Much Ado about …. Something? Contemporary critical debates on the HR function in the UK.

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This article aims to present a preliminary analysis of the factors that restrict the scope of the critical debate on the HR function in the UK. Academic publications on the HR function in the UK since mid 1980s, when the HRM concept emerged in the US, are examined using the critical analysis. The examination reveals aspects that influenced the debate about HRM and the HR function in the UK and reduced the impact of the UK researchers on the current debates worldwide. Firstly, this paper explores the role of the research traditions in the UK as the contemporary discourse on HRM is partly determined by the scope of the past research that focused on industrial relations and the employee side of the equation. Secondly, the methodological aspects of HRM research may limit its further development. Over 80% of academic publications about the HR function use the ‘three-wheel chariot’ of research methods (questionnaires, interviews and case studies). Thirdly, the impact of the HRM concepts and ideas from the US on the UK academic research is discussed. The dominance of the US models often resulted in replicating the research designs in the UK. Even the models of the HR roles, so meaningful in the 1980s/90s (Storey, 1992; Tyson and Fell, 1986; Monks, 1992) did not prevail in the UK organizations and the Ulrich (1997) model from the US dominates the corporate world and the academic discussions. Since mid 1980s about 87% of all British publications about the HR function referred to the concepts and ideas developed in the US.

Despite extensive debates and numerous prescriptive solutions for personnel, or recently more accepted, human resource (HR) practitioners coming from the academic and practitioners’ literature, the status, credibility and influence of the HR function in the UK have not improved considerably throughout the years. On the contrary, negative labels and stereotypes have evolved, in line with the changing fads and rhetoric and unfavourable opinion about the HR function has persisted. Moreover, there have been surprisingly few attempts to explain the origins and causes of these problems. The explanation given by Karen Legge almost 30 years ago about the ambiguities and vicious circles in the HR function remains unchallenged and still has huge impact over the research on the HR function in the UK.

In the UK the function responsible for personnel policies and practices is rarely the focus of special academic research although it does appear in academic literature in the context of personnel management and its role in job design, recruitment, training and development, remuneration, and industrial relations. Managing these processes within an organisation exposes the personnel function to criticism from all
stakeholders - employees, trade unions and management - all with conflicting interests. All parties complain about the poor quality of services provided, lack of professionalism of personnel practitioners and overall little added value to business. The function was stereotyped as “chair warmers” (Dalton 1959), with an “inferiority complex” (Herman, 1968), and “lack of status” (Anthony and Crichton, 1969), “foot druggers” (Storey, 1992) operating in a “personnel ghetto” (Keenoy, 1990:6), “reactive, without sufficient planning” (Flanders, 1970), or, at best, negotiators in collective bargaining and administrators of policies and procedure (Legge, 1978, Tyson, 1987). The common opinion was that it is an ‘under-developed management function’ (Winchester and Bach, 1995:309), implementing policies set by others rather than creating them. Such opinions result in limited power and low status, credibility and influence of the HR function in many organisations.

Karen Legge (1978), analysing the problems related to personnel management and its practitioners, presented three ambiguities in the personnel function, based on the research by Ritzer and Trice (1969) in the US. The first refers to the overlap between personnel management as an activity of all managers responsible for managing their staff/personnel and as an activity of the specialised personnel function, with its structure, areas of responsibilities, etc. The second refers to the problematic definition of what constitutes the success in personnel management and what the criteria for the personnel function are. And the third refers to the particular, unique position of the personnel function in an organisation - it is part of the management but at the same time it has certain responsibilities for all employees.

The above ambiguities combined with a general lack of power and credibility created three vicious circles for personnel managers. Their lack of power and absence in decision making about people issues results in a situation where the problems are addressed whenever they arise, on a reactive, ad-hoc basis. Many of the issues might be prevented by involving personnel practitioners in the planning processes from the outset. The lack of success criteria, along with the lack clear strategic priorities, force the personnel function to respond to various demands coming from internal customers, which strengthens the perception of the function as ‘hodgepodge’ of ‘necessary chores’ (Drucker 1954). The last vicious circle is related to all the above, as the low status of the personnel function discourages new talent from joining it. As a result, it is difficult to change the function from within and overcome the vicious circles.

The emergence of the Human Resource Management (HRM) concept in the mid 1980s was a unique opportunity for the personnel function to overcome the ambiguities and vicious circles related to personnel management and establish its credibility as a firmly managerial approach (Legge, 1995:1-29). The proposition of HRM as strategic and business oriented, adding value to an organisation offered a chance to rebuild its reputation in organisations. The personnel function, by applying the principles of HRM, could embody a strategic role (Guest, 1987) thus improving its position and influence. However, the adoption of HRM in the UK was not an easy process (Hart, 1993, Torrington, 1993) and controversies about its meaning, scope, level of adoption and effect on organisations (Keenoy, 1999) still abound. Some even claim that UK had seen little of HRM due to “the profile of personnel managers”
As Alvesson and Skoldberg suggested, using the Critical Management Studies assumptions to subject human resource management to critical examination “to distinguish what is socially and psychologically invariant from what is, or can be made to be, socially changeable” should be one of the main goals of the social sciences (2000:111). Thus, the aim of the paper is to start a critical examination of contemporary debates on the HR function in the UK, to investigate the “power and privileges”, or lack of them, by HR professionals.

The key contemporary debates on the Personnel/HR function in the UK
The debate of the current academic literature on the personnel function, or more often re-branded as the Human Resources (HR) function, evolves around the implementation of the HRM practises in the workplace – both for line managers (Renwick, 2003; Poole and Jenkins 1997; Torrington and Hall, 1996) and for employees (Mabey et al., 1998; Guest, 1999) The studies focus on analysing the link between HRM practises (in particular on the use of high commitment or high performance practises) and their impact on organisational performance (Truss, 2001; Knight-Turvey et al. 2004; Sisson and Storey, 2000; Purcell, 1999; Conway et al., 2000; Guest et al., 2000; MacDuffie, 1995; Patterson et al., 1997).

The problem of the lack of status, credibility and influence of the HR function comes up in most publications, wherever the HR function is mentioned. The authors usually refer to the ambiguities and vicious circles identified by Legge and repeat or review the arguments from 1970s (Guest and King, 2004; Caldwell, 2003; Hope-Hailey et al, 1997). Yet, in the current debates on the HR function the profile of HR practitioners is rarely analysed. The impact of education, skills and competencies of HR practitioners on the overall effectiveness and the department’s position in an organisation is generally disregarded. The profile was examined mainly in a descriptive way, with a focus on presenting qualifications, numbers, responsibilities, and devolvement to line managers (Sisson, 2001; Cully et al, 1999; Kersey et al., 2006). Some researchers studied the motivations for joining the function, careers before HR, and in HR (Tamkin, 2006). There were attempts to analyse meta-abilities of HR managers (Buckley and Monks, 2004:52-53) which enable good performance as well as the relationship between the level of educational and professional qualifications of practitioners and their influence among managers (Collinson, 1991; Lupton and Shaw, 1999; Lupton, 2000). However, the results did not offer plausible explanations for the current state of affairs or powerful applications.

In order to address the issues of the low status, credibility and influence of the HR function in the UK and alter the perception of the HR function three areas occupied the academics in the UK: the representation of HR executives on the company boards, professionalisation of the HR function and the decrease of HR administration through automation and devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers.

The membership of HR executives on the boards of companies, where strategic decision making takes place, was advocated extensively in the past (Royal Commission, 1968; Watson, 1977, Legge, 1978) as a solution to increase the power and influence of the HR function in organisations. There are several studies on that
topic that use different methodologies and consequently yield different results (Sisson, 2001; Millward, 2000; Torrington, 1998; Kelly and Gennard, 2000). Despite the lack of consistent approach, they all point to a low level of representation, which hovers around 60% (Sisson, 2001:92) or 50% (Farndale 2005). However, the presence of HR executive on the board does not seem to change the influence of the function nor does it improve the status of personnel issues in organisations (Torrington, 1998:32; Sisson, 2001:80). For successful HR directors the formal positioning on the board is less important in influencing his peers than personal contacts with top executives, informal networking and in-depth HR expertise (Brewster and Bournois, 1991; Purcell, 1995; Tyson, 1995; Torrington, 1998). Therefore, the board representation as a solution to a lack credibility and influence of the HR function remains inconclusive (Legge, 1995; Hope-Hailey et al, 1997; Hall and Torrington, 1998; Purcell, 2001). The board representation, however, has a positive impact on the involvement of HR function in strategic decision-making and devolving operational HRM to line managers. (Farndale, 2005:674).

Devolving operational responsibilities for the HRM practises to line managers became one of the key postulation of the HRM concept. Many authors analysed a number and depth of HRM practises devolved to line managers (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995,1999; McGovem et al. 1997; Torrington and Hall, 1996; Poole and Jenkins, 1997) and discovered certain problems and difficulties related to the readiness, willingness and the overall relationships with line management (Renwick, 2000, 2003; Brewster, 2001; Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). However, few challenged the idea behind the ‘devolution’, assuming implicitly that there are elements of HRM which should be devolved to line managers. Good people management practises always emphasised line manager’s responsibility to recruit, develop and motivate people. It would be unreasonable to take away these responsibilities from line managers, as their job is to ‘manage’ people. The job of the HR function is to provide line managers with information on relevant areas, such as market data on compensation and benefits or employment law updates, or to design policies, tools and practises to help managers manage business. However, the design of these policies and practises should always be in close cooperation with line managers.

Professionalism of the HR staff was the last area explored by the UK academics (Legge, 1978; Armstrong, 2000; Guest, 1987). Researchers used various approaches and looked at different factors, e.g sector analysis of public/private (Lupton and Shaw, 2001) or a gendered nature of the profession (Legge, 1987; Gooch and Ledwith, 1996). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) launched a special project to enhance professional status of the HR function and its practitioners. Gilmore and Williams (2003) analysed its assumptions and concluded that with the CIPD professional project “the attractions and promotion of the ‘high commitment/performance’ approach and the concept of the psychological contract” (2003:12) provides a rationale for the personnel function. Apart from the professional standards and qualification by CIPD, another external award body was analysed in the context of improving the professional status of the HR function - the Investors in People, a state-sponsored workplace training initiative awarding the IiP award to those organisations with good people management standards, including many HRM practises. The IiP award provides a “codified body of knowledge, which legitimates the personnel function and helps to make it recognizable to the rest of the organization” (Bell et al. 2001: 201). An HR function, initiating the process of
applying for an Investor in People award, uses the process to improve its position in an organisation. From these examples one might conclude that the HR function itself is not capable of changing its own status, credibility and influence and needs external bodies (CIPD or IiP) to attest it. In addition, professionalism and professional service does not guarantee that HR practitioners will be effective and beneficial for an organisation. It depends on other factors as well.

Sisson’s two studies concluded that the emergence of the HRM concept had little or no impact on the professionalism of HR practitioners (Sisson, 1995; 2001:93). In many organisations the change of the name from ‘personnel function’ to ‘HR function’ happened quickly (Armstrong, 1987) and people continued to call themselves ‘personnel managers, personnel directors, personnel officers and so forth’ (Torrington, 1998:27). More importantly, their job responsibilities did not change significantly from those of personnel practitioners (Millward et al (2000: 62-3) and still evolved around the core of personnel/HRM activities. However, later analysis of the same data (WERS98) by Hoque and Noon (2001) suggested that “specialists who use the term HR take a form distinct from their personnel specialist counterparts” (p.18). Practitioners with HR title were more qualified and more involved in strategic planning; they used advanced HRM practices such as psychometric testing, staff surveys and off-the-job training. Farndale (2005) analysing HR departmental professionalism in the European countries introduced four measures of professionalism: board membership, involvement in corporate strategy development, devolution of HRM responsibilities to line management and the evaluation of the department’s performance (p.662). Using the CRANET data from the UK, she noted that the all criteria scored rather low, which suggests ‘a low level of departmental professionalism [in the UK] in terms of strategic indicators, particularly in comparison with other European countries’. (Farndale, 2005, p.673).

One might sum up then that all the three solutions to address the issues of lack of status, credibility and influence of the HR function seemed to have a limited impact on the HR function in organisations. Recently it appeared that the formal membership on the board of directors is less relevant in influencing the key decision makers in organisations (Kelly and Gennard, 2007). Devolution of HR responsibilities to line management started to be challenged both from conceptual and practical perspectives in the context of good management practices as advocated by Drucker (1954) or Mintzberg (1973). The quest for professionalism of the HR function clearly helped to clarify the ambiguous domain of HR specialisation and to define the standards for its specialists. However, it also revealed an obvious truism of a need to have “professional” standards for HR jobs. In other departments professionalism is a well-embedded axiom of high standards of service delivery.

Among various attempts to explain the origin of problems related to the position and influence of the HR function, the explanation of the ambiguities and vicious circles given by Legge (1978) remains unchallenged. Looking at a large and diverse pool of researchers dealing with employment management at almost every British university, it is surprising to find that not many alternative explanations were given about the source of problems. The notable exception is Torrington (1998). Examining the publications on the HR function and its practitioners, he concluded that personnel managers face three uncertainties: confidence, identity, and direction (1998:24). In addition, the business environment has changed with new technologies, new markets and new ways of delivering HR services such as outsourcing, off-shoring, etc., which
brought new challenges for the HR function. Yet, as Guest and King (2004) concluded “although there have been changes in features of the ambiguities and vicious circles, personnel managers have failed to overcome many of the problems identified by Legge 25 years earlier or to seize the opportunities outlined by Ulrich (1997) to become human resource champions” (2004:401).

The limitations of the UK debate on the HR function
The focus of UK scholars on the above topics helped advance our understanding of certain aspects of the HR function, but it did not help to alter its status, credibility and influence in organisations. In addition, other aspects of the HR function reality seemed to be neglected in the UK research – the skills and competences of HR professionals, the impact of senior management on the shape and the quality of the HR function and alternative forms of HR organisation.

The descriptive analysis of the skills and competences of HR professionals presented the status quo but it did not examine what is required by a modern organisation. Especially when a set of skills required by organisation today differs significantly from the one in the past. Experienced HR practitioners were often recruited as ‘personnel’ practitioners; different skills, competencies and abilities were required for those positions. In a new environment the old profiles are not always valid. The senior management, or rather the Top Management Teams (TMT) have a crucial role in selecting the HR directors and setting the shape and agenda of the HR function in their organisations. The organisational environment and the complexity of employment management make it difficult to analyse the underlying problems and potential solutions for the HR function.

Analysing the academic and practitioner literature there are three factors emerging that significantly influence the current debate and, ultimately, hinder the HR function in the UK to overcome the long lasting problems of the status, credibility and influence. The legacy of the personnel department, the methodological constraints of the academic research in the UK, and the influence from outside the UK seem to limit the progress.

The legacy of the old personnel function, with the welfare and industrial relations history influenced critical debates and progress of the HR function in the UK. The predecessors of the HR function – the welfare and labour departments managed the welfare of employees and helped with their accommodation, medical issues or protecting women rights in the workplace. As the majority of staff in the welfare departments were women, it “inevitably meant that the function would carry a legacy of being of low status and unimportance, at least in comparison to central male activities, such as production, finance and so on” (Legge, 1995, p.21).

The First World War forced a massive employment of civilians and special positions of ‘labour officers’ were created to manage recruitment, discipline and industrial relations during the wartime production and afterwards. With the intensification of trade union activities in the 1920s and 1930s, there emerged a need for specialist expertise in managing relations with trade unions emerged, in the area of collective bargaining and other employment management issues and industrial relations started to occupy the minds of personnel managers (Cannell, 2004). The position of the personnel function became very difficult. Its preoccupation with important but
secondary issues in back-office administration caused problems in its relations with line management and employees. From one side, as the welfare function, it represented employees with well-being and social issues to the management, from another, as industrial relations specialists, it represented the management to the trade union.

Most of the academic research on the personnel function in the past explored this relationship in employment management, some researchers anchored it around the Marxist paradigm quoting Karl Marx as one of the “intellectual founders of Industrial Relations theory” (Barbash, 1993). With an unequal status of employment relationship (between owners/managers and workers) the conflict between the working class and the owners/managers class was inevitable. The class struggle and workers’ exploitation required a unified front to defend their own interests and rights through an organised body – the trade unions or as Hyman called the “ramparts for workers in their struggle for social revolution against employers” (Hyman, 1971:6). Examining the notions of power, control, conflict, strikes, inequalities and the position of the trade unions occupied significant place in the academic discourse in the UK. It resulted in the foundation of the British School of Industrial Relations, very strong and influential in the academic world, but limiting its scope to one side of employment relationship – the employees, trade unions and other forms of workers’ representation.

As the HR function does not generate revenues either through manufacturing or selling goods or services; it has no direct impact on organisation’s financial results. The principal focus of the HR function is on employees, their employment, compensation, development and industrial relations, which prevents the function from becoming the core function of an organisation. In addition, it is the only function with the biggest proportion of women working in all roles, which creates the ‘gender paradox’ - the majority of staff in personnel function is female (CIPD, a professional body of personnel professionals consists of over 72% women, Tucker, 2005) but top managers or directors consist mainly of male population. The legacy of the old personnel function, its current preoccupation and the gender paradox seem to restrict the debates to a wide and ambiguous concept of employment management, focusing on important, but secondary aspects of an organisation.

The second factor limiting the critical debate and the progress of the HR function in the UK refers to the methodological constraints. The UK research tradition is renowned for its strong methodological background and the solid usage of quantitative research methods. The analysis of the publications on the HR function in academic books and leading journals points to the dominance of the ‘three-wheel chariot’ of research methods - questionnaires, interviews and case studies. The dominance of the chariot became so prevalent in academic journals that since mid-1980s over 80% of academic publications about the HR function used the ‘three-wheel chariot’ only. In effect, the usage of other research methods dropped significantly even though a combination of the three methods and an application of the statistical package cannot measure the complexity of HRM in contemporary organisations. Moreover, many of the scholars use the large-scale surveys such as Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys (WIRS) and Workplace Employment Relation Surveys (WERS) to analyse the HR function. The existence of these unique databases is an advantage for any scholar researching the HRM field in the UK.
However, there are limits to these methods (Bacon et al., 1996, Guest and Peccei, 1994; Vernon, 2000). As argued by Storey (2001), “there are also concerns about the reliability of single respondent box-tickers who report on behalf of whole organizations. Moreover, the meaningfulness of ‘mere’ correlations and other statistically derived data in the absence of adequate theory is open to question” (Storey, 2001:14 ). These methods can be contrasted with the practice of Ulrich (1997), the author of the most popular framework of HR roles, who did not use sophisticated quantitative methods, with beta coefficients and multiple regression analysis to develop his famous 4-quadrant model but instead focused on the practical value for HR people working in contemporary organisations.

Lack of access to stakeholders, limited time in organisations and, as a consequence, inability to observe “real” life and problems in contemporary organisations significantly restricts the research on the HR function. There are benefits of using alternative methodologies, such as observation, action research, or participatory research to help understand the complexities of the contemporary HR function and to progress its development. The participatory methods are time consuming and prone to other methodological constraints but they may help reveal the underlying problems with the HR function in the UK, provided that the challenge to ensure the quality and public accountability of the research process using experience of qualitative researchers is met.

In addition, with the more dominating “publish or perish” approach in British universities, academic journals play a crucial role in advancing the field of HRM in the UK. While setting precise policies regarding the standards of academic papers, they purposely determine the style of publications and rarely publish an article from an alternative methodology. The first signs of openness from leading journals (Heary, Frege, 2007) are encouraging and the time will show the usage of alternative research methods.

The last factor influencing the debate and the progress of the HR function in the UK comes from the US academics. It seems that the dominant concepts and ideas about the HR function and its practitioners come from outside the UK, mainly from the US. The starting point is the HRM concept itself, founded originally in the US (Beer et al. 1985; Devanna et al. 1984) and by many claimed as an essentially North American concept (Brewster, 1995). In the context of the HR function, the ideas and solutions from the US authors clearly dominated the discussion about and practise in the contemporary HR function.

The US audience, with its entrepreneurship and capitalistic characteristics was more open to the practical application of the concept and its financial aspect. General public, through magazines and various newspapers was more vocal in open critique of the HR function in the US companies. Stewart (1996: 105) put it very bluntly:

_Nestling warm and sleepy in your company, like the asp in Cleopatra’s bosom, is a department whose employees spend 80% of their time on routine administrative tasks. Nearly every function of this department can be performed more expertly for less by others. Chances are its leaders are unable to describe their contribution to value added except in trendy, unquantifiable_
and wannabe terms.....I am describing your human resource department, and have a modest proposal: Why not blow it up?

Such views triggered an open discussion about the function, its role, responsibilities and value to the business that lasts to these days with the articles such as “Why We Hate HR” in Fast Company (Hammonds, 2005), or “How to fix HR” in Harvard Business Review (Kaufman, 2006) or “A dearth of HR talent?” in The McKinsey Quarterly (Lawson, 2005).

US academics recognised the role of the HR practitioners in implementing HRM practises, and published special studies in leading academic publications in the ‘HR Planning’ journal, ‘Human Resources Management’ about the skills and competencies of HR practitioners, their effectiveness and new roles (June, 2005). Ulrich (1997), in the attempts to overcome the negative perception of the personnel/HR function, suggested new, proactive roles for personnel/HR professionals. He defined four main roles along two axes: strategy versus operations, and process (HR tools and systems) versus people. The roles are: `strategic partners’ helping the business to successfully execute strategy, `administrative experts’ improving organisational efficiency by re-engineering the HR administration and other work processes, ‘employee champions’ maximising employee commitment, competence, and `change agents’ delivering organisational transformation and culture change. In the UK many organisations have been implementing the Ulrich model of HR roles (1997), abandoning completely the UK models, so meaningful in the 1980s/90s (Storey,1992; Tyson and Fell,1986; Monks,1992). The emergence of the electronic systems that automate HR administration triggered an interest in a new form of HR delivery. In addition to outsourcing and off-shoring trends, a new HR structure with HR Business Partners, Shared Services and Centres of Expertise (Ulrich, 1998), appeared to be prevail in many UK organisations.

The Ulrich model dominated the corporate world and the academic discussions, and since the mid 1980s almost 90% of all academic publications in the UK about the HR function referred to the concepts and ideas developed in the US. The flow remains mainly one-way (from the US to the UK) with limited reverse movement. It resulted in replicating or mirroring the research agendas from the US about the HRM concept and the HR function and thus limiting the impact of UK scholars on contemporary discourse on HRM and management. In the Journal Citation Reports, the subsection Industrial Relations and Labour Relations there are only 3 journals from the UK in the top ten, with the British Journal of Industrial Relations at first place, In the Management subsection, there is only one journal from the UK - Strategic Management Journal, at the seventh place.

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This article aimed to present the key contemporary debates on the HR function in the United Kingdom. The HR function, its status, credibility and influence was researched by many academics in the UK, however little progress has been observed and the problems persist, despite extensive advocacy and prescriptive solutions. Among many recommendations to alter the situation, the presence of HR executives on company boards, devolution of HR operational responsibilities to line management and increased professionalism did not seem to change the lack of status, credibility and influence of the HR function in organisations. It may mean that either the underlying causes of these problems have not yet been explored thoroughly by researchers or the ways of addressing the problems by the HR function and its practitioners, were inadequate.

Analysing the academic and practitioner’s literature three factors were examined that limit the current debate and, ultimately, hinder the HR function. The old legacy of the personnel function, the methodological constraints and the influence from the US seem to limit the progress. Therefore, there is a need for a further study of the HR function in context of its purpose in organisations, service expected from internal

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Source: ISI Knowledge Journal Citation Reports, accessed on 23 May 2007
customers and the skills and competencies of HR professionals required in contemporary organisations. The examination of the topic may redefine and perhaps, reposition the HR function in organisations. The question, however, remains whether the limits are or can be socially changeable to overcome the long lasting struggle of the HR function with itself and the organisations for status, credibility and influence.

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