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The HR people and their role in the contemporary business market

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Abstract

Human resource management professionals and their personnel are responsible towards the organization they serve; manage employee performance, motivate, and reward people, recruit and select the ideal candidates, train, develop as well as help people change attitudes in situations of organizational change and so on. For all these to be achieved the human resource personnel need to have the support of top management as well as the power to make decisions and take initiatives. This study's primary objective was to investigate the real role of the professionals within the human resource management department and to what extent they have power and are involved in decision-making for their employees. For this reason, a large, growing private organization from the financial sector was chosen to be investigated. A qualitative case study was performed, and an unstructured questionnaire was used to obtain in-depth qualitative data. The sample consisted of two participants. Findings showed that the specific HRM department is not allowed to make any decisions nor take initiatives for any matters regarding its employees; only top management is responsible for such changes. The researcher determined that the human resource management department and its personnel did not receive the value and respect it should and nowadays with all the challenges faced in the era of Industry 5.0 it is time to change the scope, mentality and perception towards the roles and jobs of the human resource profession and its people.

Keywords: Human resource management, sustainability, working environment/culture

1. Introduction

Human Resource Management (HRM) has gained global recognition from organizations, people and associations for its great value and outcomes. Millions of researches throughout the world, have been performed for many years now on HRM and its connectivity to job satisfaction, performance, sustainability, gaining competitive advantage, the contemporary challenges it is facing and so on. Results of the investigations have shown that there is a positive relationship between HRM and sustainability, profitability, work satisfaction, performance, innovation, development, and a positive organizational working environment. Additionally, the current model of the multi-role of the human resource (HR) personnel working in national, multinational, or international organizations could be well characterized as career planners, teachers, unofficial lawyers, psychologists, event planners, coordinators, mentors, and detectives. With all these roles at a job, one could tell that the HRM itself and the HR people are protagonists in the business world and play a critical role in decision-making in their organizations.

Nevertheless, diachronically, the HR department is not considered one of the main departments in the organizations and even if the management "confesses" that the work of the HRM is as just as important and valued, their real actions don't represent this approach and perspective (Qehaja and Kullovc, 2015) ^[17]. Even in decision-making regarding corporate social responsibility activities (non-priority activities), the HRM department and its personnel do not play a key role in the organization nor hold a key position in decision-making; generally, the board executives, marketing department, the public relations and the legal department have a strong say and make the relevant managerial decisions for execution (Proenqa, 2022) ^[16]. Scientists analyzed the reasons for HRM's failure to involve in an organization's sustainability and concluded that the HR people ignore their "real role" in the organization and consequently they fail to play a strategic and critical role in their organizations (Proenqa, 2022) ^[16].

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The objective of this study is to explore a variety of different perspectives and researches with a focus on the actual role of the HRM personnel and their relationship with the management within the organization in this contemporary business market.

Literature Review

Sustainability, HRM and Management

Over the past thirty years, HRM people have writhed to corroborate their position in the organization and sought to become successful by directing their time and efforts on employee performance to increase the organization's profitability (Proenqa, 2022) ^[16]. Nevertheless, such "behavior" on behalf of the HRM personnel disclosed other important factors, activities and targets that were overlooked; such as the development of sustainability and balancing the interests (psychological and physical health and social well-being) of all the parties within the organization (Proenqa, 2022) ^[16]. Good quality of work-life balance and well-being are the first steps of sustainability (internal social concern), and are the keys to mobilizing the energy of people, building positive organizational contexts, and coping with innovations as well as challenges (Proenqa, 2022) ^[16]. Nonetheless, contrary to what has been emphasized in the literature, the job of HR professionals seems to be disengaged from the decision-making processes, even if they are requested to support colleagues/employees in facing decisions of internal transfers or even job changes that are taken by the top management. The HR roles are still mostly executional, with no further space to develop top-down or bottom-up awareness for promotional processes or decision-making power (D'Angelo, Gazzaroli, Corvino, & Gozzoli, 2022) ^[8]. Gutterman (2020) ^[13] noted that HRM and sustainability are in an early stage of development, thus, there is a long way to go to integrate and create a sustainable HRM environment in business. At the moment, employees in their organizations "suffer" from work-related stress, burnout, increased pressure of not having enough time to finish jobs and to perform well, self-exploitation behaviors, work-dependent psychosomatic reactions, lack of trust, imbalance in work and private life and so on (Gutterman, 2020) ^[13]. The idea of creating sustainable HRM is to transform mentality, thinking and concepts at the managerial level as well as in the field of HRM in order to diminish the negative effects of all the above-mentioned issues employees are suffering in their working environment (Gutterman, 2020) ^[13]. For this transformation, HR professionals are called to involve greatly and play quite a few roles such as, that of change facilitator, collaborator, innovator, and strategic partner.

Aslam *et al.* (2023) ^[3] signified that HRM practices direct the employees to achieve the business objectives and emphasized the role of the HR personnel in creating sustainable competitive advantage. The scientists also mentioned that HRM can increase both employee and financial performance, reduce costs, improve efficiency and enhance brand reputation (Aslam *et al.*, 2023) ^[3]. There is a beneficial relationship between HRM practices and the overall performance of the organization, and this is well-recognized theoretically. Also, it is well known that when employees perceive that they are respected, feel valued and supported are more likely to become motivated and highly engaged in their job. However, the research of Aslam *et al.*

(2023) ^[3] showed that HRM practices have a configurational impact (and not additive) in the organization, meaning that the effectiveness of the HRM depends on the broader organizational context, business strategy, as well as other practices.

Günter K. S., Chris J. B., David G. C., & Aida H. (2020) ^[12] proposed that sustainable HRM is well-defined as adopting such HRM strategies and practices that enable the organization's achievements profitability, and social and ecological goals, to have a positive impact on both internally and externally for a long-term period. The HRM personnel actually play a critical role in addressing these challenges and delivering corporate sustainable initiatives. Concomitantly, however, it appears that the HRM departments and their personnel are not currently accepted by management as partners in influencing corporate sustainability strategies, nor as a HRM a key implementer in corporation sustainability initiatives and programs (Günter *et al.*, 2020) ^[12]. The Scientists concluded that much of this result is the failure of top management to empower the HRM functions and to allow HRM personnel to develop and play a key role in corporate sustainability fact which has been widely documented and lamented for years (Günter *et al.*, 2020) ^[12].

Qehaja and Kutlovci (2015) ^[17] performed a research study on the role of human resources (HR) in organizations (in the private sector) and the perception of managers and executives on providing a competitive advantage in the market. Findings showed that HR is needed in the organizations and is characterized as valuable (57.14%) but, at the same time, a high percentage of 72.86% of the respondents answered that the HR of the organizations are substitutable and 42.86% of the participants answered that HR and their work are very easy to imitate (Qehaja & Kutlovci, 2015) ^[17]. The researchers resulted that the directors and managers don't consider their HR as a source of competitive advantage in their organization and that through them, they don't create a culture that cannot be copied; instead, due to that perception, these organizations only have competitive parity and are unable to build competitive advantage in terms of their HRM to distinguish in the broader market (Qehaja & Kutlovci, 2015) ^[17]. Lastly, this research study proved that the management from all the examined organizations of the country rarely proceed with training activities for their HR and the majority of the HRM departments mainly deal with administrative work (Qehaja & Kutlovci, 2015) ^[17].

Barisic, Klopotan and Miloloza (2019) ^[4] stated that organizations see HRM within the organization as an approach comprising specific and supporting functions only; that HRM is the department which delivers a wide range of activities and services such as recruitment and selection, appraisals, promotions, and remuneration. The scientists also added that it is expected by the HR personnel to deliver training and development services to all HR of the organization, increase employee performance and commitment, as well as motivation (Baricic *et al.*, 2019). HRM activities and processes traditionally occur according to the requirements of the management, however, a modern approach speaks about line managers and external HR experts to assist HRM personnel to implement HR policies and supervise employees to achieve the organization's objectives (Baricic *et al.*, 2019).

In another study, it was found that the main objective of HRM in organizations is to contribute to their economic objectives; 90% of the companies answered that HRM personnel's main job is to promote individuals' responsibilities with a focus on organizational profitability (Gutterman, 2020) ^[13]. It is explained that HRM professionals are expected to administer programs for their employees; to train, to direct them to carry out their roles and responsibilities as well as to enhance their long-term physical and socioeconomic well-being (Gutterman, 2020) ^[13]. Nonetheless, in the same study, the author argued that employees often seem to be seen as "a tool manipulated by HRM" for achieving the purposes of the management, thus, ignoring their role in the company, that they should enhance sustainability in employees' lives (Gutterman, 2020) ^[13]. Opong (2017) ^[15] in his study explained that there are two function-level approaches in the organization, and this determines the way employees are perceived and managed; the first model is about seeing employees as cost for the organization, and the second model is about seeing employees as a competitive advantage. The author continues by saying that accordingly to which model the HR professionals are using, they align their strategic plans for the people (Opong, 2017) ^[15]. The results of the research showed that the HR activities (isolated) have a positive impact on the total organizational performance, however, these functions cover only a part of the total operations of the business therefore, the HR functions should be regarded as a semantic integral portion of the organization's strategic business units and be perceived as an efficient business partner (Opong, 2017) ^[15]. How HR policies and practices are brought from design to materialization? How are they enacted? Boada-Cuerva, Trullen and Valverde (2018) ^[5] emphasized that top management is recognizable as the main responsible party in the organization for making strategic decisions and leading and managing people in significant issues such as organizational structure, instigating change, collective bargaining etc. Additionally, top management has a critical role and is involved in HRM practices and activities accordingly to their own views and perceptions of the HRM and the HR professionals (Boada-Cuerva *et al.*, 2018) ^[5]. The perception that HR departments play an auxiliary role in the organizations as well as rating HRM "poorly" drive the HR professionals to have a less strategic role in the business. Concomitantly, notwithstanding the relevance that the top management holds for the HR practices and policies shows that its support may not be sufficient for ensuring the successful adoption and implementation of the HR practices/policies if senior managers and supervisors do not align with top management's messages (Boada-Cuerva *et al.*, 2018) ^[5]. Last but not least, the functionality of HRM relates to who is responsible and who takes initiative for managing people in the organization; will there be a devoted HRM department and with what decision-making power (Boada-Cuerva *et al.*, 2018)? ^[5].

Megatrends and Global Challenges in Industry 5.0

Industry 5.0 led to the introduction of various new technologies, specifically, interconnecting human intelligence with the precision and efficiency of technologies, robots, and machines using AI in industrial production (Ganer, Kediya, Suchak, Dey & Band, 2022) ^[11]. Furthermore, Industry 5.0 is here to help in overcoming the

hamstrings of Industry 4.0. Industry 4.0 has introduced and shown tremendous growth in many technologies, such as better supply chain management, manufacturing process automation, Artificial Intelligence, development of Cyber-Physical Systems, smart products, cloud services etc. (Khan, Haleem, & Javaid, 2023) ^[14]. As these new-coming technologies and machines are entering the markets and specifically the businesses it is inevitable that they will collaborate with the human resources in the organizations thus bringing to the surface even more challenges for the HRM and its professionals (Ganer *et al.*, 2022) ^[11]. The scientists detected various areas in business that are and will be challenged by these new global industrial trends, such as people's performance, emotional intelligence, cross-disciplinary workforce, and work-process automation (Ganer *et al.*, 2022) ^[11].

Likewise, it is expected that due to advanced digitalization and automation, the employees, as well as the physical labor, will be replaced, therefore, less physical labor will be requested, specifically in some positions (Xiang *et al.*, 2023) ^[18]. A projection made by the McKinsey Global Institute presented results stating that by the year 2030, approximately 3-14% of workers will be pushed to look for new jobs worldwide due to the advances in automation and digitalization in technologies (Xiang *et al.*, 2023) ^[18]. It is obvious that all these new trends and challenges Industry 5.0 brings are also forcing the HRM (face-to-face HR duties) to transform to electronic HRM (De Alwis, Andrić & Sostar, 2022) ^[9]. Businesses, management and HRM personnel, must shift in the way they create, organize, manage, and operate in their environment as well as they must restate their strategies and practices to increase efficiency and effectiveness, change employees' attitudes, productivity and adapt to the new era of competition (De Alwis *et al.*, 2022) ^[9].

The financial industry is currently facing drastic changes in the market environment. The HR personnel are confronted with economic, social, and environmental issues that they need to negotiate and balance them accordingly, to align employees with the management and organizational demands (D' Angelo, *et al.* 2022) ^[8]. Finally, another big challenge presented globally is gender inequality. According to Xiang *et al.*, (2023) ^[18] 865 million women may be added to the workforce, thus, providing further development to the national and international economy. Issues on global mobility, demographic changes, migration status, gender, culture, age, and ethnicity are some of the detected challenging factors of inequality (Xiang *et al.* 2023) ^[18].

Organizational Culture

The culture in an organization is defined as the systems, beliefs, values and norms developed in the working environment, used to serve as the guidelines of the behaviour for all employees at all levels; used to overcome internal/external problems, do work, understand, think and feel about related situations and become values and rules in the organization to promote performance and motivation (Arif, Zainudin, & Hamid K. 2019) ^[2]. Diana, Suorutabti, Ekowati, and Ertanto, (2021) ^[10] added that the organizational culture is a method and a shared perception used by the organization's members to differentiate their organization from the competition. Also, culture can be described as a set of shared meanings that make it possible for the members of an organization to interpret and act upon

their environment (Zhang, Zeng, Liang, Xue, & Cao, 2023)^[19]. Factors such as psychological safety, collectivism, and power distance serve as antecedents to the management/social context as well as the performance management context having an imperative impact on the innovation performance, adding value to the customers, developing and differentiating in the market (Zhang, *et al.*, 2023)^[19].

Alotaibi and Campbell (2022)^[1] performed a quantitative research study with a sample including top management, seniors, and lower-level employees; revealed that good organizational culture promotes an environment that favors all employees when equally allocating duties, rewards, designing a fair system for promotions and encourage equal employment opportunities. Nonetheless, research presented results that the people and society maintain some links from the past (holding old traditions) while dealing with current and future challenges. Overall, the results show that managers do not trust that their employees can perform on their own, their job, therefore they prefer the top management to initiate the decision-making process in the organization (Alotaibi & Campbell, 2022)^[1]. Management's behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions must change to support and align with cultural changes in the organizations due to external or internal forces (Alotaibi & Campbell, 2022)^[1]. By hiring qualified agents and technically trained employees, managers will be able to see an increase in teamwork, individual and team decision-making, innovation, risk-taking, and responsibility sharing, leading to increased productivity and organizational success (Alotaibi & Campbell, 2022)^[1].

Research Methodology

For this study, its author decided to proceed with qualitative research with the aim to generate deep insights concerning the topic of study which is about how top management sees the HRM in the business? Is the HRM perceived as a valuable asset for the top management? Are the HR personnel allowed to take initiatives? Do they have the power to make decisions for the employees? Can the HR people involve and resolve problems and conflicts between employees or between managers and employees? The collection of data and information were collected mainly from a past HR manager (Participant A) of a large (successful, well-known organization in the market) growing organization in the financial industry, in Cyprus. Additional information was taken from a senior officer (Participant B) (working with this same manager at the same period) in the same department. Therefore, the author of this study decided to proceed with an instrumental case study research to investigate in-depth the theme and provide inside based on the extensive data collection (Creswell, 2008)^[7].

An unstructured interview with the past HR manager took place at her house where she felt more comfortable to open up and speak about her own experiences. The interview took about three hours, and no recording was used as the participant did not feel very comfortable with that idea, therefore, only handwritten notes were taken. Some additional information was also collected from a colleague (past senior officer) of the HRM department manager at a different time, a week after that main interview and with this lady, the unstructured interviewing just took one hour and a half; both interviews (from HR manager and senior officer)

took place two months after the HR manager resigned from the organization. The scope of the unstructured interviewing was to generate an intensive and detailed examination of the case studied (Clark, Foster, Sloan, & Bryman, 2016)^[6].

The interpretation of the data collected, started immediately after each interview ended, in order to make sure that all information would be analyzed and written down without missing/losing any important information. At this stage, the author had to read several times the data, cycle back and forth between the data to transcribe and then make an analysis of it to fill in all information. The whole process followed the correct measures of research, and all data will be kept safely locked in a drawer for confidentiality purposes.

Findings

A total of two respondents participated in this research study, two women; one who held the position of HR manager (Participant A) and the second participant was a senior officer (Participant B) in the same company. The interview was performed two months after Participant A left the company (she quit), Participant B had remained in that company for a bit longer (today, the second participant is also working elsewhere, she also quit, four months after her manager). The age of the two participants is 41 and 33 years old, respectively (Participants A and B). Today, they both work in different international organizations and different sectors anymore. The interview focused to collect in-depth data from the two participants' personal experiences and interactions with employees and top management from their previous job only. This is because their current jobs are quite new for them and is not feasible to give reliable and valid answers to the questions said since they are still learning their current working environment and organizational culture.

The HR department usually plays an important role in the organization, and more precisely, in employee engagement, satisfaction, development, on the organizations' profitability, and so on. However, for the financial institution under investigation, the responses showed that the HR department is "invisible" to the top management. The top management believes that they are the only ones who are competent to make all decisions concerning the employees. In this organization, there was the perception that the role of the HR personnel is rather executional and to perform only administrative jobs, with no permission for decision-making. HR personnel's main duties in this financial organization involve interviews for recruiting new people in the presence of the management and dealing with annual holidays, sick leaves, and payroll. Both participants expressed that they were unhappy at their positions, felt they were not respected by the management, and perceived that management didn't trust them. Participant A was continuously feeling that she was underestimated and performed minor duties in the business.

In certain situations where employees addressed problems to the HR personnel with the first to demand an immediate solution and/or an answer, the HR personnel were found in a difficult situation to reply and were unable to take the initiative to solve the problems; even if they could and the solution was clear and easy. Participant A tried, unsuccessfully, on many occasions to convince the management that as a manager of the HRM department, she should be allowed to take control and make decisions about

the different problems concerning the employees; especially the problems she should, and she knew very well how to handle from her behalf. Participant A recalled that there were times she felt that nobody listened to her and didn't bother with the issues she raised. Nonetheless, there were quite a few times in her career in that organization where she took the initiative secretly and discretely (without informing the management), to help, act as an unofficial lawyer, mentor, and offer emotional and psychological support to employees and/or give advice. Participant A declared with a smile on her face, she felt satisfaction, and happiness and concomitantly fear, of management finding out about her actions, even if those were for good purposes. Participant B noted that there was an incident where it should be handled with diplomacy due to touching sensitive employee issues. Unfortunately, this didn't happen; the top management had to be informed since this was the procedure and talked with the employee to "solve" the problem in a non-empathizing behavior. The employee felt devastated and confessed to Participant B (this participant was the responsible officer who handled the case and passed the case to the management). Participant B recalled she felt humiliated and angry at that time.

Both participants, A and B, explained and agreed that in no case there were taken any decisions for the advantage or benefit of the employees. For example, even in internal transfers, the decisions were made by the top management.; usually management forbids internal transfers, but there were a few incidences where they proceeded, always driven to benefit the business but never to benefit the employee. Also, after the economic crisis in the country, in 2013, the company benefited with huge profitability and growth and even after that growth, the employees were not rewarded, nor given any motivation to keep up their hard work.

Participant A felt like she was always ignored and fought for her right to work and serve her department and colleagues as she perceived best; she was unable to execute her job as she should and take initiative. Employees were calling her for some help or advice and she was not in the position to do that. Participant A confessed that in many times circumstances she came into a difficult situation with the employees because they expected her to help them, and she was unable to do this. Employees perceived that she was not capable enough to help them nor to understand their position; she accepted twice a visit from employees "advising" her to act properly and represent her role for the sake of good order in the organization. Participant B's responses also were in line with Participant A's and gave further examples showing that the decision-making was in all cases made by the top management, removing the right of the HR personnel to make any decisions or take any initiatives for the good of the employees; there is no autonomy in the HRM department in the specific organization.

Discussion

Analyzing the findings of the interviews the author can easily declare that HR personnel and mostly the HR manager of that department were in a disadvantageous position. Usually, managers of any department have the right, power and responsibility of their employees. However, in this case under study, Participant A could not act and perform responsibly her role. It is clear that, Participant A even holding a managerial position, had no

power at all to make decisions nor to take initiative both for the people in her department, the HR officers, and the employees in general in all other departments of the organization. Taking into consideration Oppong's (2017)^[15] research one can tell that the management of the organization under investigation sees the employees as a cost (the first approach mentioned) and all activities and decisions are made for the good of the "organization". It is supposed that by keeping employees motivated and happy their performance will level up and increase profitability; therefore, hypothetically organizations must be people-oriented, and act respectfully towards their employees.

The findings of Quhaja and Kutlovci (2015) of 72.86% of the respondents who answered that the HR of the organizations are substitutable and 42.86% of the participants who answered that HR and their work are very easy to imitate shows that the job of the HR personnel is perceived by others as easy, and a position not valued nor respected enough. Also, the comment that the job is easy to imitate declares that it is seen as a job that anyone could do maybe with or without knowledge or specialization in HRM. Aslam *et al.* (2013)^[3] explained that HRM can increase employee and financial performance, enhance brand reputation, reduce costs and so on; all these different themes which are important for organizational growth and sustainability cannot be implemented by any kind of person who has no idea of how to manage correctly the human resources of the organization he/she works and without having emotional intelligence, sympathize, respect and value for the people themselves and their work.

There are cases where the top management doesn't allow HRM professionals to work and represent their role as they should and there are cases where HR people due to different circumstances overlook important activities they should perform and forget to focus on the quality of work-life balance, employee well-being and sustainability (Proenqa, 2022)^[16] thus, even if they have the authority from top management to act autonomously, make decisions and take initiatives to benefit people and organization, they end up failing. What goes wrong? D' Angelo *et al.* (2022)^[8] added that HRM is still at the level where they execute as instructed by management, are disengaged from decision making and one can tell that HRM activities do not align with their scope and roles and this perfectly matches with the situation in the organization investigated.

Nevertheless, the various trends and challenges that Industry 5.0 is bringing to the surface; such as new technologies, AI and machines, it is inevitable to bring huge changes in the business environment thus "aggressively" forcing top management and HRM professionals to collaborate and find solutions how to manage the human resources of their organizations. It seems that these new challenges and trends will create big gaps and threats between organizations and their employees if the employees are not given the right training and development opportunities, are not supported practically and emotionally, motivated and rewarded. Also, the fact that jobs will eventually "disappear" or change due to digitalization, new technologies and robots, will increase stress in people, instability, psychological insecurity and bring further barriers to change.

The organizational culture plays a tremendous role in the everyday life within the organization, its operations, employee well-being, sustainability and how they (top management and personnel) react and adapt to changes.

Alotaibi and Campbell (2022) [1] concluded that management doesn't trust their employees to perform their job well and they have a traditional culture in their organization where all decisions are made by management; thus, showing people are not trusted, cannot take responsibility or initiative at their work, and are underestimated for their capabilities, intelligence and knowledge. Such practices and situations may drive businesses into declination. Organizational culture must change and align with the demands of the market and consider the people as it is still the most valuable resource in organizations.

Limitations and Recommendations

The present research case study focused on receiving qualitative data from two participants of a specific growing private organization, in the financial industry. The fact that the investigations took place with a focus on one organization, from a specific industry may cause a few limitations. It is suggested that further qualitative research is performed on this topic and issues, in other medium or large-sized privately owned organizations either from the same industry and/or from other industries to acquire more valuable and in-depth data in the developed countries. Also, it is recommended to make further studies in the public sector to get more insight into the scope, mentality, and perceptions of governmental management.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research study focused on the HRM professionals and how much power they have, if any, to take initiative and make decisions concerning the employees; either to resolve conflicts/help them with personal issues or about their performance, motivation, rewards, training, development and so on. The top management seems not to trust enough the HRM professionals nor give them the autonomy to do or act as they should do so. The role of HRM professionals in their everyday life is multilateral and very important for organizational sustainability. The current mentality and perception that anyone can imitate the job of the HRM department or that the job is substitutional are false and this has been proved many times through many kinds of researches; the advantages and benefits an organization can obtain from the efficient and effective running of HRM. HRM personnel must be allowed to do their job and perform as they should accordingly. Organizational culture must promote a healthy working environment to favor, reward and encourage all employees to act professionally, develop and be responsible for their duties.

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