

Customer Views of the HR Function

a literature review

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Customer Views of the HR Function a literature review

Does the HR function know what is wanted by customers and can it be discerned why customer views vary?

A first overview of the literature suggests that when it comes to self-evaluation, HR professionals are more interested in collecting official performance metrics than in taking time to ask questions of their key service users. Techniques such as benchmarking, strategy mapping and the balanced scorecard are cited considerably more often in academic papers and published reports than are customer surveys or similar feedback mechanisms. These former, 'hard' performance measures, rarely or only peripherally incorporate consultation with managers and employees, and hence are unlikely to give a comprehensively accurate picture of 'what customers want' from their HR function. A little further below the surface, however, it does appear that the department is at least listening to the views of those individuals who are on the receiving end of its activities.

In a survey by the CIPD of almost 1,200 senior HR practitioners (Emmot, 2003), line managers' views were the most frequently cited measure of HR performance, with 70 per cent of respondents indicating that this form of assessment was used in their organisation. 'Business outcomes' was ranked second, with employee surveys the third most popular measurement tool – just over half of the sample reported using these. Only a quarter spoke of relying on cost-benefit analyses. These figures present a contrasting view to that suggested by the dearth of published or otherwise available material on the subject of 'soft' performance measures, and suggest – perhaps not surprisingly – that HR-related communications between the department, managers and employees tend to be informal, or, at least, unpublished outside the individual organisation concerned.

To know what customers want, however, is not necessarily to act upon it. The almost notoriously poor reputation of HR suggests that while the function may be to an extent aware of customer requirements, it fails to put this knowledge into practice. Reinforcing this view, IRS (Crail, 2006) present survey data drawn from HR representatives who claimed that communications from employees rarely influenced their priorities. Over four-fifths reported not taking a lot of note of what workers thought. Citing a survey by the Rialto Consultancy, the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA, 2005) argue that HR needs a 'brand overhaul' to deal with the negative perceptions surrounding it, and develop a more relevant value proposition to the business.

'Customer views' can of course vary considerably between individuals, groups and organisations. It is for this reason that Edgar and Geare (2004) argue against the

universal applicability of Best Practice models, and the implication that employees can be treated as a homogeneous cluster. Their research identifies gender differences in the relative importance assigned to different HR policies and practices. Meanwhile Guest (1999) found that employees in non-blue-collar jobs, those in the private sector, those on permanent contracts and those in traditional industrial and manufacturing sectors, reported a greater awareness and experience of HRM than workers falling under other occupational categories.

Howes (2003) similarly notes the importance of considering biographical and functional subsets within benchmarking data, as opposed to relying on aggregate measures as a basis for decision making. Factors such as gender, tenure, grade and occupational group may show significant inter-variation on a wide range of HR metrics, and it is fair to assume that these differences will extend to attitudinal data also.

How does the function measure customer opinion? What techniques seem most successful?

Many organisations carry out regular attitude surveys of their employees in order to gather feedback on a wide range of issues (Daniels, 2006). Through these surveys, the HR department may canvass opinions about the general state of the business, or assess employee well-being, satisfaction and commitment. In addition, companies often make use of specific feedback questionnaires in order to evaluate, for example, the usefulness of induction and training programmes. However, such research will rarely ask for comments on the HR function per se, and generalised opinion data can at best provide only proxy measures of attitudes toward HR. It may be hard to argue definitively that, for example, dissatisfaction with pay constitutes dissatisfaction with HR, or a strong level of organisational commitment reflects good HR practices. In this vein, Guest (1999) argues that we should ideally measure 'reactions to a set of practices'; that is maintain a focus on the concept and system of HR as a whole, as opposed to disjointed elements of it.

Where more directly applicable data on this subject emerge, it tends to be from externally based projects run by consultant groups or academics, in which HR professionals and their colleagues are recruited as research participants. These studies often focus on wider organisational issues in which customer views of HR form part of the overall research picture, but are not its central point of enquiry.

The customer survey is one of the most frequently exploited methodologies in research programmes of this type. Examples include the Provision of Human Resource Services Survey (Ashton and Lambert, 2005), as well as questionnaires distributed as part of research programmes by Tsui (1990), Huselid et al. (1997) and Wright et al. (2001). Typically, respondents are asked to rate their perceptions of the effectiveness of the HR function, along such dimensions as roles, service delivery and contributions to the business. Thomas (2005) highlights the importance of careful question wording on such surveys, in a way that will promote honesty without inviting thoughtless attack.

Open answer formats, he suggests, may encourage the most constructive expressions of opinion.

Interviews are another key source of information, and have been used by the CIPD (Guest et al., 2001), CRF (Lambert, 2002) and IPA (2005) to obtain, among other things, opinions on the role and value of HR as a function. Buyens and De Vos (2001) used a series of open questions to explore three groups of managers' perceptions of the added value of HR practices. Interviewees were asked to describe the contribution of activities such as administration, planning, staffing, training and career development to the organisation, and to comment on how much each one was valued. In line with the advice of Ulrich (1997), focus was maintained on the outcomes of these policies and practices as opposed to purely their content. A second section consisted of more general questions about the added value of the HR function.

Further methods by which relevant data have been gathered include observations borne out of consultancy experience (Jewsbury, 2003), discussion and focus groups (Buyens and De Vos, 2001) and informal consultation with managers and staff (Vere, 2005). The latter two, if well conducted, may unearth particularly honest and informative views on the topic under discussion (Reilly and Williams, 2003).

Guest (1999) recommends broadening the scope of 'customer views' beyond direct feedback on the HR function, to an examination of the extent to which HRM has a presence within the organisation, and how many of its practices workers have actually experienced or seen in operation. This may serve to counter any tendencies for managers – particularly those working in HR – to exaggerate the extent to which policies and procedures have been implemented, or for employees to furnish 'opinions' on topics of which they have little knowledge. Guest's research thus examines how job satisfaction and well-being, motivation, and perceptions of the psychological contract vary according to the number of HR practices reported as being active in each organisation surveyed. The instrument used was the 1997 survey of employment relations carried out by the then-named Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD).

Beyond this, only a few published examples can be found of customer opinion measurement by and in relation to the HR function itself.

A slightly dated example of a large-scale corporate review of HR is that carried out by ICL (Matthewman, 1993). Interviews were held with board members, as well as with senior, middle and junior managers, with the aim of aligning the personnel function to business needs and establishing best practice. Following the resultant organisational changes, they subsequently became one of the largest companies of their time to achieve the Investors in People award.

Another case study involving a specific evaluation of the HR function comes from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, as reported by Ashton and Lambert, 2005). The CBI have developed a benchmarking tool dubbed 'Headstart', which is gaining popularity as an internal assessment of the HR function: Allied Domecq and City &

Guilds are two of the organisations to have implemented it. The programme is built around a staff survey investigating the effectiveness of people management practices, with focus groups used to gain additional insights into the performance and contribution of HR. Areas covered include the factors influencing HRM strategy, the relationship between HRM and organisational strategy, and the length of time taken for individuals to feel comfortable in their new jobs and have access to supporting resources. The benchmarking component of 'Headstart' offers the advantage of enabling comparisons to be drawn between HR teams and/or different organisations. Limitations include a lack of organisational specificity (though more tailored questions can be added to the focus group discussions) and a UK bias in terminology and conceptualisations of people practice.

The Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) surveys its customers annually, in three cohorts consisting of employees, front-facing HR staff, and executives/senior management (Thomas, 2005). The effectiveness of the HR function is assessed in terms of product delivery, service provision and business partnering respectively for the three groups. RBS subsequently employs an external consultancy to collate and present the findings, which are benchmarked against other companies to provide tangible results about how well HR is performing.

Some experts consider it beneficial to split questionnaires by subject area rather than by customer groups (Thomas, 2005). HR consultancy Psycon breaks down its line manager surveys using the categories operations and services, personnel development, and individual competencies and ways of working. For the first two aspects, feedback reports are given both to HR specialists and line managers. For the latter part, HR specialists receive a personal feedback report.

It is interesting to note that much of the research in this area appears to start with the default assumption that the HR function is failing to meet expectations. The CIPD (Guest et al., 2001), for example, examined the limited endorsement of progressive HRM at board level, asking: 'Are executives sceptical about the role of HR departments and HRM innovations?' Likewise the Rialto Consultancy's interviews with senior managers (IPA, 2005) were undertaken with a view to encouraging 'brand overhaul'.

Throughout all such one-off research studies, inferring causality can be an issue (Huselid et al., 1997). Where firm performance is the outcome variable in question, it may be that views of HR are positively biased when companies are performing well. Longitudinal or panel data may be preferable, with multiple raters assessing HRM performance along multiple dimensions. While in some cases longitudinal data can compound problems associated with measurement error, it would allow corrections for bias to be made, and for the impact of HRM systems to be quantified.

There is some debate over which employee group or groups are best placed to provide 'customer feedback' on the HR function. Despite authors such as Huselid et al. (1997) making the case that it is employees who will provide the most honest evaluations of HR programmes and practices, it is evident, as Edgar and Geare (2004) note, that

research in this area typically relies on reports from higher-level managers or HR executives. For some, this is not seen as a bad thing: Wright et al. (2001) argue that top line executives represent the best source of evaluative information on this topic, for two main reasons. Firstly, they are the most involved of all 'service users', in that they are both subject to HR policies, and additionally have vested interests in their positive impact on employees. Secondly, they are in a good position to judge what practices are likely to be in the firm's best interests, providing a more rounded view that balances 'what employees [think they] want' against the actual returns to those employees, or the financial impact on the business, related to particular courses of action.

Overall, as Huselid et al. (1997) nonetheless note, the concept of 'HRM effectiveness' is a very broad one, and so any assessments in this area should ideally reflect the needs and desires of diverse stakeholders. The key customer groups, as identified by Reilly and Williams (2003), will include senior management, line managers, employees, employee representatives, and external bodies such as government agencies, suppliers and contractors. It may additionally be worth comparing customer views across organisational sizes, sectors and locations, as the value of the HR function can be perceived differently according to these factors (Buyens and De Vos, 2001). As mentioned previously, it may also be the case that employee status and demographics are a source of variation in customer views, in which case these too should be taken into account in a survey instrument.

Does the HR function evaluate the impact on customers of changes it makes (eg to HR structure, processes, relationships, policies)?

On the whole it would appear that, like many of the 'customer view' research studies mentioned above, change evaluations tend to be carried out by individuals or bodies external to the HR function itself, and primarily for their own research ends. For example, responses to the growing trend towards performance-related pay in the construction industry were surveyed by *Contract Journal* magazine to provide information for its 'Best Places to Work in Construction Awards'. However, two instances of internal change evaluations by the HR department are cited below.

Drug discovery company Evotec OAI implemented a comprehensive programme of organisational change in an attempt to address high staff losses (Woolnough, 2004). Staff surveys measuring satisfaction, commitment, and opinions of managers and departments provided the data from which to identify areas for change, and were run again following the interventions in order to assess their effectiveness.

Connolly (2005) reports on a large-scale change management programme implemented at Deloitte, following a mass uptake of 3,500 new partners and staff. The company incorporated its regular people survey into the integration strategy, keeping employee concerns at the forefront of the changes, and shaping initiatives around the emerging

priorities. In this way, they were able to maintain client focus and commitment levels from both the new joiners and existing staff, ensuring continuity for new recruits and continued growth and development for those already at the organisation.

Do senior managers perceive HR is meeting organisational needs?

Senior management's vision is focused very much on the strategic role of HR. Board members would seek to align the HR function with organisational goals and objectives, thereby improving business performance and fostering innovation and creativity (Buyens and De Vos, 2001). This vision largely does not tie in with reality, however, as senior managers commonly perceive HR as a mere functional partner suffering from a 'lack of business orientation' (Lambert, 2002). In surveys of company executives, the HR department is variously described as an 'administrative centre' (Donkin, 2006); filling a 'supportive role' (Guest, 2001); and, more bluntly still, a 'necessary cost' (Jewsbury, 2003). HR may well be capable of meeting managerial needs in this functional capacity – Wright *et al.*'s (2001) research highlights the department's effectiveness at delivering HR-specific services – but it appears to make little contribution to the organisational planning and development that is senior managers' primary concern. Its activities are conceived as 'hygiene factors' (Lambert, 2002) that must be got right at a basic level, but which are inadequate as a means of gaining competitive advantage (Huselid *et al.*, 1997) and for which cumulative investment will not necessarily deliver proportional returns (Guest *et al.*, 2001). What one operational manager in the CIPD research called HR's 'command and control' thinking style was, he considered, too simplistic an approach to be aligned with complex business planning.

Thus it was that nearly one-third of respondents to the PwC survey believed the HR function did not meet current business requirements (Donkin, 2006), and almost half of the 150 senior executives questioned by Accenture were either dissatisfied or ambivalent about what HR achieved (Ashton and Lambert, 2005). The main reason given was the time it took the department to respond to business issues. The managers in question expected HR to understand the business environment and to advise them on the people implications of changes to that environment. Buyen and De Vos' (2001) interviews with senior managers highlighted further development needs for HR. One was 'anticipative HRM', to include such facets as policy influencing, guarding of organisational values, and change initiation. Another related to 'timely involvement'. Managers considered it was the HR department's responsibility to 'concretise and translate' decisions made at a higher level, but also to guide and consult on the decision-making process itself; the latter aspect, they felt, was being neglected.

The executives questioned by the CIPD (Guest *et al.*, 2001) likewise concurred that their expectations of the HR function in terms of strategic contribution were not being fulfilled. They appeared to have dismissed or despaired of the potential of the department to implement 'progressive people management'. Instead, it was line

managers who were seen as ultimately responsible for, and capable of, developing the workforce in line with business objectives. HR managers, conversely, were considered to constrain proactivity and make people feel like 'units'. Donkin (2006) coins the term 'guardians of compliance' to illustrate how HR allows its practices to be shaped by legislative requirements and tried and tested ways of working, which preclude innovation and strategic development, and ultimately take priority over individual needs and interests. Similarly in the ICL case study (Matthewman, 1993), 'bureaucratic' was one of the most common accusations levelled at the HR function.

Given this state of affairs, it is perhaps not surprising that only 12 per cent of respondents to the Rialto Consultancy survey (IPA, 2005) considered the HR function to be influential in their organisation. It may be hard for HR professionals to break this cycle of alienation from the business, as Guest *et al.* (2001) noted that any initiatives raised by the HR department tended to be treated warily, viewed as lightweight and considered likely to increase bureaucracy. Indeed, in a survey by the Institute of Directors (IoD), over half of the SME company heads questioned reported managing the HR process themselves, spending up to one day a week resolving HR issues in preference to appointing an HR director or outsourcing to a third party (Thomas, 2006). All this is in spite of increasing evidence showing clear links between investment in HR practices and positive business outcomes (Carter and Robinson, 2000).

The CIPD survey (Guest, 2001) also revealed concerns about the quality of personnel staff. Managers admitted that it was difficult to hire people with the right skills, and that those within the department lacked integrity and tended to overinflate their own importance. A sense of distrust pervades the research findings. In particular, interviewees frequently mention the bemusement and irritation caused by HR jargon (Guest *et al.*, 2001; Donkin, 2006), and the way in which it impedes communication and understanding with those responsible for delivery of the core business (Guest *et al.*, 2001; Vere, 2005).

That a low proportion of HR directors currently sit on the main boards of companies (Donkin, 2006) may be in part a reflection of these opinion trends among senior managers.

What do line managers want from HR, and has it changed?

Line managers on the whole reveal a closer involvement with and dependence on the HR function than do their senior counterparts. In a Watson Wyatt survey of 17,000 line managers (reported by Ashton and Lambert, 2005), 85 per cent said that HR activities were critical to business success – yet only 34 per cent of the sample rated the function's performance as good, and in the CRF report (Lambert, 2002), line managers complained of 'shouldering HR responsibilities'. Reminiscent of senior managers' views, line managers questioned by Huselid *et al.* (1997) indicated that HR performance was effective to an extent, but only in terms of delivering 'less important services'.

It would appear that line managers seek a constructive and mutually beneficial relationship with HR, in which they are given space to shape the HR agenda, and the HR department itself operates in a consultative and/or support role (Lambert, 2002; Buyens and De Vos, 2001). This view is echoed in the ICL case study (Matthewman, 1993), where line managers expressed a wish for greater freedom to make day-to-day people management decisions, without being encumbered by the associated administration and paperwork.

A CIPD report (Vere, 2005) is particularly informative with regard to what line managers expect from the HR function. They want to rely on HR to provide the right people, at the right time, with the right skills; to advise on problem cases and difficult issues; and to encourage long-term staff development, nurturing skills within current roles and preparing workers for future advancement. Notably, they particularly want the department to foster people management skills amongst employees, with a view to preparing the next generation of line managers.

Whilst middle managers desire a degree of autonomy and the freedom to manage their teams independently, at the same time they wish HR to have a visible presence within the organisation. Their contributions should be real and relevant; the department is chastised for hiding behind policies and procedures as the 'faceless policeman'. Support services should be streamlined, efficient and non-bureaucratic as far as possible, and to assist this, line managers – like their senior colleagues – appeal for an understanding on the part of HR of how the business works, together with the inherent stresses and strains on managers and staff.

In reality, as noted at the beginning, few line managers currently have favourable perceptions of the HR function. Whittaker and Marchington (2003) attribute this situation to the department's poor comprehension of business realities, the constraints it places on line management autonomy, and its unresponsive or slow approach to tackling pressing issues. HR policies appear good in theory, but are difficult to implement in practice.

What do employees want from HR, and has this changed?

There is some overlap between employees' expectations of the HR function and their expectations for line management. This may be explained by Ashton and Lambert's (2005) suggestion that workers project responsibility for the quality of management onto HR, and look to it to furnish a management structure and team that will inspire commitment to and confidence in their organisation. Likewise, Robinson *et al.* (2004) note that employees expect senior and line managers to be committed to the policies and practices through which the HR department operates.

With regard to these policies and practices, employees' expectations at a functional level are for administration and transactions to be delivered smoothly; and at a personal level, they want to feel respected, recognised, involved and supported

(Gratton *et al.*, 1999). Robinson *et al.* (2004) argue that clear, accessible, fair, and employee-focused HR policies and practices are a key driver of employee engagement, or 'positive attitudes towards the organisation and its values'. Fairness, or 'justice' in procedures and outcomes, is likewise posited by Greenberg and Lind (2000) as a key determinant of many positive work-related attitudes and behaviours. Opportunities for development also appear highly valued, with Silverman (2004) reporting that NHS staff who undergo performance appraisals and/or receive a personal development plan (PDP) are less likely to express an intention to leave than staff who have not experienced these procedures.

Reilly and Williams (2006) observe that as HR seeks to position itself more and more as a 'business function', it has put a greater distance between itself and the workers it serves. The function may no longer be regarded as an effective channel between managers and staff. Rather, Reilly and Williams suggest that HR's stronger presence in the management team may encourage a 'them and us' mentality among employees. The growing physical consolidation of HR into shared service centres has further eroded the relational aspect of the function.

From a customer perspective, what distinguishes a good HR function?

A review of the relevant literature throws up lengthy lists of characteristics considered to exemplify a 'good' HR function. A wide range of generic skills are seen as important for those working within the department: analysis, planning and influencing, change management, project management, risk assessment, talent identification, relationship management, negotiation, leadership, teamwork and communication are commonly mentioned (Vere, 2005).

In terms of HR's role within the business, representatives of the HSE indicated that HR ought to engage closely with business issues, maintaining dialogue with the board and business units (Vere, 2005). This way, they may ensure procedures are user-friendly and serve business needs, make sound judgements on policy issues and case law, and provide up-to-date HR management data that is aligned to financial and project information. Throughout, the department should look to provide 'timely, authoritative, clear and consistent advice' and improve the quality, responsiveness and relevance of its services and support. Self-management is also endorsed, with the IRS (Crail, 2006) reporting concerns that HR departments be competent in controlling budgets, and dedicated to measuring and monitoring their own effectiveness. A good HR function will engage in continuous learning and improvement (Ehrlich, 1997).

The 'gold standard' for HR, as perceived by the customer, might be summed up by one respondent's comments in the CRF study (Lambert, 2002). He envisioned HR practitioners as 'organisational consultants' with knowledge, understanding and experience of the business, working alongside line managers to uphold customer

satisfaction and create a committed and motivated workforce. As things stand, this vision appears some way from fulfilment.

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