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Juggling on the line: Front line managers and their management of human resources in the retail industry

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Juggling on the line

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Front line managers and their management of human resources in the retail industry

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the interplay between the role of front line managers (FLMs) and their contribution to the reported gap between intended and actual human resource management (HRM).

Design/methodology/approach – The findings draw on case study research using 51 semi-structured interviews with managers across two UK retail organisations between 2012 and 2013.

Findings – This paper argues that FLMs are key agents in people management and play a critical role in the gap between intended and actual employee relations (ER) and HRM. The research found that these managers held a high level of responsibility for people management, but experienced a lack of institutional support, monitoring or incentives to implement according to central policy. This provided an opportunity for them to modify or resist intended policy and the tensions inherent in their role were a critical factor in this manipulation of their people management responsibilities.

Research limitations/implications – The data were collected from only one industry and two organisations so the conclusions need to be considered within these limitations.

Practical implications – Efforts to address the gap between intended and actual ER/HRM within organisations will need to consider the role tensions of both front line and middle managers.

Originality/value – This research provides a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between FLMs and the gap between intended and actual HRM within organisations. It addresses the issue of FLMs receiving less attention in the HRM-line management literature and the call to research their role in the translation of policy into practice.

Keywords Employee relations, Line managers, Human resource management, Retail, Front line managers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper sets out to examine the interplay between the role of front line managers' (FLMs) and their implementation of employee relations (ER) and human resource management (HRM). The importance of studying line managers is significant to our understanding of ER/HRM in organisations because they act as key agents by taking responsibility for translating policy into action (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Brewster *et al.*, 2013; Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Townsend, 2012a, b, c, 2013; Wright and Nishii, 2013). Previous studies have found a number of issues associated with the process implying that line managers can either enhance or undermine ER/HRM effectiveness (e.g. McGovern *et al.*, 1997; Renwick, 2003, 2004, 2009; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2007; Marchington and Suter, 2012; Townsend *et al.*, 2013a). However, most research studies place line managers as an adjunct to the main analysis and underplay the importance of how they translate ER/HRM policies into practice (Brewster *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, any relationship between the problems already known about devolving people management to the line and its relationship with the reported gap between intended and actual ER/HRM has received less attention (Khilji and Wang, 2006; Woodrow and Guest, 2014). In addition, research has tended to classify line managers as a generic homogenous group with little



delineation between the hierarchal structures of management within organisations. This paper contributes to the literature on ER/HRM and line management by focusing on a group of managers who have been largely neglected in previous research – FLMs. These can be defined as the first level of management to whom only non-managerial employees report (Hales, 2005, p. 473). This paper examines FLMs' implementation of ER/HRM policy to learn about their contribution to the reported gap between intended and actual HRM. In doing so it addresses the call for more research that places FLMs central to the main analysis and differentiates between levels of management.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section considers research on line managers and ER/HRM with a focus on the problems that have been identified in the process of devolving HRM down the line. The fieldwork was conducted in the retail sector and so the industry context is briefly outlined. A summary of the methodology and presentation of the findings follows. The paper concludes with a discussion of the factors that influence FLMs' management of human resources in the case study organisations and their contribution to any divergence between intended and actual HRM. The research found that FLMs are key agents in people management and play a critical role in the gap between intended and actual policy. The tensions inherent in organisational strategies of quality enhancement alongside cost reductions resulted in a manipulation of people management by FLMs in their efforts to juggle the demands of their role.

Line managers and ER/HRM

With relatively little work focused on FLMs and HRM, previous research has primarily considered line managers as a homogeneous group who have been taking on more responsibility in the area of ER/HRM (Holt Larsen and Brewster, 2003; Renwick, 2003, 2004, 2009; Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2010). Research has found that line managers tend to be more heavily involved in recruitment choices, discipline procedures, on-the-job training, decisions about who receives training and incentive pay (Renwick, 2003; Khilji and Wang, 2006). Previous research has identified a variety of problems associated with this devolution of ER/HRM to the line, which Teague and Roche (2012) summarise as delegation, alignment and monitoring issues. Issues concerning delegation include the dissonant opinions on ER/HRM between line managers, senior management and HR professionals (Buyens and De Vos, 2001; Maxwell and Watson, 2006; Nehles *et al.*, 2006; Bondarouk *et al.*, 2009; Brandl *et al.*, 2009). Line managers also cite a lack of either time or personal motivation to carry out their HR responsibilities (McGovern *et al.*, 1997; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; Renwick, 2004; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010). Alignment issues concern the organisational support and incentives offered to line managers to execute their people management responsibilities. Studies have found that line managers often experience a lack of support in their HR role (Renwick, 2003; McConville, 2006; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010), while their ER/HRM skills have been questioned, with inadequate training highlighted as a particular problem (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Maxwell and Watson, 2006; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Townsend *et al.*, 2012b). The final problem relates to how line managers are evaluated in terms of any monitoring or assessment of their implementation of people management. Few organisations successfully evaluate line managers' HR activities and there is sometimes little organisational pressure on them to fully undertake their HR responsibilities (McGovern *et al.*, 1997; Tamkin *et al.*, 1997).

While the problems associated with devolving HRM to the line have been well documented, very few of these studies focus explicitly on FLMs. It has been argued that the role of FLMs has become more "managerial" in recent years because of additional

responsibilities they now assume, particularly in the area of HRM, and that this distinguishes them from the role of Traditional Supervisors (Lowe, 1993; Hales, 2005, 2006/2007). FLMS tend to occupy a position within organisations that brings a range of tensions to their role (see Roethlisberger, 1945; Mann and Dent, 1954; Child and Partridge, 1982; Lowe, 1993; Hales, 2005, 2006/2007), which may subsequently influence the effectiveness of their ER/HRM implementation. Research that has studied the role of FLMS in people management has found that they play a key role in the implementation of ER/HRM policy. However, the majority of these studies have been concentrated in a hospital context (e.g. Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2010; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010; Townsend *et al.*, 2012b, c; Woodrow and Guest, 2014) meaning that FLMS have been “neglected by academics and practitioners” (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010, p. 357), particularly in industries aside of the healthcare sector. Consequently, little is known about these managers and the interplay between their role and the implementation of ER/HRM. A better understanding of FLMS has become critical to our understanding of the ER/HRM process within organisations, particularly the factors that contribute to the reported gap between intended and implemented ER/HRM policies.

Front line management in the retail industry

Retailing is a major sector in the UK economy (Skillsmart Retail, 2013) with retailers being the UK’s largest private sector employers, employing around 10 per cent of the country’s workforce (Skillsmart Retail, 2013). The significance of the retail industry to the UK economy and the vital role of labour in terms of their costs and performance underline the key role of ER/HRM in this context (Freathy and Sparks, 1996). Despite this, and its people-oriented nature, research on ER/HRM in retailing is scarce. Almost two decades ago Marchington (1996) drew attention to the lack of integration between retail and HR specific research strands and while some developments in the area have since taken place (e.g. Ogbonna and Whipp, 1999; Sparks, 2000; Ogbonna and Harris, 2001; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Grugulis *et al.*, 2011; Cathcart, 2013, 2014), little work has been published in recent years.

The retail industry is characterised by increasing competition, internationalisation, technological developments, rapidly changing market conditions, more selective customer demands, longer opening hours and increases in the average size of outlet (Ogbonna and Whipp, 1999; Cox and Brittain, 2000). It is dominated by large organisations that tend to have centralised organisational systems, tight financial controls and strategies focused on achieving a high share price by serving the customer better within an acceptable cost base (Freathy and Sparks, 2000). Such a context consigns line managers to working in an environment with a customer orientation while striving for greater efficiencies (Korczyński, 2002). This paper focuses on FLMS working within retail stores who occupy a key intermediary role between the corporate organisation, the store operations and the marketplace. Recent organisational and technological changes have altered the role of these managers resulting in a greater demand for enhanced customer service and HRM skills (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2010; Grugulis *et al.*, 2011; Smith and Elliott, 2012).

This study seeks to explore the role of FLMS and their implementation of ER/HRM policy to establish their contribution to the reported gap between intended and implemented HRM using the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the roles and responsibilities of FLMS in the case study organisations, particularly in ER/HRM?

- RQ2. What factors influence FLMs in the execution of their ER/HRM responsibilities?
- RQ3. What contribution do FLMs make to any divergence between intended and actual ER/HRM in the case study organisations?

Methodology

This study is part of a larger project investigating ER/HRM in retail organisations. A case study approach was adopted to explore how ER/HRM policies and practices operate in the retail industry and the role of different levels of management in the process. This was to address the call for greater distinction between various categories of management when considering how ER/HRM policies are translated into practice (Sanders and Frenkel, 2011) and the need to better understand the processes of ER/HRM (Brewster *et al.*, 2013; Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Woodrow and Guest, 2014). The aim of this study was to understand how and why FLMs executed their ER/HRM responsibilities. As such, a case study approach was adopted as this was considered most appropriate given that the focus of the study was on social processes and consequences within a real-life context to address “how” and “why” research questions (Yin, 2009).

This paper is based on the findings of two retail organisations operating across distinct retailing sectors. Superco operates in the grocery market and Homeco operates in the home improvement sector. Each organisation is concentrated in the superstore sector of retailing, conducts large-scale store operations and hold the highest market share in their respective sectors. Two stores within each organisation were used for data collection to enable comparability between stores and increase validity by reducing the risk of one particular store distorting the findings. The selection of stores was determined through negotiation with the initial gatekeeper for the project, but was ultimately controlled by each organisation.

A qualitative approach was adopted to collect and analyse the data to understand FLMs’ roles and experiences of implementing HRM within a specific industry context. The research objectives of the study required a depth of understanding that would be more difficult to obtain using solely quantitative methods. The data were collected using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and document analysis. Interviews were selected as the preferred data collection method because the research study sought to investigate the experiences of FLMs in the execution of their ER/HRM responsibilities. The interview sample for the larger research project translated to managers at each level of the organisations’ hierarchy. Table I outlines the basic characteristics of each retail store under investigation and details the interviews conducted with each level of management. A total of 51 interviews were completed with a range of managers operating at Head Office, Regional and Store level. For the reasons articulated earlier, this paper focuses on FLMs, of whom a total of 27 interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2013. The number of interviews conducted at each store was determined by the size of the store, which in turn dictated the number of FLMs employed at each site. All interviews were one-to-one with no other persons present. A range of secondary sources including corporate web sites, annual reports, strategic plans and ER/HRM policy documents were also studied.

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of FLMs in ER/HRM so the interview questions covered a range of topics including organisational context, strategies and policies, management roles and responsibilities, the communication and implementation of ER/HRM policy, and any associated problems or challenges with the

Company	Retail sector	Store location	Store weekly opening hours	Number of store employees	Departments	Front line manager interviews	Senior manager interviews	Executive manager interviews	Total number of interviews
Superco	Grocery	Surrey Quays	83	450	Customer services Trading (fresh foods) Trading (ambient) Human resources	Section Managers × 11	Store Manager Senior store Managers × 4	HR Director (Head Office) Employee Relations Manager (Head Office) Regional Director	33
		Lewisham	126	291	Customer services Trading (fresh foods) Trading (ambient) Human resources	Section Managers × 9	Store Manager Senior Store Managers × 4		
Homeco	Home improvement	Essex	78	70	Hardside Softside Administration	Supervisors × 7	Store Manager Assistant Managers × 2 Department Managers × 3	Personnel Director (Head Office) Personnel Manager (Head office) Regional Director	18
		Oxford	78	62	Hardside Softside Gardening Customer services Administration Trade	Department Managers × 6	Store Manager Assistant Managers × 2		
Total						27	18	6	51

Table I.
Summary of case study methodology

ER/HRM process. The data were initially coded along the themes of the interview as identified above with the problems and challenges of ER/HRM implementation grouped according to Teague and Roche's (2012) framework of delegation, alignment and monitoring.

Superco case study

Superco operates in the multiple grocery retailing sector across a number of countries. The company operated along functional lines with three divisions of Head Office, Distribution and Retail. This research focuses on the UK Retail Division, which was structured on a regional basis with 24 regions across the country. The study used two stores for data collection, each of which was located in South London – Lewisham and Surrey Quays – and both classified as superstores. Both stores had four departments managed by a Senior Manager, who together with the Store Manager made up the store's senior management team. These departments were sub-divided into sections, which were managed by Section Managers who reported to their respective Senior Store Manager. For the purpose of this research, the Section Managers were classified as FLMs because they represent the first level of management to whom only non-managerial employees report (Hales, 2005, p. 473). Further descriptive details can be found in Table I.

In terms of corporate strategy, Superco was committed to a customer centred strategy alongside cost reduction targets. The organisation's commitment to customer service was emphasised in both company documentation and during interviews:

We've completely changed our attitudes towards customers and put them at the forefront of everything we do, rather than as an afterthought as they were previously treated (HR Director, Head Office).

Policies to support this included longer store opening hours and pledges for improved customer service, including a reduction in the queues at checkouts, the introduction of Customer Service Assistants and greater consumer benefits from its customer loyalty card. The expense of this customer service programme was offset by productivity initiatives focused predominately on cuts in labour costs through a ban on premium rate overtime, a store management delayering exercise and reductions in the staffing budgets. Alongside the cost cutting strategy was an emphasis on employees, which manifested in a variety of ER/HRM policies, including a training programme and performance management system to support the customer service initiative, a focus on the increased employment of full time staff to create greater workforce stability and improve the quality of staffing, a profit related reward scheme, regular staff attitude surveys and staff open forums. Strategy was communicated using a cascade system through the management hierarchy until it reached the operational level, where policy was implemented by FLMS and experienced by employees.

Homeco

Homeco operates in the decorative and DIY sector multiple retailing sector employing over 25,000 staff. The company was structured on a regional basis with nine regions across the UK. The study used two stores for data collection; one located in Essex, the other in Oxford, and both classified as superstores. The Essex store was termed a "Traditional" store, which meant it had not undergone recent refurbishment, while Oxford was a "Renewal" store, which had recently undergone major renovation. Each store had a senior store management team comprising of a Store Manager and two

Assistant Store Managers. The Essex store was sub-divided into three departments: Hardside, Softside and Administration. Each department was managed by a Department Manager, who had responsibility for a variety of sections within their department, which were each managed by a Supervisor. As a "Renewal" store the Oxford branch had the same senior store management team and then six departments overseen by Department Managers, but there was no supervisory level. For the purposes of this research study, Section Managers in the Essex store and Department Managers in the Oxford store were classified as the FLMs as these positions were the last managerial level to which only shop floor staff reported.

Homeco had a strategy of growth by means of a store refurbishment programme, the introduction of a customer loyalty card, improvements to operational efficiency and a focus on customer service. Homeco operated in a sector with fewer large competitors than Superco, but the company was struggling to maintain profitability, particularly due to the recession. Homeco was also facing a number of ER/HRM challenges including concerns about employee performance, recruitment shortages and high labour turnover. Consequently, their priorities were directed towards "recruiting more part-time employees and investing heavily in training all its staff" (HR Director, Head Office). As in Superco, strategy was communicated using a cascade system through the management hierarchy.

Research findings

The role and responsibilities of FLMs

FLMs in both organisations were the direct interface between the shop-floor staff and organisational policy with their roles primarily devoted to operational work covering people management, customer service and budget control. FLMs across both organisations commonly started their employment as school leavers and were promoted from a shop-floor position. This was in contrast to senior Store, Regional and Head Office managers who were more likely to be recruited as graduates. FLMs had less opportunity for career progression (due to a preference for graduates at the more senior management levels), were expected to fill staffing gaps on the shop-floor when required, and were only paid on average 30 per cent higher wages than shop-floor staff (compared to senior Store Managers who were paid upwards of 80 per cent higher wages than shop-floor staff). These factors compounded the pressures of the role because of the divorce between their responsibilities and their status in the organisation. Within their role they also held significant ER/HRM responsibilities including recruitment and selection, on-the-job training, performance management (including staff appraisals), staff scheduling and workload allocation. Unlike Homeco, Superco employed in-store HR Managers, but the role largely involved duty management responsibilities with only around a third of their working week devoted to HRM. These in-store HR Managers typically had relatively little HR experience, expertise or qualifications:

After the store restructuring, the job became more retail oriented and less HR focused. But they make you do time in every senior management role to be promoted. So you've got HR managers who don't know a lot about HR and aren't really interested in it, but just doing their time in the role to try and get promoted (Senior Store Manager, Superco, Lewisham).

Therefore FLMs in both organisations did not receive particularly significant support in the execution of their HRM responsibilities, even in Superco which employed store-level HR Managers.

Some aspects of ER/HRM were centrally designed and controlled by Head Office. FLMs were given support and guidance in those ER/HRM areas that held greater risk of Employment Tribunals, such as equal opportunities, reward management, grievance and disciplinary. For example, Head Office conducted diversity monitoring and provided diversity training for line managers. Other examples of centralised ER/HRM included company-wide recruitment and induction processes, as well as some selection methods such as standardised application forms in both organisations, and assessment tests at Superco. There was also a higher degree of centralised control over pay and reward decisions whereby any FLMs' decision about an employee's appointment or promotion to a particular pay grade, was subject to approval by their own Senior Manager and constrained by the budgets set at Head Office. In addition, Superco operated bonus payments, but these were related to the organisation's performance, rather than individual performance, and as such were centrally determined and beyond the remit of FLMs. Centrally produced customer service training packages were a feature in both organisations, with store-level HR Managers and FLMs at Superco, and FLMs at Homeco, delivering the training to shop-floor staff. In summary, some ER/HRM activities were centrally determined and not left to FLMs, although FLMs working at Homeco appeared to have more autonomy over ER/HRM than those at Superco.

Responsibility for the delivery of the organisation's customer service strategy also formed a significant proportion of a FLM's role at both Superco and Homeco. At Superco, these responsibilities included resourcing longer store opening hours and the company's pledge to reduce the length of checkout queues, the recruitment of Customer Service Assistants, increasing the proportion of full time employees to improve service delivery, and the achievement of customer service performance targets set by Head Office. Data were gathered through technology, mystery shoppers and Head Office visits to stores. The results were compiled into regional league tables that published the customer service performance achievements of each store. At Homeco, FLMs' responsibilities including the recruitment of customer service employees, the training of shop-floor employees to fulfil the expectation of greater product knowledge amongst all staff and achieving requisite performance standards during visits to stores from Head Office managers to assess customer service performance. However, overall there appeared to be lower demands for, and monitoring of, customer service standards at Homeco compared to Superco. The methods of measurement and monitoring of performance were less complex at Homeco and results neither were the results published in any league tables.

The third key area of responsibility for FLMs was the management of budgets and financial targets. A budget-driven context was dominant in both organisations, as reflected in their cost minimisation strategy:

The company has become more ruthless. There are forever devising new ways to cut costs. The staffing budget was cut by 12% this year even though we are open for longer than we ever have before (FLM, Superco, Surrey Quays).

Staff budgets at Superco were determined by a non-conformance team based at Head Office who would visit stores and allocate a labour allowance to each department, which was then operationally managed by FLMs. At Homeco, budgets and targets were set at store level as a proportion of its turnover, rather than through any detailed analysis of labour use at individual departmental level. These differences in the level of

financial control had an impact on FLMs' execution of ER/HRM, as detailed in the following section.

Factors influencing FLMs' execution of their ER/HRM responsibilities

The factors influencing FLMs' execution of their ER/HRM responsibilities were analysed using Teague and Roche's (2012) delegation, alignment and monitoring classifications. FLMs at Superco cited delegation issues, particularly time constraints, as a factor that limited their ability to fulfil the ER/HRM responsibilities of their role. This was largely attributed to the large spans of control for these managers caused by a high proportion of part timers and the recent management de-layering exercise within stores. Conversely, FLMs at Homeco did not cite a lack of time to implement ER/HRM practices as an influencing factor suggesting that delegation issues were less of a problem. In neither organisation did FLMs disparage their ER/HRM responsibilities or hold the dissonant opinions identified in previous research (e.g. Maxwell and Watson, 2006; Bondarouk *et al.*, 2009). FLMs appeared committed in principle to their ER/HRM responsibilities, but those at Superco believed they had inadequate time resources to effectively implement ER/HRM policy. This appeared to be a consequence of Superco's response to the economic climate of pursuing a cost cutting strategy with an accompanying delayering exercise. While this was supported by some "high commitment HRM" practices, this approach does align with Teague and Roche's (2014) findings that organisations are applying mixed bundles of ER/HRM policies in response to the economic climate. FLMs at Superco bore the brunt of the delayering exercise as it brought increased pressures to their role causing them to cite delegations issues as a problem in their execution of ER/HRM. This was not evident at Homeco who took a more incremental approach to their restructuring process and were not pursuing such an aggressive cost cutting strategy.

The problem of alignment and institutional support for these managers to carry out their HR responsibilities was also evident. Both company literature and interview data emphasised employees as a key contributor to competitive success, particularly at Superco. Yet, little explicit ER/HRM guidance was provided to FLMs:

All we have for our stores is a 12-point guide to best practice in managing human resources. We don't like to direct them specifically because they should know how best to manage their employees (HR Director, Head Office, Superco).

Combined with the lack of expertise held by store level HR Managers, FLMs had little institutional guidance or support when executing their ER/HRM responsibilities at Superco. Similarly, at Homeco, the devolvement of ER/HRM to FLMs was accompanied by few guidelines from Head Office:

Employment decisions depend very much on the Store Manager. There is very little direction or impact from Head Office (FLM, Homeco, Essex).

This approach was in line with the company's lack of centralised control, compared to Superco, with FLMs describing the culture as "relaxed", "very laid back", and "informal".

In terms of monitoring and evaluation, budgets and targets were a major influencing factor on the role of FLMs and consequently their management of human resources. This was particularly exigent in Superco where budgets and targets were devolved to individual section level and more closely monitored and evaluated by Head Office. Yet FLMs' actual people management responsibilities

were less closely monitored or evaluated beyond an adherence to staffing budgets, even in Superco:

As long as we meet the targets set by head office and keep within our budgets they don't really bother us too much about how we actually manage our staff (FLM, Superco, Lewisham).

Such a context gave FLMs greater freedom in their implementation of ER/HRM and enabled them to make decisions that were contrary to intended policy, but this was particularly evident at Homeco where there was a lower degree of centralised control and monitoring of budgets or targets. These findings confirm that the issues of delegation, alignment and monitoring extend through the management hierarchy to FLMs working at the forefront of the organisation.

The contribution of FLMs to divergence between intended and actual ER/HRM

To establish the contribution of FLMs to any gap between intended and implemented HRM in the case study organisations, FLMs were questioned on the actual execution of their ER/HRM responsibilities and links drawn between this and their identification of delegation, alignment and monitoring issues.

The time constraints cited by FLMs at Superco lead to aspects of ER/HRM not being fully executed:

I have so many part timers that doing all their appraisals is a nightmare so I can't really give them the time to do them justice (FLM, Superco, Surrey Quays).

All staff have a Personal Development Planner to support their training, but I don't have the time to sit down with staff and work through them and no one checks up whether I've done it anyway (FLM, Superco, Lewisham).

A lack of alignment in terms of support and incentives offered to FLMs in their management of human resources resulted in discrepancies between intended policy and actual practice of ER/HRM. Examples of this included Homeco's policy to recruit more part timers. FLMs claimed to have no knowledge of such a policy:

There is no pressure from head office to use part timers, to increase the number of part timers or to go for more flexibility of employment. It's all down to the personal preference of the store manager (FLM, Homeco, Oxford).

At Superco, Head Office expressed a preference for an increased proportion of full timers:

We want to employ more full timers to deliver our customer service promises because then we will have staff genuinely committed to Superco. It will also reduce the costs of high labour turnover and poor commitment that we get with shorter hour part timers and temporary workers (HR Director, Superco, Head Office).

At store level, FLMs expressed an opposing view of labour resourcing:

More flexibility is demanded by the company because flexible employees are cheaper so the company is looking to employ more part timers (FLM, Superco, Lewisham).

The lack of alignment and institutional support also resulted in significant variability in the implementation of ER/HRM across the stores. One such example was the range

of recruitment and selection methods used at Homeco, aside from a company standard application form, which led one FLM to conclude:

I don't really know how we reach a selection decision. Generally, HR decisions are totally different according to different stores (FLM, Homeco, Essex).

A lack of monitoring of FLMs' people management responsibilities also contributed to unofficial practices such as the recruitment freezes used at Superco's Surrey Quays store to control labour costs:

Recruitment is financially controlled so you look at wage costs and look ahead to the budget squeeze and so you don't recruit but flex up the part timers instead. Then there is a desperate shortage of employees, so there is a mad rush to recruit. Head Office doesn't query this as we're keeping within our budgets, but I don't know if they'd actually approve if they did find out (FLM, Superco, Surrey Quays).

Further manipulation of staffing budgets was evident in the recruitment of Customer Service Assistants who were introduced to support Superco's customer service strategy. FLMs viewed Customer Service Assistants as an extravagance at a time when they were experiencing work intensification and cuts in their staffing budget and instead used the funds to employ staff to their own departments:

I used the Customer Service Assistant budget when a vacancy in my department arose. While we're not supposed to use them in departments, when we're trying to control budgets, it frequently happens. I get a replacement employee, but the store doesn't actually get a Customer Service Assistant (FLM, Superco, Surrey Quays).

Similar contraventions of intended ER/HRM by FLMs were evident at Homeco. Despite the priority at Head Office to recruit more part timers, the Oxford store employed 85 per cent of its staff on full time contracts. Staff shortages within the store were at times so acute that there was a regular surplus in the staffing budget so that full time staff and premium rate overtime could be employed without detection by Head Office. This was confirmed at both front line and senior store management levels:

Officially we don't use full timers to work overtime in the store because there's a complete ban – but unofficially yes we do use it. But we don't go over our budgets so Head Office don't scrutinise us on this as it doesn't flag up as a staffing problem (Assistant Store Manager, Homeco, Oxford).

This most commonly occurred when Head Office managers were visiting a store to assess customer service performance levels. Premium rate overtime was used to cover staff shortages:

We really struggle when we know we've got a visit on. We make sure that everyone's brought in, even if it was supposed to be their day off, and just pay them overtime. So when we're visited there's always plenty of staff working, right down to the door greeter to hand out baskets to the customers (FLM, Homeco, Oxford).

Other examples of FLMs contravening central policies without detection included staff scheduling:

Company policy requires staff schedules to be written four weeks in advance, but the reality is that it's easier to write the schedules every fortnight and so that's what we do (FLM, Homeco, Essex).

Official policy is 48 hours' notice of any change in hours and then staff don't have to work it. But we often change their hours or ask them to work extra at much less notice because the reality is that we have to and nobody challenges us (FLM, Superco, Lewisham).

These examples illustrate how the operational demands of the FLM's role, particularly the challenge of improving customer service on lower staffing budgets, considerably influenced their implementation of ER/HRM. FLMs in both Superco and Homeco adhered to budgetary controls and policies that were more centrally controlled, or where any transgressions were more easily detected by Head Office. In addition, their manipulation of workload allocation and staffing schedules appeared to be uncontested, with evidence of support by their own line managers – the senior Store Managers. This manifested in tangible budgets and targets dictating FLMs' behaviours with ER/HRM policies circumvented accordingly, resulting in a gap between intended and actual HRM.

Discussion and conclusions

This study investigated the organisational role of FLMs and their implementation of ER/HRM policy to establish their contribution to the reported gap between intended and implemented HRM. The research found that FLMs are key agents in people management and play a critical role in the gap between intended and actual ER/HRM. Delegation, alignment and monitoring problems contributed to this gap, but the tensions inherent in the role of FLMs lead to a manipulation of their people management responsibilities. This was facilitated by their high level of responsibility for ER/HRM, but a lack of institutional support, monitoring or incentives to implement practice according to central policy, which provided an opportunity to modify or resist intended policy. While Superco maintained a closer monitoring of FLMs through budgets and targets this did not negate the gap between intended and actual HRM.

Each organisation was under competitive conditions and the impact of the recent recession compounded these pressures with FLMs ultimately at the forefront of managing the ensuing challenges. As a result, the demands made on these managers rested largely on the need to reconcile the downward pressure on costs with the goal of raising the calibre and competence of employees to deliver a premium level of customer service. FLMs became the players who facilitated necessary trade-offs to make these conflicting strategies work. In answer to the call for research into the "actual HR role line managers can realistically make in organisations" (Teague and Roche, 2012, p. 235), this paper argues that FLMs working in the retail industry are constrained in their people management role because their primary efforts are devoted to addressing the conflicting strategies of cost reduction and quality enhancement inherent within a customer service context. This conflict within their role is compounded by issues of delegation, alignment and monitoring, particularly their performance being evaluated through budgetary targets rather than HR outcomes. Within this context, ER/HRM was primarily implemented to fulfil cost focused performance targets with FLMs acting as "disturbance handlers" (Mintzberg, 1980, p. 128) due to the conflicts inherent within their role and their contested position within the organisational structure.

This paper draws on data from only one industry and two organisations so any conclusions drawn from the research study need to be considered within these limitations. Nevertheless, the retail industry is similar to other service sector industries, as well as the public sector, in terms of the formation of corporate strategies based on quality enhancement and cost reduction in conjunction with a branch structure that equates to detached reporting lines between HR professionals and line managers.

Therefore, some balanced conclusions can be made and parallels drawn from this research in the subject of FLMs and ER/HRM.

The implications for practitioners is that the context within which FLMs operate is conducive, or otherwise, to the successful implementation of HRM and that corporate strategies play an important role in this. Increased monitoring of FLMs' performance, particularly through budgetary targets is not necessarily the solution to achieving greater conformity between intended and implemented ER/HRM. This research suggests that FLMs will only find more sophisticated methods to circumvent central policy when faced with contradictory demands and tensions within their role, as was evident in Superco.

This paper highlights the critical role of FLMs in the implementation of ER/HRM and confirms the problems of delegation, alignment and monitoring that have been borne out in earlier research studies. In addition, it establishes that these issues extend through the management hierarchy down to FLMs, who have, up to now, been largely neglected in HRM-line management research. The cooperation, commitment and ability of this group of managers is crucial in the HRM process if organisations want to close the gap between intended and actual HRM. This research enhances our understanding of the interplay between the role of FLMs, the context in which they operate, and the problems of delegation, alignment and monitoring. In doing so, it provides a more nuanced understanding of the ER/HRM process and the role of FLMs within this, particularly how and why they contribute to the gap between intended and actual ER/HRM.

In terms of future research, the pivotal role of FLMs in ER/HRM presented in this paper calls for a closer examination of the role of FLMs in a wider variety of organisational settings, given that much of the current literature is concentrated on hospital contexts. More detailed analysis of the tensions inherent in the role of both front line and middle managers and the impact of this on the process of ER/HRM implementation is needed. An examination of non-managerial employees is also needed to enable stronger links to be drawn between intended, implemented and experienced HRM to support theory development on the HR-performance causality chain.

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Further reading

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