

INTEGRATING HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS STRATEGY IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND CLOTHING INDUSTRY: A CASE OF OIL AND WATER?

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Introduction

The goal of strategic integration lies at the heart of Guest's (1987) model of Human Resource Management (HRM). Legge (1995) cites Guest (1987) in identifying three aspects of strategic integration: the integration or "fit" of human resources policies with business strategy; the integration or complementarity and consistency of "mutuality" employment policies aimed at generating employee commitment, flexibility and quality; and the internalisation of the importance of human resources by line management. This paper will concentrate on the first aspect, and as such, an appropriate starting point is to consider the development of the theory of strategic human resource management (SHRM).

The HRM integration approaches have been divided into "hard" and "soft" models (Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995). According to the most technical and functionalistic approaches of HRM integration, it is the business strategy that guides the formulation of human resource policies.

Theorising on Strategic Human Resource Management

In this paper, attempts will be made to identify and highlight some of the existing strengths and weaknesses in the SHRM literature. The broad, general (not to say rather idealised) SHRM perspective is

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viewed as embodying a number of important specific changes from the practice of personnel management. Beaumont (1992) cites Mahoney and Deckop (1986: 229–234) in identifying these changes as follows:

- The practice of employment planning (e.g. succession planning) has moved beyond its early, relatively narrow, technical focus and concern with forecasting work to a concern with establishing linkages between human resource planning and the larger organisational strategy and business planning of organisations;
- The traditional concern of the personnel function with negotiating and administering a collective agreement (in a unionised organisation) has broadened to a concern with a larger notion of “workforce governance” in which non-collective bargaining mechanisms (e.g. quality circles) are all-important in permitting employee involvement and participation in work-related decisions;
- The early concept of personnel management with job satisfaction of individual employees (a notion of morale) developed into an interest in the notion of “organisational climate” which has further evolved into a focus on the notion of “organisational culture”;
- The idea of selection, training, performance appraisal and compensation decisions, being heavily centred on the role of individual employees (with their detailed job description) has given way to the belief that effective team or group working is the all-important route through which effective performance is achieved; the basic concern of personnel management to reduce costs through minimising employee turnover and absence rates has given way to the view that HRM can make a distinctive, positive contribution to organisational effectiveness, i.e. a bottom-line contribution;
- The relatively narrow focus of training on the teaching and learning of individual job skills has been broadened into a concern with developing, via both training and non-training needs, the full, longer-term employment potential of individuals.

Beaumont (1992: 22) points out that SHRM in its American context can be viewed as the latest in a series of stages in a long line of management research and practices, which began with the human relations movement of the 1940s and 1950s. The widely held view that there needs to be an explicit contemporary relationship between the inter-

nal HRM strategy of individual organisations and their external product market or larger business strategy has led to the formulation of product market strategies and their (desirably) associated HRM strategies and practices. Beaumont (1992: 23) cites a paper by Schuler and Jackson (1987) which offers three strategic approaches:

1. An innovation strategy designed to gain competitive advantage (i.e. develop products or services different from their competitors);
2. Quality enhancement strategies (i.e. enhance product and service quality);
3. A cost-reduction strategy (i.e. be a low-cost producer).

Each of these approaches should have an appropriate supportive HRM policy associated with it. Schuler and Jackson (1987) developed a model to show how integration could take place between the particular business strategies and the human resource strategies, and allow the organisation to fulfil its strategic objectives and gain or maintain competitive advantage.

Beaumont (1992) goes on to argue that whichever competitive strategy is adopted, it is essentially contingency-based. Decisions are determined by factors such as the demand of customers, the nature of competition, and indeed the fact that the individual organisation may pursue multiple strategies in their varying strategic business units or functional areas. Continuous changes to strategies in organisations over a period of time are always evident, and there are many factors that can influence this. Those most frequently identified include changes in the marketplace, influence of competitors' changing strategy, changing customer preferences, and developments in economic, social, technological and political environment, both internally and externally. Beaumont states that changing product market strategies over the course of time is all-important because of the perceived need for HRM priorities, strategies and practices to change accordingly.

This perspective suggests the importance of incorporating in HRM strategy formulation the notion of product or organisational life cycles, which are typically held to involve four stages: in the first stage startup, in stage two growth, in stage three maturity and finally in stage four decline. Beaumont highlights the model of Kochan and Barocci (1985: 115), to show how HRM priorities and strategies may change over the course of these four stages.

The second major theme in the SHRM literature cited by Beaumont (1992), and primarily identified by Kochan and Barocchi (1985), is that of the linkage (or lack of it) between corporate strategy and human resource strategy. Beaumont describes the basic message as being predominantly prescriptive. The message, in essence, is that human resource issues should be considered foremost in the formulation of business plans. Key elements include the theory that human resource issues are particularly important in strategic planning, which is aimed at achieving a major change in an organisation's direction or emphasis.

Significant attention has been paid in the late 1990s to a searching examination of the outcomes associated with SHRM. Within this context, in the USA influential work has included that of Huselid (1995), Becker and Huselid (1997), McDuffie (1995) and Ulrich (1997). Although these individuals have certainly enhanced the research output in the US through the use of large data sets, which have primarily analysed bottom-line business performance, the early models of SHRM remain as prominent as ever.

Strategic Human Resource Management at Organisational Level

Having identified some of the important contributions to the SHRM literature, it is important to consider the theoretical issues presented above in light of empirical research on SHRM. The data presented here is drawn from a 1998 quantitative postal survey of 69 clothing companies in Northern Ireland employing 25 people or more and constituting a response rate of 77 per cent. The survey instrument used in this study was derived from the longitudinal Cranfield Network (Cranet) survey of International Strategic HRM (see, for example, Brewster and Hegewisch, 1994; Gunnigle et al., 1997; and Brewster, Mayrhofer and Morley, 1999). The Cranet survey data includes data collected from 26 countries and covers every major industry grouping at national level in both public and private sectors, the nature of the survey samples in each country being seen as representative of the national population as a whole. This is a claim which, of course, cannot be made for the Northern Ireland Clothing Industry (NICI) survey. The NICI survey findings will be presented in conjunction with a diagrammatical overview of the findings from eight follow-up case studies, which were drawn from the main survey sample.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Evidence of the Integration of Human Resource and Corporate Strategies

In considering the survey findings, a number of points should be highlighted before formally presenting the results. The first issue is that the clothing industry has historically been extremely labour-intensive, and although advances in technology have had an effect on this, mass production techniques still require relatively large labour forces. This is evident in the analysis of the number of people employed in each organisation (see Table 1) with the arithmetic mean size for the 69 organisations surveyed being 287 people, and 62 per cent of the sample being represented by companies employing over 100 people.

This reflects a wider industry characteristic, where break-even in cost terms requires high production. April 1999 figures show that there are 302 companies employing less than 50 people in the industry (Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU), 1999) and 88 companies employing over 50 people (Northern Ireland Textile and Apparel Association (NITA), 1999). In the 1–50 category, 65 per cent are represented in the 1 to 10 employee category and are highly unlikely to have a defined P/HR function, as in many cases the owner/ manager will have direct responsibility for all people management.

TABLE 1: SIZE DISTRIBUTION BY NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES

Company Size	Northern Ireland Clothing Industry Survey (1998)
25–50	1 (1%)
51–100	25 (37%)
101–200	25 (37%)
201–500	10 (14%)
501–1,000	4 (6%)
1,000+	4 (6%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>69 (100%)</i>

As Gunnigle and Clifford (1997) state, the analysis of the number of people employed in the Human Resource (HR) department provides a crude indication of the role and general workload which Personnel/ Human Resource (P/HR) departments are undertaking within organisations. The figures for the clothing industry are detailed in Table 2

below. These findings suggest a considerable degree of specialisation within the P/HR function itself.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS EMPLOYED IN THE P/HR FUNCTION

No of Departmental Employees	Northern Ireland Clothing Industry Survey (1998)
1-5	51% (35)
6-10	20% (15)
11-25	25% (16)
26+	4% (2)
<i>Total</i>	<i>100% (69)</i>

They also suggest that a P/HR function is important in the management infrastructure of clothing companies in Northern Ireland. Again, the size of the companies surveyed, as detailed in Table 1 above, may be of significant importance, the number of people employed being a crude indicator of the development and enhanced position of the P/HR function in the overall management infrastructure.

The Role of the Personnel/Human Resource Function in the Organisation

As highlighted previously, considerable emphasis has been placed on the importance of integrating the P/HR function and corporate strategy (see, for example, Porter, 1980; 1985; Devanna et al., 1984; Beer et al., 1984; Tyson et al., 1997; Mabey et al., 1998a, 1998b). In line with this body of literature, one of the key aims of the analysis of policy and practice in the clothing industry is to consider the integration of the P/HR function.

One method of evaluating the growing integration of the P/HR function is to assess the level at which the function operates. Brewster and Hegewisch (1994) define integration as the degree to which HRM issues are considered as part of the formulation of business strategies. As proxies of integration, findings can be reviewed in three distinct areas:

- HR specialist involvement in the main policy-making forum of the organisation (Board of Directors or equivalent);
- HR specialist involvement in the development of corporate strategy; and
- Whether or not such strategies are linked with HR policies, which are translated into targets and evaluated.

Tables 3 and 4 indicate the proportion of companies with a HR presence at Board level (or equivalent) and the role that such Board-level HR specialists play in the development of corporate strategy.

TABLE 3: HEAD OF P/HR WITH A SEAT ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

<i>Yes</i>	43% (30)
<i>No</i>	48% (33)
<i>Missing</i>	9% (6)
<i>Total</i>	100% n=69

At 43 per cent, the number of clothing industry respondents who stated that the head of the P/HR department represented the function at board is slightly low. Brewster and Hegewisch's (1994) analysis based on the 1991 CRANET data shows significant differences across Europe, with the highest levels of representation evident in Sweden, France and Spain. In each of these countries, over 70 per cent of respondents reported the head of the P/HR function as having a seat on the board of directors. Germany and Italy represent the opposite end of the scale, with the HR function rarely represented at board level. The figures for the UK in 1992 were 49 per cent, and for the Republic of Ireland 44 per cent in 1992, rising to 53 per cent in 1995.

This analysis should be interpreted in conjunction with the examination of the P/HR department's involvement in the development of corporate strategy detailed in Table 4.

TABLE 4: HR INVOLVEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CORPORATE STRATEGY

Level of Involvement	%	n
From the Outset	52%	38
Consultative	32%	15
Implementation	13%	9
Not Consulted	3%	2

Considering the nature of the clothing industry sample, with a high number of inward investors, the figure of 43 per cent representation at board level and 52 per cent involvement in strategic decision-making from the outset are positive findings. On the basis of these findings, the P/HR function in the Northern Ireland clothing industry shows significant levels of integration and the function plays an important role in the development and implementation of corporate strategy.

When this finding is reviewed in conjunction with the information on individuals identified as representing the P/HR function on the board of directors (see Table 5) a number of interesting outcomes emerge. For example, where there is no specific representation at board level from the most senior P/HR practitioner, HR issues are predominantly dealt with by the chief executive / managing director. This can be considered an important indicator of the growing importance of HRM and might be attributed to the philosophy of people being the organisation's most important asset; in such a setting, the P/HR function should ultimately at any rate be the responsibility of the chief executive / managing director.

TABLE 5: REPRESENTATION OF P/HR ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Title of Individual	%	n
P/HR Director	34	23
Chief Executive/Managing Director	44	30
Administrative Director	12	8
Company Secretary	4	3
Finance Director	8	5
<i>Total</i>	100	69

The Role Played by the P/HR Specialist in Corporate Strategy Development

The previous section presented evidence of the level at which the P/HR function operated in the respondent organisations, with particular attention being paid to the key issue of strategic integration. As Gunnigle and Clifford (1997) state, such an analysis provides only limited insight into the extent of strategic consideration afforded to HRM issues, or into the level of involvement of the P/HR function in the strategic process. The presence of the P/HR practitioner on the board of directors is only one indicator and practitioners who do not have a seat on the board of directors may still have an input into strategic decision-making. It is therefore important to consider the extent to which the P/HR function engages in strategy formulation and development.

The first issue to be considered is how the formal processes that the organisation utilises in developing its corporate strategy and the importance it places in strategic planning are operationalised. Organisations which attach a low significance to strategic planning or, to use the popular terminology, are not strategically driven, are highly

unlikely to have a P/HR function which has a strategic focus. The instrument used in the Northern Ireland clothing industry survey uses three indicators to assess the extent of both formal strategy and of P/HR strategy development:

- the incidence of a mission statement;
- the incidence of a corporate strategy; and
- the incidence of a personnel/human resource strategy.

The findings in relation to these indicators are detailed in Table 6.

TABLE 6: INDICATORS OF FORMALISED STRATEGIC PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

	Written	Unwritten	None
Mission Statement	86%	9%	5%
Corporate Strategy	80%	17%	3%
P/HR Strategy	49%	25%	26%

The figures presented in Table 6 show a positive picture in relation to the importance attached to strategic planning and development at organisational level. There are a number of reasons why strategic planning is important in the clothing industry, including the highly competitive nature of the industry, where success or failure is often dependent on how effective the organisation's strategic planning and implementation is in comparison to its competitors. The nature of the industry places considerable emphasis on the buyer/supplier relationship; McNamee and McHugh (1992) identify the strategic competence of supplier organisations as being a major decision-making factor for buyers. This is particularly important for clothing companies in Northern Ireland, which are extremely reliant on maintaining positive relationships with their major retail buyers. It is significant that the strategy development process is indeed quite formalised, with the vast majority of organisations having a written mission statement (86 per cent) and a written corporate strategy (80 per cent).

The figure for a written P/HR strategy is lower at 49 per cent, but this still represents a positive finding, particularly in light of the fact that 25 per cent of respondents had an unwritten P/HR strategy. This contradicts the argument that the P/HR function is reactive, undermined by short-termism, that it operates on an *ad hoc* basis and shows little evidence of strategic awareness. The findings rather show that organisations in the clothing industry show evidence of a high level of

strategic integration, operate on a proactive basis, have a long-term vision for the development of the function in particular, and are seeking to play a role in developing a corporate strategy which takes HR issues into account. The effective creation, implementation and development of a P/HR strategy will also have a major impact on flexibility and quality in the short to medium term, and employee commitment in the long term. These factors are important indicators of the internal development of the P/HR function; the growing importance of the function at an overall organisational level can also be assessed from the stage at which the function is involved in the development of corporate strategy (see Table 4 above).

Translation of P/HR Strategy into Work Programmes

In taking the analysis presented in the previous section to a more advanced level, it is necessary to evaluate the extent to which P/HR strategies impact on the operational role of the personnel function. On the issues of strategy formulation and implementation, respondents were asked to detail the translation of the P/HR strategy into work programmes. The findings on this issue are presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7: TRANSLATION OF HR STRATEGY INTO WORK PROGRAMMES FOR THE P/HR FUNCTION

Yes	54% (37)
No	46% (32)

Findings presented earlier suggest that although companies may have a formalised HR strategy, in many cases the strategy is not implemented as a central element of work programmes; this may be because the key elements of the HR strategy are difficult to translate. Another of the important emerging themes in the HRM literature is the link between the effective management of the human and organisational performance. One way of evaluating how much emphasis is placed on this issue at company and departmental level is to consider the systematic evaluation of the P/HR function. The findings are outlined in Table 8. Less than one-third of respondent organisations systematically evaluated the performance of the P/HR function; this figure is low, and shows a lack of development of the function. Development and improvement are only possible if performance is assessed against feasible criteria from which aims, objectives and goals can be created and evaluated.

TABLE 8: SYSTEMATIC EVALUATION OF THE PERFORMANCE OF THE P/HR FUNCTION

Yes	32% (22)
No	68% (47)

In summarising the quantitative findings presented above as regards the strategic integration of the HR function in the Northern Ireland clothing industry, the overall findings are generally positive. The P/HR function is of strategic importance to the organisation and strategic integration is a key feature of the function in the clothing industry. Strategic planning is often formalised, although the number of organisations reporting a HR strategy that is translated into work programmes is low. There is a high level of awareness of the importance of the systematic evaluation of performance and wide ranges of criteria are used to do this.

Qualitative Findings and Discussion

The final section of this paper will present the findings of qualitative data collection in eight clothing companies in Northern Ireland using the typology presented by Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni (1994).

The effective measurement of the integration of HR strategies and business strategies is extremely difficult. One attempt to compare and estimate the degree of integration between human resource and business strategy comprehensively is the aforementioned typology presented by Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni (1994). In their typology, they present four enterprise groups that combine business strategy and human resource practice in different ways. This is based on the division by Miles and Snow (1984) which also introduces four business strategies and correspondingly four ways to combine HR practice with business strategy: reactive, defensive, analytical and pioneering.

Grouping of the Case Study Companies according to the Business Strategy

The grouping analysis (Quick Cluster) is aimed at recognising the four enterprise groups in the organisational context. Initially the clustering included all variables that in different ways measured the stability of an operational environment, market strategy and market position, the uniformity of business and competition strategy in the different units of the enterprise and the enterprise's strengths. Nine factors were finally selected for analysis:

1. The enterprise's experience in its core business;
2. Relative size in its market area;
3. Change in market share;
4. Change in demand during the past three years;
5. Change in competitive situation over the corresponding period of time;
6. Variation of competition or business strategy between enterprise units or departments;
7. The importance of cost effectiveness;
8. Product development and innovations; and
9. Market segment specialisation as strengths.

The four enterprise groups were thus located on the basis of their distinctive characteristics to the types defined by Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni's division. The eight case study (CS) companies and the 69 questionnaire (QU) respondents were grouped as follows: Group 1 Responsive or Easily Reactive (1 CS, 18 QU), Group 2 Pioneers (2 CS, 19 QU), Group 3 Defenders (1 CS, 12 QU), Group 4 Analysers (3 CS, 30 QU).

HRM in the Strategy Groups

The link between personnel strategy and business strategy in different integration types was analysed using several different integration types and several different variable groups. Table 9 gathers together the distinctive characteristics of each integration type on the basis of those variable groups that describe the enterprise's own impression of its strengths, recognising personnel qualities as a base for competitiveness and clearly defined goal setting for the personnel function. Only those variables are listed for which responders, pioneers, defenders and analysers clearly deviated from each other in one-way analysis of variance. The significance levels exceeding ($p < 0.05$) are given in the table. In addition, the groups were compared on whether personnel policy was derived from business strategy, over which time span personnel activities were planned and the degree to which the importance of recognising strategic issues in personnel activities was emphasised.

TABLE 9: COMPARISONS OF BUSINESS STRATEGY GROUPS

	Responders	Pioneers	Defenders	Analysers
<i>Size measured by total number of employees</i>	Medium-sized and large (50-499)*	Small (25-49)*	Small/very large (24-49, 500+)*	Medium-sized/very large(50-499 and 500+)*
<i>Strengths</i>	Ability to change and to anticipate changes in the market**, Customer service**, Flexible & Fast Production**, Specialist Segments**, Cost effectiveness**, R&D**	Flexible & fast production*. Ability to change and to anticipate change in the market, Customer service**	Price or product/ service, Relations to the deliverers	Customer service** Quality of manufacturing Distribution systems, Logistic, High emphasis on globalisation
<i>Reasons to invest in human resources, The goals set for HRM</i>	Adjusting personnel to new demands caused by a flatter organisation*, Creating an incentive-based salary system and/or other incentives	High expertise*. Ensuring the right kind of personnel structure in the long run**, Recognising strategy matters personnel management**	Optimising the numbers in the personnel dept., Creating a new kind of corporate culture*	Developing line-management skills*
<i>The properties of Personnel as a basis for competitiveness</i>	Binding the organisational goals, Incentive creating and effective-management, Situation sensitivity and problem-solving ability*	Specialised expertise*. Ensuring the right kind of personnel structure in the long-run**, Recognising strategic matters in HRM	Average, no recognised strengths over others	Readiness for change and the ability to learn*, Organisational goals
<i>Career planning</i>	Yes**, Open and equal	Only man. careers or training	No**, For key-personnel only	Yes**, Based on own activity
<i>Basis for Psychological contract</i>	Open information of mutual benefits and expectations (mostly relational)	Mutual utilitarian, commitment based on mutual benefits in both short and long run (closer to transactional)	The basis has failed, No longer guarantees, just trying to survive (originally relational, now insecure and transactional)	Varies from transactional to relational.

P-Levels: *0.05; **0.01

Summary and Discussion

In summarising the quantitative findings presented above in relation to the strategic integration of the HR function in the Northern Ireland clothing industry, the overall findings are generally positive. The P/HR function is of strategic importance to the organisation and strategic integration is a key feature of the function in the clothing industry. Strategic planning is often formalised, although the number of organisations reporting a HR strategy that is translated into work programmes is low. There is a high level of awareness of the importance of the systematic evaluation of performance and a wide range of criteria is used to evaluate performance.

It must be asked how strategic integration is ultimately realised. It is difficult to provide indisputable evidence that HRM integration is a conscious process, in which business strategy directs the shape of HR strategy, or alternatively that HR practices have an impact of the chosen business strategy. According to the empirics it seems possible that in the business environment of the Northern Ireland clothing industry, passive HR practices limit the selection of business strategies. Successful application of pioneer or responsive strategy seems to be possible only in enterprises that actively and persistently invest in continuous development of personnel skills and thus gain a highly committed staff that is willing to work on to offer possible customer services. In this way, pioneer organisations can secure their ability to renew themselves. Correspondingly, passive personnel policy and neglecting the importance of the psychological contract leads as its consequence to ageing of know-how, poor company performance in terms of customer service and low organisational learning. Because this endangers the company's ability to respond to the market changes, it must be hypothesised that it will automatically and unavoidably lead the enterprise to adopt a defender strategy.

If we regard strategy-making in Northern Ireland clothing companies from the systematic perspective, the likelihood of integration of a carefully articulated business strategy with long-term "soft" HRM policies appears to be a forlorn hope. Possibly, as Legge (1995) suggests, it may be sighted in strategically planning, high-technology companies, with sufficient market dominance to be able to compete on product/service uniqueness, rather than principally on price. For the companies surveyed in this research, given the nature of the environment in which they operate and the power of retail buyers, the more realistic expectation is of a thinking pragmatism reminiscent of the "standard modern" employee relations style. Insofar as such

short-term opportunistic policies are internally consistent, and that some conscious connection is made with business strategy (compete on costs, cut the cost base, get rid of overheads, let's downsize), a rhetoric might be created of integrating business strategy with a "hard" model of HRM. This being the case, the oil and water hypothesis may be proven correct.

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