The changing face of HRM: in search of balance

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Current models of HRM suggest that expectations about HR roles are changing as organisations are striving to make the HR function leaner and more 'strategic'. In our article we explore the changing roles of HRM as they are perceived by different stakeholder groups within the HR profession through the medium of a study examining the diffusion of the concept of 'the thinking performer' launched by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in 2002. We explain how the concept of business partnering dominates respondents' talk about HR policy and practice and raise questions about the impact of this in terms of HRM's relationship with employees, employee well-being and the career paths of HR professionals. We argue that the profession needs to reflect seriously on the consequences of a dominant business/strategic partner framing of HR work, which fails to address the duality that has historically always been inherent in HR practice. We conclude that there is a need for a more balanced HR agenda addressing human and economic concerns in current and future models of HRM.

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For the past decade, research in HRM has focused on the take-up and impact of commitment seeking 'high performance' HR practices that are argued to lead to improved employee and organisational performance (Huselid *et al.*, 1997; Wood, 1999; Legge, 2001). More recently, attention has been drawn to the potential of 'e-enabled HRM' in helping to reduce costs of HR services and to 'liberate HR practitioners from routine administration so they can focus on strategic and change management issues' (Martin, 2005: 17). Linked with this is the emergence of the business partnering modelling of HRM originally developed by David Ulrich in 1997.

In what follows, we critically evaluate key assumptions underpinning new conceptualisations of HR practice framed by the notion of business partnership, and present initial findings from our in-depth research into the concept of the 'thinking performer', launched by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), as it relates to the changing roles of HRM. We do this by structuring our article into four parts. In the first part we show how models and vocabularies of HRM driven by the business partner concept are currently being amplified, and how these are shaping the creation of current and future HR agendas. In the next section we explain our research design, and then move on to present our findings, which point to the dominance of business 'speak' in framing talk of HR practice and the

notion of the thinking performer, and how this is squeezing out space for framing HR outcomes in terms of employee well-being and advocacy. In our final section, we conclude by suggesting that the thinking performer concept could be a powerful tool to encourage more explicit critical reflection on HR practice. We ask whether the framing of the concept around the notion of business partner/strategic partner is damaging its potential to facilitate the incorporation of broader issues of employee well-being through promoting more critically reflective HR practice.

EMERGENT MODELS OF HRM

The term 'thinking performer' evolved from a deep-seated frustration amongst the CIPD 'executive' at the emphasis typically placed on operational rather than strategic issues amongst HR practitioners, and the need for them to understand the importance of the links between HR activities and business outcomes (Whittaker and Johns, 2004). Described as a conceptual device for focusing new entrants to the profession on both thinking and reflecting, on the one hand, and performing and doing, on the other (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005), the term frames the vision for the CIPD Professional Standards, launched in 2002, which is to ensure that all CIPD members become 'thinking performers' who continuously update their professional knowledge and 'add value' to the businesses by which they are employed (CIPD Professional Standards, 2004). This business focus is clear in the CIPD definition of thinking performer as

> [s]omeone who 'makes the move' to becoming a business partner and
> (. . .) 'is an HR professional who applies a critically thoughtful approach
> to their own job so as to make a contribution to organisational survival,
> profitability and to meeting its vision and strategic goals'. (CIPD
> Professional Standards, 2004; Whittaker and Johns, 2004)

The framing of the concept by the CIPD is tightly bound with expressions like 'strategic', 'value added', 'customer advantage' and 'doing things cheaper, better or faster'. This is exemplified in the discussion found on the CIPD website on what the thinking performer is (CIPD website, 2005) and the recent launch of the new leadership and management standards, an element of the Institute's Professional Development Scheme (PDS):

> The long-heralded shift from practitioner to HR business partner is
> happening more and more – and it's the biggest change since the
> restyling of the personnel function. How is the CIPD helping members
> make the move? . . . What is emerging is a shift from practitioner focused
> on process to the 'thinking performer', a breed of professional who can,
> through acquiring a top-to-toe, thorough knowledge of their business,
> have a tangible influence on corporate strategy. (Whittaker and Johns,
> 2004: 32–33)

The values propounded here are similar to those underpinning the business partner modelling of HRM as developed by Ulrich (1997). Described by the CIPD as a fundamental rethink of what HRM is for, and how it is measured (CIPD Factsheet, 2005), the 'business partner' framework developed by Ulrich (1997) has recently been

trumpeted as the practitioner paradigm towards which the profession should aspire (Caldwell, 2003: 988).

Ulrich (1997) prescribes that HR practitioners engage in a 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 HR professionals partner with line managers to help them reach their goals through effective strategy formulation and strategy execution (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005b: 27). Change agents are responsible for the delivery of organisational transformation and culture change. Administrative experts constantly improve organisational efficiency by re-engineering the HR function and other work processes such as introducing 'shared services'.

The employee champion is a particularly interesting role. It combines a focus on people with a focus on day-to-day operational issues. In his most recent modification of HR roles, Ulrich splits the employee champion role into the 'employee advocate' and 'human resource developer', placing the latter as a more future-focused process role (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005a, b). Central to the employee advocate role is the requirement for the HR professional 'to make sure the employer–employee relationship is one of reciprocal value', requiring the ability to

> 'see the world through employees' eyes' and act as their representative, while at the same time 'looking through customers', shareholders' and managers' eyes and communicating to employees what is required for them to be successful in creating value'. (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005b: 201)

The employee champion/advocate role is most closely associated with responsibility for employees but it differs from previous conceptualisations of employee-facing roles such as the 'consensus negotiator' of Torrington *et al.* (2002), the 'regulator' of Storey (1992) or the 'contracts manager' of Tyson (1995). These other roles recognise the inherent plurality in managing the employment relationship and acknowledge the inevitability of trade-offs between employee needs and goals and organisational objectives. The occupiers of these roles are recognised as being caught in 'a precarious balancing act' between management and labour, whereas the employee champion appears to be closely identified with management as a partner in delivering value (Caldwell, 2003: 997) in a pattern typically reminiscent of Legge's (1978) 'conformist innovator'. Given the uptake of the business partner model by the CIPD and others, this framing of the employee champion role is profoundly important when we discuss employee well-being, and we return to this issue later in the article. The positioning of the HR function as a key organisational player is proving very attractive to HR professionals and the term 'business partner' is increasingly popular with HR practitioners (CIPD HR Survey Report, 2003); thus we need to locate these developments in a broader context.

Setting the business partner model in context

Business partnership can be set in the broader context of the long-running debate on the roles of HR managers (Ulrich, 1997, 1998; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003; Purcell *et al.*, 2003; Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). In the UK context, Legge (1978)

produced one of the most influential models of HRM which identified two strategies by which personnel managers could gain power and influence within the organisation – the conformist innovator and the deviant innovator. The conformist innovator attempts to relate his/her work clearly to the dominant values and norms in the organisation aiming simply to satisfy the requirements of senior management. The deviant innovator subscribes to a quite different set of norms, gaining credibility and support for ideas driven by social values rather than strict economic criteria (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005: 131).

Alternative classifications include one constructed by Tyson and Fell (1986), which drew on a building industry metaphor to identify three distinct 'types' or models of HR practice. These ranged from a basic administrative model (clerk of works) to a sophisticated, industrial relations model (contracts manager) and a business-oriented, strategically aware function, which designed the employment relationship (the architect) (Tyson, 1995: 22). Storey (1992) proposed a fourfold typology of HR roles based on two dimensions, strategic/tactical and interventionary/non-interventionary: 'advisers', 'handmaidens', 'regulators' and 'changemakers'.

These models construct how the HR function can best contribute to improved employee and organisational performance and therefore create expectations about effective HR practice. Increasingly, they have focused on a split between strategic and non-strategic roles played by HR practitioners, and links between HRM and firm financial performance have become more prominent (Huselid, 1995; Boxall, 1996; Boxall and Purcell, 2003, Purcell *et al.*, 2003). As a result, the HR function is ever more expected to embrace a 'strategic' and less transactional approach to people management as HR information systems are extended or supplemented with new technologies (Martin, 2005). By framing the HR contribution in this way, it may be difficult for HR practitioners to assume an independent stance from their line 'partners', and thereby draw on different sets of criteria for the evaluation of organisational success that are reflective of social as much as business/economic values (Legge, 1978; Townley, 2004). In other words, it is likely that HR professionals will progressively seek to enhance their influence in the strategic decision-making process through enactment of a 'conformist' strategy, thereby treating dominant business values as a 'given'.

Noting the attractiveness of the 'strategic partner' role amongst HR professionals in the UK, Ulrich and Brockbank call for practitioners not to lose sight of the employee champion role, and argue that employee relations 'is not just window dressing' and that '. . . caring for, listening to, and responding to employees remains a centrepiece of HR work' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005b: 201). Here, attention is drawn to the need for fair treatment of employees and to treat individuals with dignity. Nevertheless, like their earlier modelling of business partnership, arguments remain underpinned by a strong notion of mutuality between different stakeholders, guided by the belief that managers, employees, consultants and HR professionals will all work collaboratively towards a common goal of efficiency and high performance levels.

Ulrich and Brockbank explain that HRM's role in delivering value to customers, shareholders, managers and employees rests on being able to create a 'unique and powerful perspective' in which they 'see aspects of the business environment that go beyond what other disciplines bring and that add substantially to business success'

(2005b: 8). In terms of employee advocacy, focus is placed on the need for HR professionals to 'form a bridge between management and employees so that mutual understanding makes the best of whatever the company faces' (2005b: 85). These arguments fail 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 an imperialistic rather than empowering style of leadership; with a financial rather than people-driven approach' (Brown, 2005).

Strategic amplification and employee well-being

What are the consequences of the strategic amplification of HR work? Peccei (2004) argues that the heavy emphasis traditionally placed within the HR literature on the achievement of business-oriented performance outcomes has obscured the importance of employee well-being in its own right, and that there is a dearth of research investigating what HR practices help to sustain and underpin 'happy workplaces'.[1] Similarly, Grant and Shields (2002) argue that the emphasis typically placed on the business case for HRM suggests a one-sided focus on organisational outcomes at the expense of employees, resonating with Winstanley and Woodall's (2000) assertions that employee well-being and ethics within the unfolding field of HRM remain contentious, and that

> the ethical dimension of HR policy and practice has been almost ignored
> in recent texts on HRM, where the focus has shifted to 'strategic fit' and
> 'best practice' approaches. (Winstanley and Woodall, 2000: 6)

Ulrich himself argues that a high degree of alignment between HR employee champions and management can lead to extreme alienation of employees from both HRM and management, which has obvious implications for employee well-being. This dynamic can be avoided, he argues, if HR professionals effectively 'represent both employee needs and implement management agendas' (Ulrich, 1997: 5, cited by Caldwell, 2003: 997). The real possibility of value–role conflict is not addressed here, perhaps because Ulrich's conception of the employee champion (and of employee advocate) seems to take for granted one of the central nostrums of normative models of HRM, that employee well-being and organisational goals can always be aligned, *e.g.* through the creation of high commitment or high performance work practices (Tyson, 1995; Purcell *et al.*, 2003). A growing number of analysts challenge this unitarist assumption that 'what is good for the organisation is good for the worker' and call for the need to build the worker back into models of HRM (Legge, 1999; Guest, 2002: 336; Francis and Sinclair, 2003; Keegan and Boselie, forthcoming).

Making sense of the possible trade-offs in HR policy and practice between the pursuit of high performance working and employee well-being is made difficult by the fact that the latter construct has been conceived broadly by researchers, and 'often not in a way that is intuitively actionable for managers and employees' (Harter *et al.*, 2003: 208). The impact of HR practices on employee outcomes is thought to be considerably more complex than that normally assumed in the HR literature, and there remain serious questions about the nature and effects of high performance work practices on employee well-being (Peccei, 2004: 12).

To summarise, the inherent 'duality' in HR work described by writers like Legge (1978) is less evident in current 'talk' about what HR is doing and where it is heading

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(Dunn, 1990; Hart, 1993; Keenoy, 1997, 1999). While it is evident from research that practitioners recognise a need to encompass both 'hard' business-oriented and 'soft' people-centred employment practices (Truss, 1999; Watson, 2002), models of HRM typically fail to capture this dynamic because these 'hard/soft' elements are conceptualised as discrete entities that can be measured in objective terms (Keenoy, 1999; Francis, 2003; Watson, 2004).

Conceptualising HRM in ways that acknowledge the complexities and tensions that line/HR managers face in their attempt to develop the kind of 'high performance working' promoted by the CIPD (EEF/CIPD Report, 2003) seems to us an essential goal which could be facilitated by a critically reflective framing of HR practice. This could provide a critical response to what Legge (1999) notes as a trend to represent employees in terms of a market-based discourse facilitating HR practitioners to draw on strict economic criteria rather than social values to legitimise their practice, and what Renwick (2003) observes as the gambling by HR practitioners with employee well-being in their efforts to gain strategic influence.

The spread of business partnership

Notwithstanding concerns about Ulrich's work, uses of the term 'business partner' have proliferated, and while there is no one commonly accepted definition of business partnering, this has not dampened enthusiasm in terms of the hiring of business partners. According to some commentators demand for business partners has increased by 30 per cent in 2004 alone and there is evidence of substantial increases in salaries (Beckett, 2005). Steeply climbing salaries and an increased perception of status and prestige mean that the business partner term seems to have become the title of choice for ambitious HR practitioners.

As CIPD research shows (Caldwell, 2003; Brown *et al.*, 2004), the concept of the business partner is often used as a synonym for strategic partner which in turn is proving the most attractive of Ulrich's original four roles for most HR people. While as mentioned above there is no one model of partnering, research evidence points to a significant amplification of the strategic partner and change agent roles amongst HR practitioners, while the other 'faces' of HR practice are unwillingly acknowledged and/or minimised (CIPD HR Survey Report, 2003). Amongst the 1,200 HR survey respondents across the UK and Ireland, a third of practitioners see their primary role as that of strategic business partner; slightly fewer (24 per cent) see themselves as change agents; 4 per cent see themselves as being administrative experts in the long term; and finally '[r]elatively few senior people saw themselves as employee champions and fewer still would wish to do so' (CIPD HR Survey Report, 2003: 11).

Bearing in mind the history of HR practitioners' struggles for acceptance as key organisational players (Watson, 1977; Legge, 1978; Guest and King, 2004), it is hardly surprising that a way of modelling HR practice, constituting HRM as 'hard', 'business driven' and 'strategic', has become so popular. If HR practitioners have indeed become strongly associated with the strategic partner role, perhaps at the cost of other roles such as the employee champion, the enhancements this might bring to HR practitioners should be carefully weighed against the drawbacks in terms of the loss of visibility and voice of other stakeholders, especially employees (Simmons, 2003).

Given the concerns that have been expressed by commentators on the business partner model, it is surprising that the CIPD align their central vision of the thinking performer so closely with business partnership. Nevertheless, the framing of the thinking performer concept in ways that emphasise a 'critically thoughtful approach' and the importance of employee well-being in all HR considerations *could* help balance the overly business focused tendencies noted in business partnership models, but is this happening as the thinking performer moves into practice? Our exploratory research seeks to answer this question by tracing the thinking performer into practice, exploring what kind of meanings are associated with the term and whether and how it influences HR practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study reported here was designed to identify the meanings respondents attach to the concept of the thinking performer and how it relates to the changing role of human resource management. Our research started with a systematic review of the CIPD Professional Standards and related documentation, and in depth conversations with a purposive sample of respondents (Patton, 2002), whom we believed likely to have rich insights into the emergence of the thinking performer, and how the thinking performer is being traced into practice. To that end, all but one of our respondents are linked to the CIPD and include: members of the CIPD 'executive' (10 members of the Membership and Professional Development Committee and the Professional Knowledge and Information Departments); examiners (2 PDS); PDS Course Leaders (7); HR practitioners (51) including HR assistants, HR advisors, HR managers, HR directors, HR business partners, HR recruitment consultants; members of the National Upgrading Panel (3); students working towards graduate membership of CIPD (11); and the Regional (Scottish) Secretary of the General Municipal Boilermakers Union.

We consider the inductive approach taken here to be consistent with our research goals of exploring, through small rich samples, the emergent meaning of the thinking performer and how this concept relates to change in HR work and changing expectations of HR practitioners (Isabella, 1990). Interviews were initially semi-structured around a list of questions pertaining to changes in the nature of the HR function in respondents' organisations and their recognition and understanding of the thinking performer concept. As the interviews progressed, the theme of HR business partnership and specifically the model of four HR roles from Ulrich's (1997) *HR Champions* book came up regularly. Consistent with accepted exploratory research practice, we adapted our semi-structured questionnaire to take account of this emerging pattern and incorporated questions to explore this issue in relation to changing HR roles (Cresswell, 1998).

One aspect of our study that deserves attention is the reliance on a homogeneous sample of CIPD respondents. It is plausible that membership and involvement with the CIPD shapes one's attitudes towards HR practice. Survey evidence has shown that there is a relationship between membership of the CIPD and those personnel/HR practitioners who are convinced of HRM's existence ('believers'), those who are convinced of its non-existence ('atheists') and those who are unsure ('agnostics') (Grant and Oswick, 1998). Trehan (2004) also suggests that the CIPD

plays a major role in shaping the ongoing dominance of normative HR discourses, and concurs with Reed and Anthony (1992) who call teachers to account, insisting on their responsibility to help practitioners engage with broader moral and social issues inherent in management practice (see also Fenwick, 2003, 2005). Recent empirical evidence also confirms the dominance of consensus-oriented theorising in knowledge construction by HR journals including those associated with the CIPD (Keegan and Boselie, forthcoming). Therefore we accept that our findings may reflect on the nature of our sample, and were we to carry out the same study on respondents not linked to the CIPD a different picture might emerge. Having said that, the influence of the CIPD is important enough to merit attention since it has a membership of over 120,000 and is a potentially profound shaper of the meaning of HR practice in the UK.

Exploratory interviews were carried out with all respondents and these were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow systematic analysis of the raw data. This produced approximately 1,500 pages of transcripts which were reviewed line by line within a paragraph. A 'start list' of analyst-constructed (Patton, 1987) codes was drawn up prior to the interviews, which reflected initial themes guiding the research drawn from the HR literature and the literature on the thinking performer published by the CIPD. These codes included familiarity, uptake and usage of the thinking performer concept; structure, process and practice in HR work; the range of activities of HR practitioners; current and aspirational roles; and key concepts, expressions, beliefs associated with the thinking performer and HR practice.

When the first interviews had been conducted, we drew up some more specific indigenous (Patton, 1987) codes closer to respondents' emergent categories, *e.g.* codes relating to the emerging theme of 'business partnership'. Coded material was summarised and outlines were placed into partially ordered matrix displays (Miles and Huberman, 1994) designed to impose minimal conceptual structure on the material displayed. As textual summaries evolved, the following themes emerged: the framing of HR policy and practice; structural changes and devolution of HR tasks to the line; shrinking employee champion role and costs to employee well-being; and finally loss of employee trust and confidence. In the next section we discuss each of these themes in turn.

FINDINGS

The framing of HR policy and practice

Most of our HR respondents have either not heard the term thinking performer or have a fairly neutral opinion about it. However, for several respondents the expression does seem to have an intuitive appeal. Even where they had no, or little, familiarity with the term, it conjured up a variety of images about being professional, being reflective, being critical and being strategic, illustrated by the following comments:

> I haven't actually heard the term before, but I think it is so important, learning and doing and reflecting. I guess that it means you probably would use models, you probably would check assumptions with other people and that you would think through the consequences of what you do. (HR director, public sector)

...an individual who questions behaviour rather than just doing the job. (HR adviser, private sector)

I think the key area is around being strategic, you know, strategic concepts and thinking. (HR manager, private sector)

While the thinking performer concept is not a strong feature of how HR practitioners talk about their work or HR policy and practice in general, by contrast there is significant usage of the business partner concept amongst our respondents. At the start of our study, the concept emerged naturally and unprompted in interviews, when people spoke about their roles and also where the function is going generally. As noted above, in later interviews we added questions to address recognition and application of Ulrich's model of business partnership.

The role of business partner appeared to offer great appeal to practitioners seeking to raise their influence and credibility and secure their identities as professionals. In this context, our analysis of the language they used to describe and explain HR work showed that it is framed by a strategy discourse that effectively closes off discussion about more employee-focused, operational issues. On considering Ulrich's roles, there is an evident trend towards people either describing themselves as strategic partners and using the term synonymously with business partner or discussing their career aspirations in terms of movement towards strategic partner status. There is far less emphasis on the other three roles. According to one senior CIPD adviser who has carried out extensive research in many public and private sector organisations experimenting with 'progressive' HR systems,

Everybody claims to be strategic partner, people struggle with the change agent, everybody likes to be the administrative expert, and nobody wants to be the employee champion.

In a similar vein, one of our respondents who is an HR business partner described the situation in his company as follows:

The emphasis is definitely on being a strategic partner, change agent as well. Depending on what you are doing at the time, some background admin. knowledge, and virtually zero on the employee champion role. (Business partner)

Clearly, at the heart of business partnering there is a concern with business-focused strategic activity. As one senior recruitment consultant for the HR profession remarks,

Most HR professionals will now have 'value added' stamped on their foreheads, because they are being asked always to think in terms of the business objectives and how what they do supports the business objectives and the business plan.

In this sense, HR work has thus become more focused on delivering business needs and HR practitioners must become more adept at measuring their effectiveness in terms of business competitiveness rather than employee comfort (Ulrich, 1998). These findings are consistent with a recent review of how recruitment consultants view an ideal candidate for business partner:

> Success in the role will have more to do with producing business metrics, than dishing out tea and sympathy. . . . The desire and ability to be an intrinsic part of the management team is a must. It's the new element of commercialism that excites yet eludes recruiters. . . . Language is often a better indicator of aptitude than a list of qualifications or competencies. (Beckett, 2005)

As part of her study, Beckett cites one HR director consultant who argues,

> I listen to the words people use. Someone who is interested in how the business is doing and talks sales figures, shows more potential than someone who uses HR speak all the time. (2005: 19)

The perceived framing of HR work in terms of business partnership was also evident in four out of the seven course tutors' accounts of HR practice and their articulated understanding of the concept of 'thinking performer'. All commented on the increased focus within the standards generally on business partnering and 'strategic capabilities'. Two tutors considered that this 'strategic emphasis' had 'gone too far' and that student practitioners working at a very junior level of HRM could 'feel alienated' from the image of the thinking performer as someone working at a strategic decision-making level:

> It is complicated by the fact that the majority of their concerns and needs are operational rather than strategic and there appears to be an increasing divergence between these needs/concerns and the content of the CIPD programmes. (Course tutor)

> The thinking performer is just the same thing as the business partner and I think that there is an implicit emphasis in the CIPD on wanting students to think more strategically. I may be wrong, but I think you have got an institute which is, in a sense, trying to promote its own prestige and its own wealth in the greater world and promote some influence. This is at the expense at what its members really need and where we fulfil that role in an educational process. I think that that is what is actually happening, and that we are actually starting to diverge away from the basic educational needs of the majority of students coming onto the standard programme and who are largely in lower level HR roles. (Course tutor)

Similarly one student practitioner talked of a 'disconnection' between his experience of HR work and the CIPD standards, noted below.

> I don't feel a lot of students doing the CIPD are performing a strategic role, then I don't think, you know, you're not going to sit there, you're not going to advise on absence management or a disciplinary process or something like that. There is a disconnection and I think, you know, you're a student and I think the CIPD think they'll be strategic business partners and we're not, you know, we have to deal with day-to-day HR issues that arise in the business and that's why I think I have to, I personally feel that I have difficulties in the examination. (Student)

Structural changes and devolution of HR tasks to the line

Administrative expertise is seen as something that is essential and our respondents typically report far-reaching structural changes to manage this aspect of the HR function linked to the e-enablement of HRM. This includes the creation of HR service ('call') centres that have become line managers' prime source of HR expertise. These tended to operate to a set of agreed service level targets consistent with recent research evidence of the 'widespread acceptance of self-service as "the" way to manage HR, for both employees and managers' (Towers Perrin, 2002: 2, 2003; Martin, 2005).[2] It may of course be that practice is running far ahead of theory in this respect, as for example in the study of publishing trends in HRM carried out by Hoobler and Johnson (2004) which revealed that there is a neglect of academic attention to HR technology issues.

> [I]n our sample, the paltry 1 per cent of articles that focused on the interplay of HR and technology seemed to ignore the magnitude of this trend. Have HR information systems been left to consultants and other management practitioners? Or, have academicians failed to keep up with the latest developments in HR technology and to incorporate these into our research questions? An underlying assumption may be that research on technology use in HR is not unique to HR representatives and HR systems, that is, that it should be left to computer scientists. Future research should explore whether HR and technology is a research area deserving unique consideration. (2004: 672)

By contrast, our respondents signalled the magnitude of technological change for the HR function. On describing the creation of new service centres respondents in our study talked of significant reductions in numbers of on-site HR staff and higher ratios of employees to HR specialists, ranging from 1:100 to 1:300. This trend works hand in hand with ongoing devolution of 'HR tasks' to the line, including absence management, grievance handling, management of discipline, coaching and counselling employees. Recent research has shown that line management involvement in HR work of this kind is not without its difficulties (Reddington *et al.*, 2005) and there remain mixed results about the process of devolution and the competence of line managers in HR work more generally (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003; Renwick, 2003).

Renwick's review of line managers' experiences, for example, indicates that line managers may well lack the capability and responsibility to deal with some HR work or may not want this responsibility. More recent survey evidence by Hales indicates that the issue of competing priorities experienced by front line managers remains strong. Based on a survey of 135 organisations, his findings paint a picture of 'a stable, consistent FLM [front line management] role where a common performance-oriented supervisory core is surrounded by a penumbra of additional managerial responsibilities relating to stewardship, translating strategy into operations, unit management and, exceptionally, business management' (Hales, 2005: 501). It is not surprising, therefore, that 'change management' (Martin, 2005) and 'problems with the line' (Reddington *et al.*, 2005) have been identified as significant issues that need to be addressed in the move towards technological and conceptual transformation of

HR service delivery. In this context, it might be naïve to assume that line managers have the time, the training or the interest to give employee well-being the kind of priority it deserves, especially when it appears to have increasingly less priority amongst HR professionals themselves.

Shrinking employee champion role and costs to employee well-being

The emphasis respondents place on business and strategy as the foundation for HR ideals, practice and values suggests that they are locked into business 'speak'. While business language sensitises HR practitioners to the importance of value-added HR activities, our analysis of respondents accounts indicates that the same language closes off possibilities for understanding and dealing with inevitable tensions in meeting employee needs and aspirations and business objectives.

Moreover the strategic amplification of HR work seems to have an effect that the employee champion role is not perceived to be a potential career route for HR practitioners, and in the face of a perceived contraction of this role, some respondents expressed concern about their career options. Those who were originally attracted to the profession because of the promise of fulfilling the long-standing ethical agenda at the heart of HR work talk of facing a bleak future. For example, one junior practitioner working in a global electronics firm, which had recently siphoned HR services off into a call centre, remarked

> We lost that human contact, we were at the end of a telephone, we weren't allowed to go out and see people anymore, to give advice to people face-to-face. . . . We are losing what HR's about.

He goes on to talk about feeling 'let down' by the failure of the profession to realise how important the employee champion is to a fully rounded HR function.

> I want to be an employee champion working directly with people and I can't. I can see that avenue being closed off fairly soon and it makes me uncertain about whether or not I want to stay in HR.

Linked with the above, our findings reveal that the employee champion role is not seen as a viable career move for ambitious HR practitioners, a finding that dovetails with the recent CIPD (2003) survey noted earlier, which shows that the employee champion role is least favoured by respondents. Furthermore, while Jarvis and Robinson (2005) cite survey evidence to indicate that HR directors have currently worked in the profession for an average of 20 years, there is a concern amongst some of our respondents that a gulf is beginning to emerge between those at the top and lower rungs of the HR career ladder as people are perceived to be parachuting into top HR jobs from outside the profession:

> business and strategic partners and people at the lower end of the scale like administrators and lower line who are beginning to feel like they have been cut off. It's almost a two-tier system. Strategic partners are the important guys, but that's not how it should be. (HR adviser)

At a more senior level, HR directors in our study also expressed concern about the profession losing sight of its distinctive employee champion role. One HR director

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responded by moving to a smaller organisation where he had an opportunity to carve out a form of business partnership 'with attitude', which proactively embraces the employee agenda (see Francis and Keegan (2005) for a case example).

One senior CIPD adviser explains this shrinking of the employee champion role as follows:

> Nobody wants to be an employee champion. They all think it is ideologically unsound. I think they see it as them being in opposition to the organisation. I think for them it suggests that their management credentials are suspect. When an employee champion is doing their job I think that is something that is much closer to the heartland of HR than business issues *per se*. The employee champion, I am beginning to think, is the elephant in the office and it's actually the bit you don't name but it's critically important. . . . If you want to make as big a shift as business partnering implies then you have to accept that there will be some losses.

Loss of employee trust and confidence

The devolution of transactional HR work to the line combined with its relocation to service centres as well as the fact that business partners are largely oriented towards strategic issues means employees are increasingly losing day-to-day contact with HR specialists and relying on line managers who may have neither the time nor the training to give HR work the priority it needs. Perhaps it would be worthwhile for the profession to reflect on the consequences of HR practitioners vanishing from the shopfloor and the risk that employees will lose trust and confidence in the HR function to advocate their needs.

The nature and impact of the potentially growing alienation of HR service from employees remains under-researched (Reddington *et al.*, 2005) and raises questions about the lack of basic social and infrastructural support for employees, a point emphasised by Harry Donaldson, Regional (Scottish) Secretary of the General Municipal Boilermakers Union:

> If business partnering becomes too much driven by team leaders and line managers, and the only place that you can contact HR is to actually go through a PC, or 'phone a call centre, then employees will question whether their employer really cares about them and is serious about the maxim that they are the company's most valued assets. It seems to me that the role of employee champion will become the sole preserve of the trade union.

HR needs to carve out a distinctive contribution in this respect to avoid the costs to employee well-being of a blindly strategic focus. The business partner ethos does not guarantee employee well-being such as job satisfaction and work–life balance for all employees, reduced levels of stress, and better promotion of health and wellness at the workplace. In HR's urgency to move away from an 'unhealthy preoccupation with administrative process and regulatory compliance' (CIPD Impact Report, 2005: 7), one has to ask the questions, who will be the guardians of employee well-being and who will ensure consistency of organisational justice for all employees?

CONCLUSIONS: THE THINKING PERFORMER – JUST ANOTHER BUSINESS PARTNER?

As we have discussed in this article, the thinking performer concept is central to the new CIPD leadership and management standards, is intuitively appealing if not widely known among our HR respondents, and is framed in terms of business partnership/strategic partnership at a discursive level in CIPD-produced material on the concept. What we would like to add is that there is the potential to use the thinking performer concept to promote a 'critically thoughtful approach' to HR practice (noted on page 232). This, however, cannot be expected to occur automatically, especially given the current strong business partner framing of the term. On the contrary, it needs critical reflection to be given more prominence in the modelling of the thinking performer and placed as a foreground issue framing effective HR practice. Such an approach might better facilitate reflection on the dominant assumptions in today's modelling of HRM and its potentially negative side-effects in terms of employees, which could be an immensely valuable contribution. Two of the main drawbacks of the business partner modelling are (1) the apparent disconnection between operational and strategic HR mindsets, and (2) the disconnection between employees and HR personnel who are gradually disappearing from the shopfloor.

These concerns resonate with issues raised in the HR literature about devolving HR work to line managers (Redman and Wilkinson, 2001; Renwick, 2003; Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 2005; Torrington *et al.*, 2005). For example, Torrington and colleagues ask:

> Is there anything harder for a manager to do well than carry out a successful appraisal interview? Are there many more important jobs to be done than explaining strategy, or making the absolutely right appointment of someone to a key role? This is operational management for HR specialists, yet so often we find that they have retreated to the strategy bunker to think great thoughts and discuss the shape of the world with like-minded people consuming endless cups of coffee, while the appraisal and the selection and the communication is left 'to the line'. (Torrington *et al.*, 2005: 731)

Case analysis presented by Hope-Hailey *et al.* (2005) provides us with a rich description of the problems that can arise in the relegation of the employee champion role to line managers. Based on a longitudinal study of HRM and performance within a retail bank, they question the wisdom of focusing on the strategic partnering role and show how the HR department may become more important strategically but 'the human factor of people's everyday work experience may deteriorate' (2005: 64). In line with other recent studies (*e.g.* Guest and King, 2004), the neglect of people-centred roles is shown to have a negative effect on the sustainability of high firm performance, as employees feel increasingly estranged from the HR department.

The assumption that line management 'could and would' fulfil the employee champion role is shown to be 'flawed' in the case described by Hope-Hailey *et al.* Line

managers were 'neither capable nor motivated' to take on people management responsibilities and the authors conclude that 'the failure to recognise the criticality of Ulrich's (1997) employee champion role was a mistake' (Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 2005: 63).

Could the thinking performer encourage HR practitioners to critically reflect in ways that might help us overcome some of the problems noted here? Our findings suggest that this would require an overhaul of how the thinking performer is currently being framed by the CIPD. The problem is the tight coupling of the concept with the business partner/strategic partner concept. This may lead to the trivialisation of the employee-facing role which in Ulrich's model is presented as an operational/day-to-day issue and not a strategic one. There is an unfortunate tendency to use phrases like 'tea and sympathy' to describe what employee champions (should) do, and to suggest that strategic business partnership is the 'future' and that any attempt to reclaim a space for talking about employee well-being is tantamount to dragging the profession back into the dark ages of 'welfare work' (Beckett, 2005; Pickard, 2005).

What we urgently need is a more constructive and thoughtful dialogue on the employee-facing role in HR work. The relegation of the employee champion to an operational/transactional concern is unhelpful in promoting this dialogue as it undermines the career prospects of HR practitioners aspiring to employee champion roles, the continuance of which are necessary if this role is to be taken seriously. Most experts in the field would agree that while it is sensible to pursue an interest in the managerial outcomes of HR practice, we urgently need to build into any analysis of how HR contributes to performance 'a stronger focus on employee-centred outcomes that may or may not relate to corporate performance' (Guest, 2002: 336).

This seeking of a more balanced agenda, as we have argued before (Francis and Keegan, 2005), is the key to shaping future successful HR work. It is heartening to note that there is a growing awareness that organisations should consider the well-being of their employees even when the business case for so doing is not immediately apparent. Finally, we hope our article can contribute to critical reflection on these discussions and help reclaim a space for talking and thinking about HR issues in terms of employee needs and not just the business case. In this regard, it might be worthwhile to consider the possibilities for providing HR professionals a perspective embedded in a 'critical pedagogy' that offers

> a challenging view of management as a social, political and economic practice, but does so in a way that stimulates involvement of the kind that is rare in other forms of management education. (Grey *et al.*, 1996: 109, cited by Rigg, 2005: 39)

Calls for a more critical pedagogical perspective to imbue management education are rooted in the paradox that, despite the considerable power and influence managers exert in the workplace and wider community, traditional management education does little to prepare managers for considering questions of power and responsibility (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Rigg, 2005; Francis, forthcoming). While business school curricula have yet to be influenced by critical theoretical perspectives in any significant way (Reynolds, 1999; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), and writing in academic HR journals is dominated by consensus perspectives (Keegan and Boselie, forthcoming), the growing influence of critical management studies (Fournier and

Grey, 2000) may in time lead to a stronger emphasis on critical reflection in management education and practice.

Critical management studies open up discussion on management issues by drawing attention to hidden aspects and offering alternative readings (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: 17; Hoedemaekers and Keegan, 2004). In this regard, the thinking performer concept could play a valuable role within the education of HR practitioners, but only where there is a commitment on the part of bodies like the CIPD to enhance the role of critical pedagogical perspectives in the programmes and publications they use to reach practitioners and frame HR practice. To conclude, given the recent strategic amplification of HR work there is an increasing urgency for more critical discussion of the ideology and practice of HRM in ways that allow professionals to develop more skilled approaches to balancing inherent tensions in the employment relationship and to build a compelling case for championing ideas that are driven by social values rather than strict economic criteria consistent with a shareholder perspective.

Notes

1. Peccei explains that employee well-being encompasses a number of work-related dimensions including for example both positive and negative work-related affect, job stress, and various aspects of job satisfaction (Furnham, 1991, cited by Peccei, 2004: 3). See also Harter *et al.* (2003).
2. In one case this included the following standards:
   - '90% of queries targeted, to be resolved immediately;
   - Urgent Calls – where the query is unable to be answered immediately and needs to be escalated, the target is for 90% to be resolved within 48 hours;
   - General Calls – where the query is unable to be answered immediately and needs to be escalated, the target is for 90% to be resolved within 72 hours;
   - the ratio of voice mails to phone calls is that it will not exceed 1 : 10;
   - all calls logged in to the Call Logging System. This HR call centre supports over 3,200 managers and employees in the UK.'

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