The International Journal of Human Resource Management,
Vol. 21, No. 6, May 2010, 873–898

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Practitioner talk: the changing textscape of HRM and emergence of HR business partnership

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It has been evident for some time in mainstream HRM writing, that HR work is largely framed as a business issue, accelerated by new developments in technology and increasing pressures being placed on the function to enhance its contribution to the organisation, and at the same time be more cost effective. Our paper examines the implications of this, and contributes to current debate about what the redesign of HR work means for HR professional expertise, the definition of legitimate HR work activities, and changing relationships with employees and line managers. By foregrounding the language of HR practitioners as a force for change in how HR work is shaped, we deploy an approach rooted in critical discourse analysis to analyze practitioner up-take of concepts like HR business partnership at the level of speech, and how it interacts with broader social and material practices. We examine three main discursive themes from our analysis, to argue that critical engagement with the concept of HR business partnership is warranted as the business facing facets of HRM discursively swamp other concerns, notably about employee well-being and HR's role in and responsibility for securing it.

Keywords: business partnership; CDA (critical discourse analysis); HR; transformation

Introduction

In recent years, much has been written about the academic discourse of HRM (Keenoy 1990, 1999; Legge 1995; Harley and Hardy 2004; Francis 2003; Francis and Sinclair 2003; Watson 2004; Francis and Keegan 2006; Keegan and Boselie 2006). Within this discursive space which has also been referred to as 'HRMism' (Keenoy 1997) the expressed priorities of HR work change over time and are a source of debate and contention. This is typical of discursive spaces – multiple discourses overlap and compete with one another (Foucault 1972). Discourse producers, including, for example, academics and other actors in educational institutions, invoke resources to influence the way language constructs particular types of HR-reality and govern the way HR-issues are talked about, understood and experienced (Harley and Hardy 2004). While for some the protection and advocacy of employee interests are integral to HR work where the ethical treatment of workers is emphasized (Hart 1993; Legge 1999; Winstanley and Woodall 2000; Greenwood 2002; Kochan 2004), for others the main priority of HR work is to contribute to firm competitive advantage and maximize shareholder value (Beer 1997).

It has been evident for some time in mainstream HRM writing, which is increasingly 'consensus' in orientation (Deetz 1996; Keegan and Boselie 2006), that HR work is largely

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ISSN 0958-5192 print/ISSN 1466-4399 online

DOI: 10.1080/09585191003729341
http://www.informaworld.com

framed as a business issue. Business priorities, rather than professional ethics such as the historically rooted duty of care of HR practitioners towards employees (Niven 1967; Legge 1978, 1995; Winstanley and Woodall 2000; Kochan 2004; Torrington, Hall and Taylor 2005), seem to be the key driver for HR functional redesign. These changes, which we describe in more detail later in the paper, refer not only to how HR organizes its work, but also to a more fundamental issue of what work is deemed central to HRM in the first place.

The elimination of tasks, in particular those relating to employee advocacy and the achievement of parity in the employment relationship, is effectively occurring by stealth as discussion on the redesign of HR work is couched primarily in terms of competitive advantage. The accent is placed on HR practitioners providing cost efficient HR services and strategic advice to senior managers. The urgent issues within this mainstream HRM discourse are how to make HRM more effective in achieving managerial interests, and how to forge ever tighter links between HR work and firm financial performance (Huselid 1995; Guest, Michie, Conway and Sheehan 2003; Wright, Gardner, Moynihan and Allen 2005; Fleetwood and Hesketh 2006). Despite persistent failures on the part of academics and consultants to prove a causal link between approaches to managing the HRM function and firm performance (variously defined; Caldwell and Storey 2007), this overtly unitarist and managerialist framing of HRM has progressively edged out pluralist perspectives on employment management including what are described as traditional personnel management or old-style industrial relations (Dunn 1990; Francis and Sinclair 2003; Wright et al. 2005).

In this context, critical reflection on what the redesign of HR work means for HR professional expertise, the definition of legitimate HR work activities, and relationships with employees and line managers, is lacking in most writing on the transformation of HR work. By using an approach rooted in critical discourse analysis, we go beyond the evidence presented elsewhere for the increasing 'Ulrichization' of the HR function (e.g., Caldwell 2003; Brown et al. 2004; Francis and Keegan 2006), and contribute to the analysis of changes to the HR function in two ways.

First, this paper contributes by foregrounding the language of HR practitioners as a force for change in how HR work is shaped. Practitioner up-take of concepts such as HR business partnership are analysed at the level of speech and how it interacts with broader social and material practices. In this way HR practitioners take-up of concepts such as business partnering and talk of priorities of practice are examined to see if they support or likewise undermine attempts to integrate HR practice into Business Partner models.

Second, rooted in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995, 2001, 2003; Wodak 2001) our study critically examines the implications of the adoption of HR business partnership as a way of organizing the HR function and ordering the relations between HR practitioners, line managers and employees. In doing so we are sensitive to how prevailing discourses can privilege as well as marginalize the interests of certain groups. We examine three main discursive themes from our analysis of HR practitioner talk to argue that critical engagement with the concept of HR business partnership is warranted as the business facing facets of HRM discursively swamp other concerns, notably about employee well-being and HR's role in and responsibility for securing it.

The textscape of HR business partnership

HR work, and the tasks of HR practitioners, have changed over time since the emergence of a professional function in the last century. We use the term HR business partnership to

describe changes emerging in the past 10 to 15 years and to distinguish an approach with the following general features which can be traced to the original formulation by Ulrich (1997) and subsequent models expounding a HR business partner model (Beer 1997; Brown et al. 2004; Ulrich and Brockbank 2005). To begin with, HR business partnership assumes the explicit redesign and fragmentation of sets of activities previously integrated in the HR department. Practitioners are urged to take on a narrow set of proactive roles defined along two axes: strategy versus operations, and process versus people.

The four key roles that emerge are: strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion and change agent. The strategic partner role is one in which the HR professional partners line managers to help them reach their goals through effective strategy formulation and strategy execution (Ulrich and Brockbank 2005, p. 27). Change agents are responsible for the delivery of organizational transformation and culture change. Administrative experts constantly improve organizational efficiency by reengineering the HR function and other work processes such as introducing 'shared services'.

In Ulrich's (1997, p. 125) framework, the employee champion role, which is defined as an operational role, has nominal responsibility for employees and is charged with eliciting 'employee contribution':

> Employee contribution becomes a critical business issue because in trying to produce more output with less input, companies have no choice but to try to engage not only the body but the mind and soul of every employee.

Here, the 'employee champion' as discursive object is framed in ways that significantly differs from previous conceptualizations of employee facing HR roles such as the 'consensus negotiator' of Torrington et al. (2005), the 'regulator' of Storey (1992) or 'contracts manager' of Tyson (1995). These latter roles, unlike the employee champion, are described in terms of the inherent plurality in managing the employment relationship and the inevitability of trade-offs between employee needs and goals and organizational goals. In contrast, the employee champion is conceptualized by Ulrich as a 'partner' with management in delivering value by securing employee contribution (Caldwell 2003, p. 997).

The role of employee champion is framed so as to deny dualism by attending to employees in terms of their contribution to business goals, and ensuring this contribution is achieved with 'body, heart and mind'. Ulrich and Brockbank re-emphasize the importance of an employee-facing HR function in their revised typology of HR roles, by making a distinction between the role of 'human capital developer' and 'employee advocate' and stressing the need for employees to be treated fairly and with dignity (Ulrich and Brockbank 2005). While they urge practitioners not to lose sight of the employee champion role, their modelling of business partnership remains underpinned by a strong notion of mutuality between different stakeholders, guided by the belief that managers, employees, consultants and HR professionals work collaboratively within a unitarist framework to achieve high performance levels according to managerially sanctioned business targets. This framing limits the room for manoeuvre of occupiers of the role to adopting a partner position with management in achieving managerially sanctioned goals. It fails to address in any depth, the real problems HR professionals face in achieving a balance between competing stakeholder interests and values, nor why so many firms still operate with a financial-rather than people-driven approach (Brown 2005).

The business partner modelling of HR developed by Ulrich (1997) also specifically works to downplay the responsibilities of HR practitioners in securing and protecting the interests of employees (Hope-Hailey, Farndale and Truss 2005; Francis and Keegan 2006) while also failing to adequately consider the difficulties and tensions faced by HR

practitioners as they are urged to adopt strategic roles (Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles and Zaleska 2002; Caldwell 2003). Employee advocacy is framed as an operational rather than strategic concern. At the same time, HR practitioners are exhorted to focus on strategic rather than operational issues (Beer 1997; Lepak, Bartol and Erhardt 2005), forcing them to neglect the role of employee advocate in order to protect their personal career progress.

Furthermore, we are witnessing increasing fragmentation of HR work (Caldwell and Storey 2007). The drive to reduce costs means that avenues are constantly sought to administer HR work in an increasingly cost efficient way. This often translates in practice to tasks defined as operational in nature being performed by parties other than HR practitioners, including employees, line managers and external parties. Not all of these parties are equally willing partners in carrying out tasks that are formerly the domain of HR practitioners and indeed previously at the heart of how HR defined its unique contribution to the organization.

The changing textscape and the role of technology

An important feature of this changing textscape of HR work is the significance of the considerable growth in the use of technology for how HR roles are changing and how HR functions are being redesigned (Barney and Wright 1998; Lepak et al. 2005; Teo and Crawford 2005; CIPD Report 2007b). Technological changes of relevance include the automation of systems used by the HR function such as payroll and personal information, and e-enabled HR (e-HR) which is concerned with:

> The application of the Internet, web-based systems, and mobile communications technologies to change the nature of interactions among HR staff, line managers, and employees from a pure face-to-face relationship to a technology-mediated relationship. (Ruël, Bondarouk and Looise 2004, cited in Martin, Reddington and Alexander 2008, p. 9)

There is growing interest among analysts about the potential and impact of such new technology and associated ways of working, such as the use of shared service centres and online tools for processes such as recruitment and appraisal systems (CIPD Report 2007b) but much of this discussion is largely technocratic in nature whereby talk of 'HR transformation' is typically advanced and defended by 'experts' focusing on ends such as 'improved efficiency' and 'greater strategic focus', while the interests privileged by such ends, and marginalized by them, are largely downplayed. In fact technological change is addressed largely in terms of its potential to improve the 'bottom line' (Reddington, Williamson and Withers 2005) while the social and relational consequences of such changes are downplayed.

This taken for grantedness of the ends, and of the legitimacy of expert rule, acts to suppress claims for more democratic forms of governance aimed at more open forms of expression (Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Alvesson and Deetz 2005). In this context the potential downsides for employees and line managers of having more and more HR responsibilities devolved to them, directly by shifting them away from HR practitioners, or indirectly by rendering services available only through electronically mediated self-service technologies, tend to be glossed over. Attention is directed rather to ways of overcoming resistance to change on the part of line managers and employees, or to ways of improving the associated technologies.

The social effects of large-scale change, and the power effects of these changes, have not received much attention in the literature, even though case study evidence suggests that these changes are far from straightforward, especially in the case of the shifting boundary between HR and line management responsibilities, and the kinds of activities

and processes for which HR practitioners are responsible (Renwick 2003; Hope Hailey et al. 2005; Reddington and Hyde 2008). Rather, HRM-based technological changes tend to be talked about as though they are without social and political consequences, as though the goals of such structural transformations are politically neutral. HR business partnership is framed as a necessity and technology as simply a means to an end – typically the streamlining of HR services in order to free up high-end HR practitioners to engage in strategic HR activities while line managers and employees are trained to be responsible for an ever-widening array of basically administrative HR activities.

HR professionals are exhorted to identify closely with line management through enactment of a strategy not unlike that of the 'conformist innovator' described by Legge (1978), where dominant business values are treated as a 'given' by HR professionals. This is in stark contrast to previous more pluralistic models of people management where the idea that HR professionals faced Janus-like towards both employers and employees was an important part of the talk in and of the employment relationship (Dunn 1990; Legge 1995; Watson 1996).

The increased use of e-enabled technologies supports the lessening involvement of HR practitioners with tasks defined as operational in nature, and including administration and aspects of employee advocacy, by shifting such tasks to both employees and line managers. This redesign of HR tasks is supposed to free up the time and attention of top HR professionals to pursue a more strategic agenda. In short, HR becomes accountable to the business, is expected to add value through reducing the costs of administration and increasing the quality of strategic advice it gives to middle and top management. There is a distinct shift away from the traditional, integrated HR function where the goals, priorities and successes were defined within HR and with respect to HR professional expertise.

The discursive dominance of HR business partnership

What explains the current dominance of a business-centred over employee-centred discourse in studies of HRM? One answer is that the struggle with what has been called 'perpetual marginality' (Watson 1996) of the HR function has made practitioners keen to embrace avenues through which HR units can reinvent themselves and create new, more favourable identities within their organizations (Kulik and Perry 2008). Members of the HR profession, just like members of other professions, employ strategies to legitimize their expertise in order to erect professional barriers to entry and build professional power (Knapp 1999). A business-centred HR agenda is perceived as offering more influence and higher status to HR professionals, than an agenda rooted in employee championship, consensus negotiation and collective bargaining.

Academic efforts to prescribe a new business facing agenda for the HR function have resulted in the ascendancy of HR business partnership as a dominant model for HR functional redesign and the emergence of new HR roles in recent years. HR practitioners are required to focus on strategic and business issues, rather than activities described as operational, such as employee advocacy, in order to climb the emerging HR career ladder.

Another factor is the sedimentation of meaning about HR work that has taken place over the past three decades. The emphasis has been placed on the contribution of HR work to business and competitive advantage and not on how such work contributes to parity in the employment relationship and the ethical treatment of employees (Legge 1995; Down 1999; Keenoy 1999; Harley and Hardy 2004).

Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) themselves remark on the prominence and attractiveness of the 'strategic partner' role among contemporary HR professionals, noting that it is sometimes used as a synonym for the business partner, consistent with CIPD research which shows that the strategic partner role is proving the most attractive of Ulrich's original four roles for most HR people (Caldwell 2003; Brown et al. 2004).

Bearing in mind the history of HR practitioner's struggles for acceptance as key organizational players (Watson 1977; Legge 1978; Guest and King 2004), it is hardly surprising that a way of discursively modelling the concept of HR as 'hard' and relating it to others concepts such as 'business driven agendas' and 'strategic management', has become so popular. It offers perhaps a way out of the dualism when they seek to claim a share of strategic decision making while at the same time struggling to attend to the employee centred and administrative aspects of the role (Barghiela-Chiappini 1999, p. 149).

The success of the HR business partner discourse can also be attributed, at least in part, to its resonance with broader social economic changes including what has been referred to as 'new capitalism' (Fairclough 2003, p. 4). Large-scale structural transformations in HR service delivery to reduce costs, increase firm competitiveness and achieve a tighter alignment between HR practices and business strategy are presented as urgent and inevitable, and the transformation of ordinary HR practitioners into HR business partners a natural step in the evolution of HR work in a globally competitive environment (Ulrich and Brockbank 2005). This unitarist and 'technocratic' (Alvesson and Willmott 1996) framing of HR transformation as natural and self evident plays an important role in obscuring questions around HR's role in advocating employee well-being, and is a theme that we will develop throughout our paper.

Our study

Using CDA to examine HRM as social practice – analysing HR practitioner talk

Given that much discussion has taken place addressing academic HR discourse, the key question we seek to address in this paper is what impact this emerging HR business partner discourse has on practitioner talk of HR work. While recognizing that HR discourse plays out in many different ways our interest is in localized practitioner discourses, and in whether these reflect broader academic discursive trends (Harley and Hardy 2004; Watson 2004).

We recognize that it is not easy to account for both micro and macro levels of discourse in the same study and draw on Fairclough's (1992, p. 43) notion of the 'order of discourse' as a means of studying local-situated texts and 'broader more generalised vocabularies/ways of structuring the social world' (Alvesson and Karreman 2000, p. 1129). To that end, the core of our study is a critical discourse analysis of 44 interview-based texts, treated here as a form of social practice (Fairclough 1995, 2001, 2003; Zanoni and Janssens 2004; Wodak 2001), located within 'historically situated discursive moves' (Alvesson and Karreman 2000, p. 1116).

Of key concern in this paper is the question as to whether HR practitioner discourses are changing in ways that suggest a more prominent role for business partnership models of HR practice. However, as Fairclough reminds us, (2003, p. 205) 'we cannot take the role of discourse in social practices for granted; it has to be established through analysis'. We therefore explore what HR practitioners' talk of HR practice reveals about the discursive framing of that practice. We examine whether HR practitioners' talk of HR practice indicates the presence of vocabularies, expressions and activities associated with academic models of HR business partnership. These include, for example, the use of terms like

'strategic partner' and 'business partner' to create specific discursive objects (Grant and Shields 2002; Francis 2006); changes to social relations including the segmentation of HR roles and new materializations of HR practice which reflect a shift in 'genres', described by Fairclough (2003) as the discoursal aspect of ways of acting and interacting, such as the creation of e-enabled shared service centres. We examine how HR practitioners discursively constitute their own role, and how they ascribe particular positions to themselves and others within the changing employment relationship.

In line with Fairclough's thinking, we assess whether current (re)ordering of HR discourses creates a 'social problem' (Fairclough 2001) through the reproduction and sustaining of unequal power relations and what this might mean in terms of the developing 'textscape' (context) of HR practice, described by Keenoy and Oswick (2004) in terms of its location within socially and historically produced texts. This approach helps us draw out some of the political implications of HR practice by examining what HR practitioner language-use, as evident in interview texts, reveals about current and emerging models of HR practice and employee–employer power relations (Zanoni and Janssens 2004).

By bringing an object into being, texts (e.g., on HR practice) come to represent particular facets of social and material life. Fairclough (2003, p. 124) states:

> I see discourses as ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings and beliefs and so on, and the social world.

Like Phillips and Hardy (2002), Fairclough (1992, p. 4) draws attention to the broader context within which specific texts arise, and the possible effects these texts have on that context when he states 'any instance of discourse is simultaneously a piece of text (written or spoken), an instance of discursive practice and an instance of social practice. CDA allows us to consider the broader effects of talk of HR practice by treating larger discursive units of text as the basic unit of communication, in contrast to conventional linguistic research that regards components of sentences as the basic unit with 'limited attention to the social hierarchy or process' (Wodak 2001, p. 7).

Fairclough's (2003, 2001) ideas on 'orders of discourse' is also useful to our analysis in that it allows us to take account of micro and macro levels of discourse noted earlier and is explained further in the methodology section. Orders of discourse are the semiotic aspect of social orders, which are, in turn, social practices networked together in a particular way. They tell us how diverse genres and discourses are networked together to create a 'social structuring of semiotic differences' (Fairclough 2001, p. 124) and thereby frame how, when and why particular texts are used (Grant, Hardy, Oswick and Putnam 2004). Orders of discourse have relative stability and durability and play an important role in social organization and control because 'these elements select certain possibilities defined by language and exclude others – they control the linguistic variability for particular areas of social life' (Fairclough 2003, p. 24).

One aspect of this social ordering of relationships among different ways of making meaning, or among different genres and discourse, is *dominance*, that is, some ways of making meaning are dominant or mainstream in a particular order of discourse; others are marginal, oppositional or alternative. Francis' (2007) analysis of the role of the human resource development function in shaping organizational change within a large manufacturing firm is a good example of how dominant discourses channel meaning and attention. Harley and Hardy (2004) observe more broadly the growing dominance of a unitarist 'high performance' discourse of HRM in academia that dominates at the expense of more pluralistic discourses such as collective bargaining and personnel management.

Finally, Keegan and Boselie (2006) observe the marginalization of more 'oppositional' dissensus inspired or critical discourses by the mainstream academic HRM discourse.

The extent to which orders of discourse 'control linguistic variation' in HR talk, and in so doing privilege some interests over others, is an issue we focus on in our analysis. Specifically, we examine how power relations are played out in HR practitioners' talk (Zanoni and Janssens 2004). Recognizing that some discourses are dominant in a particular order of discourses does not mean that those discourses are uncontested, totalizing or hegemonic. In fact, 'hegemonic struggle' is typical within orders of discourse as discourses compete to frame meaning (Fairclough 1992, 2003). So, while recognizing that dominance of high performance discourse in HRM is evident, Harley and Hardy (2004) argue it is by no mean a totalizing discourse and call attention to the potential, albeit difficult to realize, of altering and shaping discourse and the meaning of particular forms of social practice.

Following this line of argument, we treat discourse as 'regulated practice' or set of rules (Fairclough 2003) framing the way people perceive the world, and also as a 'discursive resource' (Keenoy 1999; Watson 2004) from which people can draw thereby actively structuring their own realities (Watson 2002, p. 119).

Building on the notion of 'discursive struggle' in HRM (Harley and Hardy 2004), special attention is placed on how respondents drew upon two competing discourses ('business partner' and 'employee centred') as they sought to shape and make sense of the profound structural changes taking place within the function.

Methodology

The study we present here is part of a larger study on the changing nature of the HR function which involved semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners and others involved in HR practice, including members of the CIPD, trade union officials, and those involved in education of HR practitioners. In this paper we are primarily interested in HR practitioner discourse and therefore only report data from a total of 44 interviews held with HR practitioners and consultants in Scotland and England carried out in the period 2004–2006. Of the 44 respondents, 33 are members of CIPD and 11 are not. We interviewed 12 practitioners in the public sector including HR practitioners for example, from a local health authority, a central government agency and a local government authority. From the private sector we interviewed 32 respondents from retail, banking, telecommunications and manufacturing. Finally, 27 of our respondents are female and 17 are male. In Table 1 we summarize the profile of respondents to the study.

Respondents were asked to tell us about their views on HR practice, and changes to HR practices they perceived in their environments. The interviews were loosely structured around a small number of core questions on the roles of the respondents (what is your current role? Can you tell us your job title? What does your role entail?), the roles of others having responsibility for HR tasks (what HR activities are undertaken by you and your colleagues in the HR function? Who else has a role in undertaking HR activities?), the HR function within which they operated (what is the size of the HR function? Where is the HR function located?) and the changes they currently perceive in HR practice (have there been any recent changes in how the HR function operates? Has the HR function reorganized?).

All interviews were fully transcribed and uploaded to N-Vivo software for analysing qualitative research (Richards 1999). Each of the first 10 interviews was coded by the two authors. We worked towards a thematic (coding) framework by comparing and contrasting each other's initial categories and analysis, and discussing similarities and differences. These discussions led to revision of several of the key codes, which were then developed

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Female/male	*Organization type*	*Title*
F	Retail	Personnel manager
F	Retail	Senior HR Advisor
F	Retail	HR Controller
F	HR Consultancy	Director/Consultant
F	HR Consultancy	Director/Consultant
F	HR Consultancy	Director/Consultant
F	HR Consultancy	Director/Consultant
M	HR Consultancy	Director/Consultant
M	Public Sector (Local) Authority	HR Manager
M	Public Sector Health Authority	HR Director
M	Educational Institution	Business Partner
M	Public Sector Institution	HR Officer
F	Educational Institution	Management Development Officer
M	Educational Institution	HR Director
F	Educational Institution	HR Manager
F	Financial Services Institution	HR Advisor
F	Public Sector (Local) Authority	HR Manager
F	Public Sector (Local) Authority	HR Officer
F	Public Sector Health Authority	Senior HR Manager
F	Public Sector information Provider	Head of Training and Development
M	Financial Services Institution	HR Project Consultant
F	Financial Services Institution	HR Advisor
F	Financial Services Institution	HR Advisor
F	Financial Services	HR Business Partner
F	Hotel	HR Manager
F	Hotel	HR Manager
F	Leisure and Tourism Organization	Head of HR
F	Leisure and Tourism Organization	HR Policy Advisor
F	Law Firm	Project HR Manager
M	Law Firm	HR Manager
M	Clothes Manufacturer	HR Manager
F	Food Manufacturer	HR Manager
F	Electronics Manufacturer	HR Advisor
M	Petrochemical Manufacturer	Business Partner
F	Drink Manufacturer	Business Partner
F	Drink Manufacturer	HR Director
M	Car Manufacturer	HR Director Operations
M	Drink Manufacturer	Head of Business Support Services
F	Media Company	Regional HR Manager (Business Partner)
M	Media Company	HR Director/Consultant
M	Outsourcing Agency	HR Manager (Business Partner)
M	ICT Company	HR Advisor
M	Career Advisory	Head of Network Development
M	Energy Company	Non-executive Director

into a final coding template (King 2004). In this paper we focus on three key discursive themes that are presented in Table 2, along with the expressions, terms and concepts associated with them, and an indication of the codes we used to analyse the texts for these emergent, inductive themes (HR working for the business; HR by remote, devolution of HR tasks to the line).

Our analysis focused on what discourse types were being drawn upon and networked together recognizing that all interview material must be interpreted in terms of possible

Table 2. Discursive themes.

Themes	*Vocabularies including: expressions, terms, concepts*	*Codes (sample)*
HR working for the business	HR business partners	**HRBP**
	Core business function	BUSINESS
	Business Managers	TITLES
	New profiles	**PROFILES**
	Business Skills	BSKILLS
	Making a contribution	CONTRIB
	Being strategic not operational	STRAT
	Business not staff advocacy	BUSINESS
HR by remote	HR service structures	**STRUC**
	Shared services	SHARED
	• Centres of excellence	REMOVAL
	• Business partners	BUSPART
	E-enabled HR remoteness indicated by:	E-HR SHRINK
	Removal from shop floor	REM
	Disappearing eyes	EYES
	The level/expertise of HR staff available to employees	LEVEL
	Geographical location of HR (on- or off-site)	LOCATE
Devolution of HR tasks to the line	Uptake of HR by line managers	**LINE**
	Tasks devolved	DEVOLVED
	Factors influencing	FACTORS
	Competence/training	COMP
	Workload	WORK
	Priorities (short-termism)	SHORT
	Response line managers	RESPONSELM

script-following accounts. For instance, following the norms and scripts for expression which guide conversation in interview settings, or impression management behaviours that display a 'talking up' of themselves and their job as 'strategic' and so on (Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Alvesson and Karreman 2000). The struggle of HR practitioners to achieve respect and status is a long running saga (Watson 1977; Legge 1978, 2001). Indeed, the links between practitioner talk of HR work, and broader orders of discourse embedding HR work, are critical to our analysis. In this we can refer to Jäger who views the role of the individual as:

> absolutely involved when we talk about the realization of power relations (practice). It thinks, plans, constructs interacts and fabricates. As such it also faces the problem of having to prevail, i.e., to get its own way, to find its place in society. However, it does this in the face of the rampant growth of the network of discursive relations and arguments, in the context of living discourses, insofar as it brings them to life, lives 'knitted into them' and contributes to their change. (Jäger 2001, p. 38)

Continuous reflection was therefore undertaken by the research team to evaluate empirical material, being attentive to local context and variation and thus avoiding the 'strong temptation to attempt quickly to climb the discursive ladder in organizational research and to ascribe to discourse determining capacities' (Alvesson and Karreman 2000, p. 1147). On this basis we sought to engage in reflexive analysis that is consistent with the CDA approach to understanding the 'context' of the production of 'texts'

Table 3. HR discourses.

Discourse	*Structure*
Business partner	This discourse is structured round core concepts of 'business', 'strategy', 'bottom-line', 'value added', and 'profit' and expressions like 'contributing to the business' and 'meeting business priorities'. These act to close off discussion about more employee focused, operational HR activities and constitute employees as a passive 'resource' to be used in a dispassionate and utilitarian fashion.
Employee centred	This discourse is structured round notions of 'fairness', 'alienation', 'moral', 'employee interests', 'welfare' and 'well-being'. These prioritize day-to-day welfare of employees and preservation of (employee-facing) HR roles and structures that allow for a collective 'voice' and treatment of employees as active agents who seek to create their own organizational 'realities'.

advocated by Fairclough; in ways that allowed for the employment of both a 'close-range' micro-discourse approach and one which was sensitive to historically situated macro-level academic discourses and discursive trends. Our analysis of these locally constructed texts was framed by the following questions consistent with the methodological stance advocated by Alvesson and Karreman (2002, p. 1137; see also Alvesson 2003):

- To what extent and with what means is the business partnership theme sustained, varied and contradicted across the 44 transcripts?
- What particular social reality is involved and maintained?
- To what extent and how is business partnership discourse part of the interpretive repertoire of the people in the study?

In what follows we draw on each theme to illustrate the role of discourse in reproducing or transforming particular understandings about new forms of HR practice at both micro and macro levels of analysis. Our discourse analysis oscillates between a focus on specific texts (interview transcripts) and the order of discourse within which they are related (Fairclough 1995, 2001, 2003). Focusing on alternative 'vocabularies' (lexical relations) and genres (especially 'communication technologies' and social relations as defined by Fairclough 2003), we share our insights into the emergence and ordering of two co-existing discourses which we have labelled 'business partner (BP) discourse' and 'employee-centered (EC) discourse' outlined in Table 3. The discursive themes presented in Table 2 are interrelated and overlap in producing the two distinctive HR practitioner discourses noted here.

Textual analysis

HR working for the business

Our textual analysis points to the critical potential of the business partner discourse to mould meaning for our respondents as they described the redesign of the HR functions and departments where they work, the re-labelling of HR roles, and the changing practice of HR, all in essentially business terms. Their accounts pointed to a shift occurring in the responsibilities of HR practitioners, indicated by changes in the titles given to, or adopted by, HR practitioners, much reminiscent of the shift in titles from personnel management to HRM widely adopted by practitioners since the 1980s (Caldwell 2003; CIPD 2005, 2006a, b).

New titles such as 'HR business partner' were frequently mentioned by respondents in their talk about changes taking place in the HR world generally, and the term 'business' was incorporated into the titles of seven respondents. HR practitioners talk explicitly of *working for the business* and of their practice as motivated by meeting primarily business-focused needs. Where the term HR business partner was not used expressly, talk of a shift to 'HR' status brought into play images of a significant re-ordering of discourses in which HR practices are being enacted, indicating a marked tendency for respondents to use business terms and expressions to frame descriptions of what HR practitioners want to do, and be, in their roles. In this context success in HR roles is measured in terms of developing effective 'business' rather than people skills. As one respondent remarked:

> Well I mean we're still finding people who primarily, you know, are primarily looking at designing a sort of, you know, strategies or processes for delivery across an organization. The difference probably would be that they're more concerned with their own business skills and being able to make a contribution to the business than perhaps you might find among other, you know, HR people in, what shall we say, less successful companies. (HR Manager)

The pre-eminence of the business partner discourse in the above narrative is consistent with notions of the 'rhetorical ascendancy' of HR business partner roles, observed by Caldwell and Storey (2007). The authors suggest that structural changes associated with strategic ambitions of the function are creating a dominant business partner discourse that acts as a 'centrifugal logic' for HR organization and HR roles (Caldwell and Storey 2007, p. 22).

In our study, shifts in job titles appeared to signify a significant move away from a person-centred EC discourse towards a more performance business-focused HR agenda that allowed less time and space for employee concerns and issues. This movement is indicated by phrases such as 'we have gone away from' and by comparisons between former tasks and activities and those currently taking place or emerging in practice:

> [W]e have gone away from sort of staff managers, we're very much business managers now. [HR Manager]

> HR advisor [is the] tag for people who are working for the business. I was probably 70/30, talking 70% of my time with employees and 30% to the managers. It was completely the reverse to that when I changed job. (Senior HR Advisor)

Some respondents found it difficult to find the opportunity to actively engage in a rival EC discourse that legitimized talk of people-focused agendas. For instance one HR business partner talked of how he was now positioned within the new HR structure in ways that no longer provided him and his HR colleagues with the 'permission' to advocate employee interests. This was the task of an employees' immediate line manager, or shop steward in that:

> It's a strange word but I don't think there's anybody got *permission* to be an employee champion in our sort of set up really … the unions see it as *their* role for the employees to come to them to tell them about their problems, *not* HR. (Business partner)

In addition to new labels for HR practitioners, the HR function itself has been reorganized in some organizations to come under a specific 'business support' label, as illustrated in the following quote from an HR practitioner in a large retail organization:

> At the review the structure was changed and one of the 10 service areas that were created was called business support. Business support comprised of HR and all aspects of HR. The person who was appointed head of that service had had an HR background but hadn't recently been in an HR post … it gave the whole focus a business rapport and there was a,

> for a couple of years, there was a strive to, to try and adopt this wider discipline of business support. (HR Manager)

Restructuring of the HR function in one public sector organization was similarly described by a senior HR practitioner in terms of being more business-focused. In this interview the respondent described the appointment of employee directors and a change in her role at this point. This involved a 'separation' of her 'strategic' responsibilities from her responsibilities as a 'staff advocate' as this role was now separated into a new role, a role now undertaken by full-time union officials and *not* by internal HR practitioners.

In the following extract, she describes how roles previously done within HR had been fragmented and how the staff advocate role was now done by newly appointed and external-to-HR employee directors. As she describes these changes, she points to the emergence of what she frames as a 'cultural difference' between HR practitioners and these employee director staff advocates:

> When we appointed employee directors … which only came in about 2001, then [our] role changed … [we] weren't so much of a staff advocate as we had done before because we had somebody else who is on board who is doing that. I don't think they did [that effectively] I mean … I thought sometimes they didn't, they made it sound as if it was, 'we should have this', it wasn't done in a business way. So the argument was always a, often a moral argument or a em a dependency on, 'you've got this to give we need it', rather than give us this and that's what the benefit will be … It's a cultural difference. For example we talk about strategic and operational, they [talk] about toilet rolls. We would say 'just get that sorted', it should be fixed outside the meeting. But, you know, they will persist, you know, they'll bring it to an open forum and those habits really do die hard. (Senior HR Manager)

Employee directors, who undertake the employee champion role in this new context, are associated with ineffective action because they rely on 'need' arguments and 'moral' arguments and do not construct their case according to 'business rationale' or in ways that suggest they understand 'strategic and operational' imperatives versus issues such as 'toilet rolls'. The choice of the respondent to refer to 'toilet rolls' is clearly a rhetorical move to frame the concerns of those responsible for advocating staff needs and representing employees as trivial.

The EC discourse drawn on by these staff advocates is portrayed by this HR practitioner as a weak or ineffectual one. In this way she sets herself and her peers apart from those championing staff or employee needs who are clearly framed as 'other', as pursuing trivial issues in an ineffectual way and as incapable of change, as indicated by the comment 'those habits do die hard'. This bolsters her own identity as 'strategic', as putting important things on the agenda. Ironically, having already argued that relying on moral arguments is somehow ineffective, she later goes on to say that:

> Employee champions have to be, would have to have a strong value base I think and a strong sense of morals. (Senior HR Manager)

She sees employee champions as pursuing moral arguments: arguments drawing on EC discourse described by her in derogatory terms. By linking 'moral arguments' with 'dependency' arguments she not only shows her distaste of this discourse but also tries to distance HR practice, as she sees it ideally, from HR practice linked to ineffectual moral, dependency EC discourse.

While the 'strategic' oriented BP discourse dominates much of the language used by respondents to describe the re-labelling of HR roles/functions this was not uncontested. Negative facets of what was perceived as an increasingly business framing of HR practice were expressed by several respondents, who drew on the more humanistic perspective

underpinning the EC discourse to directly challenge expressions such as 'contributing to the business' and 'meeting business priorities'.

> You know, we've got to think much more about the sort of employee side of things, the human side of things, and just much more about you know, taking back on the softer skills rather than just seeing HR as a, well seeing people as some kind of a process or a, just a resource that fits into the rest of the resources, so that's kind of how I feel it is sometimes. You know, you've got your money, you've got this, you've got that, and then you've got your human resource which is a pile of people. (HR Advisor)

Here, we see how expressions drawn from the EC discourse such as 'human side of things' are used to directly challenge the strategic amplification of HR roles and activities embedded in the business partner discourse.

Textual analysis indicates, however, that the BP discourse acted as a powerful constraint upon the ability for HR practitioners to engage in the EC discourse, both at strategic and transactional levels of activity. This appeared to be closely linked to increasing segmentation of HR roles as traditional functional hierarchies located within one site became centralized, and administrative and 'higher order' HR activities became geographically separated into shared service centres, specialist HR teams and separate bands of HR business partners.

The following account shows how one practitioner positioned in a 'strategic' role acknowledges feelings of 'guilt' at no longer having time to 'create space' to 'drop in' to the shop floor 'to catch up on gossip' with employees since the reorganization of HR in his organization:

> It grieves me because a lot of them have very long service and have got very long memories, remember the HR as the personnel function . . . and a lot of the jibes you got at the time, oh aye they're taking the person out of personnel or they're taking the human out of resources, and all that stuff.' (Business Partner working in a large manufacturing plant)

The respondent went on to explain how language-use consistent with 'personnel' (EC discourse) had little currency in the boardroom. Issues such as employee stress and absence did not become a concern at the top table 'unless it manifests itself in a statistic', a comment that is consistent with the fact that the strategic amplification of HR work means that people will not come first unless there is a clear business case for doing so. In this case, innovative HR policies geared towards enhancing people management activities were closely circumscribed by attention to the 'bottom line' so that:

> At the end of the day I think it has to come down to a cost focus so 'let's not take policies that are going to cost us a lot of money'. (Business Partner)

Effects of this segmentation of roles both in time and space, between the HR staff and employees noted here, resonate with concerns expressed among analysts about growing disconnection between HR functions and employees. For instance drawing on recent survey evidence of changes taking place in HR functions across the UK, Reilly and colleagues conclude in their CIPD Commissioned Research that HR functions in large organizations, tend to no longer interact with employees as individuals but in the collective form only, and . . . 'the danger is that HR comes too theoretical with no understanding of the practical reality of its own policies and practices within the organization' (CIPD Report 2007a, p. 47).

Similar sentiments were expressed by several of our respondents who observed that the management of day-to-day employee issues is increasingly being framed as a largely 'administrative' task relegated to junior personnel in call centres who are unable to 'cut

their teeth' by working directly with employees and their line managers and 'getting to know what conflict's all about' (HR Consultant).

Lack of exposure to EC discourse at strategy/policy levels suggested here, can have an important impact upon the positioning of employee well-being as a strategic and operational concern. In what follows we show how discursive closure and subsequent marginalization of the more 'human' face of HR is being materially affected not only at business partner level, but also at a transactional level through increasing use of e-HR technologies and segmentation of the function.

HR by remote

The emergence of new communications technologies in HR work is leading to profound structural changes and associated language-use in how HR services are delivered and work is managed. A striking feature of the new forms of service delivery as described by participants was the prevalence of references to instruments and structures designed to mediate the delivery of HR practices from HR professionals to employees. Evidence suggests that new 'communication technologies' introduced alongside new HR structures, such as HR web-based technology, and also the emphasis on 'more strategy', is leading to significant changes in social relations between participants clearly emerged from our study.

> The HR department is up on the 6th floor, so in some ways, you know, we spend a lot of time running up and down stairs. But it meant that they could get on with what they did from an operating point of view and… I'm away from that, all that day to day stuff, so actually psychologically we were, we could, we could remove ourselves. (HR Controller)

> What they've tried to do since devolution, although it would have happened anyway, is to get, to get online stuff, for example just now there's a big project on sickness absence management which they're trying to, to, well it is computerized, they're piloting it just now, that's a major one. They're looking at a range of HR processes to try and make them electronic and that includes the training. (Business Partner)

The segmentation of HR roles coupled with introduction of 'online stuff' described here was a dominant theme emerging from our textual analysis. Narratives suggested a strong sense among participants of increasing remoteness from employees, distinguished not only in terms of lack of face-to-face contact, but in the type of dialogues that were now taking place – more controlled and based on a question/answer mode rather than a conversation that focused on the particular needs of the 'client'.

> It's done over the phone, it's done on a computer, it's done like a question and answer session and it doesn't begin to put the human element into consideration. I think that's just going to lead to more conflict, you know, and I don't think it's necessarily going to get the best out of people. (HR Consultant)

These observations point to ways in which the discursive and material positioning of HR practitioners working at transactional levels may significantly reduce their autonomy to draw upon the EC discourse in ways that effectively challenge the foregrounding language of business partnership. This dynamic is likely to intensify where organizations continue to downsize their HR functions and become more reliant on call centre technology and controlled interactions with staff via 'help desks'.

For instance, one business partner explained that his organization had undergone several mergers and acquisitions during which times the HR function was streamlined. On describing moves to outsource and devolve HR work to line managers and the creation of business partners, he explains how ratios between HR and staff were significantly

increased, creating much less HR contact for employees, in line with what now appears to be normal (unquestioned) practice within the profession.

> It's funny how it was only 4 or 5 years ago . . . and it seems so archaic now . . . that in an HR and L&D function for 2000 employees we had something like 40 people . . . we've now got a team of 17 (for 1300 staff). (Business Partner)

Similarly, in the following passage an HR respondent describes how the (financial services) organization she has recently left, restructured the HR department in ways that reduced scope for face-to-face interactions with employees:

> They took away the recruitment department completely and outsourced that, or were going to outsource it but I understand they're bringing it back in house now . . . the organizational development department, I mean we lost it . . . (Laughter). And the recruitment wing they turned the HR helpdesk into much more of a kind of call centre. So although we were working on the Ulrich model we seemed to go from I don't know, we seemed to much more concentrate on being on the end of the phones rather than being face to face, there was a lot more call centre work coming in, and I recognize that. (HR Advisor)

Here the respondent constitutes a wide-ranging set of changes as a specific discursive concept – the 'Ulrich model'. She expresses, as surprise, that 'even though' the company was working the 'Ulrich model' it made decisions, which are at odds with the 'Ulrich model', for example concentrating on remote forms of HR, 'rather than being face to face'. In the passage that follows she elaborates:

> About 2 years ago HR started trying to implement that model with the business partners but there was quite a lot of difficulties in implementing it, and after the strategic review they came up with a slightly different model which still had the business partners, but an awful lot more work was put on to the helpdesk which was why we had sort of specialist departments. (HR Advisor)

In another interview where the HR practitioner described a reorganization along specifically 'Ulrich-model' lines, the respondent explained that business partners were appointed at 'the top of the HR shop floor' while employee champions were principally placed in call centres. She says:

> That's where I felt the employee champions *eyes* had disappeared because I felt like these people were just being treated as call centre workers and were actually using deep skills quite strongly, and there was a lot of upset about it at the time. (emphasis added) (HR Policy Advisor)

With HR operating more remotely through call centres in her organization, it seems that one specific aspect of the remoteness was separation of *employee champions* from employees, and the disappearance of their specific ways of seeing employees and employment issues. The symbolization of employee champions having 'eyes' (ways of seeing employees and issues), and these 'eyes' disappearing as a result of structural changes is a very powerful image that usefully captures how some respondents felt about the dynamics of the distancing of HR from employees and the resultant discursive closure that this entailed around talk that promoted business rather than employee needs and interests.

One senior HR practitioner/ consultant who trained 'a lot of people who end up working in HR Service Centres' was especially concerned about a loss of HR expertise and understanding about the 'complexities of managing people' as they lost direct contact with staff. Voicing her 'concerns with this whole idea about the HR and strategy', she considered that:

> We have to be very careful that we don't throw the baby out of the bath water and we forget about all the fundamentals of HR. I train in other companies and I know that they're well meaning but the calibre is not necessarily there, to understand the complexities of managing people and to look them in the eye and see the whites of their eyes. (HR Consultant)

From this respondent's perspective the 'fundamentals of HR' required a deep understanding of employee relations issues rooted in an EC discourse which was being closed off to graduates entering the profession. In this context, one respondent who had recently gained graduate membership of the CIPD talked of his desire to work directly with people but that given the move to business partnering within the profession said 'that avenue (is) being closed off fairly soon and it makes me uncertain about whether or not I want to stay in HR'.

Another respondent remarked on the emotional as well as geographical distancing of 'new graduates' from employee-facing work which was regarded by some as 'junior' work in which they were not interested:

> fascinatingly, I used to always ask the young graduates are you a member of the CIPD, and, you won't believe this, but one of the people, one of the HR graduates who had been in the company a few years turned round to me and said 'oh no I went to Oxford'. Can you believe that? I said what are you trying to say? 'Well the CIPD . . . it's for, it's for personnel people, juniors.' (Non-executive Director, Energy Company)

The framing of employee-centred work as largely an administrative task relegated to a decreasing number of junior personnel located within call centres remained a dominant theme throughout the interviews.

> (In the move towards an Ulrichian model) EnCo has switched to a regional business model so it's no longer the HR department in Aberdeen, it's the HR department for Europe. So when you do get through they always ask where are you? Well I'm in Spain today. The problem's in Aberdeen. Yeah, but I'm in the Netherlands for the next 3 days. And so, you know, I don't think the way that the HR business has positioned itself, that there's adequate critical mass of employee-centred people. (Non-executive Director, Energy Company)

In this section we have shown how possibilities to express attitudes inconsistent with the new HR business model appeared very limited, given the capacity created by this model to close off certain discursive options, leaving respondents to accept the dominant business partner discourse or exit, rather than give 'voice' in a subversive way (presence of active resistance to consent processes) (Deetz 1998, p. 159).

While such resistance is not strongly evident in our analysis of the 44 transcripts, increasing use of social media technologies associated with high-bandwidth internet penetration (described as web 2.0) evidenced in recent research by the CIPD (2009), suggests this has potential to challenge the order of discourse framing HRM-based change. The attributes of these social media technologies are described as being 'radically different to uni-directional internet services' (CIPD 2009) allowing for significant potential to 'change the way people collaborate, work and give voice to their opinions, attitudes and expectations' (Reddington 2009, p. 14).

In the next section we build on these arguments – our last discursive theme and explain how the professional distance (and associated discursive closure), between those that work in HR services and those who use these services, appears to be shaped by ongoing devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers.

Devolution of HR tasks to line managers

Another clear theme to emerge from our data is that devolution of HR tasks to line managers is a core facet of how HR practitioners currently view their roles and the challenges to their roles. Once again, this emerges as a broadly shared understanding of HR practice, currently and also in a manner respondents suggest is set to intensify, in ways that are creating fractures in the social and practical support provide by HR staff to employees.

> Our roles were definitely, very much, in the business helping the managers because they were put in the role of, you know, managing, absence management, performance management was going back into the business and a lot of the managers were quite uncomfortable with how to deal with these situations. We spent a lot of time coaching round the roles that were, I guess, traditionally HR roles like recruiting. (HR Business Partner)

In the quote that follows, we see an interesting account where an HR officer contrasts two businesses within one company and describes what she sees as their contrasting styles of HR.

> I mean there's two sides to the business that are run completely separately, the [BUS1] is more, much more, HR advisory service and business support, and moving things forward, a very much strategic [approach] but, you know, we are looking, we were looking at how we could introduce more for the employees, moving on training and development, that's the [one] side of the business and I should say the line managers [in that side of the business] are self sufficient .... they only come to us, you know, for their support, etc. They do all their recruitment letters, all their sort of basic admin themselves because we've given them the templates .... The [other side of the business] is very much all staff personnel, the HR team doing everything for these managers because they see their managers as only being there to grow [the products]. Whereas my managers, you know, their job is to maybe [oversee the products] but a manager should be someone, in my opinion, that, you know, has a number of different skills including some HR experience or, you know, not experience as such but being able to deal with the HR issues on their site, because at the end of the day it's their people. I don't see them every day, the managers do. (HR officer)

The description of how HR is run on the two sides of the business is clearly biased in favour of one type of HR and away from another. By constituting some managers as 'self-sufficient managers', the respondent describes much more favourably the 'very much strategic approach' and uses argumentation to constitute as positive a HR model involving large-scale devolution of HR tasks to the line. The expression 'moving things forward' is a rhetorical device to frame the HR approach of devolving extensively to the line as positive and progressive, as well as allowing things to progress.

The HR advisory model where the HR officer does 'not see people' is clearly assumed to be the superior model. The contrast of the 'self-sufficient' managers with those for whom HR 'is doing everything' reveals clear preferences in terms of a how HR should be organized. Similar views are expressed by another respondent familiar with the Ulrich model (1997 version, four roles) who described the changes she had seen in her organization. Here, she locates new HR roles firmly within a business strategy discourse with talk of 'moving away' from transactional and employee facing roles to 'strategic partner and change agent' roles being made possible by line managers taking on more responsibilities, and indicating that there is less 'one to one stuff' now. Moreover, the 'employee champion' role is specifically shown as 'displaced' to another location, in this case to 'employee forums or communication groups':

> In 18 years I think we had moved from almost being the admin expert and employee champion. I believe it has actually moved to being the strategic partner and change agent. I think the focus is on that. Not that the employee became unimportant but because the line manager took on more responsibilities then the interaction with employees was much more about, yes, there was always the one to one stuff of course and people would come forward and, you know, need counselling, but you know the employees forum or communication groups as they were then took on *that employee champion piece*. (Business Partner)

The discursive constitution of employee facing roles as being 'displaceable', amenable to separation from what are framed as core HR tasks in 'strategic partnership' and 'change agency' suggests that HR, in its 'new' and contemporary form, does not necessarily have

responsibility for that 'employee champion piece'. As a discursive concept, the 'employee champion' (and his/her work) is presented as a discrete and separable 'piece' of an old and perhaps dated model of HR practice, one related to routine administration, rather than a central or core aspect of current HR work.

While respondents commonly remarked on the significance of line mangers in the new modelling of HR service delivery, a lack of 'engagement', capability and training were common themes raised by those who expressed dissatisfaction with the effects of devolution to line managers who have not been trained or oriented, at least traditionally, towards effective people management. Rather, their emphasis has been on 'hitting targets' and 'balancing budgets', or decidedly business rather than people management priorities; discursive practices that are consistent with a performance-oriented business discourse:

> They need a lot of hands-on managing, a lot of hands on and they shouldn't. I mean, you know, the other thing we fed back as well was how do they select the managers? Em, I'm not saying anything's wrong with any of them, they all seem quite nice on the phone but sometimes you wonder have they been selected because they did well in sales? Which I think probably happens in a lot of businesses, you hit your targets, you get promoted. (HR Advisor, shared services)

> If crunch time comes who do we promote? We promote the people who balance their budgets. We do not promote the people who grow and develop people. (Senior HR Manager)

> It was very difficult to balance the good cop, bad cop thing that you have to do when you're doing line management … Some would be so task focused that it didn't matter what the employees thought of them because they were just hell bent on getting the business KPIs out and they didn't actually, until we were in (the change programme) about a year, they didn't focus the training on them hard enough to say well look you've got to be two things here. (Business Partner)

Discussion

In this section we step back from the details of our analysis of these practitioner interviews to consider what our findings suggest about HR functional redesign as experienced by practitioners. We have seen from previous sections the reordering of social relations and material practices described by respondents. The results of the study show that practitioner's talk about the changing shape of HR work is framed by expressions like 'contributing to the business' and 'meeting business priorities' and that these imperatives are linked with both structural changes enabled by new HR technologies, such as call centre technologies and online computer systems, as well as changes to the HR division of tasks between HR practitioners and line managers.

However, while practitioners in general describe these developments as though they are inevitable, they also signal concerns with the impact these developments have on their ability to do their jobs in ways that were previously not only acceptable but demanded by the professional ethics of the personnel profession in which HRM is historically embedded. Thus, concerns that 'the employee champion piece' has been eroded and face-to-face contact with employees is all but disappearing are all evident in these accounts.

The key question is then, given the problems associated with the application of emerging HR business partner models, why do practitioners seem to co-opt rather than resist these changes, embracing the 'business-centric' logic of HR work?

One answer is that even while HR business partnering and associated structural and technological changes produce tensions relating to the erosion of HR professional expertise and fragmentation of the HR function (Gratton 2003; Storey and Caldwell 2007), the 'HR business partner' and 'strategic partner' labels offer (the promise of) some relief from

the chronic lack of professional status of HR functionaries, and the marginalization of HR work. Survey evidence suggests that the majority of HR practitioners aspire to strategic partner roles even if the minority occupy those roles, suggesting that for most practitioners this aspiration will remain merely that, unless all HR functionaries can become strategic partners, which seems unrealistic and worrying ambition when one considers the consequences that would have for the HR function and the range of professional specialist and generalist roles it carries out.

The attractiveness of the 'strategy' role can be understood with reference to the integrationist and 'strategic fit' ambitions piled on the HR function and those who work there over decades. But this also suggests a problem for those not destined for strategic roles, and a general devaluing of operational activities and specialist expertise traditionally at the heart of the HR profession. It is these tensions that emerge from a critical analysis of how HR practitioners describe their current work, their ambitions, and the changes they see around them. The enticement of strategic roles is espoused at the same time as practitioners reveal their struggles with how the function has changed in terms of its role in supporting line managers, its relations with employees, and what it is supposed to do.

Relating these local HR practitioner discourses to the broader orders of discourse within which they are embedded, we see such understandings as consistent with academic accounts of changes in HR technology as well as themes emanating from 'new capitalism' discourse (Fairclough 2003) and 'globalization' discourse such as heightened competitive pressures brought about by internationalization, which are described as combining to 'force' significant changes at the workplace and in HR practice (see, for example, Marchington and Wilkinson 2005).

In drawing on business partner discourse, HR practitioners reproduce and reinforce the assumed priorities emanating from that discourse – i.e., primarily business-facing priorities. The shift away from a pluralistic view of the employment relationship which has been evident in HR discourse for some time is strengthened by this increasingly dominant framing of HR work. In particular, the tendency to view technology-enabled changes in HR service delivery, and the shift of HR tasks to line managers, in a largely technocratic way, reinforces the assumed business priorities at the heart of this discourse. More needs to be understood about the removal of traditional forms of support and advocacy previously at the heart of HR work, and how employees respond to this and perceive the HR function and practitioners.

The potential for employees to use emerging technologies to subvert managerial efforts to enforce new forms of social relations and work practices on them also merits further study. Speculation about the application of social media technologies described as web 2.0 has potential to open up discussion about ways in which e-HR can allow for greater employee voice and self expression than mainstream structures and modes of communication normally allow. In the CIPD Report noted earlier, it is suggested that 'the nature of the HR function and the services it provides might be radically changed by these potentially disruptive technologies' (2009, p. 4). Case examples are given of the role of web 2.0 in enhancing employee participation and collaboration (for example, through on-line discussion forums) and the benefits and challenges of its application.

The CIPD research suggests that the use of web 2.0 in people management and HRM 'have not yet reached even the early adoption stage' and that 'some researchers and practitioners have become sceptical of the overblown claims' made for such technology (2009b). More needs to be understood about the power dynamics of this, including the potential of web 2.0 to allow for more discursive space for employee-centred discourses to

flourish and any effects of extending the reach of the dominant business discourse to employees who are geographically dispersed.

Reflecting critically on the dominance of particular discursive framings of HR work is important in uncovering how priorities are legitimized and normalized in order to open up space for considering the social problems that may flow from these choices. In our sample, HR practitioners working in both public and private sector organizations drew on a primarily business-focused discourse referring to issues such as increasing competitive pressures facing their organization which they stressed were inevitably leading to a greater need for HR to be 'strategic' and to use technology in ways that make them more efficient and effective. Respondents expressed difficulty in finding the opportunity or 'permission' to engage in a rival employee champion discourse characterized by terms such as 'employee well-being', 'employee welfare', and 'employee advocacy' as well as the concepts of 'moral' and 'ethical'.

The diffusion of what is generally being understood as 'best practice' among private and public sector HR professionals was a common theme emerging in accounts about the context of changes taking place in the landscape of HR. Consistent with recent CIPD research, the presence of talk and ideas about business partnering appears to be as strong a driver for change in the public sector as the so-called business imperatives (CIPD 2005, p. ix). For instance, when asked why his organization was changing along these lines, one HR director working in education said:

> Em, [long pause], I probably picked it up in two ways. One just general adverts for posts. There just seems to be more of a proliferation if you look through the IPD press and you know the terminology but also talking to organizational development consultants, speaking to people and companies in the private sector companies like where they seem to have a different approach and terminology and that's where the language started to a become a combination of the two . . . where the language is getting more common and I thought well I need to look a bit more into this and see is it just a label is there something beneath it? And I suspect there's a bit of both actually. (HR Director)

Cost drivers are also seen by respondents to be significant contextual features shaping interest in and uptake of new models of the HR function along Ulrichian lines. One respondent who specializes in employment law talks of the inevitability of a marginalization of the 'employee champion side of things' in public sector organizations as cost reductions become more manifest.

> Still in the public sector, predominantly big parts of the NHS and local authorities there's still a lot of the employee champion side in HR because they feel that the public persona would be castigated if they're seen to be bad to their employees. But there is beginning to be a tension because of the cost of it all. (HR Consultant)

While the landscape of HR might be changing and HR business partnership and related terms, expressions and material practices becoming more prominent, there exists also concern that employee's rights in the workplace are under-emphasized within a HR system privileging employer interests. This concern derives from a deterioration of employment conditions driven by cost cutting and increasing work pressure showing that HR practice, even within the context of a changing 'textscape' where business partner language becomes more prominent, cannot escape 'the major contradiction embedded in capitalist systems: the need to achieve both control and consent of employees' (Legge 1995, p. 14).

While there has been much discussion within the mainstream literature about how the function can transform itself in ways that will improve organizational performance (Beer 1997; Barney and Wright 1998; Ulrich and Brockbank 2005), such exhortations are rarely

placed in an historical context which remembers that all attempts to frame the employment relationship, in this way or that, raise serious questions about winners, losers and tradeoffs. Claims that such changes are 'imperative' and 'unavoidable' obscure their potential to produce increased labour intensification, work stress, alienation and other outcomes that systematically threaten employee well-being. Recent evidence suggests, indeed, that employment under these 'new capitalistic' conditions is precarious for many, and this decries the overly technocratic nature of the discussion about employment management that is central to most mainstream HR academic work where changes are presented as politically neutral.

We have described how the 'strategic amplification' of structural changes and the turn to business partnership in HR are being construed as an ideological common sense which holds for everyone within an organizational setting. Our study, rooted in CDA, has the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the emergence of HR business partnership by focusing on the potentially negative consequences of growing professional distance that is emerging between those that work in HR services (professional and administrative workforce) and those who use these services. We have shown how the particular order of discourse in which these structural changes are emerging (here as 'business' and 'employee champion' discourses) have a strong controlling influence over the 'linguistic variability' (Fairclough 2003) within HR practice in that it acts to close off possibilities for understanding and dealing with inevitable tensions in meeting employee needs and aspirations and business objectives. Following Fairclough (2003), we have focused on how business partnership features in the talk of HR practitioners, and observed the dominance of business facing discourse at the expense of an alternate employee champion discourse.

Our analysis points to a dynamic and dialectic relationship between the local construction of HR and wider social practices and societal values (Harley and Hardy 2004). This emergent nature of social practice is important to the study of how HR discourse is played out in a local setting. While the HR business partner discursive template has been shown to objectify individuals in particular ways, changes in the wider textscape of HR inevitably create spaces where credibility and support for alternate HR practices and the discourses within which they are constituted, are driven by social values rather than strict economic criteria. However any re-ordering of HR discourses means a significant shift in language-use about the championing of employee interests at the workplace, which we have shown as being largely framed as administrative 'back office' work, relegated to junior HR staff located in an increasingly fragmented HR function where Shared Service Centres are a typical feature, or carried out by line managers with more or less enthusiasm, but within a reconfigured HR function, no longer accepted as being at the heart of HR activity.

Conclusion

HR business partnership, like earlier models of HRM, is an essentially unitarist framing of HR work and downplays the inherent duality of HR work raised in more critical accounts of HRM. While HR practitioners are urged to take on strategic roles, roles rooted in HR's historical duty of care to employees and to fight for parity in the employment relationship are disappearing by stealth. Exhortations for HR practitioners to pursue strategic roles and downplay their historically embedded administrative and employee championing pose a serious threat to the integrity of HR work and claims to professional expertise (Kochan 2004, 2007; Torrington et al. 2005). The discursive constitution of HR

business partnership is also associated with material outcomes in terms of HR service delivery.

There is a powerful coupling of the business partner discourse with the diffusion of structural transformations in the guise of the 'shared service' model of HR (CIPD Report 2005; Losey, Meisinger and Ulrich 2005). Within the UK, in the context of the government's reform and efficiency agenda, a 'business partnership' approach based on Ulrichian lines 'is taken as understood' by HR professionals transferring from private to public sector organizations, who are described as 'bringing fresh perspectives to the place of HR and the way HR operates with the business' (CIPD Report 2005).

Having said this, tensions arising from moves towards the shared services model are beginning to emerge from empirical studies that identify, for example, the distancing of HR from employees and their front line managers, segmentation of HR roles, fragmentation of HR work and an emerging imbalance between people-oriented and business-oriented HR roles. Critical scholarship of such tensions is vital albeit difficult since critical analysts can easily find themselves locked into what Harley and Hardy (2004, p. 393) describe as a 'de facto reply genre' in which the counter story mainly serves to reproduce the first story to be told, resulting in reacting to the HRM agenda rather than setting it. Accepting these difficulties, our aim has been to draw on CDA in order to examine practitioner talk of HR work and to challenge the emerging orthodoxy of business partnering by exploring tensions and difficulties for HR practitioners, line managers and employees posed by the structural and relational patterns it promotes in theory, and practice.

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