and HR developers. The role as worker advocates focused on the needs of employees through few approaches such as listen, understand, and give more attention to the requires needs. Instead, the role of human capital developers focus on aspects of managing and developing human capital (individual and team), and focuses on providing employees to succeed in the future (Ulrich, 1997).

According to Reilly and Williams (2006), changes in terms of employee champion does not indicate that HR professionals are responsible for the employees' management. Instead, this role always has been the role of line managers. Line managers have a primary responsibility to engage with employees in all circumstances, including when the HR resource functions as an employee champion, advocates, represent or be a sponsor for employees (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Therefore, to be a champion is part of the line managers' task.

This is in line with studies of Hunters and Saunders (Hunter & Saunders, 2006), who prefers to use the term 'employee champion' when, explaining the role of line managers in their book, "HR Business Partners". According to the authors, the role of line managers as employee champion has potential to a significant contribution to the organization. This is due to the close relationship between employees and line managers. Furthermore, the day-to-day professional relation between the two parties has the potential to provide a deep understanding of employee attitudes (Hunter & Saunders, 2006).

2.2.4. Agents of Change

The fourth role of HR is based on the strategic focus on employees to manage transformation and change faced by the organization. The role of change agent also is more focused on the need to ensure that the organization has the competence in dealing with changes to help workers in their attempts to adopt and implement these changes (Ulrich, 1997). Besides that, the change agent is also responsible in ensuring the success of transformation and cultural change in an organization (Larsen & Brewster, 2003). This role will then be to ensure that the entire organization is able to fit with the ability to change based on the core competencies. The author also explains that HR should serve as a change developer and therefore should emphasize the changes and ensure that the capacity for change is sufficient.

Whereas, the line managers has to play an important role in the change management and transformation. This is because for too long the line manager were responsible for the formulation and implementation of HR policies at work (Hutchison & Purcell, 2007). Therefore,

as a change agent, line managers should play an important role in implementing and managing organizational change, assess potential, understand the factors of resistance to change, and work with the HR manager to overcome these obstacles (Inyang, 2010). Logically, an organization that is associated with the transformation has to recognize the line managers' role as change agents to help the employees in adapting to a new culture. This requires a degree of trust and faith by employees. As a line manager who has close contact with the employees, by nature, they are expected to fulfill the role of HR.

3. Conclusion

This paper explores the line managers' involvement factors in HR initiatives and how it is linked to HR roles. Factors such as desire, self-efficacy, and HR support have been identified as the driving force for line managers to get involved in HR initiatives. Therefore, the review also showed that HR devolution to line managers will boost line managers' participation and responsibility to practice HR roles at the workplace. Moreover, the involvement of line managers in HR Initiatives can also increase the competency diversity among line manager. This in turn can help the organization to operate at high efficiency. In conclusion, it is pertinent that line managers equip themselves as HR implementers with relevant HR roles in performing HR initiatives.

4. Research Limitations and Recommendations

As this is a conceptual paper, there are some limitation must be taken into account. The main limitation of this review is no empirical evidence provided by the authors to support the literature of the article. All the provided literature is written based on the findings gained from the previous studies. Secondly, stakeholder's role as HR community member (Ulrich, 1997) also not precisely described in this article because the main focus of this article is to identify the possible line managers' involvement factors in HR initiatives. In view of these limitations, future researchers are recommended to carry out some study on finding conceptual relationship between HR stakeholders and HR roles.

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