

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE & MANAGEMENT

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ALIGNMENT OF HRM AND IR TOWARDS MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of managements, the ways in which enterprises are managed to achieve these objectives and the human resource management and industrial relations initiatives in this regard, are affected by pressures, many of which are exerted by globalization. Changes in IR practices have also had an impact on HRM policies and practices. The unitarist approach of HRM and the pluralist tradition of IR, though regarded by some as incompatible, are not regarded in the same light by others. The issue considered here is whether the apparent incompatibility between IR and HRM can be reconciled. If the apparent incompatibility between HRM and IR can be reconciled so that both could operate as parallel systems, it would require the satisfaction of several conditions. The two can co-exist if unions and managements are prepared and able to carve out a role for HRM, and they are able to agree on narrowing the gap between HRM and IR. If more management succeed in practicing effective HRM, on present trends it is not impossible that IR will come to be relegated to a secondary role. This possibility is enhanced by the fact that traditionally IR has never been a part of strategic planning, nor has it been seen as a means of achieving management objectives.

KEYWORDS

Human Resource Management, Industrial Relations, Management Objectives, Globalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Enterprises driven by market pressures need to include in their goals the improved quality and productivity, greater flexibility, continuous innovation and the ability to change to respond rapidly to market needs and demands. The objectives of managements, the ways in which enterprises are managed to achieve these objectives and the human resource management (hereinafter referred to as "HRM") and industrial relations (hereinafter referred to as "IR") initiatives in this regard, are affected by pressures, many of which are exerted by globalization. Changes in IR practices (rather than in institution and systems) such as increased collective bargaining at enterprise level, flexibility in relation of forms of employment as well as in relation to working time and job functions have occurred as a result of such factors as heightened competition, rapid changes in products and processes and the increasing importance of skills, quality and production of goods and the provision of services acceptable to the global market. As such, managing people in a way so as to motivate them to be productive is one important objective of HRM.

Effective HRM is vital for the attainment of these goals. Improved quality and productivity linked to motivation can be achieved through training, employee involvement and extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. The growing interest in pay systems geared to performance and skills reflects one aspect of the increasing significance of HRM in realizing management goals and a gradual shift from collectivism to the individualization of pay. In such pay system a critical attraction is the possibility of achieving these goals without increasing labour costs but at the same time increasing earnings. Realizing management goals and managing change need employee involvement, commitment and training, employee participation, cooperation and team-work- all important HRM initiatives and activities. The dominant position towards which HRM is moving points to a change in power relations and highlights the supremacy of management. The management prerogative is rediscovered but in place of command and control the emphasis is on commitment and control as quality, flexibility and competence replaces quantity, task and dumb obedience. To put it another way: the managerial agenda is increasingly focused on innovation, quality and cost reduction. Human resource management makes more demand on employees, work is intensified....there is less room for managerial slack and for indulgency patterns. From a purely HRM perspective, the traditional role personnel managers has failed to exploit the potential benefits of effective management of people; neither did personnel management form a central part of management activity. In some countries the decline of trade union influence has open the way for managements to focus on more individual issues rather than on collectivist ones. The emergence of better education workforces with higher individual expectations, changes in technology and the need for more flexible jobs have, in turn, created the need to incorporate HRM into central management policy.

2. TRENDS IN HRM AND MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

In the ultimate analysis, HRM and IR are about how people are treated and their relevance increases where an enterprise takes a long-term view, rather than a short-term one, of what it wants to achieve. As Thomas A Kochan and Lee Dyer point out, "even today we find that the human resource function within many American corporations remains weak and relatively low in influence relative to other managerial functions such as finance, marketing and manufacturing". The increasingly significant role of HRM in achieving management objectives is reflected in the transformation of the personnel management function. HRM seeks to eliminate the mediation role and adopts a generally unitarist perspective. It emphasis on strategy and planning rather than problem-solving and mediation. HRM earlier reacted piece-meal to problems as they arose. Effective HRM now increasingly seeks to link HRM issues to the overall strategy of the organization. Organizations with the most effective HRM policies and practices seek to integrate such policies in corporate strategies and to reinforce or change an organizations culture.

The attitude that people are a variable cost is, in effective HRM, replaced by the view that people are a resource and that as social capital can be developed and can contribute to competitive advantage. Thus the existence of policies and practices designed to realize the latent potential of the workforce at all levels becomes the litmus test of an organization's orientation. The view that the interests of employees and management or shareholders are divergent and conflictual – though substantially true in the past- is giving way to the view that this need not necessarily be so. HRM seeks to identify and promote as commonality of interests. Top-down communication coupled with controlled information flow to keep power within the control of management categories is gradually giving way to a sharing of information and knowledge. In enterprises which tend to have corporate philosophies or missions, and where there are underlying values which shape their corporate culture, HRM becomes a part of the strategy to achieve their objectives.

3. THEORY OF THE CONFLICT - IR VS HRM

IR is essentially pluralistic in outlook, in that it covers not only the relations between employer and employee (the individual relations) but also the relations between employers and unions and between them and the state (collective relations). IR theory, practice and institutions traditionally focus more on the collective aspect of relations. There is of course a certain measure of overlap. A discernible trend in management is a greater individualization of the employer-

employee relationship, implying less emphasis on collective, and more emphasis on individual relations. This is reflected, for instance, in monetary and non-monetary reward systems.

Some of the tensions between IR and HRM arise from the unitarist outlook of HRM (which sees a commonality of interests between managements and employees) and pluralist outlook of IR (which assumes the potential for conflict in the employment relationship flowing from different interests). The individualization of HRM, reflected in its techniques which focus on direct employer-employee links rather than with employee representatives, constitutes one important difference between IR and HRM. The principal challenge emanates from employee loyalty and commitment, which are central objectives of HRM. The issue here is whether dual allegiance is possible i.e. commitment to the goals and values of the organization, and to contribute to its success on the one hand, and commitment to the trade union on the other. It is at this point that IR becomes a critical factor. In principle there should be no antithesis, because trade unionism need not (and should not) be conflictual in approach and attitude. Much of the empirical evidence drawn from the USA indicates that in a work place with a cooperative IR system dual loyalty is possible, but that is not possible in one where a cooperative climate is absent or minimal. In some of the larger unionized corporations in Japan, this conflict of loyalty is less felt.

The unitarist approach of HRM and the pluralist tradition of IR, though regarded by some as incompatible, are not regarded in the same light by others. There are three issues involved here. The first is whether the pursuit of HRM policies such as employee involvement and commitment, two-way communication and small group activities, and the integration of HRM policies in corporate objectives and strategies pose a challenge to central IR institutions such as collective bargaining and to unionism. The second is whether such HRM policies are pursued consciously as a union avoidance strategy. The third is whether HRM and IR are necessarily incompatible or whether there is scope for their co-existence. David E. Guest points out that HRM, which is an American concept, "finds its fullest expression in a number of well known and successful American companies." He points out that research indicates that the established model of HRM is often found in a non-union company.

4. RECONCILING THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HRM AND IR

The issue considered here is whether the apparent incompatibility between IR and HRM can be reconciled. There are several writers who have expressed strong criticisms of HRM as being exploitative. But a reconciliation can be explored only on the assumption that ultimately both HRM and IR have as one of their objectives fairness and equity, that both parties are prepared to recognize the need for enterprise and employee growth, that these are necessarily interlinked, and that though their interests are to some extent divergent, there are increasingly areas of common interest for mutual survival. Before exploring the possibility of reconciling the seeming conflict between HRM and IR, it is instructive to note some of the positions of trade unions. In his analysis of trade union views in the USA, Canada and Britain, P.B. Beaumont point out that unions have sometimes expressed views about particular elements of HRM such as quality circles, rather than of HRM as a whole. Further, the avowed policy positions of unions at national level do not necessarily reflect what actually happens at enterprise level.

In the USA union attitudes have been mixed and more flexible, and the difference between Canada and the USA in this respect has been explained on the basis of higher unionization rates in Canada. The British Trade Union Congress has shown conditional support for some components of HRM such as the generally contentious functional flexibility. It has supported ESOPs, but not linking a substantial part of income to organizational performance. If the apparent incompatibility between HRM and IR can be reconciled so that both could operate as parallel systems (as collective and individual focused systems), it would require the satisfaction of several conditions. The two can co-exist if unions and managements are prepared and able to carve out a role for HRM, and they are able to agree on narrowing the gap between HRM and IR. This requires changes in the thinking of unions and managements. Some of the attitudes of unions noted earlier which are opposed to HRM initiatives, as distinct from those which are prepared to treat particular components on their merits, could push employers further towards noninvolvement of unions in HRM initiatives.

Further, Japanese practices in their large enterprises have reflected a successful blend of collectivist IR and HRM, made possible to some extent by their enterprise union system which has facilitated union involvement in HRM initiatives through mechanisms such as their joint consultation system. As significant is the case of Britain, with its long tradition of IR and trade unionism. The evidence indicates that in some instances established IR and new HRM approaches have run parallel, indicates the practical feasibility of a dual arrangement. It tended to neglect union relation. The overall situation in Britain appears to be that unions and industrial relations have to be demonstrated as relatively secondary and incidental to meeting market priorities, and secondary also to the newly discovered alternative ways of managing the labour (human) resource.

Further, IR has often been seen (like personnel management) as a non-strategic operational function. The notion that it represents collective relations between an employee and employees and the union, conducted mainly through collective bargaining, reduces the collaborative processes of communication, discussion and participation, and emphasizes bargaining. The implication of IR is that it involves unions rather than employees. The signs are that – in industrialized countries at least – IR is assuming more strategic properties. This is reflected in trends such as the move towards increased enterprise and plant level bargaining. This is a strategic change which enables IR bargaining to focus more on workplace need and issues, and to also promote more direct participation of employees in bargaining. The trend towards flexibility in place of standardization is also a strategic move in the sense that it is designed to increase competitiveness and the ability to respond rapidly to change.

Specific conditions in countries outside the West could affect the possibility of reconciling IR and HRM in those countries. For instance, in countries with union multiplicity and rivalry employees would need to organize themselves in such a way as to reduce the number of competing unions in a workplace. The desire often expressed by employers in such countries for one union in one workplace is an outcome of the problems flowing from multiplicity, which include the difficulty of reaching durable and implementable agreements. In such situations employers are unlikely to consult or involve unions in HRM strategies. In many Asian countries unionization is so low that there is no pressure for union involvement in HRM. Especially in those Asian cultures which are conflict-avoidance oriented and where relationships are determined by authority and status, IR is likely to be seen as conflict generating, and HRM as more likely to achieve integration. In this connection foreign investors have also sought union-free environment. Which increasing foreign direct investment, it is not impossible that HRM, rather than IR, will sometimes be the preferred option of some managements.

5. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, it would be unrealistic for anyone to expect managements to abandon or reduce their resort to effective HRM when the latter is one means of achieving management objectives geared to better enterprise management. The pre-occupation with HRM on the part of employers is not confined to industrialized countries. The Asian emphasis is reflected in the fact that programmes on HRM are far more likely to attract management participation than IR, in the same way that IR programmes would attract trade unions. As noted earlier, effective HRM is not widespread. If more management succeed in practicing effective HRM, on present trends it is not impossible that IR will come to be relegated to a secondary role. This possibility is enhanced by the fact that traditionally IR has never been a part of strategic planning, nor has it been seen as a means of achieving management objectives. On the other hand, HRM is increasingly seen as having a strategic role and as a means of achieving management objectives. The convergence of other factors such as declining union rates (if this trend continues) could also combine to push IR to the fringes.

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