Role of line managers in human resource activities: Evidence from a case study

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to explain the role of line managers in human resource activities. It is a case study in West Midlands.

Design/methodology/approach: The trend of line managers (LMs) involvement in human resource (HR) activities has been on-going for a while. There has been a lot of intellectual debate and controversy on the issue. Also, organisations have faced lots of challenges due to this same issue. This study aims to discover how to cope with this problem by utilizing human resources activities. This research adopted a qualitative single case study approach on a University in West Midlands, UK. In the first instance, 35 respondents consisting of line managers and HR practitioners across the Business School were invited to participate in this research. Within the context of LMs, purposive sampling was used.

Findings: The findings show that Line Managers that enhances abilities are significantly associated to HR activities. Line Managers that enhance motivation and involvement are significantly associated to HR activities. And the results showed that HR respondent 1 to 5 said LMs play an important role and are needed to carry out HR activities.

Social implications: This study has shown LMs and HR practitioners have their different reserves about working together but the issue presently is, none of them is dispensable so they have to work together. It is necessary for HR practitioners to consult LMs when formulating policies and procedures to ensure balance between business needs and standard policies, and procedures.

Originality/value: The analysis of the case, highlights the benefits of the novel idea of line managers and human resource practitioners and contributes to the need for greater clarity and knowledge of the barriers in the involvement of LMs in HR activities.

Keywords: Line managers involvement, Human resource activities, Performance

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1. Introduction

Most organisations in the bid for better performance and increased productivity source for assistance from Human Resource (HR) specialist in order to help with the smooth running of their organisation through a standard and ethical process. This has led most organisations to employ HR practitioners to take charge of a variety of activities in the organisation. Some other organisations outsource a few or specific activities they feel would be better handled by HR specialist. HR practitioners work with LMs to put policies and procedures into effect. After a certain period, it was noticed that most line managers were actually performing some of these activities meant for HR practitioners unconsciously due to their direct involvement with employees, then it became established that some of these duties would be better performed by LMs. Some of these 'activities' have not actually been streamlined and labelled for LMs, meanwhile HR specialist is still involved in these same activities. This causes some confusion which results in the barriers in the involvement of LMs in HR activities. The trend of LMs' involvement in HR activities has been on-going for a while. There has been a lot of intellectual debate and controversy on the issue. Also, organizations have faced lots of challenges due to this same issue. It has been established that line managers play a vital role in HR activities by actually performing them and helping to put them into effect, and by being in close contact with employees, which puts them in the position to know the needs of employees like training needs, the need for coaching and motivation, and also the need for recognition when employees have been outstanding in their performance. Line managers, on the other hand, believe it is not their responsibility and, as such, do not feel accountable, believing solely that they are aiding HR. Gibb (2003) stresses the fact that over involvement HR activities is a cause for worry because it can lead to a situation where the use of HR specialist will be reduced to the barest minimum. Also, LMs are perceived as a vital part of the employee development process (Katou, Budhwar & Patel, 2021), but it has been observed that there have been obvious difficulties in getting LMs to accept HR responsibilities (Aston, 1984). HR specialists feel that some of the HR roles presently assigned to LMs are not performed according to standard procedures. They feel LMs are not well trained and are not capable to perform HR activities. So, there is ongoing friction between line managers and HR practitioners. HR specialists are to act as guardian to the organisation, they are to provide services and support and also where necessary guide managers, without issuing commands or taking over their duties. A problem arises where there is no clear-cut distinction between providing help and taking over, and between giving advice and telling people what to do (Armstrong, 2006). Human Resource Management (HRM) as defined by Bratton and Gold (2007: page 7) is:

> *"a strategic approach to managing employment relations which emphasises that leveraging people's capabilities is critical to achieving competitive advantage, this being achieved through a distinctive set of integrated employment policies, programmes and practices."*

A strategic approach of HRM "is the process of linking the HR functions with the strategic objectives of the organisation in order to improve performance," (Bratton & Gold, 2007: page 39). According to Miller (1987), the ultimate aim of HRM is to help an organisation achieve its strategic goals and targets through the process of recruitment to how work is performed thus effective management. The key word is 'fit' which means that the HRM approach, seeks to ensure that there is a fit between the management of employees in an organisation, and the general strategic goal of the organisation. Human Resource Management is responsible for how people are treated in organisations; it is responsible for bringing them into the organisation; for helping them perform their work; for compensating them for their labours; and also solving different problems that may arise (Cherrington, 1995). The general role of HRM can be divided into four fields: strategic business partner; change agent; employee champion; and administration (Ulrich, 1997). An organisation uses its internal resources to achieve a sustained competitive advantage, one of such resources includes an organisations' human capital (Barney, 1991). Human capital refers to employees in aspect of their skills, knowledge and experience which are economic value to firms (Snell & Dean, 1992). The possibility for an organisation to achieve competitive advantage depends on the employees, not HRM practices, so the HR department needs to go beyond designing effective policies and practices to making sure that not only are practices put into action correctly, but that employees accept them, so that the intended results can be achieved (Wright, McMahan & McWilliams, 1994). Hay (2002) believes that most people leave their jobs not because of low or poor pay but because of the lack of satisfaction with how their talents and skills are being developed.

Thus, there is the need for HR policies and practices in every organisation. Some of them might include the following

- the need to conform with a new or existing legislation which might take into account European directives and case law;

- the need to perform effectively in a competitive environment;

- the need to comply with rules and guide from parent company;

- the need to support the management strategy of the organisation;

- the need to conform to a formal and standard approach to people management and development;

- the need to pursue the latest trend in effective people management (Remneland-Wikhamn, Styhre & Wikhamn, 2023).

HR policies or practices include: recruitment and selection; training and learning/development; career opportunities; communication; employee involvement; team working; performance appraisal; job security; job challenge/job autonomy; work-life balance.

Different organizations could need different policies, and not every organization is required to abide by every policy. Policies are selected to suit an organisation's aims and objectives, their structure, strategy, culture, and sector. And some are in accordance with good practice. In spite of going in accordance with HR policies and practices, achieving effectiveness depends on the implementation, which is where line managers come in because their role in the whole process is very important (Bratton & Gold, 2007; Remneland-Wikhamn et al., 2023).

This paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, this study adds to the relatively small amount of the research that examines whether line managers have a role in HRM. Second, the results of this study help provide a better understanding of the most important skills of first line managers that some managers play on the workplace whereas previous research provides evidence that organizations face big challenges when trying to help first-line managers be more effective in their vital roles. This study reveals that such decisions also result from the desire to decrease the uncertainty and understand the leadership basics for frontline managers. Finally, our paper is distinct from similar studies looking at what a first line managers does and how to become one. Our paper supplements the vast body of literature that identifies, how first line managers perform many crucial responsibilities that allow successful organizations to perform highly and thrive in their sectors. Thus, whether the empirical examples fulfilled the necessary but not sufficient make the relationship (Karltun, Karltun, Coelho, Havemose & Kiellström, 2023).

Aims to reveal the role of line managers in human resource management and to find out these questions: what is the meaning of line management in HRM? Can line managers perform HRM? And how HR can support line managers. In addition, what is the most important skill of first line manager.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Human Resource Management (HRM)

'Human resource management involves all management decisions and actions that affect the relationship between the organisation and employees – its human resources,' (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills & Walton, 1984: page 1). Storey (2001) suggest that it can be seen as a proactive approach to managing people which involves long-term thinking, foreseeing, and planning for changes and requirements before they become a threat to the organisation. Price (2000) adds that it is a mixture of both planning and reaction.

HRM policy goals include the following (Caldwell, 2004):

- managing people as assets which is a necessity in order for the organisation to gain competitive advantage;

- aligning HRM policies with business policies and corporate strategy;

- developing a close fit of HR policies, procedures and systems with one another;

- creating a flatter and more flexible organisation that is capable of responding more quickly to change;

- creating a customer-first approach throughout the organization;

- encouraging team working and co-operation across international boundaries;

- empowering employees to manage their own self-development and learning;

- improving employee involvement through better internal communication;

- building greater employee commitment to the organisation

- developing reward strategies designed to support a performance-driven culture;

- increasing the responsibility of the line for HR policies;

- developing the facilitating role of managers as enablers.

Armstrong (2006) puts forward the characteristics of HRM as one that is diverse in aspect of its models and practices; it is strategic with an emphasis on integration; integration of its policies with strategic business planning; it is centered on the belief that people should be treated as assets (human capital); it is commitment oriented; in its approach to employee relations, it is unitarist rather than pluralist and individualistic rather than collective; it focuses on business values, and it is a management driven activity – the delivery of HRM is a line managements' responsibility.

The main aims of HRM includes: organisational effectiveness; policies are developed in areas like talent management; knowledge management, and generally creating a positive environment to work in, all contribute to advance organisation effectiveness. Also, strategies are made in a way that it caters for continuous improvement and development of customer relations policies (Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton & Swart, 2003). This relates to many organisations because for them, to achieve effectiveness they have to consider these points:

a) human capital management: employees are seen as the main asset of an organisation so HRM ensure that skill is obtained and retained and organisations get well motivated and committed workforce. This is done through a meticulous recruitment and selection process, and a continuous process of learning and development and an effective compensation system (Becker, Huselid, Pickus & Spratt, 1997), this is currently becoming the norm in most organisations;

b) employee relations: a partnership is formed between employees, their trade unions and management which help to maintain a productive and harmonious relationship which is an important aim of HRM (Armstrong, 2006);

c) knowledge management: Here HRM aim, is to enhance skills and firm-specific knowledge that can be achieved through the organisations' learning process, which are the processes of acquiring, creating, capturing, sharing and using knowledge to improve on general learning and performance in the organisation;

d) reward management: it intends to make employees committed, to keep them motivated and engaged by putting into place policies and procedures that make employees feel valued and are rewarded for achievements and skills gained (Scarborough, Swan & Preston, 1999);

e) meeting diverse needs: it intends to meet diverse needs which may come from personal needs, individual or group. It might be work styles, aspirations and making sure there are equal opportunities for all. These are done through developing and implement policies which foster the overall aim of catering for the management of a diverse workforce and the needs of the stakeholders. (Armstrong, 2006). Bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality: HRM intends to make sure that policies and practices are not just made to look fancy, but are actually made to work because complications might arise due to contextual and process problems, which might be due to lack of resources, short-termism, resistance to change, lack of trust, inadequate infrastructure of supporting processes, limited support from LMs and other business priorities (Gratton & Hailey 1999). This brings to lime light the fact that LMs are the ones who bring HR policies to life (Purcell et al., 2003).

Ulrich (1997) puts forward that HR professionals should have four roles which enables the employees and the organisation to achieve their goals. They include: strategic partner, change agent, administration expert and employee champion. These are briefly explained below:

- Strategic partner: HR professionals need to make sure that HR policies, practices and processes are in accordance with the overall strategy of the organisation and should be well equipped to implement the strategy within a minimum amount of time.

- Change agent: HR professionals need to be positive advocates of change within the whole organisation, they are to resolve employee issues which might arise due to change and embedding change by putting into practice efficient and flexible processes.

- Administrative expert: this involves general people management which includes: recruiting, hiring, training and record-keeping, compensating, rewarding, disciplining and terminating, and all other processes that involve people. These processes must be monitored and improved for efficiency, in order to bring credibility to HRM.

- Employee champion: concerns of employees must be dealt with by listening to them and talking with them, they should receive a fair hearing. Efficient and effective communication should be encouraged through methods like employee surveys, suggestion programmes, team meetings and other available means of sharing views and information.

HR practitioners can be seen as specialist in ambiguity because they do not have clear cut roles and activities, this may be as a result of their status not being fully recognised, it might also be due to different views of line managers and top management, on their level of importance to the organisation. This role ambiguity can lead to confusion in ideals and reality (Thurley, 1981).

The general theory of HRM as a whole has been criticised by Noon (1992) for having serious deficiencies, by being too comprehensive, by raising expectations about its ability to describe and predict, he goes further to say that it is built with concepts and prepositions, but the associated variables and hypothesis are not explicit. Guest (1991) feels it is all hype and hope. Legg (1998) puts forward that management rhetoric expresses concern for employees, but in reality, employees are being used and Armstrong (2006) adds to this by saying that a lot of literature on the issue end up saying that HRM promises more than what it can actually deliver.

A lot of research has been done which contradicts these criticisms. Research done by Guest and Conway (1997) came up with findings that most employees are happy with their experiences of HRM, they are more committed, secured, and satisfied with their jobs. Also, HR practices are associated with high ratings of fairness, trust, and a general delivery of managements' promises. Another research by MacDuffie (1995) came up with facts that 'bundles' of internally consistent HRM practices were linked with higher productivity and quality in 62 automotive assembly plants. Also, with the use of longitudinal data from 30 steel plants Ichniowski, Shaw and Prennushi (1993) found that the impact of 'cooperative and innovative' HRM practices had a positive and significant effect on the productivity of the organisations. In light of the above discussion, we propose this question: Can line managers perform HRM? And how HR can support line managers. In addition, what is the most important skill of first line manager.

2.2. Line Managers Involvement in HR Activities

Larsen and Brewster (2003) suggest that the relationship between HR specialists and line managers is complex, ambiguous and dynamic. This emphasizes the need for closer scrutiny of perception on LMs in HRM as an important aspect of business performance. Research on the progress of devolution of operational HRM activities and its consequences by Hall and Torrington (1998) displays the recent trends of most organizations whereby they engage in activities towards vesting HRM responsibility with line managers. HRM in its approach to people management has a key role for LMs (Brewster & Larsen, 2000; Guest & King, 2001; Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 2001). Due to adopting increasing strategic roles for HR, much responsibility for people-focused HRM like the employee champion and change agent roles is being devolved to line management (Caldwell, 2003). Both the HR department and line management have crucial roles to play in structuring and creating the required employee behaviour on behalf of the organisation (Anvari & Janjaria,

2023). Which is a necessity or is required to achieve high performance in order to gain competitive advantage (Pfeffer, 1995). Research carried out by the University of Bath, UK for the CIPD (CIPD, 2008) discovered that line managers play a crucial role in implementing and enacting HR policies and practices. They are able to positively influence employees in such a way that it could lead to higher levels of commitment, job satisfaction, and loyalty which would in turn lead to higher levels of performance, where employees can put in more work even above the basic requirement. They have an important role of structuring people's actual experience of doing a job. Generally, they help in actualising HR policies and practices, they follow guidelines and advice on how to carry out these activities, and they control the work flow by directing and guiding the work of those under them.

Most people management practices are designed by HR but delivered by LMs where they can positively impact on employees and make significant difference (Remneland-Wikhamn et al., 2023). Such areas include:

- performance appraisal,
- training coaching and guidance,
- employee engagement (involvement and communication),
- openness-the ability for employees to easily discuss issues with their line managers,
- work-life balance,
- recognition–the degree to which employees feel their input is being recognized.

By facilitating knowledge sharing in teams, line managers can play a critical role in advancing HRM goals by adopting team-working practices and employee empowerment (Liu, Cui & Nanyangwe, 2023). There have been a lot of literature and a recent trend on devolving of HR activities to LMs. In Europe there is a serious campaign to reduce the level of control or restrictions the HR or personnel department has on the autonomy of line management by increasing LMs' responsibility (Larsen & Brewster, 2003). LMs are perceived to be more involved in HR activities (Currie & Procter, 1999; Currie & Procter, 2001; Harris, 2001; Poole & Jenkins, 1997; Anvari, Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, Mobarhan, Janjaria & Hosseinpour Chermahini, 2023; Storey, 1992, 2001). In spite of this, writers like Hutchinson and Wood (1995) believe that HR work is done by both HR specialist and LMs to different degrees depending on the area. LMs are responsible for HR in their areas while HR specialists are responsible for HR in the whole organisation (Larsen & Brewster, 2003). Hall and Torrington (1998) believe that movement towards devolution initiatives are limited. The responsibility of Human Resource Development (HRD) in organizations has traditionally been handed over to LMs (Walton 1999). In Europe, the predominant pattern is the sharing of HR work between HR and the line (Brewster & Larsen, 2000). The role of the line manager in aspect of contributing to strategic changes as a link towards the realisation of the HR strategy is very crucial and it is derived from the discretion given to them in implementing HR policies and strategies and also in their role in synthesizing information (Currie & Procter, 2001). Due to HR professionals being more strategic and operational, it has caused role ambiguity and role conflict. This conflict resulted in the process of developing a strong link to organisation strategy, taking a long-term perspective, while trying to maintain an internal consultant role on LMs focusing on short-term, reactive issues (Caldwell, 2003). According to Renwick and MacNeil (2002), a lot of benefits and cost can be derived from the process of LMs being involved in employee development, it could lead to general issues being dealt with at the root, which paves way for better change management and facilitates more commitment towards Employee Career Development (ECD). It creates a wider scope for HR managers to concentrate on making ECD a more strategic and holistic process with a business focus, which in turn increases awareness of ECD issues in the organisation and supports the idea that ECD is an indispensable element of every manager job and cannot be transferred to HR specialist. It can facilitate the process of decision making towards ECD which can be tailored to suit specific situations thereby promoting local management accountability and responsibility for ECD, managers who are given the discretionary power to make their own decisions will be more committed to achieving them. Training and development cost can generally be reduced because LMs know what is needed for ECD. It allows LM to enact strategies on ECD if they wish. This whole scenario encourages LM to willingly participate in different programs and projects in ECD which increases the possibility of building line and HR partnership in working on ECD.

2.3. Barriers to Line Managers Involvement in HR Activities

Devolving HRM to LMs has been perceived as being problematic (McGovern, Gratton & Hope-Hailey, 1997). As put forward by Renwick (2003), a major discussion regards the challenges surrounding line manager involvement in HRM started in the new millennium. Most of these challenges are noticed generally in the relationship between LMs and HRM specialists (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999), some of which lie in the debated ability and willingness of LMs to carry out HR tasks by the book (Renwick & MacNeil, 2002), and also LMs' knowledge of company policies and procedures (Bond & Wise, 2003). MacNeil (2001) feel LMs are not usually given formal training in order to help them cope with their roles, most of them feel HR work is common sense and so do not need training to handle them. This is also supported by Cunningham and James (2001) who also add that performing some of these roles and duties when not trained and not supervised by HR specialist is a recipe to endanger employment security for employees and also employee trust. LMs are generally over loaded with work which is a barrier to them being able to properly handle HR activities because it might cause them to abuse their powers by practicing discrimination, restricting access to development opportunities, to promotion and pay reward, intensifying work, and off-loading duties to junior staff (Renwick & MacNeil, 2002). Another barrier in addition to heavy work load and short-term job pressure is the lack of time management skills.

In the aspect of cost of line involvement in staff career development, it would result to them acting as gate keepers to career development, they might be problems in the process of them trying to maintain consistency in decision making so there is more pressure to continuously train LMs, and there is also the need for HR auditing. This will lead to more cost in training of LMs, and potential cost of grievances emanating from dispute cases. There can also be the problem of maintaining balance of power between LMs and HR specialist, HR roles might be marginalised, and there might be less consistent communication arising between LMs and HR on employees' needs. Poor commitment, lack of proficiency and incompetency might lead to ECD issues not being properly attended to. Other operational demands might cause them to put in limited time towards ECD responsibility, thereby producing poor quality work. There is also the possibility of LMs declining from ECD as being part of their job, which is the case presently and the possibility of them abusing their position and discriminating against employees due to handling more work (Renwick & MacNeil, 2002). Marchington's (2001: pages 238-242) "unintended impacts" is as a result of the involvement of LMs which includes among other things the fact that they may be dubious about their role and may not be committed to it. Research has shown that the need to deliver short-term business results, lack of time and training, and lack of incentives included in their package to enable them perform the additional work are barriers to them performing HR roles (McGovern, 1999). LMs lack interest in undertaking grievance and disciplinary duties which may be due to the complexity of work involved which might be time consuming, and also maybe fear of line deficiency being exposed (Renwick, 2003).

In aspect of how LMs involvement in HR activities will affect their career, Brewster and Larsen (2000) suggest that there is a general lack of willingness on the part of HR specialist to assist LM in employee development. LMs are being forced into learning and taking on more responsibility. The way employees view line involvement in developing their career with an upward negative appraisal might shorten line career.

Coping with HR activities have always been a source of frustration for LMs because they always need HR advice, and when it exists, they feel it is not helpful (Brewster & Larsen, 2000), instead they feel they are being "policed by the rule book" (Guest & King, 2001: page 67). A study by Renwick (2003) puts forward that the line managers and HR are not willing parties to the devolving of HR activities. According to research carried out by Maxwell and Watson (2006), HR perception on the level of involvement of LMs is different from that of the LMs, while HR expects much involvement from LMs, LMs feel their involvement is minimal. HR respondent say LMs are involved in four HR activities, employee selection, motivation and morale of employees; performance appraisal; disciplinary, and grievances procedure. But from LMs response, they could not all pinpoint a particular activity they are involved in. This implies that there is some confusion on the roles and responsibility each play; obviously LMs are not sure of the roles they are supposed to play and the extent, or degree. On the other hand, the situation where there is no specific HR specialist role as suggested by Thornhill and Saunders (1998) may

perhaps have some negative impact on strategic integration and, consequently, organizational commitment, flexibility and quality.

The roles and activities for LMs are embedded and have been structured to suit the business strategy of the organisation, so the inability of LMs to understand the business and HR strategy might limit their involvement in HR activities. This supports Gilbert (2000) and Kearns's (2004) opinion that differences in perceptions of the line and HR might have a negative impact on the general business performance. Also, if there are similarities in perceptions, it might have a positive impact on the organisation's performance.

A lot of studies have discovered that there is perceptual divergence between LMs and HR specialists on the involvement of LMs in HR activities (Becker, Huselid & Ulrich, 2001; Phelps, 2002; Ulrich, 1997; Wright, McMahan, Snell & Gerhart, 2001). There is the need for both parties to fully understand each other and the business objectives and strategy in order to prevent mistrust between them and also prevent negative impacts on business performance (Garavan, Barnicle & Heraty, 1993; Gilbert, 2000).

A CIPD research (Guest & Conway, 2005) found that a lot of LMs are not able to motivate and improve the performance of those they are responsible for. The results of the research came up with 37 per cent of employees saying that they received help from their managers to improve their performance, 45 per cent said they were satisfied with the level of feedback they received, and less. than half of the respondent said they were regularly motivated by their managers. Guest and Conway see this as a big challenge for HR to support LMs in their roles and activities, which need a proper understanding of particular roles of each of them.

Some other barriers put forward by Larsen and Brewster (2003), are that LMs are poor in making policies in HR area. They may not take a comprehensive organisational view, and are usually unaware about recent developments in thinking about HRM. There have been a lot of criticisms from LMs. They do not think HR specialist make any contribution to an organisation's performance, because firstly their decisions are based on principles that are not very relevant for competitive prospects because, they are out of date with commercial realities. Also, they are unable to understand the nature of the business, its customers or corporate goals. Secondly, they constrain the autonomy of managers to make decisions that they feel are in the best interest of the business. LMs get frustrated when they have to deal with legal constraints or having to either negotiate or consult with trade unions. Thirdly, they feel HR practitioners are too slow to act, their worry of future consequences drives them to thoroughly check options instead of taking series of actions. And finally, they see HR policies as not very practical (Whitaker & Marchington, 2003).

2.4 Perspective of HR Practitioners Towards the Involvement of Line Managers in HR Activities

A 1995 report suggest that the continuous increase in the devolution of HR activities to the line managers might have major implications, like the shape of the HR department changing from what it is presently, to a smaller department due to the sharing of work. This would lead to fewer specialists being required. The specialist would have to prove their worth and they would have more status (Larsen & Brewster, 2003). LMs have been perceived as not very fit in aspect of operation of performance management systems. When they make decisions and it doesn't turn out well, they blame their poor judgement and inconsistencies on the vagaries of the system (Beaver & Harris, 1996). In the aspect of performance appraisal, due to the fact that they have close relationship with their employees and also with manipulation from managers their judgement is usually clouded, made on 'gut feelings'. Research has shown that it is performed inefficiently, it is their most deskilled managerial activity, and they feel they are good at it (Redman, 2001). Coaching can be an uncomfortable process for LMs who do not have training (de Jong, Leenders & Thijssen, 1999). Works by Eisenstat (1996); Hutchinson and Wood (1995); and Ulrich (1997, 1998, 2001) are proposing and supporting the move for a partnership between HR and the line, to encourage strategic employee development, and a clear cut of duties between HR and the line. This will entail integrating HR activities into the work of LMs (Jackson & Schuler, 2000). A partnership might help in clarifying roles and also in enabling other support mechanisms to be put in place (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003).

Some other works are supporting the move towards a three-part relationship between HR, the line and employees in order to carry out HR activities (Jackson & Schuler, 2000). This move which is American based is

not supported in the UK because here HR managers have not shown support towards helping LMs cope with work either through advice or training (Brewster & Larsen, 2000; Cunningham & James, 2001; Marchington, 2001). Gibb (2003) believes that LMs cannot be better skilled developers than specialist trained in learning and development at work, even if they receive more training. He feels that they cannot be as accurate in objectively determining learning and development needs, and they will not be as good at facilitating, instructing and coaching towards developments as specialist. They will not be as skilled in evaluating learning and development so as to validate it, and highlight further need in learning and development. Generally, they will not be able to organise and evaluate high quality learning and development processes and practices as HR specialist.

There have been a lot of criticisms on the ability of LMs to effectively and professionally handle HR activities (Renwick & MacNeil, 2002). However, it is flawed by three facts, firstly data collected might be biased because it is usually from views of HR managers who feel they are the only ones qualified to carry out those activities. This is done to justify their role and the need for them as specialist. Secondly, the legitimacy of HR's role in 'policing' the line might be jeopardized so there are more unlikely to argue that the line is very capable. And thirdly, if HR are acting as advisers to the line and the line is dominating in the HR/line responsibility then the criticism of the line being incompetent is inaccurate because both bear the responsibility, one to do (line managers) and the other to advice (HR), so if something goes wrong both are to be blamed because they have not performed their jobs well, and not just blaming it on one party (LM) which is bias. And previously LM have been trusted by senior managers to carry out such activities, also the issue that LMs may have been fed with poor advice and support by the HR specialist has been ignored (Brewster & Larsen, 2000; Currie & Procter, 2001; Guest & King, 2001; Marsh & Gillies, 1983; Poole & Jenkins, 1997; Tyson & Fell, 1995). If LMs are not doing their job well with advice and support from HR specialists, then HR are not doing their job well too (Guest & King, 2001). Currie and Procter (2001) perceive that HR managers want to hold on to some of their operational responsibilities in order for the exercise to be reliable, and it is still debatable if HR would want to totally surrender their responsibility to the line, and if the line would want more or less of these responsibilities.

Higgins and McAllister (2004) suggest that it is essential for organisations to look into issues that facilitate and hamper LMs' involvement in HR activities, and create a balance which will be seen as a positive organizational culture which encourages and supports change. Organizational culture may be conceived as an important medium involving formal organisational policy and implementation in practice (Maxwell, 2004). It has a pervasive nature and also there are behavioural outcomes, in Scholz's (1987) description, it reflects and emphasises that corporate culture is the implicit, invisible, intrinsic, and the informal consciousness of the organization, which guides the behaviour of the individuals at work and which shapes itself in their behaviour. In a way, Cunningham and Hyman (1999) claim that organizational culture may be an adhesive for HR business partnerships because it may support acceptance and involvement of LM in HR activities. According to the above discussions, there are three distinct line managers components that influence HR implementation effectiveness. Thus, the proposed theoretical model could be seen in Figure 1.
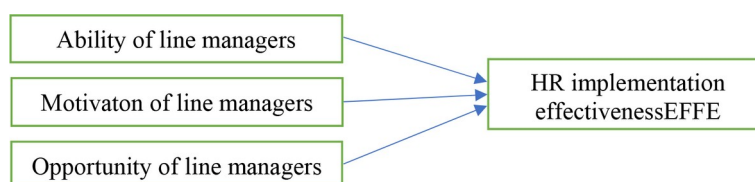

Figure 1.Theoretical framework

3. Methodology

This research adopted a case study approach on a University in West Midlands, UK. In the first instance, 35 respondents consisting of line managers and HR practitioners across the Business School were invited to participate in this research. However, due to time limitation, it is practically impossible to interview all the HR practitioners and the LMs at the University in the West Midlands. Therefore, the self-selection sampling method was used for selecting a sample for HR practitioners. In this technique the researcher allows a case usually an

individual to indicate their interest to participate in the research. This allowed the researcher to publicise the need for the cases by advertising through a suitable media or by asking respondents to take part. Then data was collected from those who respond (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2003).

General information regarding this research was sent out to participants and also theme questions regarding the interview and format was sent through the company's email system to all the HR practitioners. Thereafter, a request for volunteers were sent to HR practitioners and those who express interests would be invited to be interviewed within the context of LMs, purposive sampling was used. This type of sampling allows the researcher to select cases which he/she feels would effectively help answer the research questions or objectives. Such cases are very informative (Neuman, 2000). The homogeneous sampling technique was particularly used as it focuses on a subgroup where all the sample members are similar.

Due to the nature of researcher questions and objectives, not all LMs were in a position to offer relevant information because some of them have limited contact with the HR practitioners and also because the campuses were replicas of each other except for some few different and unique departments. The Business school was selected where LMs were approached individually through emails and direct contact. Basic information was provided to them and if they approved, individual dates were fixed for the interview. Ten LMs were selected. This research has a total of fifteen respondents which consists of five HR practitioners and ten LMs. All had prior knowledge of the research questions and objectives before the interview. The theme research questions put forward are as follows: Sample of questions in the appendix:

1. What are the roles of Line Managers (LMs)?

2. How are Line Managers (LMs) involved in HR activities?

3. What are the barriers to Line Managers (LMs) involvement in HR activities?

4. What are the perceptions of HR practitioners towards the involvement of Line Managers (LMs) in HR activities?

4. Findings

The findings will be discussed within four themes based on the research questions.

4.1. Theme 1: Line Managers Role

The roles of line managers vary very significantly in this study. Their roles begin from a team leader, coach, mentor, motivator, administrator, and communicator. The results indicate within this university setting, LMs have varied responsibilities, and play an important role in the university. This result is consistent with the findings of related studies carried out by other authors among universities (Bos, Thunnissen & Pardoen, 2020). This study also confirmed that LMs are generally over loaded with work which is a barrier to them being able to properly handle HR activities. As a result, it might cause them to abuse their powers by practicing discrimination, restricting access to development opportunities, to promotion and pay reward, intensifying work, and off-loading duties to junior staff (Renwick & MacNeil, 2002). This is very similar with results found in Armstrong (2006) and Remneland-Wikhamn et al. (2023).

4.2. Theme 2: Line Managers Involvement in HR Activities

The findings indicated the main role of the HR department is more a supportive role. Some departments have minimum contact with the HR department which is usually during recruitment process, while some other departments have more contact with the HR department, due to the general activities they are supposed to perform. All LM respondents feel comfortable being involved in HR activities. One LM described their relationship with HR practitioners as "a necessary evil" which can imply that even though LMs are not comfortable with the whole idea, they know that it is necessary. All LM receive mandatory training in recruitment and selection, equality and diversity, and also health and safety. Two LMs seek help from HR practitioners when it comes to contract issues because employees have different types of contracts which can be complicated and confusing. LMs are in charge of managing their teams or departments, when it comes to HR activities, they seek advice and support from HR practitioners. LMs do the field work. Normally, HR

involvement comes in when the situation is too complex for the LMs to handle (usually towards the final stages of most HR activities).

4.3. Theme 3: Barriers to Line Managers Involvement in HR Activities

The findings indicated many barriers to the involvement of line managers in HR activities. One of the most prominent results indicated by 6 LMs was that HR practitioners failed to inform of changes happening within HR policies and procedures. LMs had to keep abreast with the changes and development of such policies and procedures. This resulted in LMs experience in having poor guidance towards their decision making related to HR policies and procedures such as rewards and benefits, and specifically employment law. It was found that 4 LMs feel that there is a lack of ownership towards HR related decisions. Autonomy in decision making is found controlled by HR practitioners. There is an indication of bureaucracy which seems to be luring through the departments. Other barriers relate to HR practitioners not understanding the nature of the business which they are involved with. There is an indication of a balance of power is needed between HR practitioners and LMs in increasing communication and collaboration. On the last theme arising from this relate to validation and monitoring of HR processes.

4.4. Theme 4: HR Practitioners Perspectives Towards the Involvement of Line Managers in Human Resource Activities

There are many perspectives being posed to line managers being involved in HR activities. Four HR practitioners indicated that LMs are not well skilled to perform HR activities. Skilled within this context relate to lack of training on HR issues and skills. This is similar with findings of Katou et al. (2021) that LMs are not equipped when it deals with roles and responsibilities with HR activities. The results yielded that two LMs informed that training was conducted; however, it was limited to the context of academic and not business-related issues. A HR practitioner indicated that most LMs do not respond to change easily as they have been in the system far too long. Three HR practitioners indicated that LMs should be given autonomy to make decisions, however LMs are restricted within this context due to HR policies and procedures. This is aligning with Whitaker and Marchington (2003) as to their autonomist. Some other findings indicated that 3 HR practitioners found that there is a general lack of willingness to fulfilling HR roles. Renwick (2003) also indicated the same findings. There is a strong believe by 3 HR practitioners that LMs are willing to perform their HR roles for the better of their employees. The findings found that 5 HR practitioners said the barriers relate to lack of understanding of HR practices. There is a strong consensus of there is no specific human resource specialist role imposed on line managers. Similar findings were found by Thornhill and Saunders (1998), which might have some negative impact on strategic integration and, consequently, organizational commitment, flexibility, and quality. Price (2000) puts forward that the HR role is a mixture of both planning and reaction.

In relation to LMs involvement in HR activities, HR respondent 1 feel LMs do not know how involved they are, *"they might feel they don't do much HR but they do"*. This is because as said earlier, they lack understanding of HR activities. This is also reflected in responses from LMs because, similar findings were not found on the HR activities they are involved in. The activities all LM perform, that respondents were sure of, are recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, and disciplinary and grievances. Meanwhile they are involved in almost all the HR activities at the University as listed earlier. Maxwell and Watson (2006) also noticed that LMs are not sure of the HR activities they are involved in thus unaware on how involved they are. HR respondents 3 and 5 feel LMs are not aware of the consequences of their actions, that their actions or non-actions might compromise the university. This could also be related to Garavan et al. (1993) and Gilbert (2000) findings about LMs not really understanding HR policies and procedures, also it could be related to Marchington's (2001: pages 238-242) "unintended impacts" which as a result of the involvement of LMs which includes among other things the fact that they may be dubious about their role and may not be committed to it.

All HR respondents 1 to 10 say they have a causal relationship with their LMs except for the academic staff who always feel they know what they are doing and hardly ask for advice, until things go very wrong. HR respondent 1 to 10 said LMs play an important role and are needed to carry out HR activities.

The sample size was 35. Characteristics of participants are summarized in the table appendix.

Role	Number of participants	Interview mode
Head of HR,	10	Face to face
Corporate head offices	7	Face to face
Department heads	7	Face to face
Executive -HR	6	Face to face
Executives line	5	Face to face
Total	35	Face to face

Table 1. Participants profile for interview

Participants characteristics	n	%
Gender		
Male	19	54
Female	16	46

Table 2. Characteristics of participants

5. Conclusions

This qualitative single case study is an assessment of the barriers of LMs' involvement in HR activities, from the perspectives of HR practitioners and line managers, at the University in the West Midlands. The literature puts forward that LMs face barriers in their involvement in HR activities. These barriers stem from a whole range of factors which restricts their ability to effectively carry out HR activities. Factors such as:

- HRM not having a specific specialist role,

- LMs lacking skills and training needed to carry out HR activities,

- the unwillingness of LMs to attain training and to carry out such activities,

- LMs having too much work load which prevents them from effectively carrying out HR activities,

- HR specialist giving LMs poor advice,

- LMs not understanding HR policies and procedures, which prevents them from knowing or understand how involved they are in HR activities, and

- LMs being constrained by HR policies and procedures which prevents them from being fully in charge and making decisions they feel is necessary for some situations This study according to fifteen respondents also puts forward that LMs actually face barriers in their involvement in HR activities. Almost all the factors in the literature responsible for these barriers as mentioned above have been replicated in this study except for the fact that LMs are actually willing to carry out HR activities. They are also aware that they lack training and competence, and are willing to achieve it to help reduce the barriers faced.

Towards alleviating the barriers experienced by LMs in their involvement in HR activities, works by Eisenstat (1996); Hutchinson and Wood (1995); and Ulrich (1997, 1998, 2001) are proposing and supporting the move for a partnership between HR and the line, to encourage strategic employee development and a clear cut of duties between HR and the line. This will entail integrating HR activities into the work of LMs (Jackson & Schuler, 2000). A partnership might help in clarifying roles and also in enabling other support mechanisms to be put in place (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Higgins and McAllister (2004) suggest that it is essential for organisations to look into issues that facilitate and hamper LMs' involvement in HR activities and create a balance which will be seen as a positive organizational culture which encourages and supports change. In a way, Cunningham and Hyman (1999) claim that organizational culture may be an adhesive for HR business partnerships because it may support the acceptance and involvement of LM in HR activities This research recommends that organisations should see themselves as an entity which houses LMs and HR practitioners, who are a vital part of an organisation, and so organisations are responsible for their co-existence. LMs and HR practitioners have their different reserves about working together but the issue presently is, none of them is

dispensable so they have to work together. It is necessary for HR practitioners to consult LMs when formulating policies and procedures in order for there to be a balance between business needs and standard policies, and procedures. There is the need for this balance because policies and procedures are not to be over emphasized to the detriment of business needs. This will help to reduce the barriers LMs face.

Organisations should organise awareness sessions for HR practitioners to educate LMs on HR policies and procedures in order for them to understand the need for them, to also be aware of how involved they are in HR activities, and know their roles by the book. They should also be legislative updates so LMs will be in tune with what is happening in the HRM area.

There is the need for both parties to fully understand each other and the business objectives and strategy in order to prevent mistrust between them and also prevent negative impacts on business performance (Garavan et al., 1993; Gilbert, 2000).

It is not enough for HR practitioners to say LMs are not well skilled and not well trained to do the HR activities, something has to be done. Compulsory and initial LM training should be given to LMs in order to help them perform their roles properly and prevent barriers to their involvement in HR activities. If well trained LMs are capable of carrying out HR activities. This research has shown that LMs are willing and also that HR policies and practices are necessary for organisational efficiency, therefore it is important that LMs attain this training for the organisation to achieve this efficiency through HR policies and procedures.

Also, LMs should be aware that the HR function is moving towards a more specialist role, which will make LMs more independent, so they is the need for them to individually get the training required if organisations are not offering any.

This research recommends for further studies that the barriers of LMs involvement in HR activities be studied from the perspective of the organisation. It is needed so that there would be no bias either coming from LMs or HR practitioners or because both parties come should collaborate for the ultimate aim of organisational efficiency. There is the need to see it from the perspective of the organisation.

Further research could approach on how LMs roles compliment HRM. This will explore areas of harmony and collaboration between LMs and HR practitioners. Therefore, will put LMs in the limelight and enhance their importance. This is important because LMs always feel they play 'second fiddle' to HR practitioners. In addition, research could be done on LMs ability to carry out HR activities. Additionally, direct supervisor also plays a crucial role during qualitative study. Therefore, a recommendation for further research is to focus on additional indicators that may affect HR activities and use mixed method approach and data from various organizational actors such as senior management and line managers. To determine whether there are forces at play in the university, more research may be conducted in future. Future research may tackle this issue and test the study's findings to see if they apply to organizations not just in UK but also in other countries.

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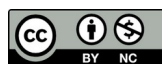Armstrong, M. (2006). *A handbook of human resource management practice* (10th ed.). London: Kogan.

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