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High-performance work systems, partnership and the working lives of HR professionals

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High performance work systems (HPWS) and workplace partnership have generated immense academic and practitioner interest in recent years, however little is known about how combining them affects the working lives of HR professionals. This represents a significant omission as HR practitioners are closely involved in negotiating, developing and implementing such systems. Utilising the findings of a longitudinal study we demonstrate how a high profile change programme that blended HPWS and partnership reaped mixed consequences for the HR population. We develop the notion of 'maintenance work' to describe how practitioners engaged with the formal and informal organisation to facilitate the smooth running of these management systems. Whilst those in senior positions experienced increased job satisfaction, the service providers found work intensified and efforts unrecognised.
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INTRODUCTION

There has been a considerable amount of research over the last decade or so on the topics of high performance work systems (HPWS) and workplace partnership (*e.g.* Appelbaum *et al*., 2000; Godard and Delaney, 2000; Guest and Peccei, 2001; Danford *et al*., 2005; Hope-Hailey *et al*., 2005; Stuart and Martínez Lucio, 2005). Furthermore, evidence suggests that some organisations attempt to lubricate high-performance outcomes by cultivating workplace partnership (Danford *et al*., 2005). Much of the attention has focused on the industrial relations consequences of partnership (*e.g.* the impact on trade unions) and organisational outcomes of HPWS (*e.g.* efficiency and productivity issues). Significantly, there has been little exploration of how the coupling of HPWS and partnership affect the working lives of HR professionals.[1] This must be regarded as a significant oversight as the endeavours of this community represent a crucial mediating element in the success or failure of such initiatives. In addition, while much has been written about the changing roles of HR professionals, very little is known about how HR departments actually operate (Truss and Gill, 2009), or of the challenges HR practitioners face in upholding an 'ethos of mutuality' (Caldwell, 2003: 984) under contemporary systems of employment relations and new regimes of work organisation.

To address this gap, this article examines how HR practitioners engage with these systems and the consequences for their working lives.[2] The structure of the article is as follows. We begin with a review of the relevant empirical and theoretical material. To develop the argument, we draw upon three strands of established literature: HPWS, the changing nature of HR roles and partnership. The setting for the case study is then summarised, followed by a methodological synopsis. An overview of the findings is then presented. In the concluding paragraphs we reflect upon how HR working lives can be shaped by a high-performance agenda and what they actually 'do' to facilitate such systems (Truss and Gill, 2009). The study concludes that a high-performance paradigm can deliver mixed blessings for the HR community.

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HPWS – A PANACEA FOR THE HR FUNCTION?

While we have limited specific empirical evidence about the consequences of combining HPWS and partnership for HR practitioners, we can observe that the general debate about the nature and outcomes of HPWS has been somewhat amorphous and significant variation exists in the way that HPWS are conceptualised. One of the criticisms of existing studies is that they have not investigated how HPWS are played out 'on the ground' by social actors. Godard observes that 'conflicts embedded in the structure of employment relations may substantially limit the effectiveness of the high-performance paradigm for employers, render it highly fragile and explain its variable adoption' (Godard, 2004: 371). Such tensions require research approaches that help to open up the 'black-box' of HPWS and give better understandings of how practitioners conceive of these systems, how they attempt to operationalise them, how social relations are affected, and the consequences for employees.

Despite a lack of consensus about the precise formulation of HPWS (Godard, 2004), Appelbaum *et al.*'s (2000) work is often used as a standard reference point for describing the broad characteristics of HPWS and forms a useful touchstone as it helps to locate the potential involvement of the HR function. HPWS are conceptualised as comprising three basic components (p. 39): opportunity for substantive participation in decisions, training and selection policies to guarantee an appropriately skilled workforce, and appropriate incentives (including extrinsic and intrinsic incentives). These purportedly create the climate for increases in discretionary effort, especially where employees 'have a vested interest in the long-term performance of the organization' (p. 43) and feed into improved plant performance and economic gains. Each of the three basic components (participation, skills and incentives) falls firmly within the 'HRM' domain, and as such, one would expect that the HR function will be involved in a variety of ways. We can reflect upon how this involvement may take shape by reference to the generic evidence about the changing nature of HR roles.

Various studies have focused upon the way that role(s) of the HR function have changed and adapted over time. This has been well documented (Truss, 2009), and we assume that readers are familiar with this literature. Our focus is upon identifying what this work suggests about the role(s) that HR practitioners may adopt in HPWS. The debate has ranged from the prescriptive work of Ulrich (*e.g.* 1997) to more empirically based insights (Guest and King, 2004; Francis and Keegan, 2006; Caldwell, 2008; Truss, 2009). While Ulrich's work has been extremely well cited and has certainly been influential in terms of practitioner discourse, it has been argued that it does not adequately reflect the tensions and ambiguities that confront HR practitioners. For this reason, we draw upon Caldwell's well-cited typology which affords more nuanced insights into changing HR roles. We then consider how these roles may play out in a HPWS scenario. Caldwell's work is also useful heuristically as a means of unpacking the experiences of our HR professionals as the study unfolds.

Caldwell's (2003: 989–990) typology describes four contemporary HR roles:

1. an adviser or internal consultant who actively offers senior management and line managers HR advice and expertise;
2. a service provider who is called in by line managers to provide specific HR assistance and support as required;
3. a regulator, formulating, promulgating, and monitoring the observance of personnel or HR policy and practice;
4. a change agent actively pushing forward processes of culture change and organisational transformation.

In respect of HPWS, it is likely that members of the HR function would be called upon in all four capacities: as advisors, offering advice and support regarding the development and implementation of appropriate HR systems and practices to support HPWS; as service providers, assisting line managers in areas such as developing capability and performance monitoring; as regulators, formulating, disseminating and monitoring policies, and engaging with the industrial relations (IR) issues associated with HPWS (*e.g.* dealing with the IR issues around flexible working and also providing expert advice on employment legislation[3]); and finally as change agents, promoting the cultural change and transformation activities required to progress HPWS. There is little doubt that HR issues are regarded as central to effective HPWS (Appelbaum *et al*., 2000). Given the historical legacy of the lack of influence and power of the HR (previously personnel) function (Caldwell, 2003), HPWS could offer the potential for acting as a panacea the HR profession, as HR becomes tasked with playing key strategic and operational roles in respect of developing and maintaining HPWS.

Despite this optimistic scenario, existing studies suggest that HR practitioners are more likely to experience tensions and ambiguities, partly because they occupy multiple and conflicting roles (Caldwell, 2003). Role ambiguity stems from 'the tensions between expected, perceived and enacted roles' (p. 992). Thinking in terms of HPWS, the various stakeholders (managers, employees and unions) will develop expectations of the role that HR should play, and their perceptions of HR will be formed by experiences of services received and how HR practitioners conduct themselves. Meeting expectations may be challenging. For example, while line managers may regard HR activities as important, they may question the effectiveness of the HR function itself in terms of delivering services (Wright *et al*., 2001). Similarly, it may be difficult to satisfy employees. For example, if HR has historically performed a welfare role (employee champion), tensions may emerge if the operational demands of the new HPWS are prioritised and employee concerns become 'trivialised' (Francis and Keegan, 2006). There could be knock-on implications for HPWS if employee-centred outcomes are indeed related to corporate performance (p. 245) and employees perceive that their interests are being overlooked. The union relationship may also raise challenges as the regulators will be involved in negotiating the various trade-offs vis-à-vis the implementation of HPWS. Trade unions may view such an initiative as a simple reassertion of managerial prerogative pursued via a strategy of 'phantom participation' (Ramsay, 1980) and be fearful of job insecurity, task accretion, and the erosion of independent representation (Danford, 2003). As Paul-André Belanger *et al*. note (cited in Danford, 2003), there are two stark options – oppose managerial initiatives or exchange employee involvement for the acquisition of new partnership rights. The regulators will be heavily involved in the brokering of such pacts and/or dealing with the fallout of union resistance. Similarly, the change agents may actively attempt to build links between the partnership accord and the HPWS, so that the passage of the HPWS is smoothed. The new relationship may become fraught if expectations are disappointed. Managing the relationship with unions could be a difficult balancing exercise as we explain now.

Experiencing the HPWS – partnership interface

While much has been written about workplace partnership, for the most part, the focus has been upon the implications for unions. Particular strands of debate include whether partnership is likely to lead to union renewal (*e.g.* Terry, 2003), how it affects the processes of collective bargaining and consultation (Marks *et al*., 1998; Bacon and Storey, 2000; Samuel, 2007), and the potential for internecine union conflict (Geary and Roche, 2003). There is a dearth of data

regarding how the coupling of partnership and HPWS affect day-to-day interactions between unions and HR professionals. At a generic level, there has been considerable debate about the potential consequences of HPWS for unions. For example, certain US studies found that HPWS can be used as a means to avoid unions (*e.g.* Kochan *et al*., 1986). However, other studies reveal that HPWS can be combined with workplace partnership. Such arrangements can certainly be found in the UK manufacturing sector (Danford *et al*., 2005). It is the latter variant that this article pursues.

Research suggests that the development of cooperative relationships are often sparked by a range of critical circumstances (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2003). One such circumstance is that management wish to initiate a programme of organisation of change (that in itself may be related to competitive or financial pressures) and believe that union involvement could smooth the passage of the initiative. For example, if management plan to develop HPWS, partnership arrangements may be cultivated prior to the launch, partly as a way of legitimising the change agenda (Bacon and Storey, 2000). At this point, HR practitioners are likely to play a key role. In essence, some form of formal or informal partnership agreement will emerge, but research suggests that the number of signed partnership deals in the UK is relatively low (Bacon, 2006). While HR practitioners are likely to be directly involved in the negotiation of partnership agreements, these may rely upon informal and implicit agreements (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2004). As time progresses, workplace actors may come to rely heavily upon a sense of 'shared understandings' (Dietz, 2004). As far as the work of HR practitioners is concerned, one can foresee the potential for disputes over the interpretation and meaning of formal agreements. But this is surely magnified in respect of informal agreements. As Dietz (2004: 19) observes, trust between parties is a key issue and that 'the strength or otherwise of partnership resides in the informal relationships forged among the key players, and their capacity to translate the terms of an agreement into tangible results and perhaps even into cultural norms' (p. 19). As a result, HR practitioners are likely to be very much affected by the ambiguities associated with partnership programmes, especially as these programmes may be predicated on some notion of 'mutual gains' (Guest and Peccei, 2001) which require the parties concerned to feel some sense of equilibrium. This equilibrium could be adversely affected if HR judgements (especially in the realm of organisational discipline and the interpretation and application of rules) are seen to undermine the status quo. We suggest that the informal nature of many agreements enhances the possibilities for misunderstandings (as actors rely on implicit understandings as a basis for HR decision making) and 'poor' decisions may lead to the fracturing of cooperative relationships, which may ultimately hole HPWS under the waterline.

These issues are related to the process of partnership, but as Johnstone *et al*. (2009) observe, there are deficiencies in terms of current understandings of processual issues. In particular, they highlight the importance of developing more sophisticated understandings of 'partnership behaviours'. These include deeper analyses of trust-based relationships and closer examinations of the nature of interactions between social actors as partnership evolves (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2005) and relatedly, the link between partnership objectives and objectives in the sphere of the labour process (see Marks *et al*. 1998). We can ally the observations about the lack of understanding of partnership behaviours (Johnstone *et al*., 2009) to the argument of Truss and Gill (2009) that there is currently limited knowledge about what HR practitioners actually 'do' (rather than the role that they play) on a day-to-day basis to facilitate management initiatives. For example, how do HR practitioners lubricate the development of high-trust relationships in organisations where partnership is twinned with HPWS? What are the tensions and ambiguities associated with these processes? This article seeks to contribute to this gap in the literature by

drawing upon detailed case study evidence (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Spoken accounts from HR professionals reveal how the coupling of HPWS and partnership resulted in increased complexity and uneven outcomes for working lives. We now turn to the findings of this study to develop these themes.

CASE DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY

EngCo are part of a multinational company (MNC) that employed 84,000 workers in five countries worldwide. Engco's core business is heavy engineering. Around a third of the total workforce is employed in the UK at five main locations including the study site. Structurally, the organisation is dominated by four autonomous business divisions. The divisions contain business units. Broad HR policy is devised at business-unit level, and there is significant room for local interpretation. The early part of the millennium saw a difficult market environment including enhanced international competition, increased cost of raw materials and high energy prices, which had triggered the necessity for efficiency savings. Another significant issue was that recent years had witnessed some employee fatalities giving rise to a significant degree of organisational trauma.

The focus for our study is their largest UK site which had traditionally been seen as something of a 'problem child' within the wider organisation. There was a belief that management had been lax for years and that certain behaviours had been tolerated and as a result had become 'custom and practice'. These included examples of systematic soldiering, lack of attention to safety procedures and collusion between shifts on the operation of how changeover arrangements were operated. Performance across the site had historically been poor compared with comparable plants within the MNC, and there was a belief that they were at a critical juncture with downsizing, or even closure distinct possibilities. Set against this backdrop, a new managing director had entered the business in 2005 and had sought to correct a perceived 'cultural malaise' via the execution of a change initiative. While health and safety issues were in the foreground of the change programme, other goals relating to cost-effectiveness and flexibility were afforded significant importance. Consistent with the protocols of business autonomy, considerable leeway was granted with respect to the precise operationalisation of change.

The change programme was branded as '*The Mission*' and was initially launched in Spring 2006 via a series of 'away days'. In these sessions, groups of up to 150 workers were taken off site to a local convention centre where, through multimedia presentations, management endorsed the values of quality, efficiency, and health and safety. The two main trade unions were closely involved in developments from the outset (as described below). This desire by management to deepen the institutional centrality of the unions – to 'reconfigure the form and content of management–union relations' (Stuart and Martínez Lucio, 2005: 7), represents a paradigmatic example of non-formalised or '*de facto*' (Ackers *et al*., 2005: 35) partnership working.

To enhance efficiency, components characteristic of an HPWS (see Appelbaum *et al*., 2000) had been operationalised. While there is no consensus on the precise nature of such interventions (see Boxall and Macky, 2009), Becker and Gerhart's (1996) meta-analysis of leading studies lists a total of some 28 practices. By the close of research, to varying degrees, 21 of these were in operations at Engco (including job rotation, initial weeks training, suggestions schemes, problem-solving groups, contingent pay, information sharing, attitude surveys, feedback on production goals and social events). Given that none of the studies cited

in Becker and Gerhart's work actually list more than 11 practices, EngCo would appear to conform fairly tightly to the HPWS specification. More detail is provided in the main body of the article.

Methodology

This article is drawn from part of a 4-year longitudinal study that has been tracking employee and organisational outcomes from a major change management programme known as '*The Mission*' (described above). Our broad approach has been to understand the drivers for the strategy, how it has been translated into the workplace, how managers enact the strategy, how different groups of employees (including unions) react to it being practised on them, how the strategy affects working relationships, and whether the programme appears to have affected performance and behaviours and why. This article focuses upon one aspect of the study, namely how the coupling of HPWS and partnership affected the daily working lives of HR professionals. As such, we seek to address questions including: What role did HR practitioners play in facilitating these systems? How were relationships between HR practitioners and unions affected? How were HR working lives shaped 'on the ground' by their engagement with these developments?

The data presented here comprise mainly from the period spanning 2006–2008. The chosen sub-locations for the study included two strategically important production areas sitting at the confluence of a range of important processes, and the plant HR function. This combination allowed us to evaluate lived experiences from an operational and HR perspective. Within the phase of the research under review (February 2006 to December 2008) five core research techniques were utilised within a broad case study approach: semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, observations, documentary analysis and informal discussions with employees. This accords with various prescriptions for the use of multiple data collection methods (see Denzin and Lincoln, 1998).

A total of 140 formal interviews were conducted with employees at all levels, including union representatives. The interviews varied in length from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours and were fully transcribed and analysed using QSR Nvivo software. For the most part, this article makes use of the formal interviews conducted with HR professionals (33 in total), union representatives (18 interviews) and key line managers (9 interviews). The formal interviews were carried out in two main phases (some 18 months apart). We re-interviewed respondents from phase 1 during the phase 2 study. Two had left the organisation, so we selected replacements from the same level. As with the wider methodology, the respondents comprised a carefully structured sample. HR personnel comprised those holding key senior positions (*i.e.* the HR director and HR manufacturing manager) through to HR advisers and administrators (the service providers). On the union side, in addition to the full-time convener, interviews were undertaken with shop stewards representing both major unions. The interviews were wide ranging and iterative, but all covered four core issues: conceptions of and expectations from HPWS and partnership, individual and organisational outcomes, the impact of the change programme upon industrial relations and voice, and the impact of the change programme upon daily working lives. Use was also made of non-participant observation. The researchers attended various corporate gatherings, including an early launch event where the necessity for corporate change was outlined and subsequent 'away-days'. Such exposure to aspects of direct participation added to the richness of the data and facilitated more impromptu informal discussions with key actors. Our reading of the data was additionally cross-validated at five formal feedback sessions to management and unions that were arranged as day-long events.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section summarises how a change management programme (henceforth 'The Mission') impacted upon the day-to-day working lives of HR professionals. In this section we trace key developments through early, developing and maturing phases.

Early period

The Mission was sparked by the confluence of critical circumstances (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2003) including poor performance, fatalities and industrial relations problems. It was regarded as a vital initiative as performance at the site was poor relative to sister facilities overseas. A high percentage of shop-floor workers were long serving (around 20 years on average) and had been socialised into particular workplace norms and behaviours:

> "The MD described it as 'Dodge City', it is like the wild west here! Events happen every day round here that make your hair curl. Last Wednesday we had a guy injured on a fork lift truck, he fractured 3 vertebrae in his neck and his back, two forklift trucks managed to hit each other. There is a mandatory seat belt requirement, he was not wearing his seat belt!.if people break rules as a matter of habit, why would health and safety rules be any different to any other rules? . . . It is that cultural malaise that the Mission is trying to break into and it affects everything we do . . . this is a symptom of a bigger issue. And if we can crack it, then we will get the performance improvements that we need" (HR Director).

EngCo was heavily unionised, and relationships between management and unions were historically adversarial. This created problems in respect of the daily working lives of HR practitioners. The HR director commented that prior to the Mission, unions had had a 'nationalised mindset' and were consistently 'inflexible' in approach – making it difficult to reach agreements, especially if these were related to changes in working practices. This was a source of frustration for the regulators (Caldwell, 2003) in particular and more widely, undermined the reputation of HR:

> "HR has had a reputation of being a 'blocking function' and a controlling function. That is really partly because of the old industrial relationship. . . . We have got industrial relations rules and we have forgotten why we have got them but 'these are the rules and you can't do that'. So management got extremely frustrated with the old 'personnel department' as it was then referred to" (HR Director).

Indeed, the workplace had had the reputation of being a 'dinosaur' both within its division and the wider company. Overall, EngCo was not a propitious setting for the development of a high-performance culture. The catalyst for change was the appointment of a new MD in 2005. The 'early period' began here and lasted around 12 months during which the MD put in place the groundwork for a significant programme of organisational change. One of the distinctive aspects of EngCo was that MDs had a high degree of autonomy, and he opted to pursue a high performance strategy:

> "within the (wider) HR community sure [the Mission] has caused some tensions because we are beginning to see things differently to the rest of the group and beginning to do things differently to the rest of the group".
>
> **In what respect?**

> "Well an example would be in the industrial relations field where the rest of the UK are still heavily focused on what I would describe as a cost reduction agenda. We are now focused on a broader performance agenda, value from employees, capabilities of employees, competence of employees. Driving that angle as opposed to driving the head count reduction angle" (HR Director).

During the early period the MD concentrated on two key areas. The first was in smoothing management structures and identifying a cadre called the 'Top 100' managers who would drive change forwards. The second was the early nurturing of the unions, which was regarded as a critical lubricant for the shift towards a high-performance paradigm (Dietz, 2004; Oxenbridge and Brown, 2005):

> "My role really was to come in and build the relationship [with the unions] so I have been pretty open in terms of approach, I have been very honest with them, I treat them with respect. There are still pockets for me of resistance and some of that is just guys not being able to let go of the past, I think. So each works area has its own branch and there are probably two branches that are particularly problematic and feel more awkward. But we have started to target them and actually work much closer with them and pull them closer in and get them involved" (HR Manufacturing Manager).

In the early phase, initial briefing sessions were held outlining the need for the Mission and the benefits that it would bring to union members, especially given the developmental (rather than cost reduction) orientation (*i.e.* notions of mutual gains (Guest and Peccei, 2001)). Regular face-to-face meetings were scheduled between the senior management and HR team and unions. As time progressed, partnership was further institutionalised via the development of forums such as the Mission Steering Committee (MSC). During these meetings, union advice and input was solicited regarding key aspects of the Mission and how it would be implemented at EngCo. The Mission was subsequently rolled out to all 6,000 employees (including contractors) via Mission training days. Critically, the unions acted as facilitators. This was an important symbolic demonstration of their support for the Mission and doubtless helped lubricate acceptance from the shop floor. As well as their involvement in the Mission launch events, unions became active more generally in terms of 'unfreezing' existing norms, customs and behaviours (*e.g.* facilitating break-out discussions and fielding queries during Mission training days).

During the early phases, senior HR managers were certainly active at strategic level and operating mainly in change agent mode (Caldwell, 2003). However, echoing Caldwell's (2003) findings, it was difficult to neatly pigeonhole roles. For example, the HR director was also working with an eye to the regulator role when considering the industrial relations implications of the proposed shift towards increased flexibility. The HR director had many years of working for the company in different locations and used this contextual understanding of the IR climate and personalities involved to brief the MD on the best way to garner support for the Mission. During the early phase, the impact of the Mission was not felt at the lower levels of HR.

Developing period

After the foundations for the Mission had been put in place, the next phase saw the incremental development and implementation of structures, systems, and HR practices to progress the Mission combined with further work around developing the partnership relationship. This

period spanned late 2006–late 2007 and included further Mission training days, management and employee capability initiatives (including the use of coaching and competence-based development), amendments to the reward system (including linking progression to competency and performance-linked bonuses), and employee communication and participation activities (including dedicated area newsletters, the regular dissemination of performance data and the development of continuous improvement groups). During the developing period, the Mission and associated change processes that it unleashed started to impact upon the work of the HR department as a whole, but the outcomes were uneven as we explain now.

From its inception, the Mission had acted as a fillip for those at senior level in change agent/regulator roles. They derived job satisfaction from their engagement in strategic developments and the shift away from being regarded as 'organisational change blockers'. Their knowledge of organisational context and key personalities was valuable in terms of furthering the Mission and building associated partnership relationships (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2005). Positive experiences continued through the developing period. A key example was the development of Mission 'values' which were intended to act as a behavioural reference point for all employees. The MSC was the forum that was used to steer the development of a framework of values (including honesty, respect, integrity, fairness and excellence), and senior HR personnel were key players within the MSC. The MSC created a strategy for developing the values and ensuring that they would become embedded within the organisation. The strategy included taking 500 employees, including managers, team leaders, unions and suppliers, to a 3-day workshop where a values framework was devised. Again, HR played a key and highly visible role at these events. Next, the values and associated behaviours were encapsulated in a booklet. The booklet was signed by the senior managerial team including HR and by union officials, and was subsequently cascaded out to all employees via dedicated communication events. Bearing in mind the history of adversarial relationships, this represented a significant development and again underlined the emerging sense of trust and the commitment to the new partnership accord from managers and unions (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2005). The articulation of mutually acceptable values was especially satisfying for the senior HR personnel in change agent/regulator roles who were at the forefront of the initiative. These high-profile HR activities should have boded well in terms of the wider standing within the organisation. However, the outcomes of the Mission were uneven across the HR practitioner population, and for some, working lives became more frenetic and difficult.

One of the outcomes of the Mission was that it was remarkably successful in terms of modifying behaviours throughout the organisation. During the developing period, all managers attended further Mission briefing sessions and training days. This was followed by a huge spike in demand for HR advice, data and services, which led to a sharp increase in work intensification. Each of the key production areas had an HR adviser assigned to it. They reported that 'something of a panic' had set in as line managers sought to showcase their commitment to the Mission. The advisers (Caldwell, 2003) experienced a sharp increase in demand for their services, including requests for guidance, support, and direct intervention in respect of issues around poor performance, discipline,[4] and training. In terms of the latter, there was frustration that the relevant training programmes had been offered (and ignored by many) for many years, with line managers routinely focusing narrowly on statutory and mandatory company training, which effectively created a bottleneck of demand that was difficult to service in reasonable time frames. Another factor contributing to the intensified HR working environment was the focus on performance monitoring that grew as a result of the Mission. There was a sharp increase in demand for various HR metrics (*e.g.* absence data, overtime and

training records, etc.). This impacted heavily on lower-ranking HR administrators [the service providers (Caldwell, 2003)]. Pressures were exacerbated because the HR software was antiquated and laborious and subsequently slowed down the speed of response. Service providers reported that line managers often became aggressive when data requests were not actioned immediately:

> "[the workload has gone up] for our department. . . . You are dealing with a lot of line managers out there and they are all screaming at the same time for the same information . . . it can be quite intimidating the way they come across (HR Assistant).
>
> Everybody wants the answer yesterday, plus they are asking for overtime and absence performance in each area, and it seems like everybody is in a panic to have it now, it has got to be done now, everything has got to be done yesterday! Everybody asks for different things and you are thinking, hang on now, we have got a team of 6 people including myself trying to service 5,500 employees. . . . It is just manic!" (HR Team Leader)

There were also changes in terms of the nature of relationship with employees which some HR advisers found stressful and uncomfortable (Francis and Keegan, 2006). Historically, HR had performed two main roles, traditional industrial relations and welfare. The overall regime had been rather lax and HR practitioners had not tended to wield the disciplinary stick (other than to deal with serious breaches of workplace discipline). However, the new climate included an intolerance of 'non-Mission-compliant behaviours' and individuals were actively challenged for transgressions of the values (for example, lateness, not following safe working procedures, etc.). This meant that HR advisers were engaging in many more disciplinaries. HR advisers reported that employees were becoming increasingly 'wary of HR' as employees perceived a shift away from their traditional 'employee champion' to a much more managerially focused role (Francis and Keegan, 2006):

> "It is a very, very emotional, stressful job, yes. . . . I have developed my skill in a certain area and I am HR, but a lot of those guys see me as 'Personnel', as someone who should protect them or shouldn't give them any bad news and [because of the Mission] they are scared of me . . . I have been told that on numerous occasions, they are scared of me" (HR Adviser).

The Mission heralded a period of major organisational change. The level of demand for HR services ratcheted up during the developing phase and remained high throughout the period of study. HR struggled to satisfy the demand despite the fact that the headcount nearly doubled. In terms of daily working lives, the most negative consequences were for the service providers and, to some extent, the HR advisers. The service providers were effectively the 'bottom of the pile' and experienced intensified work and were on the receiving end of constant criticisms from line managers (Wright *et al.*, 2001). They did not experience the job satisfaction related to the Mission that was felt by the change agents, regulators and certain advisers (Caldwell, 2003). During the developing period HR labour turnover increased, and this was mainly attributed to the pressure of work and deteriorating HR–line management relationships. The degree of churn meant that new HR recruits lacked organisational knowledge, and the increase in HR numbers did not immediately deliver a better/faster service to the line.

Maturing period

In contrast to previous organisational change initiatives within EngCo, the Mission maintained momentum. During late 2007–late 2008, further structures and processes emerged that helped embed the Mission more deeply into the organisation. Emblematic of this was the development of a new forum known as the Mission Council (MC). The MC replaced the MSC and undertook a more formalised role. It comprised senior managers, senior HR managers, HR advisers (representing the key production areas), full-time union officials and shop stewards. The body discussed Mission progress and developed new policies and practices for the Mission. The council was revamped from a previous committee that had been characterised by conflict. As one shop steward recalled, "18 months ago it was just a slanging match, which really didn't get anybody anywhere and you'd be in there all day arguing". HR managers relayed similar anecdotes; for example: "[Once] the managers laid the room out differently once and the entire set of [union] delegates walked out! . . . So it was quite hostile!"

HR practitioners observed that the relationship with unions was becoming more trusting (Guest and Peccei, 2001; Dietz, 2004) and that unions were informing aspects of decision making:

> "I truly think we have the best union relationship in the history of the business right now, certainly on a local basis. And I would probably say regionally and nationally as well. But locally, I can give you an example, we just had a joint union meeting and actually some of the [union delegates from other areas of the] business said they couldn't tell the difference between the managers and the unions, that they were all talking in the same way, and to me that is a hugely positive step. And if I am honest I tend to use the unions to help me make decisions around people because they are that much closer to the guys and are probably a bit more balanced than some of the managers I think in that respect" (HR Manager: Manufacturing).

In sum, the evidence suggested day-to-day HR–union encounters had become much more positive over time, an interpretation corroborated by the testimony of our union respondents. Partnership relationships have been actively nurtured and new mechanisms put in place to institutionalise and embed the new relationships (Hill, 1995). What this effectively meant was that many aspects of HR work became easier to discharge. Importantly in terms of the HPWS, significant progress could be made in terms of developing and implementing systems, which before would have become mired in pitched battles between HR and unions. For example, in terms of flexible working, an HR manager observed that, "I am not getting [team members] knocking on my door saying I can't run this bit of the plant or this bit of machinery, whereas I was having that all of the time before". The workplace had moved from being regarded as a problem child within the company to an exemplar that others wanted to learn from. Indeed, employees enjoyed excellent bonuses. However, as we shall see, maintaining this new relationship created challenges for HR practitioners, making aspects of HR decision making less straightforward, a dynamic that created tensions for working lives.

Additional complexity and ambiguities

As explained, HR practitioner/union relationships were much improved. Nonetheless, HR managers recognised the potential fragility (Godard, 2004) of the new relationship, and this affected HR working lives on a day-to-day basis. It became clear from the outset that HR practitioners (particularly those in adviser/regulator roles) were formulating HR decisions with one eye on the fledgling partnership relationship, and this trend was notable throughout the

developing and maturing phases. As noted, a positive outcome from the Mission was that unions were perceived to be adopting a more reasonable stance in disciplinary hearings. However, issues around workplace rules and discipline were not entirely clear-cut. HR practitioners reported that disciplinary matters, previously regarded as 'black and white', became tinged with ambiguity as a direct result of the Mission. Consider here HR decisions in relation to the drugs and alcohol policy. Because of the nature of the work, which involves the handling of potential dangerous machinery (cranes and jigs, etc.), misdemeanour (if proven) has traditionally been met with dismissal. Mission values, however, included 'respect' and 'transparency'. In terms of the drugs and alcohol policy this had been interpreted as each case requiring a full investigation, including an exploration of the root of the individual's problems. An example was provided of an individual who had developed an alcohol problem as a result of experiencing a serious incident at work (he was described as 'a hero' in that he had rescued colleagues). As a result of the Mission, a broader interpretation of policy was made and the individual was counselled rather than dismissed. We would certainly not want to give the impression that the Mission had led to a lax 'free-for-all' climate on site – in actual fact the opposite was the case, in that safety issues were being vigorously pursued (indeed, accident rates had fallen dramatically). What was at issue was that the new workplace climate put an additional onus of investigation and interpretation upon HR and line managers (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). For example, some HR advisers found the increased uncertainty disconcerting (especially when acting in areas around the interpretation of new workplace rules and protocols) and reported that the case work was more time-consuming:

> "As I join [deal with] every case of drugs and alcohol I am thinking am I supposed to be firing the guy; am I supposed to be rehabilitating him; what am I supposed to be doing? And people [line managers] question really what they should be doing. So if anything it [The Mission] is generating more work for us".

Therefore, the new social climate (Evans and Davis, 2005) had introduced additional complexity, especially in respect of how to 'call' certain HR decisions. HR managers also expressed concern about the consistency of HR decision making across the site, particularly as line managers were making HR decisions on the basis of their interpretation of the values. Furthermore, HR practitioners were acutely aware that ill-considered HR decisions could serve to undermine the productive relationship with unions. In this latter context, unsurprisingly there was often a tendency to err on the side of caution. Over and above these dilemmas, judgements were made more difficult by virtue of the fact that practitioners were not working with formally negotiated and agreed policies in the traditional sense and many aspects of the Mission were essentially reliant upon implicit understandings between unions and HR practitioners (Dietz, 2004; Oxenbridge and Brown, 2004). Essentially, the linking of HPWS and partnership generated a high degree of complexity for HR practitioners.

Overall, there is little doubt that HR issues were critical for the development and maintenance of HPWS (Appelbaum *et al*., 2000); the huge spike in demand for HR advice, support and services was testament to this. In some respects HR working lives were improved as a result of the Mission, especially for those in senior positions who played a significant role in nurturing the unions from an early stage. This improved relationship was regarded as key in terms of lubricating the high-performance agenda (Guest and Peccei, 2001; Oxenbridge and Brown, 2005) and enhanced the reputation of HR. The workplace had moved from being regarded as a 'problem child' within the division in 2005 to a situation where one of the key processes had achieved world-class status by the close of 2008. In more general terms, there was a belief among the HR community that the experience of working on a 'cutting-edge' change

management program in an MNC environment enhanced the individuals' employability. In essence, the Mission offered rich opportunities for HR practitioners to engage in a range of activities including shaping strategy, creating appropriate HR policies and practices to support HPWS, and enjoying a central and more influential role – meaning possibilities for richer and more rewarding experiences of work.

However, despite these successes, it is fair to say that many reported that working lives had become considerably more stressful. The Mission had initiated a major programme of organisational change, and difficulties emerged in meeting the expectations of the key stakeholders, whether in providing a smooth service to line managers (Wright *et al*., 2001); in maintaining their 'Employee Champion', welfare-centred role with employees (Francis and Keegan, 2006); or in ensuring that HR decisions were framed against the backdrop of the importance of protecting and nurturing the increasingly cooperative relationships with unions (Stuart and Martínez Lucio, 2005). What we were observing was the recalibration of relationships in the changing social climate (Evans and Davis, 2005), essentially moving from a situation in which the actions of unions contained a high degree of predictability (albeit typically premised on adversarialism) to a new climate based on the principles of mutuality and trust (Guest and Peccei, 2001). HR practitioners were aware that cooperative relationships could easily revert to the *status quo ante* – a shift that would not reflect well on their competence (especially given that the site was regarded as a rising star within the company). HR did not want to be regarded as the 'weakest link' in respect of the overall progress of this high-profile programme of organisational change.

CONCLUSION

While much has been written about HPWS [and to some degree the relationship with workplace partnership (*e.g.* Appelbaum *et al*., 2000; Danford *et al*., 2005)], to date there has been little exploration of how these systems affect the working lives of HR professionals. In this article we contribute to a gap in the literature by drawing upon the findings of a longitudinal study. The study makes two broad contributions. The first is in providing empirical evidence about the role that HR practitioners played and the way that working lives were affected by the twinning of HPWS and partnership. The second is in unravelling what HR practitioners actually 'do' (Truss and Gill, 2009) to progress the high-performance agenda during periods of significant organisational change.

The study certainly supports the view that HR issues are fundamental to the progress of HPWS (Appelbaum *et al*., 2000) and that a high-performance paradigm can offer the HR function a route into strategic-level work with increased visibility and influence. A range of welcome opportunities may open up that can offer the HR function (especially senior practitioners) a significant boost. However, these positive headlines may mask the full outcomes of HPWS across the HR function. Here we find some support for Godard's (2004) assertion that high-performance practices can be implemented in such a way as to have negative consequences for workers. In certain situations, service providers (our 'worker' equivalents) may experience a toxic combination of work intensification and fractious relationships with line managers (Wright *et al*., 2001) without the compensations of increased job satisfaction. If labour turnover subsequently increases and HR Departments become less stable, those remaining may find it even harder to deliver a smooth service, reinforcing a vicious circle of failed expectations. Significant challenges may also be related to the multiple and potentially conflicting roles (Caldwell, 2003) that HR adopt to progress a high-performance agenda. For example, HR may find themselves shifting from a traditional welfare/employee

champion to a managerial/performance monitoring role (Francis and Keegan, 2006). Our tentative conclusion is that performance outcomes could be undermined if employees begin to feel that HPWS are a 'one-way street' (Francis and Keegan, 2006), and this affects levels of discretionary effort (Appelbaum *et al*., 2000).

The second contribution is in generating a better understanding of what HR practitioners actually 'do' to facilitate a high-performance regime (Truss and Gill, 2009). Here we observe that the headline improvements in performance associated with HPWS (especially when these are linked with partnership) may actually shroud the complex and difficult 'maintenance work' that HR practitioners undertake. This work can be a source of satisfaction, but equally can be underscored by tensions and ambiguities that make working lives more stressful. We use the term 'maintenance work' to mean the actions that HR practitioners undertake collectively and individually to affect the smooth running of management systems (such as HPWS). Maintenance work may of course include developments/tweaks to HR policies and practices (*i.e.* aspects of the formal organisation), but we use the term in a much broader sense and particularly to include aspects associated with the informal organisation. Certainly as far as this study was concerned, important aspects of maintenance work included developing formal and informal relationships with key social actors (*e.g.* the unions were actively nurtured and became key players in terms of legitimising the HPWS in the eyes of employees). After the early nurturing phase, maintaining key relationships [especially protecting and enhancing levels of trust (Dietz, 2004; Oxenbridge and Brown, 2005)] were regarded as critical in terms of maximising returns from the HPWS. As this study has shown, this aspect of maintenance work actually requires a high degree of contextual sensitivity as HR practitioners make decisions that require subjective judgements that may either deepen or derail relationships that are regarded as key to the progress of HPWS. Our HR respondents were acutely aware of the potential implications of 'misaligned' HR decisions – and the intensification of work was at least partly related to the slower speed of decision making that resulted. In respect of the generic debate around HR competencies and partnering, the study provides further support for the view that separating notions of competency from the 'often intangible capabilities and tacit knowledge' (Caldwell, 2008) that HR professionals hold results in a partial understanding of the complex nature of HR work. Similarly for HR educators, conveying a mechanistic, decontextualised image of HR work would not adequately prepare students for engaging with the rich and challenging issues associated with maintenance work.

Critically, many aspects of maintenance work are not immediately visible and certainly would not be fully captured if one focused attention upon the existence or otherwise of sets of practices (Boxall and Macky, 2009). Maintenance work may not be immediately obvious to other stakeholders (*e.g.* line managers), and as such, they may fail to recognise the value of some of the important 'behind the scenes' work that HR practitioners undertake. As a consequence, the value of the HR function may become questioned (Wright *et al*., 2001). Essentially much of the maintenance work was associated with the social climate of the organisation (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004), including dealing with workplace social relations, interpreting workplace rules, and conveying the corporate line in respect of the expectations related to partnership arrangements and HPWS. Maintenance work plays a key role both in terms affecting day-to-day working experiences (including HR decision making) and in mediating the outcomes of high-performance relationships (Dietz, 2004; Evans and Davis, 2005). In respect of a future research agenda, significant scope exists for further studies that examine the characteristics, role and outcomes of maintenance work in different organisational settings (including non-unionised) with a view to broadening our understandings of contemporary experiences of HR work. We hope that the longitudinal and detailed nature of this study has

offered insights into the conditions and processes that underpinned HPWS and the associated partnership accord and of how HR working lives both contributed to and were affected by this engagement.

Notes

1. The term 'HR working lives' is used to signify experiences of work in the broadest sense and to capture the fact that (on a daily basis), HR practitioners engage with both formal and informal aspects of work and organisation which, taken together, form the basis of their working experiences.
2. The primary focus of this article is upon the working lives of HR practitioners. We also devote discussion to the trades unions as we wish to explore the implications of partnership relationship for HR decision making. However, this does not imply that we regard line managers as unimportant. Indeed they were very much involved in implementing aspects of the HPWS. However, because of the confines of space, we cannot examine the relationship with line managers in detail at this juncture.
3. In our study, regulators occupied senior positions as they had the most detailed knowledge of negotiated agreements. They advised HR colleagues (including HR advisers) about how to deal with certain IR- and discipline-related matters.
4. The regulators briefed the advisers about the new protocols of how to interpret the disciplinary rules vis-a-vis the Mission at training events. The advisers then provided advice to the line and represented HR in formal disciplinary hearings (effectively overlapping into aspects associated with a regulator role). However, advisers reported that they continued to find difficulty in interpreting the new disciplinary regime (see below).

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