

The Devolution of HRM to Line Managers in Malaysia: Role Expectations vs. Role Taking

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Abstract: People management has long been part of the line manager's role but it has now become a crucial component. The prominent role of line managers in HRM is evident as they are increasingly responsible for many HRM activities. For line managers to deliver their HRM role effectively, it must be clearly defined so they can enact the role according to the expectations of their role evaluators. This study presents the preliminary findings of a study on the devolution of HRM to line managers in a Malaysian setting. Drawing on role theory concepts, role expectations and role taking are considered in this study to investigate the understanding of the line managers HRM role between role evaluators and role holders. Data about role expectation is gathered from the key members of the organization as a role evaluator. Line manager's experience in undertaking the line manager's HRM role is obtained to reflect their understanding as a role holder. Results of this study showed inconsistencies between role expectations and role taking. This has important implications for developing the line manager's HRM role as to maximise their contribution to organisational outcomes.

Key words: HRM, line managers, role theory, organisational outcomes, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

HRM is recognised as one of the key elements in the development and implementation of strategic responses under competitive pressure (Budhwar, 2000). The importance of HRM is justified by its capability to provide management with the opportunity to secure organisational competitive advantage through a rich array of policies and practices that prepare the organisation for dealing with environmental change (McConville, 2006). HRM policies and practices are an essential element in building human capital and stimulating the necessary behaviours that create advantage for the organisation. Importantly, the changing demands of HRM functions are evident; organisations need to deal with constant changes in their environment and remain competitive (Ulrich *et al.*, 2012, 1995). One issue related to these changes is the devolution of HRM to line managers (Budhwar, 2000). Therefore, researchers have suggested revisions be made to the HRM function to enhance its importance to organisations in achieving organisational goals (Ulrich *et al.*, 2008).

The devolution of HRM activities to line managers is an important practice in an increasingly competitive

environment (Budhwar, 2000). The main purpose of devolving HRM activities is to give Human Resource (HR) specialists opportunity to focus attention at the strategic level. This enables the HRM function to be effectively integrated into business strategies. Towards that end line managers are given primary responsibility for managing HRM activities at the operational level. It is assumed that line managers are more responsive to staff needs and local conditions, enabling them to take responsibility for HRM in their areas. However, the line manager's HRM role has gained prominence as they become increasingly involved in many HRM activities. These include performance appraisal, training and development, recruitment and selection, pay and benefits, career development, industrial relations, safety and health and workforce expansion and reduction (Currie and Procter, 2001; Larsen and Brewster, 2003). This implies that line manager's HRM roles are greater than previously assumed (Currie and Procter, 2001). Line managers are in the best position to take responsibility for converting HRM policies into practice and for influencing the direction of work teams to achieve organisational goals (Townsend *et al.*, 2012). As employees are more likely to rely on the actions and support of their line managers

their attitudes and behaviours can be guided to achieve real improvements in unit level outcomes, potentially contributing to overall organisational performance (McConville, 2006).

Research problem: The prominent HRM role of line managers requires clear definition so they can be effective in their job. The role must be clearly defined so they can enact the role according to the expectations of their role evaluators. Evaluators include the line manager's supervisor, employees and HR specialists. It is important to highlight the expectations of role evaluators; assessment of line manager's performance depends on what the role evaluator perceives to be valuable. While this reflects the need to understand whether line managers and their role evaluators agree on role definition to date little exploration has occurred regarding the perception of line managers and different stakeholders in organisations other than in HR specialists (Harris *et al.*, 2002). Focusing only on HR specialist's views is likely to be biased as researchers have agreed there is complexity in the relationship between HR specialists and line managers (Larsen and Brewster, 2003). This suggests the need to gather perceptions from other key organisational members closely related to the line manager's HRM role. Moreover, HR specialist's views would best provide information on the intended HRM role from the perspective of the role evaluator as a policy maker, rather than line managers as implementers. Line manager's views should receive due consideration as they reflect their understandings of policy maker expectations.

Role theory: A "role" is defined as 'the specific forms of behaviour associated with given positions in which the behaviour develops originally from task requirement's (Katz and Kahn, 1966). In an organisational system, a role represents positions in the organisation. Each role has its own purpose being designed to contribute to achieving organisational goals. In exploring the line manager's HRM role, role theory is relevant. Role theory is widely used to understand employee behaviour in organisations. It provides an understanding of the causes and outcomes of employee behaviour, specifically regarding an employee's role. Early developments of role theory suggested that expectations were crucial in determining the performance of a particular role. Role development is influenced by the expectation of members in a role set. A role set "consists of the different people with whom the role holder has contact and who have a stake in and hold expectations about the role performance". This suggests the importance of interpreting the expectations of role evaluators and delivering the right message so that the

expected role behaviour is achieved. As Katz and Kahn (1966) note, the allocation of work roles reflects the required behaviour expected by the organisation which employees should comply with to ensure that work is performed effectively, achieving organisational goals. In understanding employee behaviour, role theory provides a review framework, known as "role episode". A role episode describes "any interaction between employees whereby role expectations and role behaviours are manifest in measurable consequences" (Wickham and Parker, 2007). Role episode is underpinned by four assumptions:

- "Role taking" suggests that an employee will accept a role that is conferred on them by other members in the organisation
- "Role consensus" refers to the understanding of the expectations of all roles that are interdependent
- "Role compliance" occurs when employees comply with the expected behaviour of their role
- "Role conflict" arises when the expectations of other members of the organisation are not consensual (Wickham and Parker, 2007)

Role consensus is important for both role evaluators and holders. Consensus can ensure the role is enacted as required by the role evaluator. Achieving consensus implies that the role holder is rewarded based on the assessments of the role evaluator. Two contrasting views on how consensus occurs suggest that shared norms and attitudes between role evaluators and role holders may determine the extent to which role consensus occurs. Role consensus is also viewed as part of the employment contract. Employees are assumed to be aware of role expectations and the associated reward based on role performance through this contract (Biddle, 1986). To ensure role consensus assumptions are operational requires the role to be pre-defined, fixed and agreed on by both the role evaluator and role holder (Wickham and Parker, 2007). However, this is difficult when organisations are continuously changing. Complexity of organisational structures leads to role variation over time. Consequently, role holders and role evaluators often have different understandings regarding expectations. This creates a gap between the intended and actual role behaviours. The above mentioned concepts are obviously pertinent to the diverse demands of line manager roles when undertaking HRM responsibilities. For instance, role theory argues that interpretations of organisational context will influence perception of role requirements. In this study, this perception is important because it will guide the way line managers HRM role is defined by the

role evaluators. To understand how this expectation is developed, this study will investigate the intended HRM role of line managers from the perspectives of key members in the role set who are closely related with the role. The concepts of role taking will be employed to explore how line manager's HRM role is enacted. The actual line managers HRM role reflects line manager's perception of messages sent by the role senders in the role taking process. Their responses will determine their understanding of the role expectations set by their role evaluators (Gomez and Sundaram, 1999).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a qualitative study based on three Malaysian airport case studies. These airports were purposively selected to reflect a range of airport categories and sizes but particularly for the accessibility to interviewees they provided. Interviews were conducted with line managers, senior managers and HR representatives at each airport. In this study, line managers are the role holders; senior managers and HR representatives are the role evaluators. Line managers in this study were those first line supervisors at the lower hierarchical level in the organisational structure to whom individual employees reported directly and who had responsibility to the unit head for employees under their supervision. Senior managers were those managers who were responsible for defining the line manager's HRM role, evaluating line manager's performance and influencing the way the line managers perform their HRM role. Senior managers were the heads of each unit that participated in the study. HR representatives were defined as those from HR department who involved in managing HR related issues, particularly with regards to HRM policy and practices throughout the organisation. A total of 36 interviews were conducted with 23 line managers and 13 role evaluators. Semi-structured interviews were employed because they enabled participants to give as much information as possible and the researcher to investigate the meaning of responses thoroughly. The main elements explored in the interview were the intended and actual HRM roles of line managers. The intended HRM role of line managers represents a set of behaviours expected from the role evaluators to contribute to the company goals. The actual HRM role is a set of behaviours exhibited by line managers based on their perception of the HRM role requirements. The intended and actual HRM roles of the line managers were measured by Conner and Ulrich (1996)'s perceived three HRM roles: administrative expert, employee champion and change agent. The level of involvement was measured through

line manager's participation in the HRM activities. The high involvement of line managers is described by their participation in most processes involved in the HRM activities. Line manager's involvement was not limited to implementation but also planning some HRM activities. The low involvement of line managers in HRM activities meant that they are expected to be involved in implementation while planning activities were managed by the unit head. Moderate involvement represents a situation where line managers involve in both aspects of implementation and planning but together with the unit head. Line managers will take no action without presence or approval from the unit head. Document analysis was employed to obtain general information about the airport background and to compare findings from the interviews. This process involved websites and some documentation such as job descriptions and organisational chart. This study applied role theory concepts; therefore, content analysis was appropriate for describing the content of written documents (the company documents) and spoken material gathered from interviews.

Research context Malaysia: Research into the HRM role of line managers has concentrated on Western countries; little attention has been paid to Asian countries such as Malaysia (Budhwar, 2000; Yusoff *et al.*, 2010) where social and cultural differences may add further complexity in developing the role review of HRM issues identified this as a gap in HRM literature, especially in relation to important emerging countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Thus, it is vital to fill this gap as HRM in Asian countries may face different challenges to that in Western countries.

Malaysia is a unique multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious society. It shares characteristics in common with other Asian countries including high power distance, high collectivism, moderate levels of uncertainty avoidance, high masculinity and long-term orientation (Bhopal and Rowley, 2005). These characteristics describe the values held by Malaysian people which emphasise family in actions within society as well as at the workplace.

Considering the future competitiveness of Malaysia as it moves towards becoming a high income nation, assertions have been made regarding the importance of effectively managing the workforce through the implementation of HRM to ensure a positive impact on company performance (Osman *et al.*, 2011). Scholars point out that the characteristics of Malaysian society necessitate appropriate solutions are implemented in people management (Rowley and Abdul-Rahman, 2007).

In this study, Malaysian culture may influence the enactment of line manager HRM roles by influencing how line managers perceive the requirements to perform their HRM role effectively.

RESULTS

The Malaysian airport sector has been managed by one parent company. This company was originally established as a government agency but after approximately 10 years, it transitioned to become a private enterprise. These changes meant that the company no longer had the role of the regulatory body responsible for the airports and the aviation industry. Instead, it focused on three main activities at each airport: operations, management and maintenance. The sector employs approximately 7,000 employees across 39 airports. Three airports were the focus of this study.

Airport X: Airport X is an international airport located in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia. It is a medium-sized airport and at the time of the study, employed 469 staff within seven functional units: four main units and three support units. The main units include operations, fire and rescue services, security and engineering. The support units include three functions: HR, finance and commerce. At this site, interviews were carried out with 13 line managers and four role evaluators, representing three main units and one support unit.

Airport Y: Airport Y is a domestic airport located in the northern region of peninsular Malaysia that had 69 employees at the time of the study. Airport Y is a small airport with smaller operations compared with Airport X because the services offered are limited to destinations within Malaysia. For this reason, the number of units and employees at the domestic airport is lower than at the international airport. There are five functional units comprising four main units (operations, engineering, security and fire and rescue services) and one support unit. The support unit was designed to cover other services, including HR, finance and commerce for the whole airport. At this airport, six line managers and five role evaluators were interviewed.

Airport Z: Airport Z is a domestic airport located in the centre of peninsular Malaysia. A small airport with only 81 employees, Airport Z had the capacity to handle around 500,000 passengers annually. The main factor that contributed to the increased number of passengers in the

airport is the attractive route it offers to the Holy Land, Mecca, via Jeddah and Medina, especially for Muslim passengers from the west coast of Peninsular Malaysian. At this airport, interviews were conducted with four line managers and four role evaluators.

The intended HRM role of line managers: The role evaluator's expectations were grouped using Corner and Ulrich (1996)'s typology to define the intended HRM roles of the line managers. These are presented in Table 1. The role evaluator's expectations fell into all roles: administrative expert role, employee champion role and change agent. Results of the study revealed that role evaluator's perceptions differed between airports. Although, the entire HRM role (administrative expert, employee champion and change agent role) was considered by role evaluators within airports, their views on the level of line manager's involvement differed. As can be seen in Table 1, the expectations of line managers at Airport X were higher than for line managers at Airport Y and Z in all HRM roles. Role evaluators in Airport X said: Line managers have to plan for everything that related with the unit's activities such as the monthly roster, training and performance management. They have to monitor employee's overtime and claims. Also in terms of annual leave and sick leave. We just monitor what has been done (RE 1, Unit 1). But for role evaluators at Airport Y; they were supposed to assist in preparing reports and certain documentation but at the moment there were certain part that they can manage by themselves and other part that we have to involve. They need close supervision as to ensure they are doing the right thing. We need them because they will involve in the implementation part (RE 6, Unit 2).

Moreover, the level of line manager's involvement within units at Airport Y and Z also differed based on the unit size. The involvement of line managers in a large unit was higher than that of line managers in a small unit. The only similarity found in all airports concerned the change agent role: role evaluators gave high emphasis to the change agent role. Activities defined by the role evaluators such as managing rosters, preparing reports, monitoring employee leave and conducting performance reviews were categorised and considered the components of the administrative role of the line manager. These activities essentially entail the documentation of information related to procedures and processes.

Activities defined by the role evaluators that entail interaction between the line manager and the employees were grouped together and considered the components of the employee champion role of the line manager. These activities included shaping employee's attitudes,

Table 1: Case study comparison of the role expectation (role evaluators)

Perceived HRM role function	Airport X	Case study airports airport Y	Airport Z
Administrative expert	Yes (high involvement)	Yes (low involvement)	Yes (low involvement)
Employee champion	Yes (high involvement)	Yes (moderate involvement)	Yes (moderate involvement)
Change agent	Yes (high involvement)	Yes (high involvement)	Yes (high involvement)

Table 2: Case study comparison of the role taking (line managers)

Perceived HRM role function	Case study airports Airport Y	Airport Y	Airport Z
Administrative expert	Yes (high involvement)	Yes (low involvement) only large unit	Yes (low involvement) only large unit
Employee champion	Yes (high involvement)	Yes (low involvement) only large unit	Yes (low involvement) only large unit
Change agent	No	No	No

influencing employees, communicating messages to employees and providing an example to employees. Activities that involved the ability to make changes were considered a critical component of the line manager's role. These activities included dealing with employee shortages, developing ways to cut operational costs and supporting company goals. These activities were considered the components of the change agent role of the line manager.

The actual HRM role of line managers: Generally, line managers in all airports perceived that their HRM role was related to two HRM functions: administrative expert and employee champion. The activities grouped under the administrative expert role included documentation of employee leave and claims and updating employee information. The employee champion role included activities such as building good relationships with employees and advising employees on their work and performance. All line managers perceived that managing relationships with employees was important. However, the emphasis given to the role by line managers differed between airports as shown in Table 2. High emphasis was given by the line managers at Airport X, whereas low emphasis was given by those at Airport Y and Z. For instance, line managers at Airport X expressed; I can decide not to approve employee leave but for emergency leave I have to study the case (to ensure employee really has a strong reason to take leave). We can release employees from the work station if they have to attend any physical and fitness training. By doing that we can monitor where they are and what are they doing. We also responsible to update employee personal information. We plan for the roster and manning (Line manager 4, Unit 1).

Different response is given by line managers at Airport Y; The approval for employee's leave is on the heads of unit but employees must go through me first. I'll check on the needs for a particular of time to ensure that there is no activity has been plan on that time (Line manager 14, Unit 1). Further, the perceptions of

these roles also differed among line managers at Airport Y and Airport Z based on the unit size. Line managers in the large units perceived that they were responsible for performing an HRM role but line managers in the small units believed that they were not involved in an HRM role. Instead, the HRM issues for their units were the responsibility of the unit heads. A small unit is defined as a unit that has <15 employees and a larger unit size is composed of >15 employees.

The only similarity in the perceptions of the line managers at all airports was found in the change agent role: line managers did not perceive this role as part of their HRM responsibility because their limited involvement in the decision-making process hindered them from performing beyond their routine tasks. Line managers viewed their HRM role as providing input and information regarding HRM activities to the senior managers and HR representatives for further action. Therefore, the line managers merely followed decisions made by others. Their actions were attributed to the absence of power they had to make final decisions on HRM matters. This finding is supported by analysis of line manager's job descriptions which revealed no authority for line managers to make decision on HRM issues. These findings indicate that the line managers believed that they performed their HRM role well by fulfilling the usual tasks they had been doing for a long time. There was very low awareness of their participation in the change process, either for their individual development or for others (unit and airport) suggesting that line managers were not able to increase their performance unless they were told what they should do.

DISCUSSION

Two concepts of role theory were used to explore how the HRM role of line managers is defined and enacted: role expectations and role taking. In this study, role expectations reflected the intended HRM role of line managers required by the role evaluators. Role taking

explained the line manager's experience enacting their HRM role which was reflected in their actual HRM role.

The HRM role expectations of line managers: The analysis revealed that role evaluators expected line managers to play a role in all HRM functions: administrative expert, employee champion and change agent. Of all the roles, the change agent role was given the highest emphasis by role evaluators at all the airports. The activities entailed in the administrative expert role as perceived by the role evaluators in this study were consistent with the literature which characterises them as day-to-day tasks that are repetitive and rarely change (Conner and Ulrich, 1996). The role evaluators viewed these activities as important for ensuring the continuity of the HRM processes in the unit so that they can be integrated with the needs of the HR department. This has been noted by previous researchers who have determined that the purpose of performing the administrative expert role is to ensure the efficiency of the HRM activity processes so that the organisational operation can be run as planned (Yusoff, 2012).

This study produced results that corroborate the findings of a great deal of previous work on the devolvement of the HRM role to line managers that has suggested the need for an increased emphasis on line managers performing "the interventionist HRM roles", including the change agent role (Hall and Torrington, 1998; Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Caldwell, 2003; Hailey *et al.*, 2005). Differences in focus on performing the change agent role were expected because this role has long been characterised as the most varied role which is reflected in the differences in its enactment (Conner and Ulrich, 1996). In this study, the focus was influenced by the airport categories and operations. Airport X (international airport) provided most of the company revenue but operations at Airport Y (domestic airport) were more likely to be subsidised by the revenue gained by the international airport. The domestic airport can barely gain revenue from aeronautical sources due to the limited number of aircraft using the airport services each day. Therefore, the focus was more on changing attitudes to increase employee commitment to support the airport by generating non-aeronautical revenue. However, all the airports required contribution from their line managers to achieve their strategic priorities and improve the effectiveness of their operations which supports an earlier study that described the change agent role as a strategically oriented task expected from line managers (Yusoff, 2012).

Changes in the demand and priorities of the parent company as it transformed from a public institution to a

private company may explain the changing expectations of the role evaluators in the airports about the HRM role of the line managers over time. In this situation, expectations about the line managers increased because they needed to be flexible about new work approaches introduced by the management. Therefore, high emphasis was given to line managers's involvement in the change process. These findings are consistent with those of Truss (2001) who suggested that the HR function needs to be flexible and be able to react according to the current needs and reduced uncertainty to effectively deal with drastic changes in the environment. Indeed, this is particularly true for line managers who are responsible for performing the HRM function so that the contribution of this function can be recognised by other members in the organisation (Sheppeck and Militello, 2000).

Line manager's HRM role taking: The assumption in role taking theory has been that employees are obliged to take their assigned roles when they join an organisation (Biddle, 1986). Based on this assumption, each position in the organisation is designed for certain purposes and thus, employees who hold the position are responsible for performing any task allocated to them by their employer. Therefore, the line managers at the airports were supposed to perform the HRM role if they were aware that the role was allocated to them.

Differences in responses about the administrative expert role between line managers may have been due to the HRM policies and practices used in the companies. This has been identified by previous researchers as reflecting the organisational factors that influence role taking (Katz and Kahn, 1966). Although, this study found that the airports all had the same organisational structure, the line manager's grades differed according to the airport's category. Line managers at Airport X (international airport) had higher grades than line managers at Airport Y and Airport Z (domestic airports). The grade used for line managers at Airport X was similar to the heads of unit at Airport Y and Airport Z. This factor hugely influenced the understanding of the line managers at Airport Y and Airport Z regarding the authority they had in managing HRM processes. Their lower grade reflected their limited involvement and influence in HRM activities. This finding confirms the effect that the level of management can have on line manager's understanding about the depth of their involvement in HRM activities reported in a study by Watson *et al.* (2006) and Townsend *et al.* (2013).

The main difference in line manager's experience between Airport X and those at the other airports is related to the level of influence in the employee champion

role. Organisational and interpersonal factors were identified as contributing to this difference. This study revealed that the organisational structure of the airports affected the level of respect employees had for the line managers. Employees of Airport X had more respect for their line managers compared with employees of Airport Y and Z. The effect of the interpersonal factor in enacting the employee champion role is not surprising because it has been reported that this role requires line managers to deal with people (employees) more than processes (Yusoff, 2012).

Findings of the study indicate that the perceptions of the change agent role were influenced by organisational factor; autonomy. This study revealed that a lack of authority for line managers limited their involvement because they were more likely to follow instructions than to explore what was the best for the unit and the company as a whole. This finding is in line with Townsend *et al.* (2013) who found that the line manager's hierarchical position influence their responses in the HRM role enactment. Whilst a minority of line managers at each airport were aware of the need to perform the change agent role regardless of the airport category; this suggests that personal factors also influenced the role taking of the line managers in their HRM role. This is not surprising as Knies and Leisink (2014) study reported direct relationship between employee characteristics and their role behaviour. This includes line manager's understanding about ability and commitment towards their responsibilities including the HRM role.

CONCLUSION

The inconsistency between the intended and actual line manager's HRM role implied that the line manager's ability to deal with change was limited. This was because the HRM role requirements of the line managers were not revised when the organisation transitioned to become a private enterprise. The process through which line managers learn and adapt their HRM role requirements can affect their HRM role enactment; therefore, the issue of the role development process should be underlined. The importance of this process was evidenced by the findings of this study which revealed that the line managers did not realise that they were required to perform more than what they did especially in terms of the need to act as a "change agent". Further, the transition occurred rapidly so it resulted in a change in the expectations of the role evaluators which made it difficult to clearly define the role because it varied over time depending on the situation (Farndale *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, future studies could focus on how HRM

policies and practices could be used to communicate the changing demand of the line manager's HRM role and achieve consensus between role holders and evaluators.

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