The role of human resource management in today's organizations: the case of Cyprus in comparison with the European Union

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Abstract
The present study identified and addressed some important issues related to human resource management and its role within organizations. These issues involve human resource planning, training, management and career development, and work flexibility. Cyprus was used as a case study and practices among Cypriot organizations were compared with their counterparts in the EU.

Introduction

The global and competitive market environments have led to new challenges for both organizations and individuals in them (Iversen, 2000). As a result, the workplace in Europe and other parts of the globe has faced some major changes the last ten years. These are, among many, the internationalization of the economy, the workforce demography, the density and wider use of information technology and the continuous and rapid scientific and technological change. Also in recent years European countries have faced several common economic developments and structural transformations, like increased international competition and slower growth (Ferner and Hyman, 1992).

The aforementioned changes have had several consequences on the structure of the firm and the style of management, forcing organizations to realize the value of their human resources. They created the need for new structures and management practices which contribute to organizational commitment and flexibility whilst ensuring a long-term supply of employees with necessary competencies and skills (Beer *et al.*, 1984; Iversen, 2000). Human resource managers must understand all these changes and develop the appropriate strategies in order to help their organization to succeed.

Many researchers have argued that human resource management is vital in order for an organization to achieve organizational success (Pfeffer, 1994; Jackson and Schuler, 2000; Barney, 1991). To illustrate, Tokesky and Kornides (1994) asserted that employees are increasingly being asked to be a source of competitive strength and vitality, trying to show the relation between human resource management and organizational success. In turn, human resource management is increasingly used to acknowledge the importance of employees as corporate assets. The skills, knowledge and experiences of employees have economic value in the marketplace and also potential value to an organization because they enable it to be productive and adaptable. Firms that manage their human resources effectively have higher levels of profitability, higher productivity and higher market value, thus meeting the needs of the organization, stockholders, investors, customers, employees and finally the needs of society (Schuler and Jackson, 1996).

The role of human resource management

In turn, human resource management practices and systems have been linked to organizational competitiveness, increased productivity, higher quality of work life, and greater profitability (Cascio, 1992; Schuler and Jackson, 1996). In a globalized economy, competitiveness means the ability to take the most advantageous position in a constantly changing market environment (Pfeffer, 1994). In order for this link to be accomplished between human resource management and organizational success, the role of human resource management must become strategic instead of operational, aligning the human resource function with the strategic needs of the organization (Pickles *et al.*, 1999).

To what extent, however, has human resource management been aligned with strategic planning in organizations? Brewster (1995) reports that the integration of human resource management with business strategy is rare even among large organizations. Also, Down *et al.* (1997) claim that many management teams have had difficulty transforming human resource

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management into a strategic function, leaving the human resources department in most companies focused on administrative and clerical tasks. Many organizations tend to focus on the administrative aspects of the human resource management function, due to difficulties they face on the integration of human resource management to organizational goals (Down et al., 1997). As a result, they ignore the long-term perspective of human resources planning and set their sights too low, ending up with human resource management strategies that are too functional, too operational, too narrow and too generic (Walker, 1999). In the end, such strategies fail to energize their managers in making necessary changes to achieve competitiveness through people and often fade away or are replaced before they achieve any real impact.

A strategic approach to human resources demands a process, not simply a document, focused in the long term. Human resource management strategies need to be integral to organizational strategies; they need to pay attention to multiple levers for strategy implementation, including organization, development, recruiting and staffing, rewards, performance and employee relations; they should provide for innovative ways to differentiate organizations in competitive markets; and they must establish an achievable implementation plan (Walker, 1999).

This new strategic role for the human resource management function entails two major aspects. First, the function should provide enough input into the organization's strategy about whether it has the necessary capabilities to implement it. Second, it has the responsibility to ensure that the human resource management programs and practices are in place to effectively execute the strategy.

Among such practices, training and development are of primary importance. According to Jackson and Schuler (2000) the strategic impact of training is very important, because it serves many strategic purposes. Apart from arming employees with the necessary abilities to perform well at their current and future tasks, training also offers opportunities for employees to share many experiences and develop an understanding and helping attitude towards each other. So, this speeds up the process of the development of organizational cohesiveness and employee commitment. When employees become committed to their work and their working environment, they become more willing to work for valued results. Furthermore, strong commitment

results in less absenteeism and turnover rates, because employees are becoming intensely loyal to the organization. Besides, commitment aims to ensure that employees can use all their skills at tasks they perform (Jackson and Schuler, 2000).

Training also results in higher performance. Especially for organizations that are rapidly incorporating new technologies and are adapting to the new, more competitive business environment, or are suffering from low productivity, training is more than essential to help their employees perform at the desired level. Although training can be very costly and training budgets require a large amount of money, in the long run it proves to be critical to the success of an organization's efforts. Training enriches human resources with high productivity; such a workforce fits the meaning of resource-based competitive advantage, as Barney (1991) explained. So, training adds value to the organization, thus helping to acquire a source of sustainable advantage in today's competitive markets (Jackson and Schuler, 2000; Koch and McGrath, 1996; Porter, 1980).

In conjunction with training, career and management development are now viewed as facilitators of organizational effectiveness by building competence among those responsible for formulating and implementing strategies and policies designed to manage organizational resources effectively. In fact, the ongoing development of skilled managers is now viewed as a priority for all organisations, with the ultimate objective to create a synergy among the development of individuals, business strategies and the organisation (Morley et al., 2001).

In developing the organisation, employee changing needs must be accounted for. Given the sociodemographic, technological and economic changes throughout the global business environment, these needs are different today than they were 20 years ago. In response, Europe is moving towards labour flexibility. As a result, several types of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) have emerged. Some researches argue that FWAs that are so innovative as to be regarded as an advantage over competing companies will finally become commonplace (Kirrane, 1994; Verespe, 1994). Such arrangements have the potential to benefit all parties involved, but in order to do so, they need to be integrated well into the organisational system.

Therefore, human resource managers need to create the ability to visualize the future, to think systematically and to understand the complex forces that shape organizations

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(Gratton, 1998). They need to push responsibility for daily delivery of human resource management services to business units and line management, thus satisfying employee and organizational needs more efficiently and focusing on companywide issues rather than on micromanagement (Down *et al.*, 1997). Finally, human resource management strategy and practice, in their alignment with organizational strategy, need to interact within and with an external environment of national culture, market mechanisms, power systems, legislation, education, and employee representation (Brewster, 1995).

The present study

Within this strategic context, key human resource management practices related to planning, training, management development, career management and flexibility are explored in the present study among smaller and larger organizations in Cyprus in comparison with the European Union as a whole. Such practices provide for a number of challenges and opportunities to Cypriot organizations, especially given Cyprus' efforts to join the European Union in the near future.

The study was conducted by using the 1999/2000 CRANET survey, translated into Greek. The survey was sent to all organizations in Cyprus which employed at least 100 employees. The mailing was preceded and followed by telephone calls to those responsible for human resource management at each organization, urging them to complete and return it. In addition, questions of the participants were addressed through the telephone.

At the time of the study, the population of such organizations in the free parts of the island was 230[1]. Efforts were made to collect surveys from all organizations, however the final number of those who responded was 91. Of the 91 organizations, 52 had fewer than 200 employees (will be referred to as "smaller" in this report) and 39 had at least 200 (will be referred to as "larger" in this report).

In order to assess the level of sophistication among Cypriot organizations in using human resource practices, the author compares the results from the Cypriot data with those from the EU countries collectively. Data for these EU countries also have been taken from the 1999/2000 CRANET survey. The total number of valid cases for the EU member states is 4,842, from which 929 involved smaller organizations and 3,913 involved larger organizations. The states

used were the following: UK (including Northern Ireland), France, Germany (including the former East Germany), Sweden, Spain, Denmark, Holland, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Finland, Greece, Austria, and Belgium. The authors wish to thank colleagues in these countries for giving their permission to use these data. The study's results and their discussion are presented next, followed by implications on the human resource management practices among Cypriot organizations.

Results

Among the 91 Cypriot organizations, 23.9 per cent of the smaller ones and 44.4 per cent of the larger ones claimed to have a written human resource management strategy. Further, 50 per cent of the smaller ones and 36.1 per cent of the larger ones claimed to have an unwritten human resource management strategy. In the EU, a written human resource management strategy was in place among 39.8 per cent of smaller and 52.2 per cent of larger organizations, while an unwritten one existed among 32.4 per cent of smaller and 28.4 per cent of larger organizations.

The level of involvement of human resource management in the development of organizational strategy was acceptable, even though it could have been higher. Specifically, human resource managers in 62.5 per cent of the smaller and 56.2 per cent of the larger organizations in Cyprus were involved from the outset in the development of an organizational strategy. In the EU, such involvement from the outset existed among 54.1 per cent of the smaller and 56.8 per cent of the larger organizations.

On a similar note, 46.15 per cent of the smaller and 74.35 per cent of the larger organizations in Cyprus reported having a human resource management function or department in place. Moreover, only among 13.46 per cent of the smaller ones and 25.64 per cent of the larger ones was the director of human resource management on the organization's board of directors. A department was in place among 82.7 per cent of the smaller and 94.7 per cent of the larger organizations in the EU, while the head of human resources was on the board in 46.6 per cent of the smaller and 55.3 per cent of the larger organizations.

A written policy for training and development was in place among 41 per cent of the smaller organizations and 68.42 per cent of the larger ones in Cyprus. A written policy for flexible working existed for 68.18

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per cent of the smaller and 16.6 per cent of the larger organizations. And, a written policy for management development existed among 15.2 per cent of the smaller and 19.4 per cent of the larger ones. Within the EU, 61.3 per cent of the smaller and 69.8 per cent of the larger organizations reported having a written training and development policy. A similar policy for flexible working existed among 39 per cent of the smaller and 43.2 per cent of the larger EU organizations. And, a written policy for management development existed among 26 per cent of the smaller and 38 per cent of the larger EU organizations.

Even though training needs seem to be analyzed and monitored in the majority of Cypriot organizations, career management by these organizations seems poor. Specifically, 67.3 per cent of smaller and 74.4 per cent of larger organizations analyze the training needs of employees. Further, 73.1 per cent of smaller and 79.5 per cent of larger organizations monitor training effectiveness. However, formal career plans are used regularly by only 13.5 per cent of smaller and 15.4 per cent of larger organizations. Similarly, assessment centers in relation to employee development are used regularly by 7.7 per cent of the smaller and 10.3 per cent of the larger organizations. In addition, high flyer schemes are used in 36.5 per cent of the smaller and 30.8 per cent of the larger organizations. And, succession plans are utilized in 29 per cent of smaller and 23 per cent of larger organizations.

Among EU organizations, 66.5 per cent of the smaller and 74.4 per cent of the larger ones analyze the training needs of employees. Furthermore, 53.4 per cent of the smaller and 64.3 per cent of the larger ones monitor training effectiveness. However, only 22 per cent of the smaller and 28 per cent of the larger ones regularly use formal career plans. On a similar note, only 13 per cent of the smaller and 23 per cent of the larger ones regularly use assessment centers for employee development. In addition, high flyer schemes are used by only 24 and 34 per cent of smaller and larger organizations respectively. And succession plans are in place among 30 per cent of the smaller and 41 per cent of the larger EU organizations.

The use of flexible work arrangements as a human resource management tool is fairly limited in both types of Cypriot organizations. For example, at least 70 per cent of organizations use weekend work, shift work, overtime, temporary work, and subcontracting. However, few organizations use annual hour contracts (24 per cent of smaller and 19.4 per cent of larger ones), job sharing (19.5 per cent of smaller and

12.5 per cent of larger ones) and teleworking (5 per cent of smaller and 9.1 per cent of larger ones). Finally, part-time work, fixed term contracts and flexible time are used in approximately half of the organizations in the sample.

In the EU, the results are similar to Cyprus in terms of weekend work, shift work, overtime, temporary work, and subcontracting. Furthermore, part-time work, fixed term contracts and flexible time are widely used among EU organizations. However, annual hour contracts (used among 34 per cent of smaller and 41 per cent of larger organizations), job sharing (used among 34 per cent of smaller and 44 per cent of larger organizations) and home-based work (used among 31 per cent of all organizations) are more common than in Cyprus. Finally, the use of teleworking, even though higher than in Cypriot organizations, is low among EU organizations (approximately 24 per cent among both types).

Discussion

The above results illustrate the role of human resource management in Cyprus under the prism of certain key functions. Furthermore, they offer a reference group – the EU – against which Cypriot organisations may be compared. Even though the European scene is not homogeneous and neither are organizational human resource practices within the EU member states (Sparrow and Hiltrop, 1997; Ronen and Shenkar, 1985), these states do form a collective context, abiding by certain collective regulations, practices and norms (Brewster and Tyson, 1991; Thurley, 1990). Therefore, given that Cyprus is under consideration and wants to join the EU, Cypriot organizations need to take a closer look at how they may utilize their human resources in becoming more competitive within the EU context.

Within this context, unprecedented changes and a variety of challenges forced organizations to operate in a continuously changing economic environment in order to survive (Jackson and Schuler, 2000; Pfeffer, 1994; McKenna and Beech, 1995). In order to help managers face adequately these unprecedented changes of a turbulent environment and to give greater value to the organisation, the role of human resources towards meeting organisational goals and objectives is constantly refined (Elsdon and Iyer, 1999). In turn, the shift from a functional role of human resource management to a strategic one is becoming clear due to its increasing contribution to the overall

effectiveness of the organisation (Swiercz and Spencer, 1992).

The results of the EU reference sample demonstrate that EU organizations have utilized, to a much greater extent than Cypriot organizations, the strategic role of human resource management. However, the role of human resource management among Cypriot organisations is not strategic, regardless of claims made by many respondents about having a human resource management policy in their organisation. As Walker (1999) would conclude, such policy may exist on paper or in principle, but may not be integrated into the organisational strategy and planning.

While human resource management in the EU seems to have moved towards a strategic orientation, human resource management in Cyprus seems to be at the stage where it needs to prove its utility in improving organizational effectiveness and profitability. It has yet to earn a seat at the senior management table as Pickles *et al.* (1999) described it, by helping to locate and implement the critical levers of change related to human resource management and necessary for organizational success. In other words, human resource management practices among the Cypriot organizations surveyed have not evolved interactively within and with their external environment as defined by Brewster (1995), but have remained for the most part as they were traditionally regardless of cultural, social and market changes in Cyprus. Three major examples of such changes include the highly increased numbers of working women, especially working mothers, increased divorce rates and the increased emphasis of Cypriots on their life outside work. In addition, Cyprus has become a predominantly service economy, relying mainly on tourism and financial services for its GNP (Kaparti and Mihail, 1996).

Such changes would welcome more flexible employment methods in order to accommodate industry as well as workforce needs. However, most Cypriot organizations in the present study continue to utilize, without much adjustment, practices such as weekend work, shift work, overtime, seasonal and part-time employment. The majority of these organizations do not utilize flexible work schedules like fixed hour contracts, job sharing, home-based work or teleworking.

Looking at the EU results, it is clear that flexible work arrangements are more embedded into the organizational system. By comparing the use of FWAs between Cyprus and the EU, the author does not suggest that

Cypriot organizations should strive to follow blindly EU practices. But, the author does suggest that human resources professionals in Cyprus take a close look at the use of FWAs by EU organizations and evaluate how such use may apply to Cypriot organizations in making them more competitive within the EU and the global environment.

Flexibility is one of the main characteristics of the new way of doing business and benefits accumulated from implementing FWAs concern both employees and employers (Cressey and Jones, 1995, p. 72; Roberts, 1996). One should neither neglect nor underestimate the impact of a change in the demographics and psychographics of the labor market, since employees today appear to be unwilling to commit to one job "for life" as they used to (Verespe, 1994; Bien, 1996). As more people tend to be employed on less traditional work arrangements (Bien, 1996), flexibility seems to be the name of the game (Wilsher, 1993). As a result, organizations that want a competitive edge must offer benefits that revolve around changing employee needs (Gilbert, 1996). Cypriot organizations cannot be the exception.

In order for organizations to have the ability to adjust to changing employee needs and market conditions, their management must design the appropriate training and advancement strategies, orienting employees towards change. Training and development can add value to the organization by maximizing productivity, enriching personnel's skills and finally helping the organization to effectively confront the external pressures (Petaraf, 1993).

However, the orientation of staff training and development in Cyprus has remained stagnant in past practices. Furthermore, when compared to EU practices, Cypriot organizations do not seem to be much different. While Cypriot organizations take pride in the emphasis they place on staff training and development as shown in the present study, serious questions are raised as to the effectiveness of such efforts. Specifically, few organizations have linked their training and development practices to management or career advancement. To illustrate, few organizations in Cyprus have implemented formal career plans, assessment centers, "high flyer" schemes or succession plans. Furthermore, few organizations have committed to a written policy for management development.

Such results are an indication that human resource management has a long way to go before becoming a change agent among Cypriot organizations. However, as human resources are becoming a crucial and

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differentiating factor for an organization, managers have to understand the process that results in the creation of a competitive human resource. In doing so, it is not sufficient for organizations to simply motivate their employees. Heads of human resource management departments are expected to plan strategically, so that they will build, develop and retain employees in such a way that they will direct the organization to accomplish its goals (Gannon et al., 1999).

Implications and conclusions

The present study identified and addressed some important issues related to human resource management and its role within organizations. These issues involve human resource planning, training, management and career development, and work flexibility. Implementing such practices will improve employee performance and enhance organizational competitiveness.

Cyprus is among the countries that are preparing for entrance in the EU. Therefore, organizational and national competitiveness becomes even more important. According to the Cypriot Planning Bureau (PIO, 2000), the competitiveness of Cypriot products is suffering when compared to products of other countries. It is imperative for organizations in Cyprus to realize the fact that in today's environment and with the potential entrance of Cyprus in the EU, competitiveness becomes even more crucial. In turn, a number of challenges and opportunities evolve for Cypriot organizations.

The first challenge is related to the role these organizations attribute on the management of their human resources. If they choose to attribute a strategic role to their human capital, then they will need to examine closely the complex interactions between organizational strategy and human resource management within not only the Cypriot, but also the European environment. According to Brewster (1995), focusing on these interactions within a social context, enables organizations to choose the forms and styles of managing human resources that are the most appropriate for them. In doing so, human resource managers will have the opportunity to align the way human resources are managed to the needs of their organizations. Otherwise, they may as well "close the personnel department" (Lester, 1994, p. 40) because it will not be instrumental in managing human resources effectively.

More specifically, human resource managers among Cypriot organizations need

to bring into line their practices with corporate strategy. They need to incorporate a long-term orientation, enhancing management's ability to bring the necessary changes in achieving organizational competitiveness (Walker, 1999). Human resource practices need time to be developed and to be employed so that they will have the desired results (Pfeffer, 1994). The main focus of strategic human resource management is on integrated combinations of human resource management practices. In such a case, human resource managers need to be innovative.

In turn, the second challenge has to do with the level of innovation human resource management will display in integrating human resource management practices, thus meeting organizational needs. According to Ruigrok et al. (1999), the geographical differences within Europe are surprisingly small, suggesting that organizations across Europe have acknowledged the strategic role that human resource innovations may play in them. Such innovations may be derived from any of the human resource management practices and may provide the opportunity for organizational competitiveness in attracting and maintaining the most suitable and effective human capital.

In order to do so, however, employers need to pay special attention to the needs of their human capital. These needs involve skills, abilities and interests. To ensure that employees will have all the necessary skills and competencies to perform as best as they can, training and skill development are essential (Veiga and Pfeffer, 1999; Flanagan and Deshpande, 1996; Delery and Doty, 1996). Furthermore, career advancement offers incentives for better performance and also ensures that those employees who are promoted already know the organization (Pfeffer, 1994; Delery and Doty, 1996). And various forms of work arrangements may increase employee commitment towards their organization, in turn reducing absenteeism and turnover (Erza and Deckman, 1996; Kirrane, 1994).

In paying attention to the needs of human capital, organizations in Cyprus will face a third major challenge. This challenge concerns the level of partnership provided between employees and employers as well as managerial and non-managerial staff. Presently that level seems to be low, based on union representation and top-down methods of management. If organizations in Cyprus take the opportunity to re-evaluate this role and consider different ways to upgrade it, then they may have the opportunity to develop and implement flatter and more

horizontal organizational structures that are based on collaboration, partnerships and teamwork.

In conclusion, unless human resource management takes on a leading role among Cypriot organisations, their chances for success in a European or a global context may be seriously impeded. As Gratton (1998, p. 13) points out:

> The competitiveness of … organisations no longer depends on access to capital and technology but on human capital. Yet human capital is fundamentally different from financial or technological capital. As humans, we have hopes and dreams, we can choose to give or to withhold our knowledge, and we can search for meaning in our work. Accommodating this shift creates an unprecedented opportunity and challenge for the human resources function. Central to these challenges is the creation of the sustainable bonds that link individual knowledge and inspiration to the business goals and long-term corporate strategy.

Note

1 Please note that approximately 38 per cent of the island presently is under Turkish occupation and, in turn, inaccessible by the authors.

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