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## Article

# Implementing Human Resource Management successfully: A first-line management challenge

Management Revue

## Provided in Cooperation with:

Rainer Hampp Verlag

Suggested Citation: Nehles, Anna C.; van Riemsdijk, Maarten; Kok, Irene; Looise, Jan Kees (2006) : Implementing Human Resource Management successfully: A first-line management challenge, Management Revue, ISSN 1861-9916, Rainer Hampp Verlag, Mering, Vol. 17, Iss. 3, pp. 256-273

This Version is available at:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10419/78909>

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## **Implementing Human Resource Management Successfully: A First-Line Management Challenge\*\***

In this paper we will address the success of Human Resource Management (HRM) implementation, concentrating not on the HR function but on first-line managers. First-line managers find implementing HR practices at the operational level difficult and show reluctance with their HR responsibilities. However, they have become increasingly responsible for the implementation of HRM and thus, their performance is critical for HRM effectiveness. Previous research pointed to five factors that could lead to HRM implementation difficulties. Four case studies in four different multinational business units are presented here to investigate the salience of these factors. Results show that first-line managers perceive four of the five factors hindering, but that the challenges faced vary per business unit.

Key words: **HRM Implementation, First-line Managers, HRM Effectiveness, Strategic HRM, Operational HRM**

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\*\* Article received: May 8, 2006  
Revised version accepted after double blind review: July 3, 2006.

## Introduction

First-line managers (FLMs) have an unquestioned crucial role in implementing Human Resource Management (HRM), because they are responsible for executing HR practices on the operational work floor (Guest 1987; Storey 1992; Lowe 1992; Brewster/Larsen 1992; Legge 1995; Gratton/Truss 2003; Den Hartog/Boselie/Paauwe 2004). In this paper, we investigate the application of the HR practices: performance appraisals, training and development, staffing and compensation.

According to Hales (2005: 473), the expression 'first-line manager' traditionally stands for "the position representing the first level of management to whom non-managerial employees report". We include the performance of HR activities in our definition and define FLMs as the lowest line managers at the operational level, who manage a team of operational employees on a day-to-day basis and are responsible for performing HR activities.

Until now, researchers have primarily investigated the relationship between HR practices and HRM system (or organisational) effectiveness (Schuler/Jackson, 1984; Arthur 1992; Pfeffer 1995; Delery/Doty 1996), whereas the implementation of HRM has attracted only limited attention. However, some constraints on effective HRM implementation were identified in the devolution literature (cf. Cunningham/Hyman 1999; Brewster/Larsen 2000; Renwick 2000). Devolving HR responsibilities to the operational line level implies a change in the roles taken on by the HR function (Storey 1992; Ulrich 1997; Caldwell 2003). The interventionist HR roles of 'change agents' and 'regulators' are consequently reduced by emphasising on non-interventionist roles, such as 'advisor' and 'service provider' (Caldwell 2003; Hope Hailey/Farndale/Truss 2005). The interventionist HR roles are increasingly devolved to FLMs, who seem to be neither capable nor motivated to take on such roles (Hope Hailey/Gratton/McGovern/Stiles/Truss 1997; Hall/Torrington 1998; Cunningham/Hyman 1999; Whittaker/Marchington 2003; Hope Hailey et al. 2005). Therefore, it seems that FLMs have failed to live up to their new roles.

In recent years, scholars have dedicated much attention and energy towards demonstrating a linkage between human resource management and firm performance. Effective HRM can help an organization achieve a competitive advantage and so improve its performance (Lado/Wilson 1994; Huselid 1995; Pfeffer 1995; Becker/Gerhart 1996). The effectiveness of HRM depends on the quality of HR practices, as well as the success of HRM implementation (Huselid/Jackson/Schuler 1997; Wright/McMahan/Snell/Gerhart 2001; Kane/Crawford/Grant 1999; Gratton/Truss 2003; Bowen/Ostroff 2004). However, even if HR practices were believed to be effective, the HRM system might still not be effective because FLMs do not know how to implement HR practices successfully on the work floor. Therefore, we need to study the challenges that FLMs face when implementing HRM processes, as these can influence the effectiveness of the whole HRM system.

### **Theory: Factors hindering first-line managers in executing HR practices**

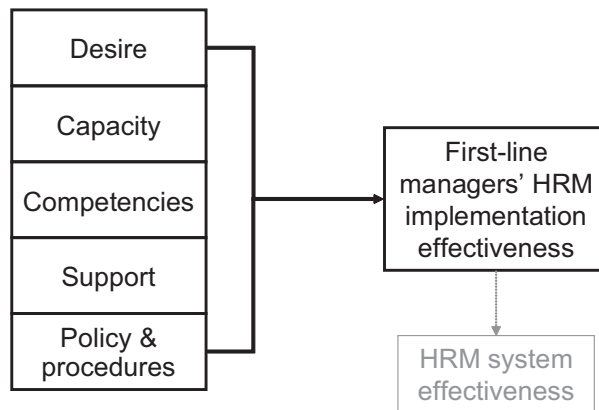
FLMs are in a position in which they are responsible for operational output, as well as for the performance of their team. To draw the best performance, FLMs are supposed to perform HR activities by using HR practices. However, FLMs do not always see

the need of using HR practices to achieve their business goals (McGovern 1999; Harris et al. 2002). Many authors have stated that FLM's are, in fact, 'reluctant' to take on these HR responsibilities (Storey 1992; Cunningham/Hyman 1995; Whittaker/Marchington 2003). The literature suggests that FLMs may not be willing to perform HR activities, have no spare time to spend on their additional responsibilities, have insufficient competencies to apply HR practices, are not well supported by HR managers or are not provided with clear policy and procedures for performing the additional HR tasks. These five factors are suggested to be the challenges FLMs experience when implementing HRM.

However, FLMs themselves have never been asked what they perceive as a hindrance to implementing HR successfully. Therefore, we want to investigate to what extent first-line managers themselves perceive the five factors that have been identified so far as hindering or fostering their HRM implementation success?

Therefore, our research model focuses on the relationship between the five factors that should hinder FLMs and HRM implementation success.

**Figure 1: Research model**



So far, the results of numerous case studies showed the following possible explanations for FLMs' reluctance.

***Lack of desire***

Willingness among FLMs is an essential precondition to successful HRM implementation. While some managers are enthusiastic about their HR responsibilities for the people they supervise, many are not. This low level of desire can result from a lack of either personal or institutionalised incentives. The fact that FLMs are not always sufficiently willing to take on HR responsibilities or that their motivation to do so is lacking highlights a lack of personal incentives for using HR practices (McGovern 1999; Harris et al. 2002). Institutional incentives can persuade FLMs to give HR activities serious consideration (McGovern 1999; Whittaker/Marchington 2003), e.g. by making HR responsibilities an integral part of FLMs' own performance appraisals, their job descriptions or business policy. In addition, FLMs often give HR tasks low priority

when managerial short-termism dominates (Cunningham/Hyman 1999; Brewster/Larsen 2000; Whittaker/Marchington 2003).

#### ***Lack of capacity***

FLMs need time to implement HRM successfully. HR tasks are generally devolved to FLMs without reducing their other duties (Brewster/Larsen 2000). This implies that FLMs might not be able to devote enough time to HRM, especially when short-term operational pressures dominate (Gratton/Hope Hailey/Stiles/Truss 1999; Renwick 2000).

#### ***Lack of competencies***

There is a need for HR-related competencies for successful HRM implementation. FLMs lack specialist knowledge and skills (Lowe 1992; Gennard/Kelly 1997; Hall/Torrington 1998; Harris et al. 2002), for example on legal requirements and agreed practices. Competencies in performing HR activities can be developed through training. Some authors have shown the need for continual and systematic training in HR activities (Cunningham/Hyman 1999; McGovern 1999; Renwick 2000). However, there is evidence that few organizations provide such formal HR training (Brewster/Larsen 2000; Harris et al. 2002).

#### ***Lack of support***

There is a need for support from HR managers for successful HRM implementation. If HR specialists are unable or unwilling to provide clear and proactive support, FLMs will lack sufficient HR skills (Gennard/Kelly 1997; Renwick 2000) and proper encouragement to manage the operational workforce effectively. Thus, FLMs need advice and coaching from personnel specialists on how to perform HR activities (Hope Hailey et al. 1997; Hall/Torrington 1998; McGovern 1999; Whittaker/Marchington 2003). However, some HR managers are not able to provide FLMs with the support they need, or are reluctant to abandon their HR responsibilities and play a new organizational role in supporting FLMs (Gennard/Kelly 1997; Hall/Torrington 1998).

#### ***Lack of policy and procedures***

There is a need for a clear overall HR policy and accompanying procedures to coordinate which practices FLMs should use and the way they should do so at the operational level (Gennard/Kelly 1997). On the one hand, this is necessary to consult FLMs about the devolution of their responsibilities and prevent that they become unclear about their roles (Lowe 1992; McGovern 1999). On the other hand, it is necessary to remove individual judgment and potential bias in – and interpretation of – HR practices by defining the way in which HR activities are performed in practice. If FLMs do not know how to use HR practices, they ‘adjust and fine tune’ the practices according to their idiosyncratic understanding (Brewster/Larsen 2000; Bowen/Ostroff 2004).

These five factors highlight the possible causes of the difficulties FLMs experience when implementing HRM and could explain their ‘reluctance’. In order to research which of these five factors are salient we will begin by outlining our research design and methods. We will then present our findings, and discuss them. Finally, we

will present our conclusions and emphasize those aspects of the case studies that are particularly relevant for future research.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The research was carried out within four multinational business units (BUs). BU A, which is part of one of the world's biggest electronics companies, has a product line that includes technologies in cardio/vascular X-ray, ultrasound, magnetic resonance, etc. The complex job tasks in the high-tech working environments require well-educated and trained employees. BU B, which is part of a large international company in the market of foods, home care, and personal care, is an operating BU responsible for the production and marketing of ice cream and frozen products in the Netherlands. The routine production environment requires fewer complex job tasks and thus less well-educated employees than in BU A. BU C, a unit within a global group of energy and petrochemical companies, is responsible for refinery operations and the distribution of refinery products. Refinery operations require less well-educated employees than BU A, because the job tasks are not as complex as in BU A. However, responsibilities and especially the hazardous nature of the operation need better trained employees than those in BU B. Finally, BU D is a subsidiary of an international technology company. It develops and produces high-quality, lightweight components and systems for the aviation and aerospace industry. Here again we see a technologically advanced working environment, in which well-educated employees are needed to handle complex job tasks.

We selected a total of 30 FLMS with day-to-day supervisory responsibility for teams of about 5 to 15 operational employees and the relevant HR responsibilities in various operational departments of the different BUs. The number of FLMS selected per BU was evenly distributed, resulting in seven to eight FLMS per BU. In addition, we selected four HR staff members who work with operational line managers. For each of the four BUs, we selected one HR staff member. Information about the different units of analysis, as well as sample data, is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Unit of analysis and sample data**

Variable	BU A	BU B	BU C	BU D
Location	Netherlands	Netherlands	Germany	Netherlands
# of employees/site	2200	160	1500	825
# of line managers	200	11	100	80
Sample	7	8	8	7
Average age (s.d.)*	42 (6.9)	40 (8.4)	44 (6.7)	48 (6.5)
Average span/control (s.d.)*	12 (6.0)	9 (5.2)	12 (3.2)	30 (41.1)**
Average years of experience (s.d.)*	7 (5.5)	9 (9.0)	11 (6.9)	15 (10.3)
Average education level	tertiary	sec./vocational	vocational	tertiary
Average education level team	tertiary	secondary	vocational	vocational
* standard deviation				
** 1 outlier: span of control of 120 employees - without outlier: 15 (11.1)				

### **Procedures**

During 2005, we undertook four case studies based on semi-structured interviews with thirty FLMs and four HR staff members (one per BU). On average, each interview lasted between 1 and 1,5 hours.

### **Measures**

We aimed, first, to examine whether FLMs indeed experienced the previously identified factors as hindrances, second, to better define the problems these factors actually contain, and third, to explore what FLMs perceive as hindering in performing their HR responsibilities.

To control for the differences between the four BUs and for the personal differences of the interviewees, the variables age, span of control, years of experience as a line manager, education level of the FLM, and education level of the team were taken into consideration (compare Table 1). Hindrances experienced by FLMs are not significantly influenced by the control variables. The variable span of control has a high standard deviation in BU D and could thus be regarded as an outlier. We nevertheless included the results of this FLM as the characteristics with respect to age, years of experience, education level and education level of the team are in line with the average results in all BUs. We identified a commitment-oriented HRM system in each of the four BUs.

We explicitly adhere to the research stream on HRM effectiveness that uses the *perceptions* of the main party involved in the HRM implementation process (cf. Delaney/Huselid 1996; Huselid et al. 1997; Wright et al. 2001; Kane et al. 1999). Using perceptions gives us the opportunity to investigate how FLMs consider their HR role, which challenges they go through when managing their team, and what experiences they have with executing HR practices. We therefore asked FLMs whether they perceive the factors *desire*, *capacity*, *competencies*, *support* and *policy and procedures* as hindering in effectively applying HR practices. The data from the 30 interviews were analysed by dividing each factor into several operationalised sub-items (see Table 2).

The answers given by the interviewees were transformed into results by counting the perceived hindrances per factor at the item level. To measure the *desire* factor, the FLMs' personal unwillingness to perform HR activities was measured with the *personal and institutional incentives* items, as well as *managerial short-termism*. For the *capacity* factor we measured insufficient time for performing HR activities by comparing the *actual and necessary time spent* on performing these activities. Insufficient HR knowledge or skills was observed for measuring the *competencies* factor. This item is based on the *training courses followed* and *experience* sub-items. The *support* factor was examined by measuring insufficient support from the HR department, taking the difference between *needed support* and *received support* into consideration. For the *policy and procedures* factor *role unclarity* and *idiosyncratic understanding* were used as sub-items to see if policies and procedures are perceived as unclear. In addition to inquiring about the five factors already identified in the research, we asked the respondents if they experienced any other hindering factors to explore the possibility that additional factors should be added. This proved not to be the case. In order to get an indication of the most salient

factor for FLMs, we asked the respondents to identify the factor that they experienced as being most hindering and thus the factor that they would change if they could.

**Table 2: Operationalisation of questionnaire**

Factor	Item measured	Sub-items	Operationalisation
<b>Desire</b>	Personal unwillingness to perform HR activities	Personal incentives	Value added of HR role for reaching business goals
		Institutional incentives	Enjoyment in carrying out HR responsibilities
		Managerial short-termism	Job description Performance appraisal Business policy Priority for people or business issues
<b>Capacity</b>	Insufficient time for performing HR activities	Actual time spent	Average actual time spent on performing HR activities
		Necessary time spent	Average necessary time spent on performing HR activities
<b>Competencies</b>	Insufficient HR knowledge/skills	Training courses attended Experience	Value Sufficiency Value Sufficiency
<b>Support</b>	Insufficient support from the HR department	Needed support	Kind and amount of support needed
		Received support	Kind and amount of support received
<b>Policy &amp; procedures</b>	Unclear policies and procedures	Role unclarity Idiosyncratic understanding	Knowledge about HR responsibilities Concreteness of HR instruments Guidelines for HR activities Standardisation/formalisation of HR activity performance in different departments

## Results

### *FLMs' HR responsibilities*

Of the HR practices we investigated, line managers in the four BUs are responsible for applying appraisal and training and development activities. In BU B, a formal appraisal system had not yet been introduced, but FLMs will be responsible for assessing employees' performance as soon as the system is in place. In the areas of staffing and compensation, the line manager shares his responsibility with the HR department. FLMs are responsible for daily staffing decisions, such as work distribution among employees, and administrative tasks, such as time registration and holiday planning. Recruiting and selecting new employees are tasks that are often handled by the HR department, although line managers are sometimes involved in selection decisions. Compensation decisions were only indirectly influenced by the FLM's appraisal assessment. The application of compensation activities, however, was performed exclusively by the HR department or by outsourced parts of the companies. The kind of people management responsibilities that are included in the HR role of FLMs depends

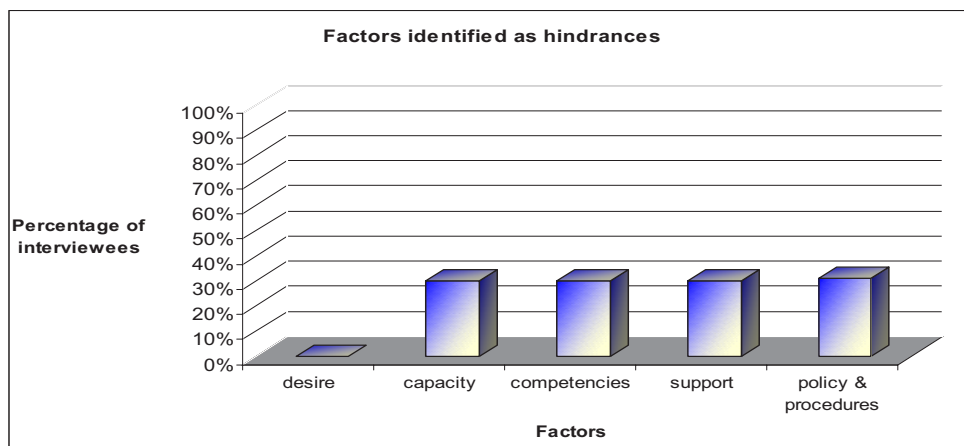


on what the FLMs themselves perceived as necessary. This part of their role was less structured and formalised. However, FLMs perceived it as a very important part of their HR role, investing more time in these tasks than in the execution of centrally developed HR practices. Most FLMs invest a lot of their time in guiding, monitoring, coaching and motivating employees, sometimes in the context of regular, structured bilaterals and sometimes in less structured contexts, whenever they deemed it necessary.

### ***Challenges identified***

We analysed the results quantitatively in order to be able to establish which factors are relevant in what way and under what conditions. When looking at an average of the five factors across the four case studies, no factor is perceived as hindering by more than 1/3 of all interviewees (compare Figure 2). In total, four of the five factors are identified as being obstacles for effective HRM implementation. The overall result illustrates that the *capacity*, *competencies*, *support* and *policies and procedures* factors are considered to be hindering to nearly the same extent.

**Figure 2: Factors identified as hindrances**

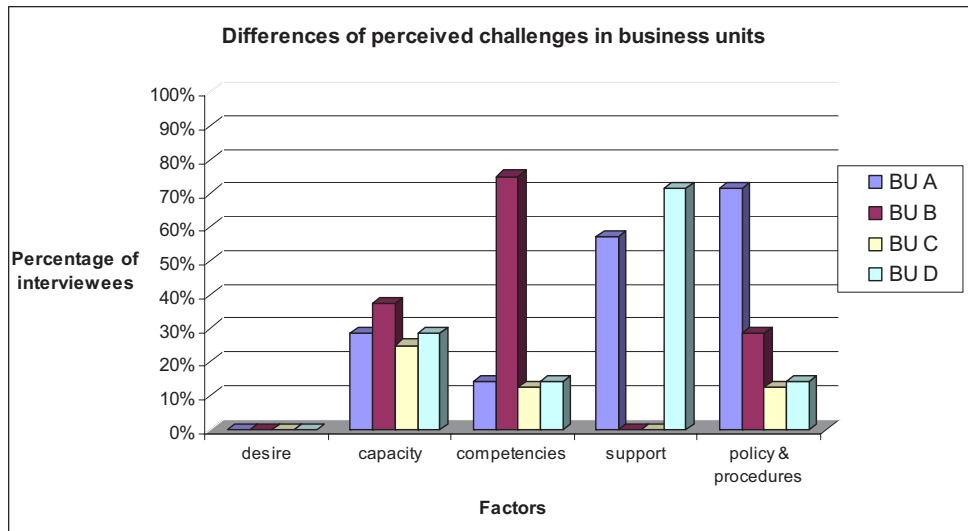


Although 4 of the 5 factors identified by previous research are found to hinder line managers in our sample of the first hierarchical level, their relevance clearly differs per company studied. Some factors are very relevant in some BUs, whereas they appear less relevant in others (compare Figure 3). Many differences are apparent regarding the *policy and procedures*, *competencies* and *support* factors, whereas all FLMs interviewed experience nearly the same challenges with the *desire* and *capacity* factors. These differences will be further elaborated in the discussion.

### ***Desire***

Not one of the 30 FLMs we interviewed shows reluctance to perform HR activities. All FLMs perceive sufficient personal and institutional incentives to commit to their HR responsibilities and are willing to do so. All FLMs either see an added value in applying HR practices or like this aspect of their responsibilities. However, the reasons

**Figure 3: Differences of perceived challenges in BUs**



for FLMs’ personal motivation are different. In general, HR practices are regarded as a valuable tool for helping individual employees grow, improve and develop, as well as for motivating and leading the team. Some respondents also state that HR practices are valuable tools to get “the right person with the right skills in the right place”, that they represent a structure or framework for fulfilling HR responsibilities and symbolise uniformity in the instruments within the company.

Regarding institutional incentives, we found that the general HR role of FLMs is included in most job descriptions, performance appraisals and business policies. All FLMs from BU C and more than half of those from BU D state that their HR role is written down in the business policy, whereas the majority of FLMs from the other companies state they are not. Much higher is the percentage of FLMs that state their HR role and responsibilities are clearly communicated throughout the whole company.

When asking FLM’s about what they would prioritise, it turned out that 83% rank business issues over HR issues because they perceive managerial short-termism. This means that when they need to decide what to do first, most aim at solving technical or business problems before solving people problems. However, for most FLMs, this does not mean that they do not perform HR activities at all but simply that the performance of HR activities will be postponed.

**Capacity**

Of the 28 FLMs who could indicate how much time they actually spend on HR issues, 14 respondents spend less than 10%, 10 spend between 10 and 20%, and 2 spend between 20 and 40%. However, 2 FLMs indicated that they spend much more time on HR activities, namely between 40 and 50%. When asked whether they perceive the time they spend on HR activities as sufficient to lead their team effectively, 9 of all 30

FLMs said they would prefer to spend more time on HR issues, whereas 17 perceived the time they spend as sufficient and 4 wanted to spend less time in order to concentrate more on business issues. Thus, in total, 9 (30%) of all FLMs interviewed perceive time problems in their HR role. They pointed out that operational pressures prevent them from performing all of the HR activities they are supposed to perform or from spending sufficient time on the individual HR activities. The *capacity* factor is perceived as hindering in all four BUs, but is regarded as challenging by most FLMs in BU C.

### ***Competencies***

Results show that 9 (30%) of all FLMs interviewed experience a lack of competencies to apply HR practices in an effective way. This factor is perceived as most disturbing in BU B. Here, 6 of the 8 FLMs consider their HR competencies as insufficient to perform HR activities effectively, whereas only 1 of the FLMs in each of the other BUs experiences this obstacle.

Almost all interviewees indicate that both experience and training are necessary to develop the right competencies. Of those FLMs that are hindered by a lack of competencies, half point to limited experience as a cause and the other half to insufficient training courses. A lack of experience correlates with a limited number of years of experience in a supervisory job (2 years on average). Those FLMs that refer to a lack of training as a cause primarily perceive themselves as lacking particular leadership skills, which they think they could develop by attending appropriate training courses. Gaining leadership skills is regarded as helpful for applying HR practices, especially in order to become more secure and make fewer mistakes in the HR role.

### ***Support***

In total, 9 FLMs (30%) perceive this factor as hindering because they do not receive the support they need. The kind of support needed is, however, different in the different BUs. If a lack of support is perceived as hindering in one BU, this is always perceived by most of the FLMs interviewed in this BU. FLMs in BU C and D require support on *regulatory questions and organisational arrangements*, whereas FLMs in BU B require support on *competency-related matters*, including *advice on how to apply HR practices* and FLMs in BU A require support on *directions about how to apply HR practices*.

Although the kind of support demanded is different, only FLMs in BU A and D receive less support than they require and thus feel hindered by this factor. FLMs in BU A feel a lack of guidance and coaching on how to apply HR practices. In addition, they feel the need to implement HRM in a way that matches with the future plans of the company and guarantees uniformity within the firm. The HR department, however, seems not to be able to deliver this information. FLMs in BU D miss support in organisational arrangements and extra services, such as system registration and badges for new employees. They are hindered by the fact that the HR function does not perform the tasks they perceive it is supposed to perform or that it does so too late.

### ***Policy and procedures***

In total, 9 of the 29 FLMs (31%) (1 respondent felt he could not judge the policies and procedures) perceive the *policy and procedures* factor as hindering. All but 1 FLM, who experienced difficulties with this factor, indicated idiosyncratic understandings

about how to apply HR practices, whereas 2 respondents indicated hindrances because of unclarity on which HR practices they are supposed to use. This factor is perceived as most challenging in BU A. Here, FLMs miss concrete policies and procedures on how to standardise and formalise the performance of HR activities within their teams.

The causes for the hindrances that are based on an idiosyncratic understanding are all more or less the same. People are bothered by the fact that the instruments they use are not concrete enough or that they are not provided with enough or sufficiently detailed guidelines on how to execute HR practices on the work floor. If this information is lacking, FLMs feel obliged to interpret the practices according to their own understanding, although they fear that this might lead to inconsistencies across departments. They regard it as problematic when, for example, employees from different departments meet each other at the coffee machine and discover that they are not appraised in the same way their colleagues are appraised. Perceptions of role unclarity emerge because FLMs do not have a handbook on which HR responsibilities they are responsible for and which HR activities they are to perform.

### Discussion

Regarding the *desire* factor, it is remarkable that most FLMs did not question the fact that they are the ones responsible for HR issues. Some FLMs even thought their HR role was written down in the business policy, although this was not in fact the case, and some wondered whether anyone else could theoretically be responsible for HR issues, as they themselves are the ones who work most closely with their team. This finding is in line with McGovern (1999), who stated that line and HR managers support the devolution of HR responsibilities to the line, as FLMs have the most knowledge about people.

FLMs are aware of their HR role in all four case companies, irrespective of institutional incentives with which they are provided. Institutional incentives might help to increase their personal incentives but are not necessarily needed to encourage their understanding of what they are supposed to do.

Generally, we were surprised about the results regarding managerial short-termism. Because of short-term pressure, we expected a clear priority for business issues instead of HR issues (Cunningham/Hyman 1999; Whittaker/Marchington 2003). However, 17% of all FLMs interviewed prioritise HR issues over business issues. In addition, a lot of them also stated that although they prioritise business issues when they need to choose, they would nevertheless always perform HR activities at a later point in time. In addition, they could also think of situations in which they would prioritise HR issues because people issues can affect business issues in the long run. Therefore, short-termism of business issues might result in postponing HR activities but not in cancelling them, as most FLMs perceive the performance of HR activities to be valuable for the business.

*Capacity* is perceived as a problem in all case companies to nearly the same extent. Thus, differences in the BUs cannot explain our findings for this factor. Instead, a lack of capacity seems to depend on the personality of FLMs or, alternatively, to be a general problem identified in all companies at the first-line management level. Some

FLMs compensate for the time problem by preparing for or even performing HR activities during weekends, evenings or breaks. This is another indicator for the fact that our respondents regard HR issues as important and are willing to perform them.

It was clear that those FLMs indicating a lack of training as the reason for a lack of *competencies* are more insecure than the FLMs indicating a lack of experience. Inadequately trained people feel really bothered by this factor, whereas the ones who lack experience believe that they will certainly become more competent over time. FLMs who indicate a lack of competencies even though they have a lot of experience in their job are only found in one company, i.e. BU B. These FLMs have a lower education level on average than the people that state they lack competencies due to a lack of experience.

FLMs get *support* not only from HR managers but also from colleagues, their superior, the works council or even the medical service department. This is a new finding, not mentioned in previous research. Instead of asking HR professionals, FLMs often contact their superior or other FLMs first, and only contact the HR function when support from colleagues is not sufficient or the problem is too complex, making HR contact necessary.

Besides this, FLMs contact different parties for different concerns. They often talk to their colleagues or their superior about problems that their employees encounter or about how to handle certain day-to-day HR difficulties. The HR function is contacted for legal issues or information about specific regulations. It seems that FLMs with a secondary or vocational education, who work in operational areas where the task complexity is low, often ask their superior before contacting the HR function or even ask their superior, if necessary, to contact the HR function. In contrast, FLMs with a tertiary education, who work in operational areas where the task complexity is high, often contact the HR department directly without involving their superior.

A lack in *policies or procedures* will not necessarily lead to obstacles as perceived by FLMs, when they are balanced by support from the HR department. When FLMs know that HR managers will provide them with the answers they need, the success in the execution of HR practices should not be harmed. A number of FLMs admitted that they like the freedom they have in applying HR practices in accordance with their own interpretation and understanding. However, at the same time, a lot of them recognised that differences in application of HR practices might result in different outcomes, which might be negative for the company. Therefore, they asked for policy and procedures in order to standardise the execution of HR practices, thereby ensuring that HRM is implemented in a consistent way. Idiosyncratic understanding, as proposed by Bowen/Ostroff (2004), but also role unclarity (compare results), as proposed by Lowe (1992), was thus found to be a challenge for the implementation of HRM.

The perception of this factor seems to be related to the BU environment and, even more so, the HR environment in which FLMs perform. Providing FLMs with clear and concrete policies and procedures is an HR decision at a centralised level, but can also be taken care of by local HR in the form of personal guidance.

Figure 3 shows the factors perceived as challenging differ by BU. Only the *capacity* factor is perceived as almost hindering uniformly in the four BUs. The fact that FLMs in different BUs perceive different obstacles in their daily HR work has various causes. What seems to explain the difference between some challenges experienced by FLMs in different BUs is the education level of FLMs and the complexity of tasks at the operational level. The high-tech work environment in BUs A and D, for instance, requires performing complex tasks by well-educated and well-trained staff. In BUs B and C, the task complexity and the educational level of the operational staff is lower because the routine production setting does not require sophisticated training. It is clear that the *support* factor is only experienced as challenging in those BUs that have high task complexity and a highly educated work force, whereas it is perceived as non-challenging in those BUs that have low task complexity and less educated staff. The factors that are perceived as most challenging in BU A, for example, are *policy/procedures* and *support*, whereas the *competencies* factor is perceived as least challenging after the *desire* factor. However, in BU B the most worrying factor is *competencies*, whereas the *support* factor is not perceived as a hindrance by any of the FLMs interviewed.

The support demanded from the HR function depends on the perceived relevance of support received from HR managers and the interest the HR staff show in operational problems. In the BUs with low task complexity and employee education level, support is given in a different way than in the BUs with high task complexity and employee educational level. FLMs in BU B, for instance, have frequent contact with the HR function and a close relationship between line management and the HR function was indeed apparent. HR managers from this department are valued for the interest they show in problems that occur at the operational level and for their frequent visits to the work floor. With this kind of behaviour of the HR function, it is unsurprising that FLMs do not perceive the *support* factors as challenging. In BU C, the HR function also offers personal support, but FLMs do not use it this as frequently as in BU B. The HR function describes itself as quite service-oriented to line managers, because the HR staff we interviewed said, “supporting line managers, this is what we are there for”. The fact that FLMs do not use this support can be either explained by the fact that line managers in Germany (BU C is located in Germany) need to follow a special line manager training to pass an exam (“Meisterprüfung”), and thus do not need as much support as line managers in the Netherlands who do not follow such training, or by the fact that FLMs in BU C have a close relationship with their superiors who they often ask for support first. In the BUs that can be described as having high task complexity and employee education levels, the service orientation of the HR functions is not as high as in BU B and C, and more educated FLMs seemed to demand more support from the HR functions than their less educated colleagues in the other BUs. In both BUs, FLMs complained about HR managers’ lack of interest in (HR) problems that occur on the work floor and their lack of time and motivation to support them in solving such problems.

However, the perception of some factors seems to be rather BU-related, and thus could not be explained by internal or external differences between the BUs. The *competencies* factor, for example, is perceived as challenging by the majority of the inter-

viewed FLMs in BU B, whereas the majority of FLMs in BU C, the BU with a similar job complexity and educational level, perceived it as non-hindering. FLMs in BU A and D, which are comparable regarding their task complexity and education level of staff, perceive the *policy and procedures* factor differently as well. In BU A, they perceive it as the most hindering factor, whereas in BU D they perceive it as one of the least restrictive ones. The training programs for FLMs and the policies and procedures that FLMs obtain in the different BUs are obviously different.

The competencies of FLMs are audited differently in the different BUs. In all BUs except BU B, line managers are selected based on a specific test or exam. Then, those FLMs are trained on how to apply HR practices in specially designed training courses in BU C and D. FLMs need to register for all training courses (HR practices related or general coaching or leadership courses) themselves, but the HR function checks for their participation in those courses in BU A and D. BU D is currently developing a line management introduction training program, that contains all courses that line managers are expected to follow. However, in BU B there are no specific training courses for line managers and no specific training on how to apply HR practices. The HR function trains FLMs personally on an ad-hoc basis. The fact that BU B offers fewer specific training courses for line management, does not select line managers based on a clear procedure, and does not audit the training courses followed results in the fact that FLMs perceive their lack of competencies as challenging the effective implementation of HRM.

Policies and procedures are handled differently in the four BUs. When we look at the guidelines that line managers are provided with, it is clear that the type of guidelines and the way in which they are communicated differs a lot. In BU A, the BU in which we noted the most *policy and procedure* challenges, information is given on the intranet and HR managers give personal guidelines to departmental managers. They are then supposed to communicate this further to their line managers. However, this does not seem to work well. In BU B, some general guidelines are given on the intranet, but HR managers also explain FLMs orally how to apply HR practices. In BU C, the intranet provides detailed guidelines and, additionally, HR managers hand out information and examples to help improving the application of HR practices. Besides, the used forms also contain some guidelines on how to complete them. In BU D, there are no written guidelines on how to apply HR practices but training courses cover these instructions. In addition, some general guidelines are given on the intranet. The fact that FLMs in BU A are most bothered by the *policy and procedures* factor, shows us that the guidelines given on the intranet are either not detailed enough or FLMs are not aware of their added value. Moreover, the personal guidelines that are given to departmental managers should either be better communicated to FLMs or given directly to them, as is done in BU B.

We found out that the majority of the hindrances that line managers perceived are comparable with what the literature suggested, but that the desire factor was not perceived as hindering, as suggested in the literature. For some factors, more insights than provided by the literature were gained during in the interviews. The perception of these factors as challenges differs for the BUs studied. For some factors, these differences can be explained by the complexity of tasks and educational level of staff in the

different BUs, whereas for other factors the differences can be explained by BU-related HR processes such as the training, guidelines given and communicated, and the support provided for line managers.

### Conclusion and limitations

The four case studies offered valuable insights in FLMs' difficulties in effectively implementing HRM and in the concrete factors that hinder them in performing their HR responsibilities. Many case studies have been carried out with the intention of identifying various factors that might hinder line managers in performing their HR role. We aim, not to identify more factors, but to understand which of these factors are salient for HRM system effectiveness. With the help of our four pilot cases, we built our theoretical framework and prepared our way for asking the right questions in a quantitative investigation. An operationalisation of the factors was possible after getting input from the line managers themselves and was necessary for the construction of a questionnaire. A quantitative survey would be helpful in exploring what really hinders FLMs in effective HRM implementation and which factors are most salient in different circumstances.

Case study research and, in particular, the use of interviews based on perceptions, present some drawbacks. Asking FLMs about what they perceive as hindering in performing their HR job successfully and which problems they encounter when carrying out HR activities could result in biased answers, because FLMs might not want to admit their weaknesses in leading people. In particular, the response given when asking FLMs about their willingness to perform HR responsibilities and their own HR competencies is difficult to judge as we asked them to assess themselves. All factors, except the factor *desire*, can be extrinsically attributed. The responses FLMs give when being asked about their personal incentives for performing their job successfully could also be influenced by social desirability. Asking FLMs about their own competencies turned out to be complicated, as FLMs are modest about this. The first answer was either 'you can never have enough competencies', 'I can always improve' or 'why don't you go and ask the people in my team about this issue?'. Even the experienced FLMs showed hesitancy in answering this question and showed uncertainty by noting that they can always learn more and improve skills. Using a scale to test the factors *desire* and *competencies* seems to be a more appropriate way to measure both the FLMs' willingness to implement HRM and their ability to do so.

Although the qualitative nature of our research shows some limitations, it provided us with a valuable insight into what FLMs perceive when reflecting on their HR role. The results show that FLMs experience obstacles in executing HR practices on the operational work floor. As this could harm the effectiveness of the HRM system, these hindrances need serious attention.

It became clear that some differences between our results and the results from previous research exist and that some factors involve different issues than those previously assumed. In contrast to the case study results reported by McGovern (1999) and Harris et al. (2002), we did not find evidence for the factor *desire*. FLMs in the four case companies we investigated are either motivated to perform their HR responsibilities or at least see an added value in applying HR practices in their teams. The



factors *capacity, competencies, support* and *policy and procedures* are experienced as challenging by nearly the same percentage of FLMs. However, the average numbers do not illustrate the strong differences between the results of the four case companies. We found that four of the five factors are indeed relevant in explaining HRM implementation success.

It seems to be essential to take company characteristics into account in order to understand the differences in the perceptions of FLMs in the different BUs. A classification of task complexities and FLMs' educational levels necessary to fulfil these tasks seems to be relevant for identifying which factors are salient under which contextual conditions. However, this only helps understanding the perceived differences of some factors. For other factors, it is necessary to look at BU-specific differences in the HRM systems, such as training and development, guidelines and support provided for line managers and the way these processes are communicated. Only then will we be able to determine which factors explain the reluctance of many FLMs to implement HRM in different environments.

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## Appendix: First-line manager interview framework

### 1. Introduction of interviewee

- Name
- Gender
- Age
- What do you do now (business function)?
- How long are you already in this function?
- How long in company?
- What did you do before (function, company)?
- What is your educational background (technical, managerial, HBO, university)?
- How many people are in your team (span of control)?
- What is the average education level of your team?

### 2. Current situation regarding HR issues

- How much time per week (on average) do you spend on HR issues?
- What does that include (which HR practices)?
- How much time are you willing to spend on using HR practices?
- How much time do you think you should spend on using HR practices in order to use them effectively?
- Do you do it alone or together with the HR department?

- Are there also HR practices used by other people (on your team)?
- Is there anybody else supervising your workforce? Does this help you?

### 3. Reasons for using HR practices

- Why do you use HR practices?
- Do you like using HR practices? Why?
- Are there incentives for you to use HR practices (financial and non-financial)?
- What are your performance appraisals based on (is using HR practices included)?
- Are your HR responsibilities included in your job description?
- Is the HR role of line managers part of the business policy (stated in, communicated by higher management)?
- Does using HR practices help you to reach your business goals? How?

### 4. Reasons for *not* using HR practices

- Is anything hindering you in using HR practices? Please explain!

#### *Practices*

- What is your opinion about the practices you are provided with?
- Where do the HR practices you use come from (central HR department)?
- Do you know what is expected from you in using HR practices?
- Are the practices concrete enough for you to use them? Why not?
- Are you provided with guidelines for using the HR practices? Do you need guidelines for using HR practices (do they help you)?
- Are the HR practices you use in line with the overall business strategy?
- Do the HR practices you use help you to reach your business goals (short term, long term)? How?
- What do you prioritise, business issues or HR issues? Why?
- Are you involved in HR policy making? How?
  - Do you think you should?

#### *Ability*

- Do you feel you have enough HR knowledge/ HR skills for using HR practices?
- Did you receive any training for using HR practices?
  - If yes, was it valuable and was it sufficient?
  - If no, do you think you need any? What kind of?
- Do you need support for using HR practices?
  - What kind of support?
- Do you get the support you need (from HR or someone else)? Why not? From whom?
- Do you ask (the HR department) for support/advice?

#### **General**

- Is there anything else hindering you that we have not discussed yet?
- From all things discussed in this interview, what needs to change most regarding the use of HR practices? Why?