

HR ROLES AND EMPOWERING THE LINE IN HUMAN RESOURCE ACTIVITIES: A REVIEW AND A PROPOSED MODEL

Yusliza Mohd.Yusoff* and Hazman Shah Abdullah

*Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

Within HRM, empowerment is sponsored as a means to seek greater purpose and value for HRM in the organization. HR units have been, at the same time, observed to display different role orientations. They are encouraged to adopt different roles or different mix of roles for greater influence, effect and respect (Ulrich, 1997). How do the two streams of strategic HR development relate to one another? This paper uses Ulrich's (1997) HR role typology i.e. administrative expert, employee champion, change agent, and strategic partner to conceptualize the relationship between HR roles and the extent of empowerment. Based on a review of extant literature on empowerment and the HR roles, a model is presented and propositions outlined for future empirical testing.

Keywords: HR roles; Empowering the line in HR activities.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is suggested that the ultimate source of competitive advantage for an organization is the quality of its human resource – competent, committed, flexible and empowered (Huselid, *et al.*, 1997; Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick Hall, 1988; Pfeffer, 1994; Schuler and Jackson, 2005; Ulrich, 1997). Empowerment is an essential element of organizational change and transformation as the global business environment becomes ever more competitive. The global organizations are empowering the national subsidiaries, the corporate headquarters are empowering the branches, and staff functions are empowering the line officers to achieve greater organizational effectiveness to overcome intensifying competition from highly agile competitors. The practical reasons for empowering are many and powerfully convincing. The theory of empowerment, if it can be called as such, is logical and has tremendous experiential validity. The anecdotal evidence of the efficacy of empowerment has convinced and converted many practitioners to the idea although actual level of empowerment is lagging far behind.

Within the broad area of empowerment, there is dearth of studies looking at empowerment within the HR function in organizations. Although there are numerous theoretical and empirical articles on empowerment, the academic and practitioner literature on empowering line managers in HR activities is almost non-existent. Notably absent from the literature is a contingency view of empowerment i.e. when is empowerment most appropriate. In other words, are there internal and external forces that are conducive to empowering of the line managers? Empowerment theorists gravitate towards the now untenable universalistic theory of empowerment (see for example the works of Pfeffer, 1994; Ulrich, 1997; Wilkinson, 1998). As is mostly the case in management, a contingency framework (Delery and Doty, 1996; Hazman, 1999; Wright and McMahan, 1992) offers better understanding of the “theory” of empowerment. As such, it is necessary to address the question of when is it right or necessary to empower the line managers in HR activities by looking into the theoretical issue of empowerment in the literature to form a basis for empowering the line in HR activities. Of particular interest here are the different roles HR managers are both observed and also suggested to adopt and its relationship to the general prescription of empowerment.

* Corresponding author: Yusliza Mohd. Yusoff, Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. E-mail: yusliza1977@yahoo.com

II. EMPOWERMENT

Extensive literature on the empowerment concluded that an empowered workforce will lead to achieving a competitive advantage (Quinn and Spreitzer, 1997). Over a decade ago, “the practice of empowering subordinates is a *principal* component of managerial and organizational effectiveness” (Conger and Kanungo, 1988: 471). However, there is no single nor simple definition of empowerment. The term “empowerment” itself may have different connotations for different users.

The concept of empowerment appears to focus on the dynamic process of redistribution of decision-making power between management and employees (Bowen and Lawler, 1995; Greasley, *et al.*, 2005; Nielsen and Pedersen, 2003). A central proposition in the notion of empowerment is that decision-making authority should be delegated to employees, so as to enable them to respond promptly to customer expectations, problems, and needs (Dimitriades, 2005). Apart from that, empowerment is further defined as “the involvement of employees in the decision-making process, inviting the members of the organization to think strategically and to be personally responsible for the quality of their tasks, animating, favoring and rewarding employees for behaving always in a way they consider more suitable to satisfy customers and to improve the organization’s functioning” (Pardo del Val and Lloyd, 2003: 102).

Empowerment is formal when there are official and recognized channels to put it into practice (Locke and Schweiger, 1979); that is to say, there are certain norms or rules that impose or guarantee employee participation (Dachler and Wilpert, 1978; Harber, *et al.*, 1991). Empowerment is informal when the influence on decisions is based on the personal relationship between the manager and the subordinates (Locke and Schweiger, 1979), through a non-regulated exchange (Harber, *et al.*, 1991) that arises from the agreement among the members of the organization (Dachler and Wilpert, 1978). Therefore, the more formal channels that make empowerment possible, the more participative the management style (Cole, *et al.*, 1993), because informal participation is a result of an exceptional relationship and does not guarantee a continued and general empowerment (Pardo del Val and Lloyd, 2003). In addition, employees do not just suddenly feel empowered because managers tell them they are or because companies issue statements saying it is part of the culture (Bowen and Lawler, 1995).

Empowerment is important in the service industry (Bowen and Lawler, 1995; Lin, 2002) and also seemed more common in manufacturing industry (Cunningham, *et al.*, 1996). Ron Zemke and Dick Schaaf (as quoted in Bowen and Lawler, 1992) noted that empowerment is a common theme running through many, even most, of the excellent service businesses such as American Airlines, Marriott, American Express, and Federal Express. Moreover, empowerment in manufacturing organizations is part of the general move towards greater task flexibility and the need for employees to take on increased initiative and responsibility (Cunningham, *et al.*, 1996). The benefits of empowerment for service firms were positive, but the impact was less than that for manufacturing firms (Bowen and Lawler, 1995). Furthermore, they stated that empowering management practices have been adopted and documented less frequently in service firms than that for manufacturing firms. In conclusion, employee empowerment has been hailed as a management technique which can be applied universally across all organizations (service as well as manufacturing organization) as a means of dealing with the needs of modern global business.

Although organizational researchers have begun to reach consensus on conceptualizing empowerment (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Conger and Kanungo, 1988), conceptual research of empowerment has been limited in terms of depth and scope (Lee and Koh, 2001). Systematic and rigorous study of employee empowerment is still in its infancy and empirical research on the topic has been rather limited (Ramaekers, 2005). In light of the observations described earlier, firms should adopt a contingency approach to empowerment (Bowen and Lawler, 1995). They further added that research on every management issue from leadership to organizational design concluded that there is no one best way for everyone. So, the present study believes the same is true for empowerment.

Empowerment and Strategic Human Resource Management

Empowerment should be the major human resource goal for the new millennium (Nadler, 1999). However, until the early 1990s, definitions of empowerment have received little or no attention in academic HRM literature and loosely defined (Cunningham, *et al.*, 1996). It is argued that, line managers role in empowerment is a central focus in the management of human resources (Hall and Torrington, 1998; Hazman, 1999; 2002; Hyman and

Cunningham, 1996; Mayrhofer, *et al.*, 2004; Wanless, 2003). Empowerment will allow greater control over non-management staff by line managers and supervisors when given authority or more authority in areas such as recruitment, discipline and absence control (Cunningham, *et al.*, 1996).

Several authors have argued that HRM is too important to be left solely in the hands of HR manager (Guest, 2001; Legge, 1995; Schuler and Jackson, 1989). To develop greater business orientation, HR activities must involve and also devolve powers to the line officers. This, it is argued, will automatically flavor HR decisions with the business imperative. Line managers, unlike the HR managers are more likely to make these decisions to facilitate the value creation activities. HRM literature has addressed the issue of empowering the line managers in HR under many rubrics. Empowering the line goes by names like *devolution* or *devolvement human resource responsibilities to the line* (Budhwar, 2000; Davies, 2002; Hall and Torrington, 1998; Johnson and Mouly, 2002; McGovern, *et al.*, 1997; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003), *delegating the HR role to the line manager* (Johnson and Mouly, 2002), as well as *HR-line* (Kulik and Bainbridge, 2006; Renwick, 2003). All in all, Cunningham, *et al.* (1996) concluded that devolution of some parts of human resource activities to the line managers is under the umbrella practice of “empowerment”.

Although line managers are expected to play a greater role in HR activities, the nature of the role has not been clearly defined (Hazman, 1999). In fact, there is a lack of clarity of the concepts of devolution (Hall and Torrington, 1998; Lowe, 1992), involvement (Beer, *et al.*, 1984) and influence (Guest and Peccei, 1994) in order to characterize the role of line managers in HR activities. Indeed, Hazman (1999) proposed a four stage developmental model of the role of the line in personnel matters which begins with interest, involvement, influence, and devolution. Devolution of HR responsibilities is an advanced stage of the process marking the reorientation of the line (Hazman, 1999).

Due to the closeness of line managers to the employees, responsibility of human resource activities should not left solely to human resource managers (Mayrhofer, *et al.*, 2004). The five-year longitudinal study in the UK by Hope-Hailey, *et al.* (1997), Glaxo, Citibank, Hewlett Packard, WH Smith, Lloyds Bank, BT, KJS, and NHS Trust, found people management was a definable workload that could easily be devolved away to the line managers and the management of line managers had become a feature of organizational life. Needless to say, there is slightly wider devolution of HR authority in the workplaces to the supervisors (Hoque and Noon, 2001) and it is not an exaggerated trend but the reality (Hall and Torrington, 1998; McGovern, *et al.*, 1997).

A separate article by Budhwar (2000) and Budhwar and Sparrow (1997) touched on certain contingent variables that lead Indian and UK organizations to devolve HR activities to the line. Specifically, research by Budhwar and Sparrow (1997) reveals how internal organizational policies related to recruitment, training and development and employees' communication act as significant determinants of the levels of devolvement of HRM to line managers practiced in Indian firms. Unfortunately, there were some constraints for the line managers to handle HR activities which are related to the institutional reinforcement of HR practices, managerial short-termism, delaying McGovern, *et al.* (1997), inconsistencies in implementation by managers, increasing managerial workloads, and time constraints (Wanless, 2003).

A study conducted by Kulik and Bainbridge (2006) from University of Melbourne found more than 70% of their respondents said that line managers have been increasingly involved in people management activities. While there has been a trend towards greater devolution, it also equally important to understand the drivers of this change. Without the knowledge of the forces that are facilitating this authority shift, we would be blindly advocating change without offering greater insight of the change. The trend towards greater empowerment of the line in HR activities may be driven by forces of industrial isomorphism i.e. mimetic, coercive and normative tendencies as much as it is driven by the efficacy of the realignment of powers within the organization (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Hence, it is vital that the specific forces, conditions and triggers be isolated, identified and described. The information contained in these studies indicate that a good understanding of the factors that drive empowering of the line in HR matters is necessary to ensure that organization fulfill their HR functions in a manner that allows them to remain competitive in their industries.

Even as more research appears on the horizon looking at the environmental and organizational contingents of empowerment, within strategic HRM there is a longstanding void in studying the relationship between the various HRM roles and interfunctional empowerment. To address this void the foregoing sections of this paper outlines

the various typologies of HRM roles and examines the role of empowerment. Specifically, Ulrich's four roles of HRM are used as a framework to examine the relationship to interfunctional empowerment.

III. TYPOLOGIES OF HR ROLES

The empirical work to date on HR has been around competencies (Conner and Wirttemberg, 1993) or HR practices (Schuler and Jackson, 1987a, 1987b) but not HR roles. Likewise, Hope-Hailey, *et al.* (2005) also highlighted that one area of neglect in unpicking the link between HRM and performance is the role played by the HR department. The criteria for defining HR roles has varied from a focus on activities (what do HR people do) to time (where do HR people spend time) to metaphors (what identity do HR people have) to value creation (what value to HR people create) (Conner and Ulrich, 1996).

Over the past two decades, changes in the nature of managerial work have had a profound impact on the personnel manager's role and other functional specialists (Caldwell, 2003). Legge (1978) identified *conformist* and *deviant* innovator of personnel manager's roles for purposes of developing power and influence within an organization. According to her, *conformist* innovators used their expertise to enable the organization to adapt or implement personnel policies designed to achieve tangible improvements in business performance. Conversely, *deviant* innovator strongly encouraged them to embrace new ideas or values to the organizations. Guest (1991) and Clark (1993) found that neither of these roles appeared in British-owned companies. In 1997, Hope-Hailey, *et al.* found that only *conformist* innovator's role has been partly adopted by some HR managers.

Walker (1990) noted that there appears to be a continuum of four roles around what people do—from support, service, consulting, to leadership. More time is spent in the support and service among HR practitioners as compared to the consulting and leadership roles. Walker (1990) further added the companies want to emphasize the consulting and leadership roles. Whereas, Schuler (1990) outlined six new key roles based on where HR people spend time: business person, shaper of change, consultant to organization/partner to line, strategy formulator and implementer, talent manager, and asset manager and cost controller.

In 1970s, the personnel function was associated with a role as negotiator in collective bargaining and an administrator of policies and procedures (Tyson, 1987). Tyson and Fell (1992) presented three models of personnel management. It ranged from 1960s "clerk of works" (routine administrative), a 1970s "contracts manager" (interpretative industrial relations) and 1980s "architect" (business manager planning). It is loosely arranged on a continuum from least to most strategic, measured in terms of amount of discretion, focus on the long term and integration between business and HR strategy (Tyson, 1995).

Storey (1992) takes a stage further and identifies two dimensions—strategic/tactical and interventionary/non-interventionary, which give rise to four potential roles that drawing on case-based research into 15 mainstream UK companies and public sector organizations. The four roles were *advisers*, *handmaidens*, *regulators*, and *changemakers*. While the first three roles overlapped with Tyson and Fell's (1992) role typologies, *changemakers* is a new role. Caldwell (2001) opined that *changemakers* were interventionists with a strategic agenda focused on both the hard realities of business performance and the softer HR interventions designed to enhance employee commitment and motivation. Indeed, Storey (1992: 187) found that at least half of the personnel managers and directors moved towards the *changemakers* roles.

Table 1: HR Role Typologies

| Author/s | Role typologies |
|-----------------------|---|
| Legge (1978) | Conformist, Deviationist |
| Walker (1990) | Support, Service, Consulting, Leadership |
| Schuler (1990) | Business person, Shaper of change, Consultant to organization/partner to line, Strategy formulator and Implementer, Talent manager, and Asset manager and Cost controller |
| Tyson and Fell (1992) | Clerk of Works, Contracts Manager, and Architect |
| Storey (1992) | Advisers, Handmaidens, Regulators, and Changemakers |
| Wiley (1992) | Strategic role, Legalistic role, and Operational role |
| Ulrich (1997) | Administrative Expert, Employee Champion, Change Agent, and Strategic Partner |

HR role can be further classified under three headings—the strategic process, the legal aspects, and the operational aspects (Wiley, 1992). The strategic process role is defined as consultant, assessor, diagnostician, innovator/change agent, catalyst, business partner, and cost manager. In regards to the legal aspects of the role, it includes auditor/controller, consultant, provider, and conciliator. Lastly, she defined the role as operational aspects are firefighter, innovator/change agent, employee advocate, facilitator, policy formulator, and consultant.

Role of the HR department typology is widely cited and perhaps the best known is that of Ulrich (1997). He recommends that successful HR departments ensure that the roles of *change agent*, *strategic partner*, *employee champion*, and *administrative expert* are all fulfilled. Most of the HR function's time is spent as *administrative expert*, and this role covers people management: recruiting, hiring, compensating, rewarding and disciplining, training, record-keeping and terminating – and all the other processes that involve people. It is to ensure that these processes are both efficient and optimized as well as continuously track, monitor and improve on these basic processes to give credibility to its own existence. As *employee champion*, requires the HR function to know the concerns of employees and spend time talking to them and listening to their concerns. Moreover, HR function should promote all possible methods of communication, including employee surveys, suggestion programmes, team meetings and any other means of sharing information and views. A key element of this role is to ensure that employees receive a fair hearing. The HR role as *change agent*, is that of a facilitator, involving modelling change to other departments, being a positive advocate of change across the entire organization, resolving employee issues arising from change, and embedding change by implementing efficient and flexible processes. The final role, *strategic partner*, it must make sure that its practices, processes, and policies complement the overall organizational strategy. It must also develop the capacity to execute that strategy in the minimum amount of time.

Ulrich (1997) further argued that, *administrative expert* and *employee champion* are still important and still need to be handled effectively and with credibility. However, *change agent* and *strategic partner* have interestingly different implications for the relationship and involvement with the line managers if they want to perform the role successfully. For Ulrich, *change agent* and *strategic partner* constitute the strategic roles and imply that HRM becomes a *business partner* in strategy execution. Whereas, Legge (1978) referred to the strategic component as being a *conformist innovator* and Buyens and de Vos (2001) referred to the same anticipative HRM.

According to Conner and Ulrich (1996), Ulrich's HR framework can be effective for gaining further insight into the HR role. The qualitative data from Buyens and de Vos's (2001) study indicated that top managers, line managers, and HR managers perceived added value of the HR functions contains more than just the fulfillment of strategic partnering role which taking into account the four domains in which HRM can deliver value. Furthermore, they argued that, in order to become a member of the management team, not only as *strategic partner* but also as *employee champion*, *administrative expert* or *change agent*.

The HR Role Survey (Conner and Ulrich, 1996), which originally comprised 40 items that were divided into three of the four roles outlined by Ulrich in his HR role framework. The data did discriminate between *administrative expert* and *employee champion*, however, did not discriminate between the *strategic partner* and *change agent* role. Both the *strategic partner* role and *change agent* role had the greatest variability in the data. They also found that less variability in the ratings and higher ratings in the areas of *administrative expert* and *employee champion* suggested that HR continues to be consistently stronger in these areas.

In the present study, emphasis was on Ulrich's HR role. The dimensions used were *administrative expert*, *employee champion*, *change agent*, and *strategic partner*. The HR role variable and its corresponding dimensions were chosen based on the advice of Conner and Ulrich (1996) who suggested that to include line managers as well as HR practitioners in order to generate a discussion where expectations are set and shared and roles are clarified and communicated. In addition, there is currently a scarcity of empirical evidence of how HR roles are carried out (Conner and Ulrich, 1996; Lawler and Mohrman, 2003; Truss, *et al.*, 2002).

Truss, *et al.* (2002) emphasized to include those outside the HR function as suggested by role-set theory because it is essential to take views from members of the role set in order to define the nature of the role. Overall, it would therefore be advisable to adopt multiple methods and consult multiple constituents as suggested by Wright, *et al.* (2001) and Ulrich (1997). Thus, the examination from both line managers and HR manager in the organization is necessary in order to understand the relationship between this variable and the resulting impact on empowering the line.

IV. THE PROPOSED MODEL

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the closer examination of HRM under the banner of strategic HRM has shown the existence of a variety of HR roles. Some of these roles have no clear implication for empowerment of the line whilst other may be hypothesized to demand it. Using Ulrich's now popular typology of HR roles, the issue of interfunctional empowerment is examined and tentative propositions offered for further development. In particular, role-set theory is used to develop the proposed framework. Figure 1 depicts the proposed model of the relationship between HR role and empowering the line in HR activities. Role-theory is particularly helpful in indicating ways of measuring the outcomes of role performance in relation to expectations (Truss, *et al.*, 2002). According to role theory, two conditions need to be met to enable HR managers to change the role of their department successfully. The first is the expectations of the role-set members—HR management, line management and top management—must change, whilst the second is HR managers have to achieve actual change in the nature of the work that they do (Truss, *et al.*, 2002). This also suggest that 'the need for HR managers to perform well against current expectations of the role in order to achieve reputational effectiveness (Tsui, 1984) before being able to take the next step and undertake change to the role' (Flood 1998 cited by Truss, *et al.*, 2002).

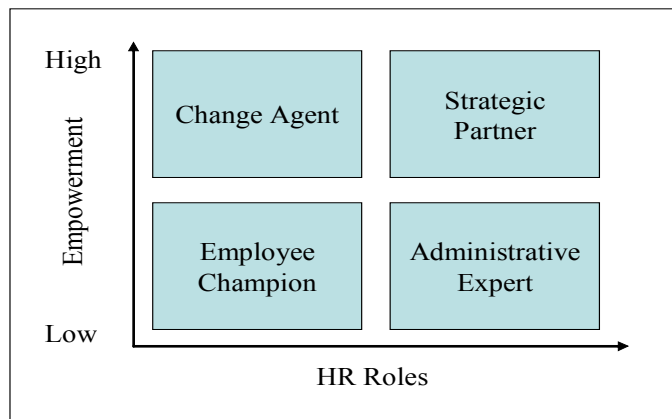


Figure 1: HR Roles and Empowerment

HR Role and Empowering the Line in HR Activities

Different HR roles require the HR units develop different capabilities, different mindsets, different priorities and different attention. It is possible to examine how empowerment will figure in each of the role set. For example, where the role is conceived as an administrative expert, the pressure to empower may be less felt by the HR units. Whereas in a change agent role, the HR units are more likely to facilitate rather than displace the line in HR matters. The strategic partner role envisages a friendly, empathetic and a supporting stance with regards to the line managers. HR units that evince this role are likely to emphasize the business need to devolve authority to the level responsible for it. The role set can deemphasize the risk of such empowerment. The HR in an employee champion role is more attuned to the interest and needs of the employees as a strategy to organizational capacity development. Line empowerment within this role set may be seen as heightening the risks of alienation and heterogeneous employee treatment (Hazman, 1999). Hence, an overall proposition of the relationship between empowerment and HR role can be advanced.

Proposition 1: HR roles influence the extent of line empowerment in HR activities.

HR function has been played as an administrative function that largely focused on cost control and administrative. According to Ulrich, being an *administrative expert*, HR professionals require mastery in improving processes as well as rethinking value creation. Line managers only can play a role in supporting HR reengineering and value-creation effort (Ulrich, 1997). However, in recent years, line managers and HR professionals have had to discover more efficient ways to get work done through reengineering of human resources (Ulrich, 1997). The higher the HR professionals played the role as *administrative expert*, the lower the line managers become empowered to

handle HR activities. Where the HR units exhibit high level of administrative expertise, the demand for the transfer of the HR matters to the line may be less urgent. Research findings by Raub, *et al.* (2006) suggested that the antidote to reducing administrative expert role is to turn over the work to the line. To reduce administrative workload, samples in their study believed that delegating some of administrative duties to line managers should be part of the solution (Raub, *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, based on the foregoing, the following proposition is postulated:

Proposition 1a: Administrative Expert role is consistent with lower line empowerment in HR activities.

The role contrasted with *administrative expert* role is *employee champion* role which focuses on listening and responding to employees. HR professionals who work as *employee champions* focus on finding the right balance between demands and resources (Ulrich, 1997). He further added that HR professionals need to work with managers and employees to ensure that employees can meet their expectations. Similarly, line managers should pay attention to employees' needs and ensure employee contribution. Thus, HR units which assume such a role will see themselves as best placed to articulate the motivation and utilization of employees as compared with the line. Therefore, the following proposition can be stated.

Proposition 1b: Employee Champion role is inconsistent with high degree of line empowerment in HR activities.

According to Ulrich (1997), *change agent* role focuses on managing organizational transformation and change. In a similar vein, to help organizations respond to change initiatives, process changes, and culture changes, line managers and HR professionals must master both the theory and the practice of change (Ulrich, 1997). The *change agent* and *strategic partner* will have to be closely involved with their line management colleagues if they want to perform that role successfully (Holt and Brewster, 2003). Most notably in Raub, *et al.*'s (2006) study, unit level HR managers' main desire is for a stronger involvement in the *change agent* role. They believed this may be an indicator of the fact that unit level HR managers need to interact more productively with line managers. Their desire is in line with Tracey and Nathan's (2002) assertion that "all decision-making authority, responsibility, and accountability should be vested in the person who supervises the employee". Therefore HR units that adopt such a role and mindset, can be argued to be less inclined to retain the conventional division of responsibilities between line and HR. As part of the overall theme of change, HR units with the preoccupation are likely to champion empowerment as part of the change. Hence, to examine the relationship between *change agent* role and empowering the line, the following is surmised:

Proposition 1c: Change Agent role requires greater line empowerment in HR activities.

Due to rapid deployment of information technology, globalization, and the intensity of market competition, HR function is beginning to redefine its role (Wright, *et al.*, 1999). A number of studies have investigated the changing directions needed for the HR function (Bhatnagar and Sharma, 2005; Buyens and de Vos, 2001; Caldwell, 2003; Conner and Ulrich, 1996; Mohrman and Lawler, 1997). In order to make the new change in HR, Caldwell (2001) proposed that HR director's role as *change agent* can be shifted to *business partner* role which can make a positive virtue out of the necessity of devolving HR responsibilities to the line. Additionally, several studies have argued that HR function need to become as a *strategic partner* (Brockbank, 1999; Lawler and Mohrman, 2000, 2003; Mohrman and Lawler, 1997; Ulrich, 1997, Wright, *et al.*, 1999). The most effective HR departments are those that add value by playing a *business partner* role has been well established in the literature (Lawler and Mohrman, 2000, 2003).

A number of studies have investigated the function of HR as a *strategic partner* that can add value to the organization. For example, work by Lawler and Mohrman (2003) found that HR becomes a *strategic partner* when they fully participate in both the development and implementation of strategy. They argue that for firms which rely on knowledge-based competitive strategies, this is an opportunity for HR departments to become true value-adding *strategic partner*. They conclude that HR function needs to establish partnership with the line managers to take charge of HR even though their study showed that putting line managers in charge of HR work against a strategic partnership role. Whilst, in India, research by Bhatnagar and Sharma (2005) concluded that HR managers perceived a significantly higher *strategic partner* role as compared to the line managers. To improve HR function effectiveness and have greater impact, the HR function must understand how to add value in the

organization by helping line managers align HR strategies, processes, and practices with business needs (Conner and Ulrich, 1996).

In Lawler and Mohrman's (2000) study, in order to be effective, the HR organization needs to decrease the amount of time it spends maintaining records and doing auditing and controlling, and increase the amount of time it spends as a strategic *business partner*. Strategic activities for strategic partnering role for HR are time-consuming, and reduce the amount of slack resources available to HR managers for handling the operational tasks (Kulik and Bainbridge, 2006). In addition, they further claimed that operational activities used to be the exclusive domain of the HR department.

Recently, HR department focused more on managerial activities and face great pressure to devolve some or all of their authority to the non-specialist line managers (Holt and Brewster, 2003). Even, Hyman and Cunningham (1996) argued that, with empowerment, the role of line managers is expected to become more facilitative and development oriented. Certainly, changing HR's role will require line managers to handle HR activities. It also will require the HR function make much greater use of information technology, that significantly changes the relationship of HR and employees by empowering employees to do things that HR used to do for them (Lawler and Mohrman, 2000). It has been noted that the successful of the implementation of devolution and the increasing of HR function credibility will achieve the desired position of a *strategic partner* (Papalexandris and Panayotopoulou, 2005). Therefore, based on the foregoing evidence and assertions, the following is proposed:

Proposition 1d: Strategic Partner role requires greater line empowerment in HR activities.

V. CONCLUSION

Empowerment at various levels and forms has received reasonable scholarly and industrial attention. Its efficacy is deeply rooted industrial democracy and the simple and age old managerial principle that authority must reside in hands of those who execute. The proponents of SHRM point out that handing over HR activities to the line is an important cornerstone of SHRM. Storey (1992) indicated that HR in the hands of the HR department is not the best way to organize and deliver HR services in the increasingly competitive business environment. To compete in business arena, line managers must assume all or some of the HR activities previously handled by HR units in order to become more effective (see for example, Hazman, 2002). Strategic HRM literature observes the varied roles HR units play in organizations and prescribes role change or role mix changes to develop greater influence in the business value creation process (Ulrich, 1997; Lily and Gray, 2005). In parallel with the observation of changing HR roles is the growing support for greater empowerment of the line in the context of HR matters. For reasons unknown, these two strategic concerns and prescription have not invited conceptualization. There has been no attempt to study empirically the relationship between human resource roles and empowering of the line. Is there a confluence or coherence between the two developments? What is the nature of the relationship between the two? Is it empowerment imperative, facilitative, destructive and non-consequential to the various HR roles?

This paper is a modest attempt at outlining the two developments and conceptualizing the possible relationship between empowerment and HR roles using Ulrich's typology. This conceptualization point towards yet another contingent of empowerment within organizations i.e. roles. It also asserts that HR roles potentially make different demands on empowerment of the line. Based on extant literature, some tentative propositions about the general and specific nature of the relationship between the two can and is advanced in this paper. Hopefully, this conceptualization will invite further discussion, debate and eventually empirical examination giving rise to a more contingency-based, integrated and nuanced view of HR roles and empowerment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and participants of the 2nd International Borneo Business Conference 2006 as well as the editor for their helpful comments of this article.

REFERENCES

- Beer, M., Spector, B., Lawrence, P.R., Mills, D.Q., and Walton, R.E. (1984). *Managing human asset*. New York: Free Press.
- Bhatnagar, J., and Sharma, A. (2005). The Indian perspective of strategic HR roles and organizational learning capability. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16(9), 1711-1739.
- Bowen, D.E., and Lawler, E.E. (1992). The empowerment of service worker: What, why, how, and when. *Sloan Management Review*, Spring, 31-40.
- Bowen, D.E., and Lawler, E.E. (1995). Empowering service employees. *Sloan Management Review*, 36(4), 73-84.
- Brockbank, W. (1999). If HR were really strategically proactive: Present and future directions in HR's contribution to competitive advantage. *Human Resource Management*, 38(4), 337-353.
- Budhwar, P.S. (2000). Evaluating levels of strategic integration and devolvement of human resource management in the UK. *Personnel Review*, 29(2), 141-157.
- Budhwar, P.S., and Sparrow, P.S. (1997). Evaluating levels of strategic integration and devolvement of human resource management in India. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 8(4), 476-494.
- Buyens, D., and de Vos, A. (2001). Perception of the value of the HR function. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 11(3), 70-89.
- Caldwell, R. (2001). Champions, adapters, consultants and synergists: The new change agents in HRM. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 11(3), 39-52.
- Caldwell, R. (2003). The changing roles of personnel managers: Old ambiguities, new uncertainties. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(4), 983-1004.
- Clark, J. (1993). *Human resource management and technical change*. London: Sage Publications.
- Cole, R.E., Bacdayan, P., and White, B.J. (1993). Quality, participation, and competitiveness. *California Management Review*, 35(3), 68-81.
- Conger, J.A., and Kanungo, R.N. (1988). The empowerment process: Integrating theory and practice. *Academy of Management*, 13(3), 471-482.
- Conner, J., and Ulrich, D. (1996). Human resource roles: Creating value, not rhetoric. *Human Resource Planning*, 19(3), 38-49.
- Conner, J., and Wirtenberg, J. (1993). Managing the transformation of human resources work. *Human Resource Planning*, 16(2), 17-34.
- Cunningham, I., Hyman, J., and Baldry, C. (1996). Empowerment: The power to do what? *Industrial Relations Journal*, 27(2), 143-154.
- Dachler, H.P., and Wilpert, B. (1978). Conceptual dimensions and boundaries of participation in organizations: A critical evaluation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 23(1), 1-39.
- Davies, D. (2002). The devolution of human resource functions to the line: An examination of the impact of organizational change in Australian electric utilities. *Management Research News*, 25(8-10), 49-51.
- Delery, J.E., and Doty, D.H. (1996). Modes of theorizing in strategic human resource management: Tests of universalistic, contingency, and configurational performance predictions. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(4), 802-835.
- DiMaggio, P.J., and Powell, W.W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147-160.
- Dimitriades, Z.S. (2005). Employee empowerment in the Greek context. *International Journal of Manpower*, 26(1), 80-92.
- Flood, P. (1998). Is HRM dead? What will happen to HRM when traditional methods are gone? In P. Sparrow and M. Marchington (eds). *Human Resource Management: The New Agenda*. London: FT Pitman.
- Greasley, K., Bryman, A., Dainty, A., Price, A., Soetanto, R., and King, N. (2005). Employee perceptions of empowerment. *Employee Relations*, 27(4), 354-368.
- Guest, D.E. (1991). Personnel Management: The end of orthodoxy? *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 29(2), 149-176.
- Guest, D.E. (2001). Human resource management: When research confronts theory. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 12(7), 1092-1106.
- Guest, D.E., and Peccei, R. (1994). The nature and causes of effective human resource management. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 32(2), 219-242.
- Hall, L., and Torrington, D. (1998). Letting go or holding on – The devolution of operational activities. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 8(1), 41-55.

- Harber, D., Marriot, F., and Idrus, N. (1991). Employee participation in TQC: An integrative review. *International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management*, 8(5), 24-34.
- Hazman, S.A. (1999). *Line influence in HR decisions: An exploratory study of a contingency model*. Paper presented at the 3rd Asian Academy of Management Conference, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia.
- Hazman, S.A. (2002). *Sending HR to the line: Beyond the prescription*. Paper presented at the National Human Resource Management Conference, Penang, Malaysia.
- Holt, L.H., and Brewster, C. (2003). Line management responsibility for HRM: What is happening in Europe? *Employee Relations*, 25(3), 228-224.
- Hope-Hailey, V., Farndale, E., and Truss, C. (2005). The HR department's role in organizational performance. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 15(3), 49-66.
- Hope-Hailey, V., Gratton, P., Stiles, P., and Truss, C. (1997). A chameleon function? HRM in the '90s. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 7(3), 5-18.
- Hoque, K., and Noon, M. (2001). Counting angels: A comparison, of personnel and HR specialists. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 11(3), 5-22.
- Huselid, M.A., Jackson, S.E., and Schuler, R.S. (1997). Technical and strategic human resource management effectiveness as determinants of firm performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 40(1), 171-188.
- Hyman, J., and Cunningham, I. (1996). Change in employee relations – Can line managers deliver? *Management Research News*, 19(4/5), 35-37.
- Johnson, E.K., and Mouly, V. S. The human resource function in New Zealand: the Cranfield survey. *The New Zealand Journal of Human Resources Management*, 2, 1-15.
- Kulik, C. T., and Bainbridge, H. T. J. (2006). HR and the line: The distribution of HR activities in Australian organizations. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 44(2), 240-256.
- Lawler, E.E., and Mohrman, S.A. (2000). Beyond the vision: What makes HR effective? *Human Resource Planning*, 23(4), 10-20.
- Lawler, E.E., and Mohrman, S.A. (2003). HR as a strategic partner: What does it take to make it happen? *Human Resource Planning*, 26(3), 15-29.
- Lee, M., and Koh, J. (2001). Is empowerment really a new concept? *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 12(4), 684-695.
- Legge, K. (1978). *Power, innovation and problem solving in personnel management*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Legge, K. (1995). *Human resource management: Rhetorics and realities*. Hampshire: Macmillan.
- Lengnick-Hall, C.A., and Lengnick-Hall, M.L. (1988). Strategic human resources management: A review of the literature and a proposed typology. *Academy of Management Review*, 13(3), 454-470.
- Lily, J.D., and Gray, D.A. (2005). Outsourcing the human resource function: Environmental and organizational characteristics that affect HR performance. *Journal of Business Strategies*, 22(1), 55-73.
- Locke, E.A., and Schweiger, D.M. (1979). Participation in decision making: One more look. In L.L. Cummings and B.M. Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (vol. 1, pp. 265-339). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Lowe, J. (1992). Locating the line: The front-line supervisor and human resource management. In P. Blyton and P. Turnbull (Eds.), *Reassessing human resource management*. London: Sage.
- Mayrhofer, W., Muller-Camen, M., Ledolter, J., Strunk, G., and Erten, C. (2004). Devolving responsibilities for human resources to line management? An empirical study about convergence in Europe. *Journal of East European Management Studies*, 9(2), 123-146.
- McGovern, P., Gratton, L., Hope-Hailey, V., Stiles, P., and Truss, C. (1997). Human resource management on the line? *Human Resource Management Journal*, 7(4), 12-29.
- Mohrman, S.A., and Lawler, E.E. (1997). Transforming the human resource function. *Human Resource Management*, 36(1), 157-162.
- Nadler, P.S. (1999). Empowerment: The human resources goal for a new century. *The Secured Lender*, 55(7), 68-71.
- Nielsen, J.F., and Pedersen, C.P. (2003). The consequences and limits of empowerment in financial services. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 19(1), 63-83.
- Papalexandris, N., and Panayotopoulou, L. (2005). Exploring the partnership between line managers and HRM in Greece. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 29(4/5), 281-291.
- Pardo del Val, M., and Lloyd, B. (2003). Measuring empowerment. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 24(2), 102-108.
- Pfeffer, J. (1994). *Competitive advantage through people*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

- Quinn, R.E., and Spreitzer, G.M. (1997). The road to empowerment: Seven questions every leader should consider. *Organizational Dynamics*, 26(2), 37-49.
- Ramaekers, S. (2005). Educational support, empowerment, and its risks: The correct voice of support? *Educational Theory*, 55(2), 151-163.
- Raub, S., Alvarez, L., and Khanna, R. (2006). The different roles of corporate and unit level human resources managers in the hospitality industry. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 18(2), 135-144.
- Renwick, D. (2003). Line manager involvement in HRM: An inside view. *Employee Relations*, 25(3), 262-280.
- Schuler, R.S. (1990). Repositioning the human resource function: Transformation or demise. *Academy of Management Executive*, 4(3), 49-60.
- Schuler, R.S., and Jackson, S.E. (1987a). Linking competitive strategies with human resource management practices. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 1(3), 207-219.
- Schuler, R.S., and Jackson, S.E. (1987b). Organizational strategy and organization level as determinants of human resource management practices. *Human Resource Planning*, 10(3), 125-141.
- Schuler, R. S., and Jackson, S. E. (1989). Determinants of human resource management priorities and implications for industrial relations. *Journal of Management*, 15(1), 89-99.
- Schuler, R.S., and Jackson, S.E. (2005). A quarter-century review of human resource management in the U.S.: The growth in importance of the international perspective. *Management Review*, 16(1), 11-35.
- Storey, J. (1992). *Developments in the management of human resources*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Thomas, K.W., and Velthouse, B.A. (1990). Cognitive elements of empowerment: An "interpretive" model of intrinsic task motivation. *Academy of Management*, 15(4), 666-681.
- Tracey, J.B., and Nathan, A.E. (2002). The strategic and operational roles of human resources: An emerging model. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 43(4), 17-26.
- Truss, C., Gratton, L., Hope-Hailey, V., Stiles, P., and Zaleska, J.(2002). Paying the piper: Choice and constraint in changing HR functional roles. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 12(2), 39-63.
- Tsui, A. S. (1984). Personnel department effectiveness: A tripartite approach. *Industrial Relations*, 23(2), 184-197.
- Tyson, S. (1987). The management of the personnel function. *Journal of Management Studies*, 24(9), 523-532.
- Tyson, S. (1995). *Human resource strategy*. London: Pitman.
- Tyson, S., and Fell, A. (1992). *Evaluating the personnel function* (2nd Ed.). Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.
- Ulrich, D. (1997). *Human resource champions: The next agenda for adding value and delivering results*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Walker, J.W. (1990). What's new in HR development? *Personnel*, 67(7), 1-6.
- Wanless, C. (2003). *Devolution of HR activities to the line: Does the reality lag behind the rhetoric?* [On-line]. Available: <http://www.business.king.ac.UK/research/hrm/wanless.pdf>
- Whittaker, S., and Marchington, M. (2003). Devolving HR responsibility to the line: Threat, opportunity or partnership? *Employee Relations*, 25(3), 245-261.
- Wiley, C. (1992). A comprehensive view of roles for human resource managers in industry today. *Industrial Management*, November/December, 27-29.
- Wilkinson, A. (1998). Empowerment: Theory and practice. *Personnel Review*, 29(1), 40-56.
- Wright, P.M., and McMahan, G.C. (1992). Theoretical perspectives for strategic human resource management. *Journal of Management*, 18(2), 295-320.
- Wright, P.M., McMahan, G., Snell, S., and Gerhart, B. (2001). Comparing line and HR executives' perceptions of HR effectiveness: Services, roles and contributions. *Human Resource Management*, 40(2), 111-123.
- Wright, P.M., Dyer, L., and Takla, M.G. (1999). What's next? Key findings from the 1999 state-of-the-art and practice study. *Human Resource Planning*, 22(4), 12-20.