

# **PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT PRACTICES: UNIFORMITY OR DIVERSITY? EVIDENCE FROM SOME IRISH ORGANISATIONS**

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## **Introduction**

The textbooks used on undergraduate and diploma programmes depict personnel management as a standard set of activities and imply that personnel practices are the same in all organisations. While common sense suggests that real life is usually far removed from textbook prescriptions, there is little evidence available on personnel management in Ireland from which to understand how organisations operate their personnel departments.

This article reports on the findings of research carried out in ninety seven Irish organisations. The study indicates that a great variety of activities are carried out under the label of personnel management. While the research did not suggest that there is one best way to manage the personnel function, there was evidence that some organisations are moving away from the industrial relations and administrative activities which have traditionally preoccupied the personnel manager.

## **The Research**

The study of personnel practices in Irish organisations was part of an investigation into personnel management education (Monks, 1991). The research followed up individuals who between 1980 and 1989 studied for the National Diploma in Personnel Management at one college in Dublin. These individuals were asked, through a postal questionnaire, for information on personnel practices in their organisations. While 180 individuals completed questionnaires (an 80 per cent response rate), data on personnel management activity was available for only ninety seven organisations; a large number of individuals were working for the same companies while others were in firms without structured personnel departments.

While a cross-section of Irish firms was investigated during the research, the survey was not random. In addition, the respondents comprised individuals who had all completed a diploma in personnel management and whose perceptions of personnel practice may have been coloured by this process. The research is therefore similar to the study carried out in Britain by MacKay and Torrington (1986). They also used students to gain access to information on personnel management practices and as a result they suggest that their findings may have provided 'a rosier picture of personnel management than a random sample' (p. 6).

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While the findings cannot be seen as representative of Irish personnel management, there are several factors in the way in which the research was conducted which suggest that it gives a good insight into the range of personnel management activities carried out in Irish firms. In the first place a substantial amount of data was collected on the organisations in the study and the information also came from a variety of sources. Thus, the postal questionnaires were carefully completed by respondents who also provided extra comments. In addition, follow-up interviews were conducted in thirty of the companies and trends and developments in all the firms were monitored from newspaper and journal articles. Secondly, cross-checks could be made on the data because there was more than one respondent in many of the companies. Thirdly, a cross-section of organisations was represented in the study. Two thirds were drawn from the private sector and the remainder were from public and semi-state organisations. A range of industries was included with 65 per cent involved in services and the rest in manufacturing. Three quarters were Irish companies and the remainder were foreign-owned. Finally, respondents were drawn from both personnel specialists (71 per cent) and individuals working in other positions. In using a mixture of respondents in this way it was hoped to decrease the possible bias of personnel managers who, as Legge (1988:35) points out, may don 'rose-coloured spectacles' in assessing personnel management activity in their own organisations.

The examination of personnel practices focused on a wide range of issues. This article concentrates on the variety of ways in which personnel departments were structured and on the activities they carried out.

### **The Personnel Departments**

The first indication of the diversity of personnel practices emerged in the titling of personnel departments. Thus, in the ninety seven organisations investigated, thirty two different titles were used to describe the personnel function. While the term 'personnel department' was most commonly used, there were a number of 'mixed' functions with personnel, even in some of the larger companies, quite frequently part of a general administrative or 'service' department, or seen as a combined operation with either training or industrial relations. Perhaps surprisingly, given the attention paid to the emergence of human resource management (HRM), only four departments had adopted this label. The 'hodgepodge' of activities undertaken by personnel departments (Drucker, 1968:332) appears to be thriving in Irish organisations with some personnel functions taking responsibility for areas such as organisation and methods, organisation development, staff house loans, welfare, premises, payroll, canteen, security, cleaning, telephone and reception.

The diversity of personnel practices was also indicated in the range of titles used by personnel practitioners. Sixty eight personnel-related positions were named, ranging from personnel director through to specialist posts in training and industrial relations. As with the titling of departments, there was little indication of the adoption of HRM.

In parts of the public service terms such as 'grade IV' or 'executive officer' were used to describe personnel practitioners. The use of such titles reflects the way in which these individuals were viewed within this sector: they were certain grades of staff who happened to be working in the personnel function, but they were not recognised as specialists. Such an approach within the public sector does not seem to be unusual and has been reported in other research (e.g. Crichton and Collins, 1966; Millward and Stevens, 1986:24). But the lack of recognition of the specialist nature of personnel management was seen as a problem by public sector respondents. Those working in personnel departments were expected to be experts on personnel matters, but there was little incentive to acquire the specialist qualifications which would have assisted them in their tasks.

### **Staffing of Personnel Departments**

While it would be unwise in the light of recent research (e.g. Ahlstrand and Purcell, 1988; Marginson *et al.*, 1988) to suggest that there is an optimum size for a personnel department, staffing levels may give some indication of the importance given to the personnel function within an organisation. In this group of organisations there was a correlation between the size of the personnel function and the number of employees in the organisation ( $r=0.86, p=0.000$ ). Size was also correlated with the number of unions in the organisation ( $r=0.44, p=0.000$ ). Foreign-owned firms were better staffed than their Irish counterparts with a ratio of 1.05 specialists per 100 employees, and an overall ratio of 1.7 staff per 100 employees compared with the 0.54 specialists and 1.3 staff of the Irish organisations. This follows the pattern found in other studies (Murray, 1984; Enderwick, 1985; Millward and Stevens, 1986; Shivanath, 1987; Purcell *et al.*, 1986).

While some Irish research has shown differences in staffing levels between the public and private sectors (Canniffe, 1985; Shivanath, 1987:178), no significant differences between the two emerged in this research as the ratio was 1.4 staff per 100 employees for both sectors. There were, though, differences in the number of specialists employed. While the private sector had a ratio of 0.74 specialists per 100 employees, there were only 0.34 specialists in the public sector. This reinforces the lack of recognition given to public sector personnel specialists already noted in the titling of staff.

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### **Personnel Management Tasks**

Some interesting insights into the nature of personnel management activity emerged from both the questionnaire and the interviews. In the postal questionnaire respondents were asked to 'list, in order of importance, the 5 activities carried out by the personnel function which you consider contribute most to the objectives of the organisation'. The question was directed only at individuals working in personnel (sixty nine respondents) and sixty replies were received. Table 1 uses a score to represent the importance given to each task.

**Table 1: Ranking of Tasks Contributing to Organisational Objectives**

Task	Score
Industrial/Employee Relations	184
Recruitment	169
Training	157
Remuneration	59
Communications	54
Policy Making	47
Welfare	42
Advice to Line Management	34
Manpower Planning	32
Personnel Administration	32
Discipline	16
Redundancy	15
Promotion	8
Job Evaluation	7
Performance Appraisal	7
Organisation Development	3

N = 60 organisations

The core personnel activities of industrial/employee relations, recruitment and training emerge as the tasks viewed as most important in achieving organisational objectives. Thus, 83 per cent of respondents mentioned industrial/employee relations, 80 per cent training and 77 per cent recruitment in listing the five most important tasks. These three tasks were, between them, ranked first by nearly 70 per cent of respondents, with 28 per cent placing recruitment, 25 per cent industrial/employee relations and 15 per cent training in first place.

The emphasis on these three areas broadly follows the pattern found in other studies (e.g. MacKay and Torrington, 1986; Shivanath, 1987; Keating, 1987). Yet, while respondents agreed on the priority of personnel tasks, the interview data revealed a great many differences in the way in which these were carried out. For example, in some organisations recruitment was an activity undertaken by a clerk or line manager, with a short interview the only selection device. In others it was a task occupying the time of the most senior personnel practitioner with batteries of tests and up to five or six interviews for one position. The strategies employed in the management of industrial relations also varied considerably. In some firms the personnel practitioner was mainly engaged in 'firefighting' with the resolution of disputes and the negotiation of agreements

the centre of activity. In other companies there was evidence of 'macho management' with changes in the economy and employment having provided the opportunity of, as described by one respondent, 'managing the union'. Yet another strategy involved a collaborative approach with an emphasis on joint consultation and the sharing of information. Some of the non-union companies employed integrated sets of measures which were at least partially directed towards maintaining their non-union status. These included the use of intensive selection procedures in order to recruit the 'right' employees, extensive performance appraisal and the deployment of a wide range of communication and involvement programmes in order to ensure employee commitment.

Other aspects of this list of tasks deserve comment as they raise question marks over traditional perceptions of the nature of personnel management activity. For example, communications was ranked as the fifth most important activity and was mentioned by approximately a third of respondents. Yet, while the topic has usually appeared in textbooks, it has never featured as a major task, and Mackay and Torrington (1986) did not include it in their checklist of personnel activities. But in some organisations, in particular the non-union companies, a great deal of time was spent by the personnel department on communications and involvement initiatives.

Another activity of interest is policy making and development. Although it was mentioned by only twelve respondents, six of these ranked it as the most important activity. While this task is again only infrequently encountered in the textbooks, the perception of policy making and development as important may indicate that some personnel managers are taking a long-term strategic approach and are contributing in a proactive way to the achievement of organisational objectives.

The final task which justifies comment is welfare. This is an activity which some researchers feel has declined in importance (e.g. MacKay, 1987) and it is certainly one which is now given less space in the textbooks, even to the point of being reduced to a very small section in conjunction with health and safety in the recent Irish textbook (Gunnigle and Flood, 1990). Yet welfare seems to rank as a reasonably important task, being mentioned by a third of respondents. There were some indications that an upgrading of this activity may be taking place and that it is being tackled more professionally. Thus, 30 per cent of organisations had employee assistance programmes and some personnel managers mentioned counselling as an activity under this heading.

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### **Organisational Initiatives**

Another aspect of task activity which revealed the diversity of personnel practices was the range of initiatives implemented within the broad areas of communications, involvement and participation. Respondents were asked in the postal questionnaire to tick those in use in their organisations and their responses are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Organisational Initiatives**

	%
Suggestion schemes	52
Communications programmes	51
Job rotation	37
Team briefing	34
Disclosure of financial information	34
Attitude surveys	33
Employee participation	22
Profit sharing	18
Share ownership	18
Multi-skilling	16
Quality circles	10
Job enrichment	9
Affirmative action	8
Autonomous work groups	6
Single status	5

N = 96 organisations

While, as already indicated, communications was mentioned as an important activity by some personnel managers, only about half the companies had implemented any initiatives in this area. Suggestion schemes appear to be the most popular and these operated in just over half the organisations. About half the organisations had structured communications programmes and these were more prevalent in the private sector companies and in manufacturing industry. More elaborate mechanisms such as attitude surveys, team briefing, and the disclosure of financial information each occurred in only about a third of companies. These were generally confined to the private sector and foreign firms were more likely to use attitude surveys. The disclosure of financial information was more common in manufacturing companies.

There was very little evidence of measures to improve the quality of working life, for example through the use of autonomous work groups or job enrichment schemes. Job rotation was found in about a third of the organisations and these were mainly in the private sector and foreign-owned. Foreign-owned firms were more likely to use multi-skilling and job enrichment and, as might be expected, multi-skilling was more frequently found in manufacturing firms. Participation, either as a general activity or as profit sharing, does not appear to have made any great progress, being confined to about 20 per cent of organisations. Nationality, sector or industry do not appear to make a difference to these initiatives. Quality circles, which can be seen as a means of

increasing participation at the level of the job, were found in only ten companies. These were all private sector firms of which nine were foreign-owned and seven were manufacturing.

While the evidence does not indicate any overall enthusiasm for the adoption of communications and involvement initiatives in these organisations, there were great variations between companies in their espousal of such schemes: some companies had taken no initiatives, while others employed a very wide range.

### Computerised Personnel Systems

A computerised information system can have a number of advantages for the personnel function. It can remove much of the drudgery of record keeping and filing; it provides accurate information very rapidly and allows for the exploration of a wide range of possibilities in, for example, human resource planning. The extent of computerisation in the firms investigated is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Extent of Computerisation**

	%
Fully computerised, used to analyse data and generate reports	30
Partially computerised, used as a record system but for little else	21
Computer system exists but does not work well, manual system still in operation	10
Computer system in process of being installed	21
No computerised system	18

N = 95 organisations

Although over 80 per cent of organisations had a computerised personnel system, or were in the process of introducing one, only around a third of these were using the system to analyse data and generate reports. While larger organisations might be expected to make more use of such a system, no relationship was found with extensive usage and either the size of the organisation or the number of staff in the personnel department. The limited use of computerised systems fits in with the pattern reported by Torrington *et al* (1985).

A number of reasons for the failure to use computerised personnel systems emerge from the research. Some personnel specialists indicated that they had difficulties

in persuading top management of the value of a computerised personnel package. In other organisations personnel systems had been, to use the words of one respondent, 'concocted by computer experts'. These systems were described as 'inflexible', they were not designed specifically for the personnel function and generally did not work well. It was much easier to continue to use the manual records than to waste time with their computerised version. Another personnel specialist indicated that 'personnel is always at the end of the list when it comes to computerisation': the personnel department was not seen in any way as crucial to the success of the organisation and it was both the last to be computerised, and the last to be attended to if problems arose with an existing system. However, personnel practitioners with fully operational systems spoke enthusiastically of what could be done with these, and considered that they were one of the reasons for the effectiveness of their personnel departments. This fits in with the case study research completed by Hall and Torrington (1989:29) who found that 'where the computer is used in more sophisticated ways the image and credibility of the personnel function is improved'.

### Costing of Personnel Activities

The variations found in the ways in which personnel activities were carried out also extended to the costing of these activities as shown in table 4.

**Table 4: Costing of Personnel Activities**

Activity	N	%
Remuneration	93	97
Training	88	84
Support	86	78
Relocation	82	60
Leaving	87	58
Absenteeism	87	51
Recruitment	85	45

The evidence, which broadly follows trends noted in other studies (e.g. MacKay and Torrington, 1986; Shivanath, 1987), suggests that personnel departments are costing those activities which are either relatively easy to monitor, such as remuneration, or which need to be analysed in order to meet accounting controls, for example in relation to training. Other costs such as absenteeism and recruitment, which are more obscure, appear to be given less attention. These trends may be a symptom of the unsophisticated approach already noted in relation to computerisation: if computers are only used as a record-keeping device, other data, for example in relation to absenteeism, will still have to be produced manually, and may prove too troublesome to collect.

## **Personnel's Influence within the Organisation**

One of the problems which has consistently plagued the personnel department has been its lack of status (e.g. Foulkes, 1975; Skinner, 1981). The survey revealed a mixed picture of the influence of the personnel function in the organisations surveyed. In the first place, there had been no dramatic changes in the number of staff employed in personnel departments: decreases in some organisations were counteracted by increases in others, a pattern similar to that reported by MacKay and Torrington (1986). Secondly, 60 per cent of respondents considered that the personnel function had become more important in the period 1986-1989 and only 8 per cent felt it had become less important. Thirdly, personnel issues were represented at board level in 85 per cent of organisations and in approximately 60 per cent of cases this was by a personnel specialist. Yet, despite these positive aspects, there was little evidence to suggest that the personnel function was involved to any great extent in strategic decision making. A question on the influence of personnel and industrial relations issues, compared with financial and technical considerations, on a range of business decisions revealed that they were mainly confined to the 'people' oriented matters of redundancies and closure and that they had little impact on areas such as takeover and investment - decisions which can be seen as part of the 'sharp end' of the business. The lack of recognition given to personnel and industrial relations issues in strategic decision making does not seem to be unusual and has been reported in other studies (e.g. Shivanath, 1987; Marginson et al., 1988), but it does raise the question of whether the personnel department exerts any real influence within the organisation.

Further insights into this issue were gained from responses to a question on whether the organisation had an explicit employment policy, that is, following Rothwell (1984:31), 'an overall strategy which integrates the organisation's various personnel policies and manpower plans'. About a half of the organisations had employment policies and of these about a third were unwritten. These were much more common in the private sector and in foreign-owned firms. The fact that only eight organisations had employment policies which were both written and given to employees raises the issue of the extent to which Irish firms apply an integrated and strategic approach in the management of their staff.

## **Types of Personnel Management Practice**

In addition to providing information on the activities which were carried out by their personnel departments, respondents were also asked to classify the type of personnel practice within their organisations. They were provided with six short descriptions of personnel practice and asked 'to circle the one which best matches the role of the personnel function in your organisation'. These descriptions were drawn from the work of Tyson and Fell (1986) and from Guest (1987) and from in-depth interviews conducted with personnel practitioners prior to the survey.

The six types of practice were as follows:

1. The personnel function is concerned to ensure that industrial relations conflict is minimised and that grievances and disputes are quickly resolved.
2. The personnel function is concerned for both its staff and its customers. There is an emphasis on selecting and training staff and on providing excellent welfare facilities for them.
3. The personnel function is mainly engaged in administrative work such as the preparation of reports and statistics and the maintenance of records. It acts as a resource for the line manager.
4. The personnel function is staffed by specialists with high levels of expertise in selection, training, pay and industrial relations. It is well integrated into the business and valued by the line manager.
5. The personnel function emphasises the value of the individual within the organisation and has developed policies and practices which ensure that individual talents are developed and maximised. Communication, consultation and involvement are emphasised.
6. The personnel function is closely integrated with the business needs of the organisation and people are seen as business resources. A range of sophisticated systems, including human resource planning, operate and are linked to strategic planning.

Most respondents opted for one of the six types, but one additional type was created. This was a mixture of the administrative and industrial relations approaches to personnel practice and was labelled 'caretaker'. The breakdown of organisations by type of personnel practice is shown in Table 5.

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**Table 5: Types of Personnel Practice**

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Type	%
Administrative (Type 3)	27
Industrial Relations (Type 1)	18
Professional (Type 4)	17
Individual (Type 5)	12
Caretaker (Type 7)	10
Customer (Type 2)	8
Business (Type 6)	8

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N = 97 organisations

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About half the organisations (types 3, 1 and 7) were perceived by respondents as preoccupied with what have been described as ‘traditional’ approaches to personnel management (Ahlstrand and Purcell, 1988; Mooney, 1989; Guest, 1990; Gunnigle, 1990), that is as focused primarily on administrative and industrial relations matters. In the remainder of the organisations personnel management was seen as concerned with a wider range of activities. Approaches in these companies were categorised as ‘innovative’ (Guest, 1990; Mooney, 1989).

Analysis of the data using the ‘traditional’ and ‘innovative’ categorisations revealed differences between organisations which had adopted ‘innovative’ personnel practices and those which continued to pursue ‘traditional’ approaches. Those with ‘innovative’ practices were more likely to be using computerised personnel systems, to be costing personnel activities, to have taken initiatives in communications, participation and involvement and to have employment policies. There also seemed to be a more positive image of the personnel department in organisations with ‘innovative’ practices: respondents considered them effective in contributing to organisational objectives and the reasons given centred on the quality of personnel staff and systems and the key role of personnel within the organisation. In contrast, in nearly a half of the organisations with ‘traditional’ practices, respondents felt that these were ineffective in contributing to organisational objectives. The lack of expertise of personnel staff and the low status of the personnel function were blamed for this. The employee relations climate, measured in terms of employee attitudes and morale, was also perceived as more positive where organisations had adopted ‘innovative’ practices.

But even where ‘innovative’ approaches had been adopted, only nine companies were identified as having espoused policies which could be described as designed to ‘produce strategic integration, high commitment, high quality and flexibility among employees’ (Guest, 1989:42) in a way which can be seen as indicative of HRM. The majority of firms with ‘innovative’ practices appeared to be intent on remedying the problems associated with traditional personnel management, rather than necessarily replacing it with an integrated and comprehensive new system.

## Conclusions

The evidence from this survey suggests that personnel management is not the tidy set of tasks prescribed in the standard textbooks: it comprises a very wide range of activities and it also varies considerably between organisations. In some companies the personnel department is still very much involved in ‘firefighting’ and administration and in reacting to events as they arise. In others a more proactive stance is being taken with an emphasis on communications and involvement. The research did not indicate an optimum model of personnel practice. No link was established between organisational performance and type of personnel practice: some companies with ‘traditional’ approaches were performing well; others, with ‘innovative’, were performing badly. There was, however, evidence,

particularly in companies with 'traditional' practices, of very ineffective personnel management. For example, the failure to utilise a computerised personnel system can cause excessive amounts of paperwork as well as an inability to produce relevant information; sloppy recruitment methods may give rise to long-term staffing problems; a preoccupation with industrial relations matters may result in a failure to attend to other issues.

There were indications that shifting towards more 'innovative' approaches has positive repercussions for both the personnel function and for the employee relations climate. These shifts in direction had not in the main stemmed from the introduction of a set of strategic, integrated measures which could be seen as indicative of HRM in the organisations which were investigated. Rather the emphasis had been on a piecemeal and opportunistic approach to dealing with human resource issues and the adoption of certain initiatives to aid this process.

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