

**RECONCILING THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LINE MANAGEMENT  
INVOLVEMENT IN HR: THE CASE OF AN IRISH SEMI-STATE**

**HRM TRACK**

**COMPETITIVE PAPER**

**POSTGRADUATE PAPER**

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# **RECONCILING THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LINE MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT IN HR: THE CASE OF AN IRISH SEMI-STATE**

## **Introduction**

The notion of line managers assuming an increased involvement in human resource management (HRM) is not a contemporary phenomenon, although the practice of devolving HRM responsibilities to line managers has received increased attention in the management and HRM literature in recent years (Guest, 1987; and Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995; Ulrich, 1998; Budwhar, 2000; Renwick, 2000; Brewster et al., 2004; Mesner-Andolsek and Stebe, 2005; IRS, 2006, Watson et al., 2007). Within the last decade, the issue of line management involvement in HR has maintained a significant focus by both academics and practitioners alike (Budwhar, 2000; Renwick, 2000; Holt Larsen and Brewster, 2003; Brewster et al., 2004; Mesner-Andolsek and Stebe, 2005; Papalexandris and Panaayotopoulou, 2005; IRS, 2006; Cascon Pereira et al., 2006; Maxwell et al., 2007). The consensus from this literature is that a partnership between HR and line management is increasingly being adopted for the process of HR delivery. The forming of this collaborative partnership impacts on the roles and responsibilities performed by both line management and HR specialists and in turn affects the organisational outcomes (Harris et al., 2002; Holden and Roberts, 2004). Utilising case methodology, within a large semi-state organisational environment, the findings draw on a series of interviews with senior HR specialists, a survey of line managers and the analysis of HR documentation at the research site.

## **Introducing the Role of Line Management within HRM**

With the advent of rising costs, increases in competition and the subsequent pressures on cost containment, organisations have been challenged to seek new strategies and management techniques to enable all levels within the organisation to operate more effectively (Gibb, 2000). Reflective of this, McConville and Holden (2006:637) have suggested that, “*HRM offers a rich array of practices to allow organisations to adapt and respond to environmental changes*” and one such approach is to involve line managers in the delivery of HR as they are “*placed at both lower and middle management layers of organisations*” possessing a unique ability to “*to influence both strategic and operational priorities*” (Mac Neil, 2003:294). Line management positions are recognised in the literature as those that have a direct and general responsibility for achieving the goals of the organisation, while providing advice and direction to employees under their control (CIPD, 2005), as through “*coordinating and directing all resources in the business unit*” including the human resources (Legge, 1995:74) line managers can play a pivotal role in “*bringing HR policies to life*” (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003:1).

As previously alluded to, the notion of line managers accepting a degree of people management responsibility is not a new phenomenon. Guest’s (1987) and Storey’s (1992) strategic human resource management (SHRM) models both identify a central role for line managers in the delivery of HRM. Guest (1987:51) presented a rationale for involving line managers in HR when he stated, “*if HRM is to be taken seriously, personnel managers must give it away*”. Similarly, Storey’s (1992:26) strategic model of HRM emphasises that the human resources of an organisation may lead to sustainable competitive advantage and as part of that, “*people management decisions ought not to be treated as incidental operational matters or be sidelined into the hands of personnel officers*”. Storey’s (1992) findings

resonate with those of Guest (1987), in that line management are identified as key vehicles for the delivery of HRM and as such should not be excluded from this practice. Harris et al. (2002:218) view incorporating line management involvement as a “*business model of HRM*”, where line managers are purposefully included as key stakeholders in decision making and implementation of HRM policies and practices in conjunction with HR, a view supported by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005).

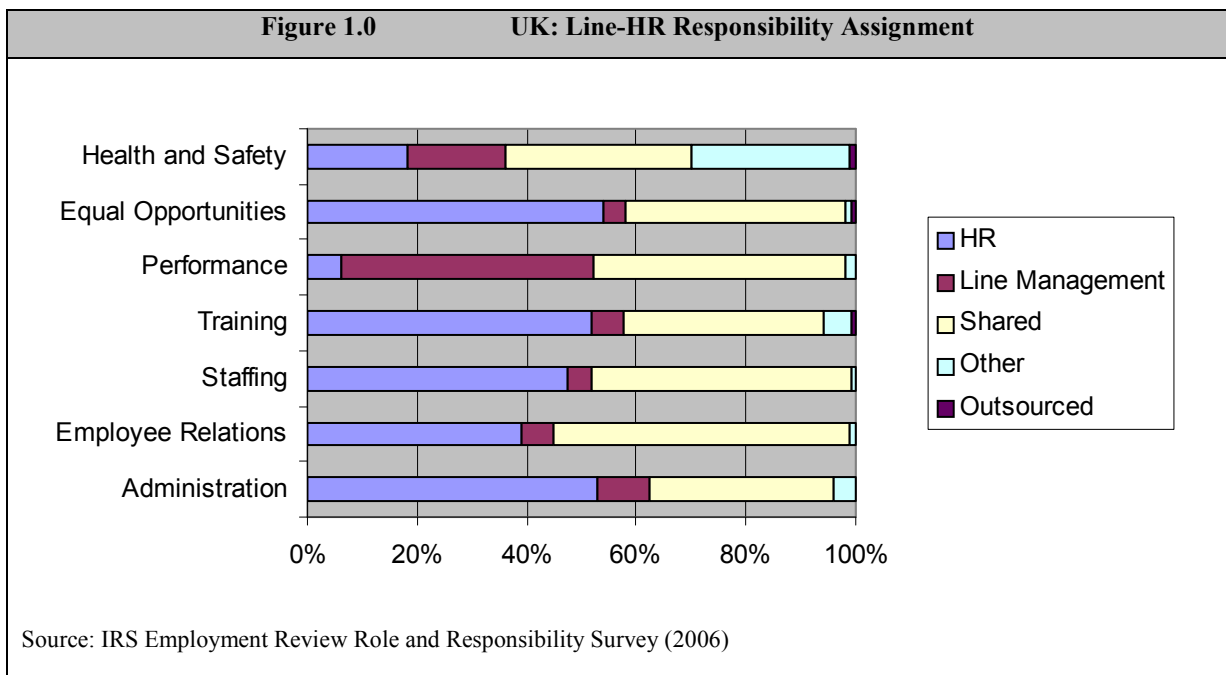
The subsequent literature supports these seminal research outputs by identifying the increasing evidence and patterns of devolving responsibility for HRM to the line (Harris et al., 2002; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; Mesner Andolsek and Stebe, 2005 and Cascon-Pereira et al., 2006). As an example, Hutchinson and Purcell (2003) have illustrated that the responsibilities of line managers have developed to include a HR remit, in conjunction with the traditional supervisory, budgetary and technical duties, manifesting in the HRM activities of recruitment and selection, discipline and grievance management, performance management and HR communication. From an international perspective, the Cranet (2006) survey on HRM practices similarly reflects the devolved HR responsibilities to line managers.

### **Devolvment of HRM to Line Management**

In attempting to define devolvment in the context of HRM, the consensus in the management literature over the last two decades has viewed devolution as a process of involving and giving responsibility for the discharge of HRM activities to line managers (Krulis-Randa 1990; Brewster and Soderstrom 1994; Renwick 2000; Holt Larsen and Brewster 2003). Fundamental to the devolvment process, is the issue of authority, “*the related decision-making power, financial power and expertise power required to carry out*

*these tasks*” to effectively discharge these responsibilities (Cascon Pereira et al., 2006:147). Inherent in this process of involving and giving HR responsibility to line managers, Torrington and Hall (1996) identify that devolution is indicated by a co-determination of HR practice with line management, enabling HR activities to become closer aligned with the general business strategy.

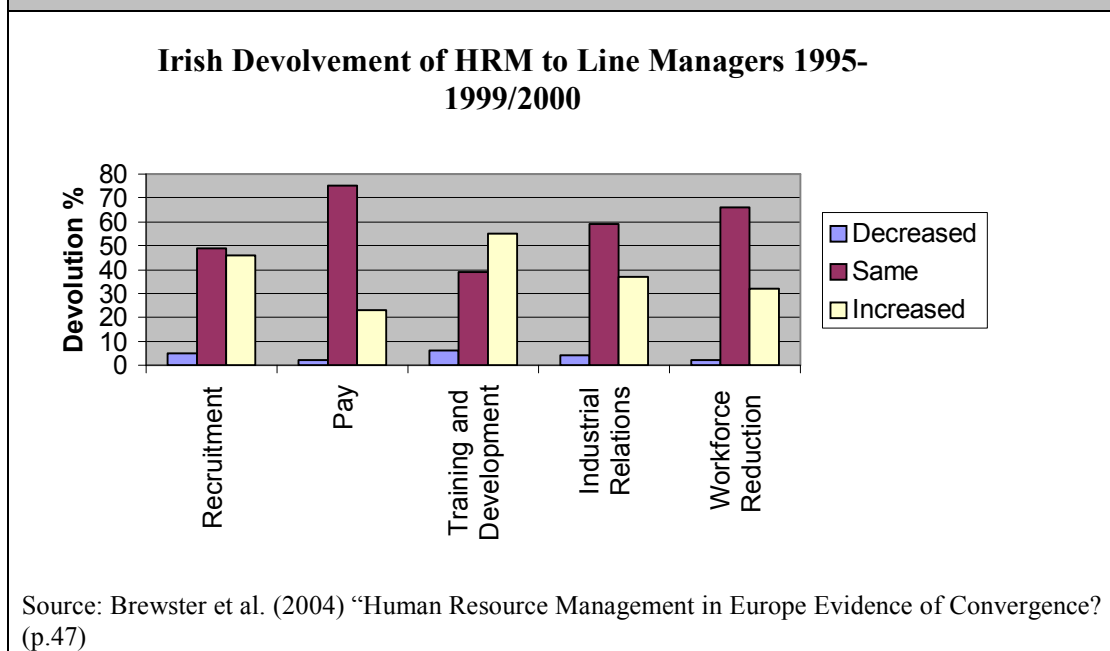
In terms of evidence identifying the closer alignment of HR with general business management, the IRS (2006) employers survey of fifty-eight UK organisations on the extent of devolving HR responsibilities to line managers (Figure 1.0) reports that line management are becoming increasingly involved in the delivery of all aspects of HRM, either as the sole provider or forming part of a partnership with HR. In more than sixty percent of organisations in the IRS research, line management had assumed an increased responsibility similar to the Cranet (2006) survey data assignment categorisations, in the areas of staffing, training, performance management and employee relations and to a lesser extent, in health and safety, equal opportunities and HR administration.



The IRS (2006) research confirms the earlier findings of Mc Conville and Holden (1999) in which line management were identified as having significant involvement in the transactional delivery and administration of HRM responsibility. Further examination of the available literature on HRM devolvement to line managers, has resulted in a number of distinct HR practices, reflective of those reported in the IRS (2006) research. For example, the findings of Renwick (2003) UK based research on line management involvement in HRM, illustrates that there is scope for improving the partnership relationship, while Ulrich (1998:126) suggests that line management can “*lead the way in integrating HR strategy into the company’s real work*” within the departments and staff whom they manage which ultimately presents the rationale for their involvement in HR delivery.

Research on the devolution of HRM to line management in an Irish context is relatively scarce, when compared to other European countries. Notable exceptions include, the early research conducted by Heraty and Morley (1995) and later research outputs of Holt Larsen and Brewster (2003), which indicated that in an Irish context, there was some evidence of operational devolvement, with even less evidence of strategic devolvement of HRM to line management. Exploring the changing patterns of HR devolvement to line managers in Ireland specifically, Brewster et al.’s (2004) research illustrates the breakdown of line manager involvement for each HR activity over a four-year period (Figure 1.1). It is noticeable that the pattern of line managers identifying that their involvement in recruitment had increased from twenty-eight percent in 1995 to forty-six percent in 1999/2000. A similar increase is noted in the area of employee training, with an increase of responsibility of fifty-five percent assumed by line management, over the previous four years of the study. Changes in responsibility for pay, industrial relations and workforce reduction have remained consistently stable over the four-year period of this study.

Figure 1.1 Ireland: Changes in HRM Devolution 1995-1999/2000



The outputs of Brewster et al. (2004:46) research on HRM devolvment in an Irish context indicate that while line management' involvement in the core HRM activities has shown some evidence of an increase over the four years of their study, there is no evidence of complete devolvment to the line but "*rather the specialist HR function retains considerable input into, and responsibility for, core HRM activities*" in conjunction with line management.

### **Rationale for Devolving HRM to Line Management**

The on-going discussion within the literature indicates that the concept of the aforementioned shared responsibility for HRM by both line management and HR specialists is being realised in practice. The reasons for this are varied, encompassing the requirement for speed, adaptability and flexibility of HRM offerings in dynamic and changing environments (Renwick, 2000); the agenda of cost reduction and increased utilisation of HR capital through (Budhwar, 2000: Renwick, 2003); and the adherence of a strategic human resource management philosophy of integrating HRM policy and practice with the needs of the

business (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Positioning HRM responsibility at a local level through line management, affords managers the opportunity to be directly involved in the HRM issues affecting their own staff and department. The logic behind this rationale is that an employee's line manager may be more suitably positioned to interact, translate and disseminate HR policy and practice to elicit commitment and performance (Renwick, 2000 and Holt Larsen and Brewster, 2003). Budwhar (2000:142) is also supportive of this position in that he suggests that "*local managers are able to respond more quickly to local problems and conditions*" and that devolvement results in motivating employees through fostering effective control as line managers are likely to be in regular contact with employees. With line managers assuming an increased role in the transactional delivery of HR, HR specialists may be liberated from this 'bureaucracy' and enabled to focus on strategic value adding activities (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999). Related to the aforementioned benefits, the decision to devolve HRM to line management may increase the speed of decision-making on HRM issues as evidenced in the findings of Renwick (2000) and Holt Larsen and Brewster (2003). Their studies demonstrated that devolution may serve to limit the duplication of management effort within HRM delivery and reduce the financial costs through reducing the headcount of HR and by enabling them to focus on strategic, value adding activities as opposed to those of a transactional nature.

### **Impact of Line Managers Involvement in HRM**

As previously discussed, the devolvement process, in effect, realigns the delivery mechanisms for HRM, which in turn may impact on the HR specialists, line managers and moreover the organisation. In particular, the key stakeholders - HR professionals and line management may have varying views on the devolvement process and how it impacts on them.



## **Line Management**

As the recipients of devolved HRM responsibility, the impact of devolvement on line managers manifests in the evolving roles and responsibilities, which line managers, assume to implement their HR remit, in conjunction with their traditional management brief. This is evidenced by the view taken by McConville and Holden (1999:406) who purport that “*line managers, positioned between the services decision making bodies and its employees, are bearing many of the consequences of the change process*”.

As a precursor to exploring the consequences of the devolvement process, it has been found that the majority of line management have welcomed their new HRM role, although this may be conditional on being sufficiently prepared (Renwick, 2003 and Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). One of the HR respondents in Renwick’s (2003:267) research commenting on the necessity to discharge their increased HR role effectively noted that, “*management is about managing people and money, and they [the line] can only achieve what they need to achieve by managing those things correctly*”. Concomitantly, a number of other studies have also indicated that many line managers identify that the prospect of assuming responsibility for HRM is not always welcomed. For example, Harris et al. (2002:224) UK public sector research, identified that the line manager respondents felt uncomfortable with being the focal point of HR and additionally felt under prepared to exercise their own managerial discretion with respect to people management responsibilities. Moreover, the IRS (2006) employers survey found that fewer than half of line managers were enthusiastic with assuming people management responsibilities.

Inherent in assuming a HR responsibility, line managers undergo various levels and degrees of preparation and the level of preparation undoubtedly impacts on line management’s capacity to perform HRM (Nehles et al., 2006). The pressure of combining the traditional

managerial role with additional HRM responsibilities is an increasingly prominent theme in the devolvement literature (McConville, 2006 and Nehles et al., 2006). The difficulty with balancing responsibilities is also noted in Whittaker and Marchington's (2003:255) study where one line manager respondent identified, "*am I straying from the main things I am meant to be focusing on?*" A similar position is also reflected in Harris et al. (2002:222) where a respondent who felt overwhelmed by the combined HR responsibility and general management role noted that "*I am employed for my professional expertise and that is not as a personnel manager*" which raises the issue of line management HR competencies.

Issues of line management's HR competence are similarly raised in Cunningham and Hyman (1999) who argue that, for some managers there had been inadequate training in HRM practice, citing a one-day training course in a disciplinary procedure, with little follow-up development and a complete absence of employee relations training in another case. Emphasising the paucity of developmental opportunities to facilitate the devolvement of HR responsibilities, Renwick's (2000) research found that conflictual relations regarding preparation levels were evident, which frequently resulted in confusion over accountability and responsibility for both HR and line managers and also with regards to undergoing training and development in the area. Reinforcing the conflictual stance, McConville and Holden (1999:420) report similar findings in that line managers often have "*impotent responsibility*" as they are being held accountable for the activities, behaviours and performance of their staff with little discretion to adapt rewards systems or adjust staffing levels as a result of budgetary constraints (McConville and Holden, 1999; Cascon Pereira et al., 2005).

## **HR Specialists**

As the devolvement process involves line managers assuming HRM responsibilities that are traditionally the province of HR professionals, Thornhill and Saunders (1998) have identified not surprisingly that it is not uncommon for HR professionals to feel that their responsibilities are changing also. This impact manifests, in HR assuming an advisory role as opposed to an exclusively transactional role (Storey, 1992). Caldwell (2002:699) research on HR's role in managing change identifies that the advisor role is the most frequently occurring role for HR, which involves the responsibility of offering "*line managers HR advice and expertise*". Assuming a change in role focus has immediate implications for the body of HR professionals in an organisation, in that they need to acquire and utilise a completely different range of skills (Harris et al., 2002). Related to this, Budhwar (2000:154) highlights the struggle HR staff have in attempting to maintain the standards of HR delivery as well as coping with their own strategic responsibilities which results in a problem of "*maintaining a balance of power between line and specialists*".

While recognised by line management themselves, HR professionals also raise the issue of the capability of line managers to assume the responsibility of managing human resources. In Cunningham and Hyman's (1995:12) devolvement investigation in forty-five public and private organisations in Scotland a respondent identified that "*at present, they [line managers] are supposed to take decisions on these issues, but they tend to take them immediately to us. We want to move away from this situation*".

Moreover, Ulrich and Brockbank (2005:236) in recognising the operational skills that line managers can exert in conjunction with the people management skills that HR possess, asserts "*partnerships ensure that, while both parties bring unique competencies to their joint*

*task, their combined skills are more than the sum of their parts*". In order to achieve these synergies, both line management and HR need to recognise each other's respective contribution to the relationship. For line managers, this means preparing themselves for a HR brief and similarly for HR, providing assistance and developmental opportunities to line managers.

## **Conclusion**

It is apparent that the impact of competitive pressures exerts a necessity for organisations to seek effectiveness in terms of the organisation of its functions and the services they deliver. Within the HRM literature it has been recognised that line managers have role to play in HRM (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992), and the decision to involve line management in the delivery of HRM was identified as a means of enhancing the effectiveness of organisational HRM contribution (Holt Larsen and Brewster, 2003; Renwick, 2003; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). Arising from a collaborative line and HR relationship, the involvement of line management in HR increases and as such, they are exposed to greater levels of responsibility (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003). This increased responsibility may result in increased line manager workloads and tensions between line managers and HR (Holden and Roberts, 2004) over competence and preparation issues (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999). Similarly, the role of HR specialist's changes as a result of devolving the transactional element of HR and this may evolve into more of a facilitator (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), providing guidance and assistance to line management.

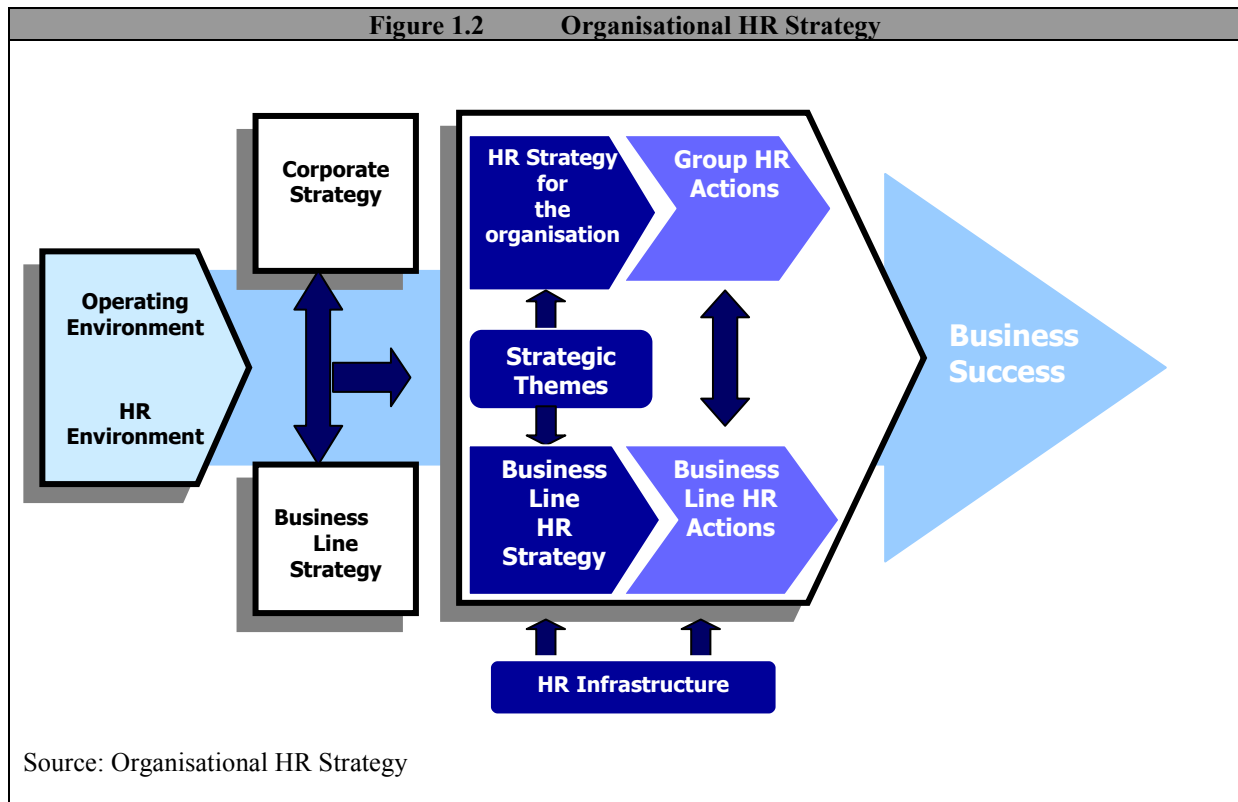
## **Methodology**

The objective of this paper is to reconcile the theoretical aspects of line management involvement in HR with the reality of line managements' collaborative enactment/execution of HR responsibilities in the context of an Irish semi-state sector organisation. In achieving this objective, the particular case site was selected due to having developed a formal HR training and development programme for practising line managers to support the devolvement of HR activities within the organisation. The research findings draw on both HR and line management perspectives through utilising a mixed method qualitative/quantitative case study methodology (Creswell 2003), involving in-depth interviews with senior HR professionals; the administration of a questionnaire to forty-five line managers and analysing organisational documents.

The population for questionnaire administration was sourced from the Manager of the training programme, which consisted of forty-five current and past participants. In conjunction with the questionnaire data, semi-structured one-to-one interviews have been conducted as an additional data collection method as they provide for an in-depth understanding of the social phenomena under investigation (Silverman, 2001). Similarly, Wright and Crimp (2000:19) identified that resulting interview data "*attempts to go deeper, beyond historical facts and surface comments*". In order to obtain a detailed insight into the research phenomenon under exploration, the interview respondents included senior HR specialists involved in the initial design and on-going management of the training programme for line managers. To further support the primary research data, organisational documentation in the form of HR strategy for the organisation and also the line manager training programme material were also reviewed.

## Research Site

The organisation on which the research is based is a large semi-state organisation. The organisation operates as a single company consisting of a diverse set of businesses and the HR infrastructure spans across and integrates with the various autonomous business units.



The HR infrastructure comprises of the Group HR function which develops organisational wide HR strategy and policies; a shared services HR function which serves the various autonomous business units with organisational-wide HR services; HR functions within each business unit and finally the line managers, within the autonomous business units. As evidenced in the organisation's HR strategy (Figure 1.2), the various business units each have their own strategies and actions, which are, interlinked with the organisation's overall group HR strategy.

## Findings

### Factors Influencing Devolution

The increased regulation of the operating environment and the competitive pressures it has created at the research site, are identified as the catalyst for seeking opportunities to extract increased value from the HR function. The interview respondents made this explicit, by commenting that the internal organisation of HR needs to progress in the line as a result of the external environment and identified that this progression involved developing the organisation and delivery of HRM:

*“we used to have what was called a personnel function in the early nineties and it was a very, very strong function and then it was regionalised...it was broken up into autonomous business units and unfortunately what happened, the strength of the personnel units was really watered down”*

*“we need a HR strategy in terms of less people with the right skills and competencies in place and do the right job for us”*

Deregulation and the introduction of an industry regulator exposed the organisation to increasing financial and new competitive pressures and demands, which in turn impacted on HRM requirements in terms of how the HR function operated:

*“the essence, the main thrust of it [developing line managers HR competencies] is coping with the change the business is going through”*

Reflecting the need to adapt existing HR practice to improve HR delivery, the participants of the line management training programme identified that their involvement in the programme was based on the motivation to improve their own competence in HR, which subsequently impacts on the organisational standards of HR delivery. Below is a summary of the line managers' responses with the average response indicated as the mean (Table 1.0).

**Table 1.0 Reasons for Participating in the HRM for Line Managers Programme**

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>	<i>Mean Response</i>
I felt involvement would contribute to my career advancement	22	91.7	2.05
I had little or no knowledge of HRM practice	24	100	3.17
I wanted to enhance my skills as a manager	24	100	1.54
I wanted to contribute to improving the standard and delivery of organisational HR	22	91.7	2.32
I was encouraged to get involved by a colleague or a manager	22	91.7	2.09
* Mean (1= Strongly Agree; 2= Agree; 3=Uncertain; 4= Disagree and 5= Strongly Disagree)			

One line manager respondent further identified that their reason for participation was to lead by example by demonstrating a willingness to adopt a best practice ethos:

*“ To lead by example as a senior manager and also to get a better understanding of the strength and value of the programme with a view to influencing others to participate”*

### **Line Manager Role in HRM**

The role of a line manager in the context of the HR strategy, according to one of the interview respondents, is to enact the various HR policies, with the support from the higher levels of the HRM function. Respondents reported that line managers are now being held accountable for managing all the resources within their remit, including human resources:

*“Each manager has to operate their own area, very much on the lines of self-contained businesses.”*

*“getting line managers responsible for more of the people management issues certainly would be... an objective.”*

In order to explore the divergence mentioned in the literature regarding line managers HR understanding, competence and preparation, the learning gained from the training programme



of the training programme, was examined. The interviewee respondents identified that the goal of the programme was to develop line management's HR competencies:

*“getting people management and better HR skills throughout the company both in HR and from the line managers.”*

*“there's devolution then to the businesses and within the businesses. They now have HR teams and they thoroughly devolve to line managers”*

Regarding the preparation line managers received to assume HRM responsibilities, 95 % of the respondents responded positively that participating in the programme had enhanced their level of understanding of the concepts of HRM. Linked to this, 33.3 % of the respondents strongly agreed and an even greater percentage of 54.2% of respondents agreed that they are more conscious of the value and contribution of HRM. When the respondents were questioned as to whether they considered themselves, as a line manager, to play a significant role in terms of HRM delivery, over 65% of the line manager respondents positively indicated that they regarded themselves as an important element HR.

### **Impact of the Programme**

With regards to the impact on HRM involvement from participating in the training programme, 47.8 % of the respondents agreed and a further 13 % strongly agreed that that the skills and learning they have acquired had contributed to an increased role in terms of HR responsibility. Inherent in these figures, 37.5 % of those surveyed agreed that they were more confident in enacting their existing level of HRM responsibilities. Similarly, 37.5% of the respondents agreed and an additional 25% strongly agreed that they are increasingly becoming involved in a collaborative responsibility when it came to HRM. When the specifics of their involvement in HRM was explored (Table 1.1) through a series of statements, with the average response indicated as the mean, the programme participants

identified that they agreed their involvement increased in the areas of communicating HR policy, recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management and handling grievance and disciplinary matters.

**Table 1.1 Impact on HRM Involvement**

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>	<i>Mean Response</i>
I am now more involved in the area of communicating HR policies	24	100	2.46
I am now more involved in the area of recruitment and selection of staff	24	100	2.71
I am more involved in the area of pay and compensation	23	95.8	3.48
I am more involved in the area of training and developing staff	24	100	2.33
I am more involved in managing and appraising the performance of staff	24	100	2.75
I am more involved in handling disciplinary and grievance matters	24	100	2.71

\* Mean (1= Strongly Agree; 2= Agree; 3=Uncertain; 4= Disagree and 5= Strongly Disagree)

The consensus from the interview respondents was that the programme was making a difference, to the changes in work behaviour and practices of the participants. It was noted that the HR-line relations had improved due to line managers understanding of HR issues having improved. In support of this, the interview respondents commented that:

*“they [line managers] are easier to talk to about HR issues”*

*“they will have a view, an informed view, on how policies should be enacted and implemented and that would be informed on the basis of their increased knowledge of the theoretical background of HR and it’s focus”*

*“their skills in this area had improved dramatically”*

## **Line- HR Collaboration**

The interview respondents identified that line managers were becoming more integrated into the delivery of HRM and their confidence in their ability to exercise their HR remit had risen as they had received a solid underpinning in the theoretical and practical foundations of HRM from the training programme:

*“there is more unanimity, I would say, between line management and the HR function than there would have been heretofore”*

*“I think what they will do and what they do now, because of their increased knowledge of HR, the policies and the impact HR has... they can employ their HR function better than they would have before.”*

*“they [line managers] are not just being blindly led by the HR function, they would challenge the HR function.”*

The extent to which line managers were willing recipients of increased HR responsibilities, 37.5 % of questionnaire respondents agreed and a further 41.7% strongly agreed that they had welcomed the opportunity to become directly involved in HRM. Similarly, 37.5 % of the respondents again strongly agreed that they viewed their HR responsibilities as important, which concomitantly resulted in the respondents strongly agreeing as regarding the role of line management as a significant contributor to HRM. This was also deemed in their view to have positively impacted on collaborative HR-line working arrangements (Table 1.2). In terms of identifying the resulting relationship between line managers and the wider HR function, arising from participation in the programme, the respondents were asked to rate three different statements in the questionnaire. The programme participants agreed that they now work on a more collaborative basis with HR, they also strongly agreed that they are better placed to request and value the specialist support from their HR colleagues.

**Table 1.2 Participation Impact on Line Manager-HR Relationship**

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>	<i>Mean Response</i>
I now work on a more collaborative basis with HR colleagues	24	100	2.29
I am now better placed to request the appropriate support and advice from the HR function	24	100	1.96
I now value to a greater extent the expertise of HR function/specialists	24	100	1.79

\* Mean (1= Strongly Agree; 2= Agree; 3=Uncertain; 4= Disagree and 5= Strongly Disagree)

## **Discussion**

An in-depth review of the literature on the devolvement of HRM to line managers has identified that a partnership of HR and line management is increasingly being adopted and that this partnership is impacting on both line and HR specialists. The driver for the decision to devolve HRM to line management as suggested in the literature is to achieve organisational effectiveness of the HR function in the face of increased competition and organisational change. The interview findings identify change in the operating environment of the research site in the form of increased regulation and competitive pressures, which have driven the decision to seek collaborative opportunities with line management, supporting the arguments and findings presented in the literature. Furthermore, the participants of the training programme also identified that the rationale for their participation in the programme was based on improving organisational and personal HRM standards and practice.

As also noted in the literature, a collaboration of line and HR specialists can lead to tensions within their relationship (McConville, 2006; Nehles et al., 2006), role overload and may risk inadequate HR skill and competency development. Recognising the latter in particular, the case organisation designed and implemented a comprehensive developmental programme, and the findings confirm that this may have sufficiently equipped participants with the skills required to enact their existing HR responsibility and to effectively collaborate with HR

specialists on HR issues affecting their roles. The manifestation of these concentrated efforts is to be found in the positive outcomes in terms of line management' perception, realisation and enactment of their HR responsibilities. However, any interpretation of the research findings should recognise that due to the single case site, these findings are not readily generaliseable to other organisational environments.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the involvement of line managers in the area of HR from the dual perspectives of HR and line management, with positive results in the form of improved line management perception, commitment and execution of HR responsibilities, culminating in an emerging line - HR collaborative partnership to the delivery of HR at the research site. These positive results were observed through exploring the rationale for line management involvement in HR and the subsequent HR-led intervention to support line management involvement in the form of a HRM developmental training programme. The findings generated from the research would appear to reconcile with the theory espoused in the literature. These empirical findings have both practical and theoretical implications for the area of HRM devolvement and line management involvement in HRM.

## **Implications for HRM Devolvement Practice**

This paper makes a direct contribution to research practice in Ireland, as there is a paucity of empirical work in the area, with Heraty and Morley (1995); Holt Larsen and Brewster (2003) and Brewster at al. (2004) as the only contributors in the area of HR-line management devolvement within this context. By reflecting on the process of integrating line management involvement into HR at the case site, from the identification of the necessity and rationale for

their involvement; the design and implementation of an organisationally-driven and tailored HRM training programme, to the impact which this programme made, there may be valuable lessons for both researchers and practitioners.

A significant practical lesson is to secure line management buy-in for a devolved HRM approach. Issues raised by line management in the literature, which have been reported to negate the benefits of devolvement through negatively impacting on the line- HR relationship include an absence of HR competencies; a lack of HR developmental opportunities and dissatisfaction with support given from HR specialists (McConville and Holden, 1999; Harris et al., 2002 Renwick, 2003 and Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). At the case site, providing a HR developmental training programme contributed to fostering the requisite line manager buy-in, as line management were given the opportunity to acquire and develop the competencies to firstly understand their HR responsibilities and secondly, to enable them to implement these responsibilities effectively.

Preparing line management to assume HR responsibility at the case site positively impacted on the line-HR relationship. This was evidenced in HR respondents identifying that there is now a more common language between themselves and line management. Reflective of this, line manager respondents also indicated that that they are better placed to communicate and request the support of HR in the enactment of their HR brief. From these empirical research findings it is noted that a positive working relationship is a significant variable in the devolvement process and as a result, for devolvement in practice, efforts should be placed on generating and maintaining these relationships to ensure that HR delivery is integrated with optimal fit with organisational conditions and contexts (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Such a focus on the line-HR relationship could include, strategically planned rather than ad-hoc

interactions, through regular formal and informal meetings, networking events and the promotion of cross-functional team-working.

### **Implications for Research**

From a research perspective, the case organisation can be seen to be taking a strategic perspective to devolving HR responsibility to line management as an approach to improve the effectiveness of HRM within the organisation, which clearly resonates with the SHRM devolution literature (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1998; Budhwar, 2000, Harris et al., 2002; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003). However, in order to progress beyond the potentially conflictual/consensual dichotomy relating to the impact of devolution for both line management and HR specialists that is currently reflected within the existing literature and to subsequently create new knowledge and understanding on the issue, it is proposed that the line-HR partnership focus need to expand. This development would encompass exploring the configuration of the entire HR infrastructure - not just HR specialists - and locating the line management role in relation to the other HR constituents within this infrastructure. To support this contention, Holt Larsen and Brewster (2003:241) identify that the relationship between HR and line management is *“not a simple issue. Indeed, it is a rather complex, ambiguous and dynamic one”* when in fact, *“HR department and line management, cover many levels of the hierarchy”*.

Following on from this, a deeper exploration of the line-HR relationship might include the interrelationships, processes, practices, enablers and barriers of this and may illuminate how line management enact and evoke their HR responsibilities in conjunction with HR specialists. To reinforce this issue, Cascon-Pereira et al. (2006:147) also call for further studies in the field of devolution and line management inclusion in HR to be carried out: *“In*

*particular, these should be in-depth in order to go beyond the existing but simplistic studies that quantitatively frame these perceptions as positive or negative*". Finally, according to Renwick (2000:196), it is imperative to extend research on the attitudes and motivations of both HR and line managers through exploring their work relations as it is *"in the pursuit of understanding HR and line managers' actions at work that will produce findings of interest to academics and practitioners alike"*.



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