

The Future of the HR Profession

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In November of last year, while visiting the European Work and Employment Relations Centre (EWERC) at the University of Manchester, I had the opportunity to hear Ian Roper from Middlesex University-London report to the Manchester Industrial Relations Society on findings from a study focusing on the professional nature of human resource management (HRM) in the UK. The research was conducted by Associate Professor Roper, in association with his academic colleagues Dr Paul Higgins and Dr Sophie Gamwell, and was supported by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Research Grants Council (RGC) of Hong Kong's Joint Research Scheme. It culminated in a report published in January as part of a book edited by Adrian Wilkinson, Donald Hislop, and Christine Coupland and entitled *Perspectives on Contemporary Professional Work: Challenges and Experiences*.

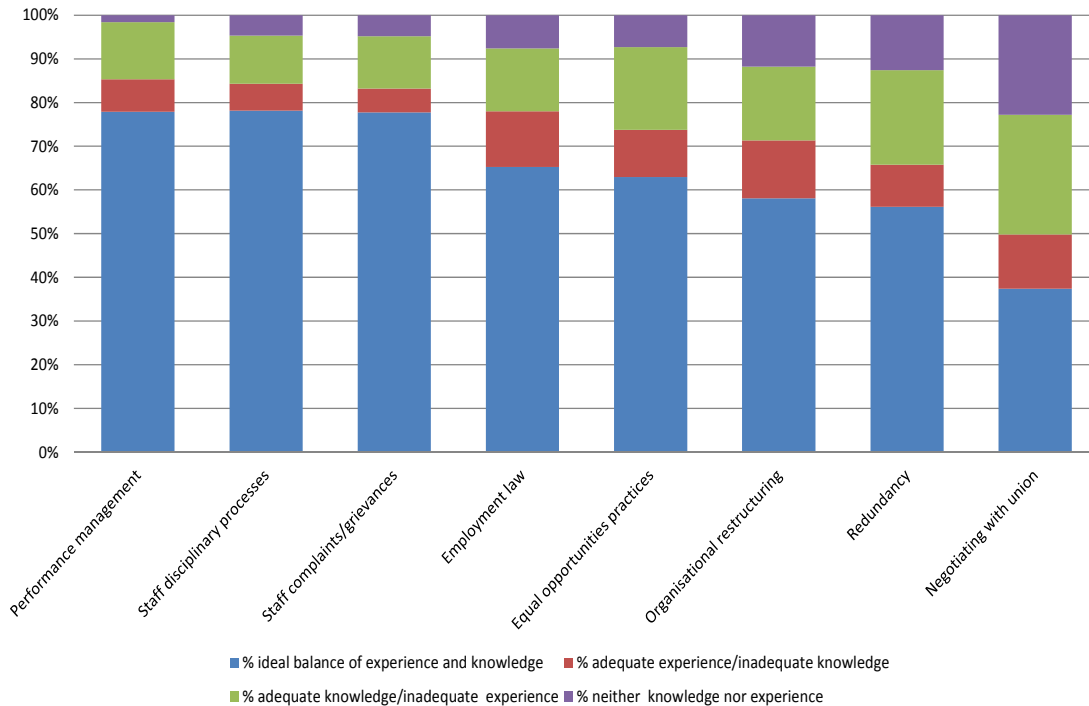
The study itself focuses on what the researchers refer to as 'four dilemmas' facing the HRM profession. These are posed as a series of 4 questions which drive this research.

1. What is the scope for professional discretion?
2. Is HR being fragmented and does it matter?
3. Does devolving HR decision-making lose influence for HR?
4. Who is HRM for?

The data used in this study were gathered in three parts. First, 'elite interviews' with national level 'stakeholders' in the UK were conducted; this involved a total of 14 interviews, covering 12 organisations, including employers' associations, unions, the Trades Union Council (TUC), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). New Zealand counterparts to these organisations are, respectively, the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (NZCTU), Business New Zealand, and the Human Resource Institute of New Zealand (HRINZ). Findings from this component of this research suggest that the somewhat understated role played in the area of organisational conflict is a primary source of professional legitimacy for HR practitioners in the UK.

The second part of the data collected for this research involved a survey of CIPD members (N=920), in which questionnaire items were linked to professional standards at different membership levels. As shown in the table below, when asked how well suited are HR practitioners to various activities associated with their role in the organization, more than three-quarters of CIPD members who responded to this survey indicated that their HR professionals manifest an ideal balance of experience and knowledge in the areas of performance management, staff disciplinary processes, and handling complaints and grievances.

“How suited are they to the activity they are doing?”



On the other hand, respondents to this survey typically pointed to activities related to IR/ER as being those about which HR practitioners are least knowledgeable and experienced. Nevertheless, since most organizations in the UK have no direct dealings with trade unions, most HR professionals are not required to have any knowledge or experience negotiating with a union. Yet, other ER-related skill areas in which HR practitioners are also frequently deficient – employment law, EEO, and redundancy and restructuring – are relevant to *all* employers, regardless of whether or not they have any dealings with unions. This suggests that – at least, in the UK – there is a need for greater preparation in ER than is currently offered through HRM academic programs.

Finally, in the third and final component of this study, a total of 36 interviews were conducted with HR practitioners and non-HR managers representing multinational and large national companies, a development agency, organisations in hospitality, transport, and technology, as well as local government and higher education institutions and consultancies in the UK and Hong Kong. When asked, “*What HR activity is the least capable of being done by a non-HR generalist or external consultant?*” those interviewed offered the following observations:

I think certainly in terms of employment law you need to have that, you need to have a firm basis in employment law. I think without that you could get yourself in a lot of trouble. (HR Manager: Hotel Chain)

I think the biggest thing is legislation, from an HR perspective, is having somebody that is up on all of that and somebody who can remain a step away from the operation, if you look at hotel wise. Yes, some of it could be a management consultancy exercise but, you know, if you're dealing with people, you need to have somebody that's good at dealing with people and sometimes management consultants are more about numbers (General Manager: Hotel Chain)

...can (non HR managers) manage training themselves? Absolutely! Can they do the nice, fluffy meetings? Here's a certificate: I'll help you with these questions, absolutely. What if someone raises a 17 page grievance, going into different, various discriminations they have suffered at

various points and one day, you need someone with the background that understands that to go over that? (HR Officer: Hotel Chain)

The authors of this study conclude with the observation that, while absorbing the dominant discourse of managerialism, markets, entrepreneurialism and flexibility should ensure legitimacy for the HR profession, the primary source of that legitimacy is organisational conflict. That is, although HRM needs to be seen to be 'business savvy' to be credible, the consistently reported activity that managers exclusively depend on from HR is their role in the resolution of conflict. Yet, because this role is counter to the dominant discourse in the UK on the professionalisation of HR management, the 'reactive', 'firefighting' role of HRM is unwisely disregarded in the clamour to achieve a strategic role for HRM.