

Introduction

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OVERVIEW

This chapter provides an introduction and overview of the contents of the book. It introduces the reader to some underlying themes that define what the authors mean by ‘critical issues’ and explains how a critical approach applies to the study of human resource management (HRM). It suggests how the reader can use prior knowledge and understandings gained from previous studies in the functions of HRM and consider what additional considerations need to be taken into consideration when confronted with more acute circumstances – a situation that human resource (HR) managers could reasonably be expected to face in real-world situations. The chapter finishes by mapping the structure of the book and providing a rationale to the topics that will be encountered throughout the remainder of the book.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Welcome to *Critical Issues in Human Resource Management*. This edited textbook has been written specifically to cover the subject area of HRM from a critical point of view. The reader in mind for this book is a final-year undergraduate studying HRM as a specialist subject, or perhaps a postgraduate HRM student who is looking for supplementary text to support his or her core reading. In either case the reader will be assumed to have already studied some HRM and will know some of the topics. The aim, within the book, is to problematise otherwise familiar topics and to confront higher-level problems that could face HR professionals. By engaging with this text, it should be possible for the reader to integrate his or her prior understanding of some key operational aspects of HRM with the wider institutional and social contexts in which they occur (at the level of the firm, industry sector, nation and international) by reference to wider social science and business theories. The book concentrates predominantly on HR practice in the UK, but consciously views the UK experiences within (a) the

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convergence pressures of globalisation and (b) the counter tendencies of cross-national divergence.

SCOPE OF THE BOOK

The book covers topics considered emerging and important within the particular subjects addressed in each chapter. It is not within the scope of this book to repeat core theories in managing HR, although some background to the concepts explored is provided in each chapter to refresh the reader's memory of such theories surrounding the particular topic. Rather, the book aims to present significant new developments in the field, which are and will remain at the forefront of managing HR in the coming years.

For example, Part 1 of the book deals with the influences on and shapers of HR practice and strategy. A core HRM textbook targeted at levels 1 and 2 undergraduate students would perhaps focus on a more general discussion, introducing theories of organisational, business and corporate strategies and how these link to HR strategies. What the current book is exploring, though, is the range of issues considered emerging and important for organisations. Topics such as corporate governance, corporate social responsibility and financialisation, for example, could be seen as being more influential on mainstream HR policy in the future as the dominant management paradigms leading up to the 2008 financial crisis are successively reflected upon (for example, see Currie et al 2010). Similarly, while globalisation, technology, politics and demography are frequently cited in mainstream HR textbooks as important background factors influencing the way that HR policy-makers need to plan, it is less often described and explained what these trends are.

The 'critical approach' is slightly different in Part 2 of the book. Here, it moves away from exploring basic concepts in the core HRM activities that present a definitive guide to managing HR processes, to a critical approach of emerging issues in these areas.

Here, the particular approach taken on each topic is personal to each author and reflects the contributors' diverse adopted positionings of HRM, which are multidisciplinary in nature. However, in all cases, there is reason to believe that the issue under discussion will remain relevant and not a passing fad: it is difficult to see the demise of *offshoring* as a most contentious aspect of resourcing policy, or that the issue of defining *performance* within *performance management* will suddenly reach consensus and be unworthy of further discussion.

Part 3 of the book completes this critical approach to exploring current HR issues by providing a sector-by-sector analysis. The intent of this section is to demonstrate to the reader that there is no 'one best way' to manage HR. Rather, the particularities of sectors need to be taken into consideration before implementing HR strategies. This part, therefore, explores the four main sectors present in the UK economy (manufacturing, private services, public services and

not-for-profit sector) and discusses in particular how HR is managed in each of these sectors.

WHAT IS MEANT BY 'CRITICAL'?

The term 'critical' requires some explanation. Critical could be taken to mean a number of things in the broad social science disciplines that are embedded within the discourse of contemporary HRM. In contrast, 'criticality' takes on a looser, broadly analytical meaning when used in a learning context. Criticality also implies an approach to the selection of evidence used to demonstrate (or refute) assumptions in general practice. These will now be considered in turn.

CRITICAL THEORY, CRITICAL REALISM, CRITIQUE

One definition of critical would be that associated with the philosophical notion of *critique* more generally – applied as a challenge to assuming orthodox views on a subject. This definition stretches from the use applied by Kant, through to Marx and later applied to a more specific definition of 'critical theory' associated with the Frankfurt School (Habermas 1984). More recently approaches associated with the term 'critical' have varied from postmodernism to the now apparent turn away from postmodernism towards critical realism (Bhaskar 1986). Within the broad academic areas that are relevant to the study of HRM, a number of these critical approaches have been prominent over the years: from the early 1980s, a whole new area opened up under the broad umbrella of 'the labour process debate'. Initially influenced by Braverman's (1974) contention that modern work in capitalist society is subject to a continuous process of degradation through the essential nature of the managerial imperative, this debate widened with a significant alternative narrative influenced by Foucault, turning to examine the fundamental importance of employee subjectivity and managerial *discourses* – in precedence over *processes* – as being of primary importance (Knights and Willmott 1989). Most recently there has been a further turn towards *critical realism* as both a rejection of Foucaultian relativism and an attempt to link the analysis of workplace relationships back to the political economy of the forces determining managerial behaviour (Fleetwood and Ackroyd 2004; Thompson and Vincent 2010).

There are, therefore, a number of definitions and approaches associated with the notion of 'critical' when considering how we think about studying HRM – and just from the overview above, it can be seen that adopting one particular approach would be putting itself in contestation of another approach. The editors have their own views and preferences on these issues, but this was not a consideration when inviting contributors for the large range of topics contained in this book. In all cases, chapters are presented, to a greater or lesser degree, in such a way that is intended to challenge an assumption about orthodox views of HR practice, but not by adherence to any one specific philosophical view.

CRITICALITY AS A PEDAGOGIC PROCESS

At a more pragmatic level, criticality is used to define the level of engagement that the *reader* is expected to make. It is intended that the reader will aspire to be 'thinking critically' and therefore it is anticipated that the reader will read in a critical way (Wallace and Wray 2006).

It is expected that the reader has some prior exposure to the study of HRM: that they may have studied the basic functions and what processes are involved in HRM and that they know the kinds of activities that an HR manager may be responsible for and may do on a day-to-day basis.

The 'critical' aspect of the content of the chapters in this book is that of taking the reader beyond the operational aspects of HR. This is not the same as 'being strategic' – though there is a link. Being strategic requires a consideration of 'the big picture'. Thinking critically sometimes requires thinking about the bigger picture – what larger forces are at work when considering an operational decision about outsourcing, absenteeism, pay awards, and so on – but also may involve a consideration of the micro effects of strategic decisions – the reason that workers may react differently to a *change management* initiative because of differing workforce composition, workplace dynamics, demographic factors or other characteristics.

CRITICAL CASE SCENARIOS

A special feature of this edited textbook is 'HRM in the media', a section in each chapter that presents a relatively contemporary HR news story that has been communicated in the news media. The chapter structure aspires, in a broad sense, to a problem-based learning approach (Boud and Feletti 1991). Each news story relates directly to the topic of the chapter. News stories were selected based on the scope for discussion they present. Questions for discussion follow these news stories, which are then revisited at the end of the chapter in the 'HRM in the media: critical reflections' section. Readers need to remember that it is not the purpose of this textbook to prescribe definitive answers regarding the particular critical HR issues raised. Instead, the purpose is to present current debates in HR and illustrate the complexities of these contemporary HR policies and practices and to encourage the reader to look deeper into the issue to uncover further evidence in order to attempt to understand the reasons for the apparent differences.

The use of this 'HRM in the media' device has two components and two important caveats. The first component is, by the reasoning that a story relating to the chapter subject has appeared in the news media, that there must be something within the chosen topic to make it contentious in some way: stories tend not to appear 'on the news' if they are routine and unproblematic. There is, then, the potential for the topic under discussion, for outcomes of HR policy, to sometimes not go according to prescribed best practice. Thinking critically should allow the reader to consider the reasons for this. The second component

is the realisation that, by virtue of the fact that such linked stories are available, further stories are also almost certainly available. A carefully written case study by a tutor to draw readers' attention to a topic is a good pedagogic device, but potentially better still is the existence of real-life events that readers can research themselves. Modern electronic searching facilities make this task relatively easy, in contrast to the painstaking archive research required for such a task in the past. Indeed, being able to make such a search should be considered an important research and study skill in its own right, provided appropriate caution is taken by understanding the limitations of the technology involved (Devine and Egger-Sider 2009).

It is taken as given (notwithstanding the induction/deduction dilemma) that being familiar with *theory* is essential to a full understanding of an event; but that also in being able to apply an abstract theory to explain (or at least to gain more considered insight into) a real-life situation is equally important to being fully able to grasp what a theory means *in practice*. Given the ease with which electronic searches are possible, students of HRM using this book should be able to embed their understanding of theory by reflecting upon the reported examples and searching more for themselves.

The first caveat to the above is to acknowledge the limitations of trusting the news media as an indication of 'facts'. For the first part – and as an important corrective to the point made above – an event being reported in the media, while indicating that what may be assumed to be unproblematic could be demonstrated not always to be so, it also needs to be remembered that the other reason why such an event is being reported is that it is not necessarily 'normal'. A second important caveat is that news media sources should not be assumed to be objective conduits of 'the truth'. It has long been established that news outlets distort events around their own ideological (and commercial) interests (Eldridge 1993). Even those sources bound by the principle of 'due impartiality' – public service broadcasting organisations such as the BBC – are still subject to 'agenda-setting' by the more overtly biased source – particularly the tabloid press. This tendency was linked explicitly to the reporting of industrial relations, for example, in the first of the well-known Glasgow University Media Group's 'Bad News' series (1976). Some HR-related stories make for obviously 'juicy' news stories: strikes, moral panic over 'compensation culture', or the offshoring of British call-centre jobs. But does the story reflect the background reality? Strikes are the product of discontent about a previous – and unreported – situation; headline stories about large payoffs of unfairly treated employees do not convey the reality from the statistics showing that the vast majority of unfair dismissal claims put through the employment tribunal service in the UK are unsuccessful and those that are successful tend to pay modest levels of compensation (see www.employmenttribunals.gov.uk); and in addition to offshored call-centre work, it is less well known that during the 2000s, more UK jobs were created in this industry than were exported from it.

So using media sources requires critical thinking and a degree of 'filtering' in order to properly judge how it may link to the topic in question. The overall approach offered would be:

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- Be aware of the subject material taken by formal study.
- Be vigilant and observe media stories that appear relevant to study topics.
- Are there differences between formal theory and apparent practice observed via the media?
- Be critical of the theory: does the apparent difference indicate that theory is inadequate in its present form?
- Examine the back story: what lies behind the reported story? To what extent is the story informed by 'moral panic'?
- Dig deeper. What other sources can be found on this story? What similar stories on this topic are there?
- Integrate the accumulated findings of the news stories and academic theory. What do you now understand about this subject?

CHAPTER FORMAT

Each chapter is structured in a way that is intended to stimulate interest in the topic, provoke further enquiry and embed previous knowledge. Each chapter starts with an overview, follows with three to four key learning objectives – which are expected to be achieved through the reader not just reading the chapter, but engaging with the subject more generally. There then follows a short case study extracted from a media source: 'HRM in the media'. The main body of the chapter then follows – with an introduction following the case study. Each chapter then follows a series of subheadings specific to the topic in question and, after the conclusion section, the HRM case study is returned to with some reflections. Some suggested further reading is then provided. As explained, above, the use of the 'HRM in the media' device has two purposes. Firstly, it is intended to demonstrate that a seemingly straightforward technical aspect of HR practice – perhaps already known to the reader – does not always go according to plan and that a critical approach to a particular topic enables a deeper understanding of the topic if such problems are to be resolved or avoided. Secondly, it is intended to challenge the reader to seek out other such dilemmas, notwithstanding the important caveats made about over-reliance on media-based stories as being representative.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book follows the following structure: Part 1 focuses on the influences on, and shapers of, HR strategy and sets the scene for the book. This is intended to mirror what students studying at this level, or an HR practitioner, would need as prerequisite knowledge: an understanding of some critical determining factors that shape the choice of HR policy and practice within a specific organisational context. Chapter 2 by Sepideh Parsa discusses corporate governance and how the differing approaches to the accountability structures of large corporations

go on to shape the relationship that such companies choose to have with their stakeholders – including employees. The underlying assumptions that shape these accountability structures go on to shape HR policies and practices. Chapter 3 by Elizabeth Cotton analyses corporate social responsibility (CSR) and its link to HRM. CSR has become a significant feature of management in large – especially multinational – enterprises, and one of the fundamental issues within CSR is the treatment of labour – whether that be direct employees or contract labour; yet this topic is rarely considered and discussed in conventional HR literature. Chapter 4 by Geoff Wood addresses issues in managing HR in different national contexts and considers, in particular, the importance of the influence that differing national business systems can have on HR practices at firm level. Chapter 5 by Martin Upchurch explores the impact that information technology has had in work organisations and its implications for the nature of contemporary work and organisations. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 focus on the more specific themes influenced by the preceding chapters. Chapter 6 by John Grahl considers the significance of the dominance of shareholder value for the way that HRM is conducted in the UK. Chapter 7 by Phil James and Ian Roper considers the ways in which national-level politics have – and will continue to have – an influence on HR policy in firms in the UK. Chapter 8 by Matt Flynn and Michael Muller-Camen considers one of the emerging socio-demographic features of modern advanced economies: the ageing workforce and age diversity as an emerging issue for management. Finally, Chapter 9 by Annie Daguerre concludes the first part of the book with a discussion on HR strategy and the business environment and makes a case for why external forces need to be considered in planning and implementing any HR processes.

Part 2 of the book focuses on critical aspects of HR practices and policies. This section covers topics that students studying HRM would be likely to have covered in previous studies: the core operational functions of the HR practitioner, defined here under the recognisable terms used over a long period and codified by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). However, where previous studies should have equipped the student with an understanding of the important foundations in the issues of *people resourcing*, *employee relations*, *employee reward* and *learning and development*, the chapters in this section of the book attempt to take students into particular areas of these subjects. It is not claimed that these chapters represent the final word on the subjects. What they attempt to do, however, is take an aspect of the subject and consider, from each author's own perspective, an issue that could be seen as problematic or critical in the subject. Chapters 10 and 11 explore critical issues in people resourcing. They look particularly at how performance can be identified in performance management (Chapter 10 by Sebastian Fuchs) and at the dilemmas associated with the most acute aspect of hiring and firing: that of outsourcing and offshoring (Chapter 11 by Rea Prouska). Chapters 12 and 13 investigate critical issues in employee relations. Chapter 12 by Susie Leigh and Ian Roper explores the dilemmas associated with an individualised workforce and the attempts to rectify such problems with the notion of employee engagement. Chapter 13 by Richard Croucher looks at the often neglected issue within the notion of global HRM, that of global labour institutions. Chapter 14 by Mary Hartog examines critical

issues in learning and development and centres its discussion on the learning organisation. Chapter 15 by Geoff White introduces the debate surrounding reward management and explores the background to the phenomenon of 'new pay' and considers whether future pressures may force a return to some older concerns of equity and voice. The remaining chapters in Part 2 critically deal with equality and diversity and consider: the issue of gender equity and its inter-relationship with the problematic work-life-balance narrative (Chapter 16 by Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and Suzan Lewis); the far from straightforward issue of institutional racism (Chapter 17 by Doirean Wilson); and the often taken-for-granted issue of disability discrimination in the modern workplace (Chapter 18 by Asiya Siddiquee and Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya). Having three chapters on these aspects of equality and diversity may seem to some as excessive. Yet, as the motive bases of discrimination, of good and bad practice, are different in each case (economic, cultural, social, respectively), covering all categories of equality and diversity as one unified issue would not, ultimately, lead to particularly helpful insights as to how to promote inclusiveness in any one of these areas at the level of study intended in this book. Of course, this does lead to the editors needing to acknowledge the omission of equally pertinent areas of equality and diversity: the issues of sexuality and religious belief being the most prominent. Ideally, it would have been possible to include all aspects of diversity, but space restrictions constrain how much of a book on critical HRM could be dedicated to the equality and diversity agenda without jeopardising the quality of the critical treatment of other aspects of HRM.

Finally, Part 3 is structured around a sectoral analysis of HRM. Past experience has led the editors to believe that students attempting to apply aspects of HRM theory into a specific workplace context often fail to grasp the contextual differences in explaining the manner in which specific HR practices may be applied. This error is either by way of an over-reliance on prescriptive HR models and/or an assumption that ideal-type best practice will necessarily be embraced (or even possible) in a particular organisational setting. For example, an assumption could be made, on prescribed best practice, that a 'social partnership' approach to employee relations would be welcomed by management in a small non-union retail organisation; or that an off-the-shelf 'change management' programme will be welcomed by staff in a unionised public service organisation with a recent history of staff redundancies. Of course, the application of context is not unique to this subject – or indeed this book. And the editors of this book would also not suggest that any serious student should not take their own initiative in investigating important organisational contexts when applying theory to practice. However, the manner in which much HR practice is presented in many textbooks suggests universal applicability. In some cases, this may be as the author intends and that there are universally applicable 'rules' that can apply. In most cases, however, it is due to the author undoubtedly assuming that the reader would need to do the extra sector-specific reading to complete the full picture. This final section therefore provides an overview of the external contexts and resulting HRM practices associated with these particular sectors. Chapters 19, 20, 21 and 22 introduce the particularities of HRM in the manufacturing sector (Lola Peach Martins and Geoff Wood), private services (Sebastian Fuchs), public

services (Miguel Martinez-Lucio and Ian Roper), and the not-for-profit sector (Ian Cunningham) respectively.

Part 4 concludes the book with a one-chapter afterword devoted to what, in the view of Anil Verma and Qian He, constitute the 'big issues' facing HR in the coming decades. This chapter is not presented as others: it has no learning objectives or case study. The big issues covered in this chapter – migration, precarious work, lifelong learning and work–life balance – are considered from a global perspective. All of these themes are covered elsewhere in the book individually, but this chapter integrates them. If some readers of this book find themselves selectively reading certain chapters, they would be encouraged to read this chapter in conjunction with the specialist chapter of choice.

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