THE PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT FUNCTION IN IRELAND: MODELS AND PROSPECTS

Patrick Gunnigle*

Introduction

This paper reviews the development of the personnel function in Ireland, considers some key challenges facing the function and assesses prospects for the function as we face the next century. In tracing its development as a management function in Ireland, it is argued that the personnel function evolved towards a prevailing industrial relations' orthodoxy. However, as a result of increased competitive pressures, we are now witnessing a dismantling of such orthodoxy. As yet no clear alternative path to IR orthodoxy is discernible. Rather, a range of alternative approaches are emerging, with the role of personnel function varying according to organizational and environmental contingencies.

Industrial Relations as the Key Personnel Activity

A critical theme emerging from a review of the historical development of the personnel function in Ireland is the predominance of industrial relations as the most significant area of personnel activity (see, for example, O'Mahony 1958; Shivanath 1987) . The growth of an industrial relations emphasis in personnel work was a direct result of the increasing influence of trade unions (McNamara *et al* 1988). After some initial opposition, employers came to accommodate the reality of organized labour and responded through multi-employer bargaining via employer associations and the employment of personnel practitioners whose primary role was to deal with industrial relations matters at enterprise level. The primacy of industrial relations within the personnel role reflected a widespread acceptance of the 'pluralist model' incorporating primary reliance on adversarial collective bargaining.

The pluralist tradition was underpinned by public policy support and employer acceptance of trade union recognition and collective bargaining. For the personnel function, industrial relations became *the* priority with personnel practitioners vested with the responsibility to negotiate and police agreements. Industrial harmony was the objective and personnel specialists through their negotiating, inter-personal, and procedural skills had responsibility for its achievement. This industrial relations emphasis helped position the personnel function in a more central management role, albeit a largely reactive one.

* Department of Personnel and Industrial Relations, University of Limerick and currently a Fulbright Scholar in the Department of Management, San Diego State University.

IBAR – Irish Business and Administrative Research, Volume 17, 1996, pp. 32–43

A related factor which helped consolidate the personnel function as an important feature of the Irish management landscape was the major growth of *employment legislation* in the 1970s primarily focused on extending the individual employment rights of workers. These developments provided a industrial relations and quasi-juridical basis of 'expert power' for personnel practitioners: handling the complexities of collective bargaining and employment legislation.

The Lessons of the Market

While the historical development of the personnel function have helped shape its role, the most salient challenges for personnel management in recent years emanate from changes in market forces. The 1980s heralded a period of considerable turmoil for personnel management. A depressed economic climate together with increased competitive pressures, helped change both the focus of personnel management and the nature of personnel activities. Competitive pressures combined to set new priorities, forcing the personnel function to act under tighter cost controls and to undertake a wider range of activities. The harsh economic climate dramatically changed the industrial relations environment. Widespread redundancies and high unemployment significantly altered the bargaining context. Increasingly employers sought to address issues such as payment structures and levels of wage increases, the extent of demarcation and restrictive work practices and, ultimately, the erosion of managerial prerogative. In Ireland trade union membership fell significantly and industrial unrest also declined. At the same time increased market competition forced many organizations to seek ways of establishing competitive advantage. One apparent source of such improvements lay in the better utilisation of human resources.

Turning specifically to the Irish context, there is little doubt that 'traditional' approaches to personnel management have come under immense challenge in recent years. There is also general agreement that the main sources of such challenge originate outside the sphere of personnel management (see Beaumont 1995). In the Irish context, developments in the wider business context have acted as the key catalyst in stimulating changes in personnel management. The most widely accepted explanation of changes in traditional approaches to personnel management is the increasingly competitive nature of product and service markets. In attempting to disaggregate the sources of increased competitiveness one can point to an amalgam of factors, most particularly the

- liberalisation of European and world trade;
- deregulation in capital, product and service markets;
- improved communications and transport infrastructures, and
- greater market penetration by the emerging economies of South-East Asia (see Roche and Gunnigle 1995).

These developments have particularly significant implications for Ireland as a result of its status as a small, open economy which is heavily reliant on export performance.

The impact of increased competitive pressures has been to focus attention on both cost and product innovation/quality as factors impacting on competitive positioning. For many firms, this creates a "flexibility imperative" whereby companies have to be increasingly responsive to consumer demand on dimensions such as customisation, delivery and support services. The overall implication of these developments seems to have all but diluted the concept that companies compete on *either* a price (low cost) or a product differentiation (premium price) basis. Increasingly, it appears that all companies, and not just the low-cost producers, must tightly control their cost structures. While the need to control labour and pay costs may be more intense in labour-intensive sectors, it is also important in other sectors as product and service market competition increases and profit margins tighten.

It is also significant that these competitive trends are increasingly penetrating the State owned sector. A major reason for this development is the erosion of state monopolies as a result of developments at European Union level. The conditions imposed by the Maastricht Treaty for entry to the third phase of economic and monetary union on issues such as interest rate convergence and the debt/GDP ratio pose considerable challenges for Government, not least the issue of public sector expenditure (see Hourihan 1994) The completion of the internal market and removal of trade barriers also serves to expose many Irish organisations to increased international competition with attendant implications for personnel management at the level of the enterprise (see, for example, Hastings 1995).

The Human Resource Management Phenomenon

In the personnel sphere, a common organisational response to increased competitive pressures is a greater emphasis on aligning personnel management policies and practice with overall business strategy. A key concept which has emerged from this debate is that of *Strategic Human Resource Management.* Indeed, Human Resource Management (HRM) is by far the most widely debated development in personnel management during this past decade or so. HRM was seen by many as a new development which contrasted with 'traditional' personnel management. Its apparently proactive stance was viewed as a major departure from the traditionally reactive 'industrial relations' focus associated with established approaches. The central contention underpinning HRM is that organisations incorporate human resource considerations into strategic decision-making, establish a corporate human resource philosophy and develop a complementary and coherent set of personnel strategies and policies to improve human resource utilisation.

The implications of HRM for personnel management remain unclear. Some contributors argue that it merely involves a re-titling exercise or 'old wine in new bottles'. Others argue that its implications are more substantive, involving a complete reorientation of the role of personnel management and the personnel function. In evaluating the application of HRM, David Guest (1987) argues that companies will be

more successful if they pursue four key HRM goals, namely: Strategic integration; Employee commitment; Flexibility and Quality. He suggests that these HRM goals can be optimally achieved through coherent policy choices in the areas of organisation/job design, management of change, recruitment, selection and socialisation, appraisal, training and development, rewards and communications. Guest identifies five necessary conditions for the effective operation of HRM, namely:

- *Corporate leadership*: to ensure that the values inherent in HRM are championed and implemented;
- *Strategic vision*: to ensure the integration of HRM as a key component of the corporate strategy;
- *Technological/production feasibility*: Guest suggests that heavy investment in short-cycle, repetitive production assembly-line equipment militates against the job design principles and autonomous team-working necessary for HRM;
- *Employee relations feasibility*: Guest suggests that multi-union status, low-trust management employee relations and an adversarial employee relations orientation militates against the implementation of HRM;
- *Management capacity*: to implement appropriate policies.

Problems with the HRM Concept

Several commentators have identified a number of inherent contradictions and inconsistencies in HRM, particularly the 'soft' variant. For example, Legge (1995) highlights the apparent paradox between the traditional commodity status of labour under the capitalist framework and the essentially unitarist perspective of HRM which sees no conflict of interests between management and employees. It has traditionally been accepted that there is an inherent conflict of interest between management and employees over the price of labour. Indeed, this is the very basis for the existence of industrial relations as a key concern of workers and management. However, the HRM perspective appears to ignore the 'inherency' of a conflict of interests, but rather focuses on the achievement of congruence between management and employee interests and on achieving high levels of employee commitment.

In particular, the HRM focus on employee commitment not only seems incongruent with the pluralist perspective of the organisation but also appears to conflict with another basic tenet of HRM, namely that personnel should be integrated with and complement business strategy. Clearly, many decisions which complement business strategy may not develop employee commitment. If, for example, an organisation's business strategy is to maximise short-term returns to owners/shareholders, this may well involve decisions which do not develop employee commitment; for example, replacing labour with technology, contracting out, or intensifying work flow.

High levels of flexibility are seen as a core objective of HRM. However, the difficulties in achieving congruence between different flexibility forms (numerical,

functional and financial) is widely evident. It is clearly difficult to achieve high levels of functional flexibility (such as multi-skilling) where employees have a tenuous relationship with the organisation, as may result from attempts to improve numerical flexibility for example.

A further difficulty in the HRM argument, that personnel policies must be internally consistent, arises in relation to job security. A prominent theme in the HRM debate is that for HRM to be effective, management must provide implicit job tenure guarantees for employees. Indeed, it is argued that job tenure commitments are a 'necessary' precondition in achieving a mutuality of management and worker interests. However, it is patently evident that high levels of competition and volatility in product markets have made job security increasingly difficult to achieve. Indeed, job security may itself be incompatible with broader business goals attributed to HRM, such as increased flexibility in responding to rapid changes in demand. In practice, it would appear that some organisations seek to achieve such flexibility by policies which actually reduce the likelihood of job tenure commitments, for example, by using atypical employment forms.

Another apparent inconsistency in HRM is the focus on achieving greater individualism in management employee relations. As we have seen, personnel management practice in Ireland is been characterised by a highly collectivist emphasis as manifested in, for example, relatively high levels of trade union density and much reliance on collective bargaining. The 'soft' HRM approach places the managerial emphasis on achieving high trust relations between management and employees, and appears to have a preference for pursuing this goal in a non-union environment. Within the 'soft' HRM model, high-trust relations are pursued through managerial initiatives to increase individual employee involvement and motivation, and the adoption of techniques such as performance appraisal and performance-related pay. Thus, such organisations attempt to create close management employee ties and break down the traditional management/worker dichotomy, of which collective bargaining is seen as the principal manifestation. Such initiatives are indicative of a unitarist management perspective, albeit a sophisticated variant, and have potential for significant conflict with the pluralist perspective, characteristic of industrial relations in Ireland.

HRM in Practice

While the wider debate places much emphasis on the strategic nature of HRM, there is limited empirical evidence on the extent to which strategic approaches to HRM are actually adopted in practice. Indeed, recent Irish research questions the extent of strategic HRM (Roche & Turner 1994). Research on high performing British organisations by Tyson, Witcher & Doherty (1994) sought to examine whether organisations attempt to achieve a fit between the business and HRM strategy, and if so, how. The research discovered three distinct approaches to corporate and business strategy formation, and

found common elements in the HR strategies adopted by the sample companies in the fields of management and employee development, employee relations and organisation development. However, the integration of HR and business strategies occurs more naturally where there are core values and explicit mission, thus suggesting, according to the authors, that integration is "easier in more simple businesses". At the strategic level, the study failed to find any distinctive approach to human resource management, but it did find that financially successful companies, in different ways, took human resource issues seriously. Thus, according to Guest & Hoque (1994: 44), while the link between practices and outcomes is tenuous:

> The key is strategic integration. What this means is that personnel strategy must fit the business strategy, the personnel policies must be fully integrated with each other and the values of the line managers must be sufficiently integrated or aligned with the personnel philosophy to ensure that they will implement the personnel policy and practice ... Where this can be achieved, there is growing evidence that a distinctive set of human resource practices results in superior performance.

As indicated earlier, personnel management practice in Ireland has traditionally been associated with a strong 'industrial relations' emphasis. As such, personnel management practice is seen as essentially reactive, dealing with various problematic aspects of workforce management. Thus, personnel policies and activities tend to focus on short term issues with little conscious attempt to develop linkages with business policy. A key manifestation of the pluralist tradition at establishment level was a primary emphasis focus on *industrial* relations, with collective bargaining and related activities being the key role of the specialist personnel management function. However, we have also seen that the 1980s was a decade of reappraisal for personnel management. In Ireland, the onset of recession lessened the need for many core personnel activities such as recruitment and, particularly, industrial relations. At the same time increased market competition forced many organisations to seek ways of establishing competitive advantage including improved approaches to workforce management.

Looking at contemporary developments, it appears that recession and subsequent recovery have led to a change in traditional approaches to workforce management, a greater devolution of personnel management activities to line management, and the emergence of a greater strategic role for personnel management issues in a number of Irish companies (Turner & Morley 1995).

The Personnel Management Function: Models and Prospects

A critical aspect of organisational approaches to workforce management concerns the role of the personnel function. For example, it is suggested that a key feature of the so called 'strategic' HRM approach is that the major responsibility for personnel management be assumed by line managers. However, we have noted above that a specialist personnel

function with a reasonably well defined range of responsibilities is an established feature of workforce management in most larger Irish organisations.

Recognising that considerable variation can arise in the role that the personnel function may play in organisations, Tyson (1987) provides us with probably the most useful categorisation of role models of the personnel function, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Role Models of the Specialist Personnel Function

Clerk of Works: Within this role model personnel management is a low level activity operating in an administrative support mode to line management. It is responsible for basic administration and welfare provision.

Contracts Manager: Within this role model personnel management is a high level function with a key role in handling industrial relations and developing policies and procedures in other core areas. The role is largely reactive, dealing with the personnel management implications of business decisions. This model incorporates a strong "policing" component where the personnel department is concerned with securing adherence to agreed systems and procedures.

Architect: Within this role model personnel management is a top level management function involved in establishing and adjusting corporate objectives and developing strategic personnel policies designed to facilitate the achievement of long term business goals. Personnel management considerations are recognised as an integral component of corporate success with the Personnel director best placed to assess how the organisation's human resources can best contribute to this goal. Routine personnel activities are delegated allowing senior practitioners adopt the broad strategic outlook of a 'business manager'.

A study by Shivanath (1987) considered the relevance of Tyson's role models for personnel management practice in a cross section of large organisations in Ireland. In relation to the *clerk of works* model, the survey evidence found that the vast majority of Irish personnel practitioners were not limited to this role. While personnel departments were, of necessity, concerned with routine clerical/administrative tasks, these were generally delegated, allowing senior practitioners deal with more strategic matters. The description of the personnel practitioner within the *contracts' manager* model seemed to most accurately reflect the roles of the majority of Irish practitioners. Industrial relations was identified by the bulk of respondents as the most crucial area of their work. The study also found that the *architect* model was prominent in a number of organisations.

In assessing contemporary developments, the last decade may be typified as a period of both 'continuity and change' for the specialist personnel function in Ireland (see Monks 1992; Foley & Gunnigle 1994 1995). The continuity dimension is manifested in the widespread presence of a specialist personnel function in Irish organisations and a continuing emphasis on employee relations as a significant aspect of the personnel role. However, we can also point to evidence of important changes such as greater

strategic integration of the personnel/HR function, some movement away from traditional industrial relations and collective bargaining to a more individual approach, a growth in atypical forms of employment and greater emphasis on other aspects of personnel activity, particularly training and development. Many commentators have noted an increasing opposition to trade union recognition while still others have alluded to some (limited) examples of organisations seeking to increase the extent of labour-management participation. Existing research provides evidence of a more individual approach to workforce management, replacing traditional pluralism, particularly among newer organisations. Recent research also identifies training and development as an increasingly important area in the work of the personnel function (Heraty *et al* 1994). Still more evidence indicates significant managerial initiatives designed to dismantle accepted procedures and custom and practice in personnel management. Thus, contemporary practices indicates that there is an increasing proliferation of personnel management types, with no apparent convergence to any dominant model.

Looking to the Future: A Search for Orthodoxy

In tracing the development of the personnel function in Ireland over recent decades one can identify a predictable pattern of evolution. From somewhat humble beginnings, the specialist personnel function developed to a stage where it became accepted as an integral part of the management structure of larger organisations. This pattern of evolution saw convergence to a prevailing orthodoxy on the role of the personnel function. This orthodoxy was grounded in the belief that *the* key employer concern in workforce management was the establishment and maintenance of 'stable industrial relations'. Cornerstones of this approach were trade union recognition, adversarial collective bargaining and a degree of procedural formalisation. Thus, the personnel function assumed responsibility for managing relations with the unions. While more reactive rather than strategic, this *industrial relations* role was nonetheless significant: it served to both define what personnel work involved and position the personnel management function as an important aspect of the managerial infrastructure.

This role had its heyday in the 1970s. By the early 1980s we began to witness the initial dismantling of industrial relations orthodoxy. As we have seen earlier, the roots of such change can be traced to numerous sources but most particularly to the increased competitive pressures on organisations. For the personnel function these changes have heralded a period which essentially appears to be devoid of orthodoxy. Rather, what we see emerging is a range of different roles for the personnel function so that, as Paauwe (1996: 227) comments "it is almost impossible to speak of *the* personnel function". Rather it appears that contingency approaches are the order of the day with the role, and even the existence, of the personnel function varying according to industrial segment, managerial philosophy, product market performance and so on. It is therefore useful to consider some of the more common *organisational context-personnel function* models

which are apparent today. Four such models are discussed below, *viz.*: the commitment model; the transaction cost model; the traditional adversarial model; and the partnership model.

Organisational Context-Personnel Function Models

The Commitment model: Often labelled 'soft' HRM, this was the first model to seriously challenge industrial relations orthodoxy. It is characterised by a resource perspective of employees incorporating the view that there is an organisational pay-off in performance terms from a combination of 'sophisticated' personnel policies designed to develop employee commitment and emphasise the mutuality of management and employee interests. In this model, the personnel function is high powered and well resourced with a significant change agent role. This model appears to characterise core business organisations whose competitive strategy is based on a product differentiation/ premium price approach, often on a 'first to market' basis. Such organisations may employ significant numbers of highly trained technical and engineering staffs whose development and retention are critical to organisational success. This model generally relies on a *union substitution* premise: although organisations with union recognition but where the union role is essentially peripheral also fall within this category.

The Transaction Cost Model: While the commitment model has received much attention, its viability has increasingly come under scrutiny in recent years. In particular, exemplars of the commitment model (e.g. Wang & Digital) experienced intense competitive pressures from low cost producers. The transaction cost model places the workforce management emphasis on minimising operating costs. Thus, outsourcing becomes an important strategy, particularly in using contracted labour and other forms of 'atypical' employment. This approach is also associated intensification of the pace of work flow and an increased range of work tasks. This model may rely on a *union suppression* premise: often linked to the (management) suggestion that unions inhibit the development of necessary flexibility levels to ensure competitiveness. In this model the key role of the personnel function is cost-effective labour supply. The personnel role is essentially reactive: dealing with the operational workforce management consequences of a low cost competitive strategy. This model is likely to prosper in more de-regulated environments and, thus, poses much challenge for the European Unions 'social market' philosophy.

The Traditional Adversarial Model: This model equates to 'industrial relations orthodoxy' discussed above and was traditionally the predominant personnel function type in Ireland. It is grounded in low trust management-employee relations and primary reliance on adversarial collective bargaining. It equates to Tyson's contracts manager model.

The Partnership Model: The development of union-management partnerships has been the focus of much recent debate in Ireland (see McKersie 1996, in this issue). The proponents of partnership often point to perceived deficiencies of the adversarial model, in particular the apparent dominance of distributive bargaining with its emphasis on dividing limited resources. It is argued that this approach leads the parties to develop adversarial positions believing that any gains can only be made by inflicting losses on the other party. Based on recent analyses of industrial change, it is widely argued that there is a need for a new 'partnership' model of employee relations which incorporates a strong trade union role. It is further argued that this new model allows both sides to 'break out' of the traditional adversarial relationship through the adoption of a 'new industrial relations' model based on "mutual gains" principles. The essential 'deal' is that employers and trade unions enter into a set of mutual commitments as follows:

- employers recognise and facilitate worker and trade union involvement in strategic decision making;
- workers/trade unions commit themselves actively to productivity improvements;
- the gains of productivity improvements are shared between employers and workers;
- productivity improvements do not result in redundancies but rather employers actively seek new markets to keep workers gainfully employed.

In essence, the mutual gains argument is that workers and trade unions actively pursue *with* management solutions to business problems and appropriate work re-organisation in return for greater involvement in business decisions and in the process of work re-organisation. Within this model, the personnel function becomes an important strategic lever in developing the partnership agenda. It also assumes an important role in implementing a range of personnel policy initiatives to underpin this new orientation: specifically in areas such as reward systems, management-employee communications, job design and employee development.

Managing without a personnel function

While the focus of this paper is the changing role of the personnel function it is useful briefly to consider the issue of managing without a traditional personnel function. As many organisations move to 'leaner' organisational structures, it is clear that the establishment of a traditional personnel function is no longer an inevitable consequence of an increase on organisation scale.

In essence, there appears to be two principal means of replacing the traditional personnel function: devolvement to the line (internal devolution), and outsourcing (external devolution) (see Paauwe 1996). The first route is not particularly novel: indeed line management have always had a key role in day to day personnel issues. What is somewhat novel is the argument that line managers should play a greater role in policy

development and interpretation. This theme has developed concurrently with moves towards flatter organisation structures and teamworking. Undoubtedly this is important and will lead to a changing division of labour between personnel and line management. However, it is unlikely to lead to a widespread abolition of the personnel function. Possibly the greatest threat to the personnel function is that of outsourcing. The transaction cost model, discussed above, places considerable emphasis on the 'make' or 'buy' decision. If a particular department does not make a demonstrable added value contribution when compared to outsourcing, so the argument goes, then such services should be contracted in. Two other factors make this option even more attractive: first, on the demand side, the trend towards smaller organisation scale combined with growth of contracted-in labour means that organisations have less 'employees' to manage; and second, on the supply side, the proliferation of 'management consultants' provides a buoyant source of relatively inexpensive contracted-in personnel services.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the development and nature of the personnel function in Ireland. It considered some of the key challenges facing the function and outlined some typologies which reflect alternative role models of the personnel function. A key theme of this paper is that up to the late 1970s the development of the personnel function was characterised by *convergence* to a common model of 'industrial relations orthodoxy'. However, since that period a combination of environmental changes have called into question the appropriateness of this model. In particular, increased competitive pressures have stimulated significant *divergence* in relation to acceptable models of personnel management.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Kathy Monks (Dublin City University), Mike Morley and Tom Turner (University of Limerick) for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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