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Vincent Obedgiu,

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Human resource management, historical perspectives, evolution and professional development

Vincent Obedgiu

*Department of Business Administration, Arua Regional Campus,
Makerere University Business School, Kampala, Uganda*

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to trace the historical perspectives in the development and evolution of human resource management as a field of study and profession.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper adopts a desk research to conduct a general review of literatures that are fundamental in tracing the historical routes, evolution, and professional development in the field of human resource management.

Findings – The literature reviewed reveals that human resource management is a product of the human relations movement of the early twentieth century, when researchers began documenting ways of creating business value through the strategic management of the workforce. The function was initially dominated by transactional work such as payroll and benefits administration, but due to globalization, company consolidation, technological advancement, and further research, human resource now focuses on strategic initiatives like mergers and acquisitions, talent management, succession planning, industrial and labor relations, and diversity and inclusion. In start-up companies, human resource's duties are performed either by a handful of trained professionals or even by non-human resource personnel. In larger companies, an entire functional group is typically dedicated to the discipline, with staff specializing in various human resource tasks and functional leadership engaging in strategic decision making across the business. To train practitioners for the profession, institutions of higher education, professional associations, and companies themselves have created programs of study dedicated explicitly to the duties of the function. Academic and practitioner organizations likewise seek to engage and further the field of human resource, as evidenced by several field-specific publications.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the body of knowledge in human resource management and practices, professional development, history of human resource management and the future of human resource functions. Further attempt is made in the study to present historical perspective of the evolution of the field to prepare professional managers in managing the human resource function and disseminate the human resource development philosophy and values to improve human resource practice and recognition within the management agenda.

Keywords Human resource management, Historical perspectives, Evolution and professional development

Paper type General review

Introduction

Human resource spawned from the human relations movement, which began in the early twentieth century due to work by Frederick Taylor in lean manufacturing. Taylor explored what he termed scientific management referred to as Taylorism, striving to improve economic efficiency in manufacturing jobs. He eventually keyed on one of the principal inputs into the manufacturing process labor sparking inquiry into workforce productivity (Merkle, 2012).

The movement was formalized following the research of Elton Mayo, whose Hawthorne studies serendipitously documented how stimuli unrelated to financial compensation and working conditions attention and engagement yielded more workers that are productive. Contemporaneous works by Abraham Maslow, Kurt Lewin, Max Weber, Frederick Herzberg, and David McClelland formed the basis for the studies in organizational behavior and organizational theory, giving room for an applied discipline. The theoretical evidence existed to make a business case for strategic workforce management, changes in the business landscape and in public policy had transformed



the employer-employee relationship, and the discipline was formalized as industrial and labor relations.

In 1913, one of the oldest known professional human resource associations the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development was founded in England as the Welfare Workers' Association, then changed its name a decade later to the Institute of Industrial Welfare Workers, and again the next decade to Institute of Labor Management before settling upon its current name (CIPD, 2011). Likewise in the USA, the world's first institution of higher education dedicated to workplace studies the School of Industrial and Labor Relations was formed at Cornell University in 1945 (Cornell, 2010).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, union membership declined significantly, while workforce management continued to expand its influence within organizations. Industrial and labor relations began being used to refer specifically to issues concerning collective representation, and many companies began referring to the profession as personnel administration. In 1948, what later became the largest professional human resource association the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) was founded as the American Society for Personnel Administration (ASPA) (SHRM, 2011).

The twenty-first century saw advances in transport and communications that greatly facilitated workforce mobility and collaboration. Corporations began viewing employees as assets rather than as cogs in a machine. Human resources management, consequently, became the dominant term for the function the ASPA even changing its name to SHRM in 1998 (SHRM, 2011). Human capital management is sometimes used synonymously with Human Resource, although human capital typically refers to a more narrow view of human resources; i.e., the knowledge the individuals embody and can contribute to an organization. Likewise, other terms sometimes used to describe the field include organizational management, manpower management, talent management, personnel management, and people management.

Human resource has been depicted in several popular media. On the US television series of *The Office*, Human Resource Representative Toby Flenderson is sometimes seen as a nag because he constantly reminds coworkers of company policies and government regulations (O'Brien, 2009). Long-running American comic strip Dilbert also frequently portrays sadistic human resource policies through character Catbert, the evil Director of Human Resources (Personnel Today, 2007). Additionally, a human resource manager is the title character in the 2010 Israeli film *The Human Resources Manager*, while a human resource intern is the protagonist in 1999 French film *Resources humaines*. Additionally, the BBC sitcom *Dinnerladies* main character Philippa is a Human Resource Manager.

The human resource practice and business function

Dave Ulrich lists the functions of human resource as: aligning human resource and business strategy, re-engineering organization processes, listening and responding to employees, and managing transformation and change (Ulrich, 1996). In practice, human resource is responsible for employee experience during the entire employment lifecycle. It is first charged with attracting the right employees through employer branding. It then must select the right employees through the recruitment process. Human resource manager brings on board new hires and oversees their training and development during their tenure with the organization. Human resource assesses talent through use of performance appraisals and then rewards them accordingly.

In fulfillment of human resource functional role, human resource manager may sometimes administer payroll and employee benefits, although such activities are more and more being outsourced, with human resource manager playing instrumental strategic role. Human resource managers are involved in employee terminations including resignations, performance related dismissals, and redundancies. At the macro level, human resource is in

charge of overseeing organizational leadership and culture. Human resource also ensures compliance with employment and labor laws, which differ by geography, and often oversees health, safety, and security. In circumstances where employees desire and are legally authorized to hold a collective bargaining agreement, human resource function serve as the company's primary liaison with the employee's representatives. Consequently, human resource manager engages in lobbying efforts with governmental agencies to further its priorities.

The discipline may also engage in mobility management, especially pertaining to expatriates; and it is frequently involved in the merger and acquisition process. Human resource is generally viewed as a support function to the business, helping to minimize costs and reduce risk (Towers, 2010). There are almost half a million human resource practitioners in the worldwide (Jonathan, 2010). The chief human resource officer is the highest ranking human resource executive in most companies and typically reports directly to the chief executive officer and works with the board of directors on CEO succession (Wright, 2011; Conaty and Ram, 2011).

Human resource positions within organizations fall into one of two categories, i.e. generalist and specialist. Generalists support employees directly with their questions, grievances, and projects. They may handle all aspects of human resources work, and thus require an extensive range of knowledge. The responsibilities of human resources generalists can vary widely, depending on their employer's needs (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Specialists, conversely, work in a specific human resource function. Some practitioners will spend an entire career as either a generalist or a specialist while others will obtain experiences from each and choose a career path later. Being a human resource manager consistently ranks as one of the best jobs, due to its pay, personal satisfaction, job security, future growth, and benefit to society (CNN Money, 2006, 2009).

Human resource consulting is a related career path where individuals may work as advisers to companies and complete tasks outsourced from companies. In 2007, there were 950 human resource consultancies globally, constituting a USD18.4 billion market. The top five revenue generating firms were Mercer, Ernst & Young, Deloitte, Watson Wyatt, Aon, and PwC consulting (Towers, 2010). CNN Money (2011) ranked human resource consulting the best jobs in America.

Educational institution and human resource professions

The School of Industrial and Labor Relations at the Cornell University was the world's first school for college-level study in human resource. Several universities offer programs of study pertaining to human resource and related fields. The School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University was the world's first school for college-level study in human resource (Cornell, 2009). It continues to offer education at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels; and it operates a joint degree program with the Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management, which human resource patriot termed the crown jewel for aspiring professionals (Human Resource Patriot, 2009). Other universities with entire colleges dedicated to the study of human resource include the Michigan State University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the Renmin University of China. Dozens of other universities house departments and institutes related to the field, either within a business school or in another college.

Human resource professional associations

Human Resource education also comes by way of professional associations, which offer training and certification. The SHRM, which is based in the USA, is the largest professional association dedicated to Patriot (Jonathan, 2010) with over 250,000 members in 140 countries (SHRM, 2011). It offers a suite of Professional in Human Resources

certifications through its Human Resource Certification Institute. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, based in England, is the oldest professional human resource association, with its predecessor institution founded in 1918.

Several associations also serve niches within Human Resource. The Institute of Recruiters is a recruitment professional association, offering members education, support and training (IOR, 2011). WorldatWork focuses on total rewards (i.e. compensation, benefits, work-life, performance, recognition, and career development) offering several certifications and training programs dealing with remuneration and work-life balance. Other niche associations include the American Society for Training & Development and Recognition Professionals International.

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Corresponding author

Vincent Obedgiu can be contacted at: vobedgiu@mubs.ac.ug