Managing the HR function in Public administration
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Abstract
Human resource management in public administration concerns human resource management as it applies specifically to the field of public administration. It is considered to be an in-house structure that insures unbiased treatment, ethical standards, and promotes a value-based system. As the public sector has modernised and sought to become more efficient and cost-effective, the effective and strategic management of people has received increasing prominence and there have been calls for the HR function to play a more strategic role. The quality of human resources is a critical factor in the capacity of the government to deliver on its mandate. Human Resource Management (HRM) is critically important in that it ensures that human capital is well managed and that all issues relating to this resource are effectively dealt with. These issues include compensation, recruitment and selection, performance management, organisational development, safety, wellness, employee motivation, communication, administrative support and training. In this light, this paper investigates the effect of Managing the HR function in Public administration. The findings highlight the complex and often contradictory nature of HR functional roles, and suggest that new and more strategic roles have not replaced traditional approaches but, rather, have been grafted on, giving rise to a variety of hybrid HR forms.

Keywords: PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, DISCIPLINING ADMINISTRATION, HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

1. Introduction
The reform of structures, systems and processes within public services over the past 20 years has been well documented at an international level (Massey and Pyper, 2005; Skalen, 2004). The main purpose of these changes has been to increase the efficiency, cost-effectiveness and performance of public organisations, and has involved an increasing pressure from government on organisations to emulate private sector managerial practices, including performance management, customer orientation, and a heightened strategic focus (Boyne et al., 2004; Horton, 2003).

Since salaries can amount to up to 80% of organisational costs in the public sector, the domain of human resource management (HRM) has received renewed attention under these reforms (Barnett et al., 1996). Potentially, it has been argued, improved human resource management could facilitate the recruitment and retention of valued staff, enhance organisational cost-effectiveness and serve to promulgate a performance-driven culture through the adoption of a more strategic HR role (Bach and dellaRocca, 2000).

Public administration is both an art and a science. It is not a single set of principles and concepts due to its socio-cultural context, its evolving intellectual content, and its tacit values.

As a relatively new and applied field, public administration is constantly adapting to changing socio-political and economic conditions, and as a result is not easy to classify. The most popular approach to teaching public administration theory is to trace its evolution throughout time, putting different theories in their historical context. The pursuit of effective public sector administration may be explained as a series of ideas, each representing a step, or increment, towards a complete theory of public administration. Viewed over time, they have helped build a substantial reservoir of knowledge.

Similarly, it is important to discuss theories and tenets of public administration from the viewpoint of their impact on the development of the field, the rhetoric that justified their embrace by the public, and the factors that shaped them.

Human Resource Management is a long-established task within the Government's Management Framework. Through this task the Government meets its obligation to be a good employer; seeks to secure staff commitment; and develops and manages staff to give of their best to help the Government serve the community. The need to respond to changing community expectations means that the task of managing our staff better is more important than ever - it is the staff who deliver the service, and it is through a new emphasis on staff management that a customer service and performance oriented culture will gradually evolve.
However, despite the acknowledged significance of HRM under New Public Management (NPM), evidence as to whether or not there have been any substantive changes in the role of the HR function remains both partial and inconclusive (Selden, 2005; Lupton and Shaw, 2001; Boyne et al., 1999). This paper contributes to this important debate over the reality of change in the public sector, and seeks to answer the question: is there any evidence that the role of the HR function in the public sector has become more strategic?

2. Disciplining administration

The nineteenth century was the age of positivism. Empirical observations and logical deductions came to be seen as the only legitimate sources of knowledge. Science and technology appeared to provide rational grounds for the establishment of a new social, moral and political order. Even if Auguste Comte coined the term “positive philosophy”, he was not the only thinker who contributed to its development. Most nineteenth century social philosophers shared the view that social realities can be known objectively, i.e., that separating facts from values is both possible and desirable. This was true of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, and in a more qualified sense, this was true also of Marx (Hollis, 1994). The practical effects of this new faith were not immediately visible. However, the political and bureaucratic elites in western Europe undertook to reform their administrative systems early in the second half of the century. By the 1870s, a politically neutral civil service commission was in charge of recruiting the members of the British professional administrative elite. A rudimentary system of classification was also in place. When Max Weber wrote his classical analysis of bureaucracy, the institutions he was describing existed in most countries of continental Europe. Administrative reforms in North America took a little longer to produce noticeable effects. In both the USA and Canada, the British example inspired many active reformers. However, the practice of political patronage was so well entrenched that it became necessary for the reformers to mobilize political support (Adams, 1994). While administrative reforms in Britain and in other European countries came about as a result of a top-down approach, it was a bottom-up process in the USA. Various groups, notably the National Civil Service Reform League, campaigned for a professional civil service. They had very practical objectives, but their discourse also revealed an underlying commitment to “science” defined less as a specificity than as a mythical force. Harold Lasswell’s efforts to create new interdisciplinary “policy sciences” often evoke the politics/administration dichotomy and strategic planning. True enough, the epistemology of the policy sciences shares with the behaviourist social sciences of the 1950s and 1960s a commitment to linear causal modeling using statistical methods. However, Lasswell insisted that the policy sciences are not simply applied social sciences. The positivism inherent in his methodological prescription was balanced by a contextual orientation that took values as an integral part of the analytical process. The policy sciences he envisioned were to be “the policy sciences of democracy”. Democracy needs both enlightened leadership and the freedom to engage incritical debates. The Lasswellian scheme achieved a synthesis of both aspects. The policy advisor or public sector manager who would wish to be guided by it would have to be both priest and jester, to borrow a metaphor from Douglas Torgerson (Torgerson, 2000). The priestly function is that of the professional analyst who carefully collects data according to the best methodological rules. Lest he or she confuses these data with the “real” world (or the many worlds constructed by other actors in the political system), the policy analyst must learn also to play the jester’s role and to ask “is this perhaps not too neat?”.

3. Cameralism and mercantilism

A major concern of cameralist writers was the provision of adequate revenues to government. As Small observed, they sought to determine the answer to the question: “What programme must a wise government adopt, in order first and foremost to be adequately supplied with ready money, and thus able to discharge the duties of the state in their various orders of importance?” Justi himself confirmed the importance of these fiscal needs when he observed that money or the “readiest means of the state” was the “great subject of national duties of the state in their various orders of importance?” (Spicer, 1995). This emphasis on money is asserted perhaps most boldly in the writings of an earlier cameralist writer of the seventeenth century, Wilhelm Freyer von Schröder. Schröder observed that “a prince who has no treasure in the chest, but plans to rely upon the goodwill of his subjects and lands, is walking on stilts: for the tempers of subjects are lame dogs, with which one can catch no particular hares”. He argued that a prince “should have the hilt in his hand and money in his chest, whereby he may put his demands into effect, and prostitute neither himself nor his reputation, nor he obliged to put his subjects off with fine words, because he is unable to act from lack of means” (“With gold and silver,” according to Schröder, “we can work miracles” (Wood and Ban, 1994).

Key to obtaining this “gold and silver” for the state, according to cameralists, were mercantilist policies, directed at regulating economic production and trade so as to increase the amount of precious metals held within the state and available, therefore, to government. Not surprisingly, cameralism has often been associated with mercantilism. Indeed, Sommer observed that cameralism was “properly the German and Austrian variety of mercantilism”. Justi demonstrated his fidelity to mercantilist doctrines when he asserted that “the first principle of advantageous
commerce with foreign nations is, that more gold and silver shall come into the country as a result than goes out.” Accordingly, Justi argued that “it must be made a fixed rule that nothing which can be produced at home shall be imported” and that “necessary measures” must be “adopted to promote production of those wares”. Furthermore, according to Justi, “those industries must be stimulated which will produce goods that foreign nations need”. Also, Justi argued that mining should be encouraged since mines “increase the treasure of the country with respect to the amount of gold and silver which they extract from the earth” (Stillman, 1995).

However, cameralism differed from mercantilism in other countries in that its primary aim was the consolidation of the political and administrative power of princes.

4. Public administration

Public administration is a subject of human inquiry with ancient roots. Contrary to present practice, the ancients were preoccupied with governance of public affairs as opposed to business, and very often, as in Greece, had disdain for commerce and management of business enterprise. Ancient empires created elaborate state structures, and effectively operated an apparatus overseeing huge territories. China gave the world the first civil service systemsome two thousand years ago, while the Roman Empire set the structures of governance (e.g., the organization of the executive branch into five main agencies) that many modern European states borrowed in their development (Frederickson, 1976).

The study and systematic development of public administration in America, however, is only scarcely more than a century-old phenomenon. It is a field of study that continuously adapts-both in practice and theory-to the changing nature of the government in the twentieth century. Public administration is often characterized as an application of social and other sciences to public problems, thus bridging disciplines (Frederickson, 1976). Constantly trying to define itself, public administration draws from multiple sources, with an effort to reconcile often contradicting views.

Coping with the perpetual “identity crisis” of the field (as coined by Dwight Waldo in the 1960s), and in search of answers that are in step with the times, academicians and practitioners of public administration have consistently reflected upon several key issues: Where does politics stop and administration begin? How can employees be led, motivated and protected (from political excesses)? How different is public management from private management? What is the necessary scope of government’s services? What, and how much, should be centralized or decentralized? How can the public sector achieve efficiency and effectiveness, at the same time balancing those concerns with equity in service delivery? Who should govern, and what is the role of experts and expertise in the process of governance? What is the nature of public interest, if indeed there is one? Some such questions pertain to the realm of political theory that underlies the field, while others refer to more pragmatic concerns of the applied practice of public administration.

During the evolution of American public administration, these questions were often framed through public discourse in a much simpler, sharper and sometimes conflicting pattern, often rejecting an established mentality or casting it in dichotomous terms (i.e., administration is different from politics, public management is different from private management), and often used as powerful rhetoric to advance the development of the field (Roberts, 1994).

In some form or another, during the century-long development of American public administration theory, key issues were always articulated by scholars of administration from different perspectives. Although never receiving simple and final answers in administrative studies, several ideas caught the spirit of the times. Catalyzed by events and problems which caught the public’s attention, such ideas were able to command significant amounts of scientific effort and advocacy, and each marked an era in the evolution of the field. For example, Frederick Taylor’s system of industrial shop management was viewed by Progressives, such as Louis Brandeis (who coined the term “scientific management”) as a means to improve productivity of the railroads, and therefore help prevent fare increases. Following Congressional hearings on Taylor’s methods, which resulted in their banishment from the federal government, Taylor and others continued to publicize the concepts of scientific management, which were widely embraced by many in the private sector (Wron, 1994). Similarly, the pioneering work of Whiting Williams in developing the human relations model (i.e., industrial sociology) in the 1920s did not take hold until the social sciences were an established, significant field of study in the 1930s, at which point the academic credentials of researchers at Harvard and M.I.T. made the case for that model through the Hawthorne studies.

5. Analysis of Human Resource Management

Human Resource Management is a planned approach to managing people effectively for performance. It aims to establish a more open, flexible and caring management style so that staff will be motivated, developed and managed in a way that they can and will give of their best to support departments’ missions (Quinn, 1988).

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and develops and manages staff to give of their best to help the Government serve the community. The need to respond to changing community expectations means that the task of managing our staff better is more important than ever - it is the staff who deliver the service, and it is through a new emphasis on staff management that a customer service and performance oriented culture will gradually evolve (Truss et al., 1991).

The function of human resources management is to provide the employees with the capability to manage: healthcare, record keeping, promotion and advancement, benefits, compensation, etc. The function, in terms of the employers benefit, is to create a management system to achieve long term goals and plans. The management allows companies to study, target, and execute long term employment goals. For any company to have an efficient ability to grow and advance human resource management is a key (Ostrom, 1989).

Human resource organisational strategy and planning is about ensuring that proper organisational structures together with human resource requirements are in place and are aligned to the departmental strategic plan. It is important to assess this area because the quality of organisational structures and capacity in turn impacts on service delivery.

HRM also needs to be supported by proper HR Information Management (HRIM) systems. To this end the importance of a PERSAL clean-up strategy and the introduction of the Integrated Financial Management System (IFMS) is necessary. Processes are well underway to implement such a strategy as well as IFMS. This should allow departments to have a credible information base from which to align their organisational structures, forecast their human resource needs and maintain proper databases for the management of human resources. Human resources are designed to manage the following:

- Employee Benefits
- Employee health care
- Compensation
- Annual, sick, and personal leave
- Sick banks
- Discipline
- Records (tax information, personnel files, etc.)
- Recruitment and employee retention strategies

6. The Role of Human Resource Management in the Public administration

In the UK, up until the Conservative reforms which began in the 1980s, public administration was closely associated with the Weberian centralised, hierarchical model of public services, where administrative rules were determined by central government and implemented by public organisations with relatively little scope for strategising at a local level (Bach and dellaRocca, 2000). Notions of paternalism, standardisation, job security, collectivism, developmental-humanism and the aspiration to be a ‘model employer’ were the values underpinning the management of people (Lupton and Shaw, 2001).

Under NPM, this traditional approach came to be seen as something of a liability, undermining performance and demotivating individuals. In a move mirrored by governments around the developed world, what were perceived as ‘best practice’ concepts of people management derived from the private sector were held up as ideals to which the public sector should aspire (Harris, 2004). Some of the core components of this imported model were performance-based rewards for staff, reducing the costs of employment, empowering organisations to take strategic decisions in the HRM field, increased flexibility in order to respond to customer demands, increased individualisation of the employment relationship, and decentralisation (Skalen, 2004). Critical to this was the notion that HR functions could move away from their traditional administrative roles and become more strategically involved in their organisation than had hitherto been the case (Jaconelli and Sheffield, 2000).

However, this raises two important issues. First, what precisely is meant by a ‘strategic’ role for the HR function and, second, how can it be applied in a public sector context?

The extensive conceptual literature on HR functional roles in the private sector has generally distinguished between roles that are largely concerned with administration, and those that are strategic in some way (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). Strategic roles have generally been viewed as focused on activities that will have long-term implications, such as the development of integrated HR strategies, involvement in organisational strategic decision-making, and managing organisational change. Administrative roles, on the other hand, are regarded as routine, reactive and tactical tasks associated with the operationalization of HR policies, and employee-facing roles such as welfare and industrial relations (Boxall and Purcell, 2003).

The consensus within the prescriptive literature is that a move towards a more strategic role is desirable, if not essential, to the future of the HR function (Ulrich and Beaty, 2001), whilst the conclusion within the empirical literature is that the role enacted by HR functions in most organisations in fact remains primarily administrative or reactive (Truss et al., 2003).
The reality is that the HR function in almost all organisations is required to play multiple and, often, conflicting roles, torn between the competing demands of employees, employers and professional norms (Kamoche, 1994). There is no evidence that one clear ‘model’ of strategic HR function roles exists within the private sector either conceptually or empirically that could be adopted by the public sector. Harris (2002) questions whether public sector HR roles can be held up as a model to which the public sector should aspire, even supposing one single model existed. Substantial contextual differences have been highlighted between the public and private sectors that impact significantly on the role that the HR function may play.

With a greater degree of openness to their environment, coupled with higher levels of public scrutiny and monitoring, public organisations have a much broader range of stakeholders than their private sector counterparts. These bring a multiplicity of objectives and priorities, compared with the more limited number of stable goals that exist for private sector firms. This creates a complex and qualitatively different working environment for public managers, where top-down, strategic and linear planning processes, whether in general management or HRM, may be less appropriate than more incremental, emergent approaches that allow for adaptability and the ability to manage discontinuity (Ring and Perry, 1985). Prior research has, in any event, been largely sceptical as to whether the processes of coercive isomorphism being imposed by governments on public sector HR functions will achieve the desired aim of shifting them towards a more strategic role (Harris, 2004). The continuing dominance of central government imperatives over all public organisations through auditing and target-setting, combined with central control over resources, sets limits on managerial discretion and on the degree of strategic choice available to HR actors within public organisations (Harel and Tzafrir, 2002). As Chadwick and Cappelli (1999) argue, the degree of intentionality available to managers, in this case, HR managers, is critical.

Historically, the HR function in the public sector has lacked credibility and been regarded as peripheral and relatively powerless compared with other more powerful groups vying for resources (Horton, 2003). Resource dependence theory might suggest that unless HR functions can gain and maintain control over valued resources, then their position will be further weakened (Jackson and Schuler, 1995). However, Oswick and Grant (1996) go so far as to argue that ongoing public sector reforms are actually challenging the power of personnel specialists rather than strengthening it through a focus on cost control that reframes the HR function as an overhead to be cut. Klingner (1993) reflects that HR’s traditional role in the public sector of balancing the competing values of efficiency and responsiveness with individual rights and social equity is shifting towards a primary focus on cost and accountability under strategic HRM. However, it has also been argued that traditional public sector values continue to impact on the role and activities of the HR function, and that demonstrable fairness in the treatment of employees and the notion of the ‘good employer’ remain critical, alongside strategic pressures (Farnham et al., 2003). The presence of these competing demands, set alongside the crosscutting stakeholder relationships and public accountability, creates a complex and contradictory setting in which HR functional roles are enacted.

Legacy factors, notably traditional approaches to managing the employment relationship, have been shown to be relatively enduring, exerting a strong counterpressure against an increasingly strategic role (Harris, 2004). As Jackson and Schuler (1995) argue, HRM can be regarded as a sub-system embedded within a broader organisational system set in an institutionalised environment and subject to isomorphic pressures resistant to externally imposed change, mitigating against the uptake of new HRM approaches.

Within this context, empirical evidence over whether the role of the HR function can be considered ‘strategic’ is inconclusive. Whilst some studies suggest that public sector HR functions have not adopted a more strategic role (Teo and Crawford, 2005), there is some counter-evidence that HR functions are adopting a more strategic role; for instance, Kelly and Gennard (1996) found that some NHS HR directors were involved in strategising, and Stock et al (1994) found evidence of a move towards the increasing professionalisation of the HR role. However, given the centrality of the debate over HR roles to the whole new public management agenda, this is an area where more research is needed to find out in what ways the HR role is changing. Although Boyne et al. (1999) have conducted a large-scale quantitative survey of approaches to HRM in the public sector, this study does not analyse the role played by the HR department itself, so this area is ripe for further research. Set within the broader context of public management reforms, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate over whether or not HR functions are performing what can be considered a strategic role. Are public sector HR functions contributing merely at an administrative level, or is there evidence of an evolving strategic contribution? What role does the HR Director play in the senior decision-making fora, and what are the different perspectives of line and HR managers on the role played by the department?

7. Conclusions
This study has explored the Managing the HR function in Public administration. our conclusion is that HR is in a continuous cycle of change and evolution. There is clear evidence that the HR role is becoming increasingly strategic, but this role is not replacing traditional HR roles, rather, it is being grafted on, adding to the diversity, challenge and complexity of HR in the public sector.
Our findings show that change within public sector HRM has progressed much further than earlier research would suggest. From a policy perspective, it is clear that the government’s change agenda is taking effect. However, there is also evidence that in some organisations, such as the police, the full potential of the function is being held back by cumbersome and time-consuming procedures. There is therefore a need to investigate new ways of streamlining and reducing the burden of process, as well as investigating in more detail how tensions and conflicts within the role can be addressed.
References


