

*Review*

# Exploring the dynamics of HR-line relationship: A comprehensive analysis and future prospects

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This paper reviews strategic HRM literature that directly or indirectly discusses HR-line relationship. It documents what has so far been done to understand and manage this relationship. Literature has been identified through the relevant keyword search and secondly from going through citations of the most relevant academic papers. HR-line relationship is likely to maintain its importance in future. Various dimensions of the concept have been identified and elements within each dimension have been proposed. The paper also identifies that HRM importance, supports and barriers for line managers to take on HR responsibilities, level of line involvement in an organization, role understanding of line managers, HR role type, and competencies of HR department may influence this relationship. All the scattered literature on this issue has been made available in this paper. Future research may use the identified dimensions to empirically develop measurement construct for HR-line relationship quality. Empirical confirmation of the predictors from the identified influencing variables is also needed.

**Key words:** HR-line relationship, line involvement, Devolution, SHRM.

## INTRODUCTION

### HR-line relationship

Line functions have direct impact on the accomplishment of the objectives of an organization. Whereas, staff functions help the line perform most effectively in achievement of these objectives. Traditionally, staff functionaries perform three main roles - the advisory or counseling, service and control roles (Steiglitz, 1966). HRM is one of the most important staff functions in performing the three roles.

HRM activities are the special responsibility of HR department. However, these responsibilities are also a part of every line manager's job along with their basic responsibilities. Line managers have authority and considerable impact on the way employees actually behave (Cascio, 2006). Therefore, there is an overlap of the authority between HR department and the line managers. This relationship that always exists between HR professionals and line managers in management of employees

of an organization is the operational meaning of the term HR-line relationship (HLR) in this paper.

The changing responsibilities have impacts upon the roles, functions and lives of line managers. Observing a scant attention paid to study these impacts, McConville (2006) believes 'with only a few exceptions (Renwick, 2003; Harris et al., 2002), the lack of research attention paid to this matter is almost embarrassing'. Renwick (2000) presents very useful insight on HR-line work relations. The progress that has been made since then should also be reviewed.

### Importance

The importance of HLR is widely highlighted, generally, in HRM and particularly in strategic HRM literature. The attempts to differentiate personnel management from HRM (Truss and Gratton, 1994; Wright et al., 1994) show that line managers play a key role in HRM in coordinating resources toward achieving profits, which is not the case

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**Table 1.** Period-wise distribution of documents.

Period	Frequency	Percent
1982-1995	09	09.57
1996-2000	19	20.21
2001-2005	27	28.72
2006-2009	39	41.49
Total	94	100.00

under personnel management. An ever-increasing interaction between HR professionals and line managers is now required, subsequently increasing the importance of this relationship as well.

Secondly, in transition toward strategic HRM, one important change is devolution of much of the HRM responsibilities down to line managers (Truss and Gratton, 1994; Lundy 1994; Mello, 2007) . The traditional work of HR managers diminishes; line managers are stepping up and performing duties often done by the HR managers. Hence, the importance of the relationship in strategic HRM has further increased.

Thirdly, the continuous trends of devolution (or devolve-ment) and increased line involvement in HR requires addressing the problematic HLR for making these trends more successful (Brewster and Larson, 1992; Brewster and Mayne, 1994; Larson and Brewster, 2003; Renwick, 2000, 2003 and 2004; Perry and Kulik, 2008; Brandl et al., 2009).

Fourthly, for successful HR implementation the role of line managers is of great importance to understand the ways HR policies and practices are actually operated as opposed to the ways in which they are intended to operate (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003; Hartog et al., 2004; Kinnie et al., 2005; Lervik et al., 2005; Zupan and Kase 2007) . This requires good reputation about HR unit among line managers (Wright et al., 1998; Kulki and Perry 2008).

Fifthly, efforts to create values and not rhetoric (Conner and Ulrich, 1996); minimizing gaps between intended and implemented policies (Khilji and Wang, 2006), HR policy and practice (Paul and Anantharaman, 2003), rhetoric and reality (Cunningham et al., 2004), espoused and enacted HR practices (Nehles et al., 2006; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007); moving from production to service (Bowen, 1986), moving on and not losing in HRM (Cleland et al., (2000). For success of all these efforts, high quality HLR is critical.

Lastly, the developments of some concepts in HRM and in general management demands proper management of HLR. For example, system thinking (Miller, 1972; Ackoff, 1981; Deming, 1993) requires that the two important subsystems HRM and line functions must be effective. Similarly, the true spirit of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Ginzler et al., 1993; Gubbins et al.,

2006) ; resource-based view (Barney, 1991; Wright et al., 1994; Colbert, 2004); and TQM indirectly demands HLR to produce optimum results.

### Literature search

Extensive review of the relevant literature is the basis for theory development. In order to collect the literature about HLR, two types of search is done. Firstly, HRM literature is filtered by using different key terms like, line managers, line involvement, devolvement, devolution, HR-line, HR -line work relations, HR-line relationship. Secondly, all the citations of the most relevant academic papers (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995, 1999; Heraty and Morley, 1995; Hall and Torrington, 1998; Thornhill and Saunders, 1998; Renwick, 2000, 2003) are gone through. Table 1 show a period-wise distribution of 94 documents (including 78 academic papers) reviewed for this study. More than 70% of these documents appeared in the present decade. The journal-wise numbers of the academic papers reviewed here are shown in Table 2.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussions about HLR are available directly or indirectly in SHRM literature. The presents review divides the literature into three categories, depending upon the research context. The original focus of the first category of literature is on devolution of HRM. However, it also necessitates the discussion about HLR. In the second category, while dealing with different issues of HRM, researchers discuss the relationship as well. In order to enhance our understanding about the relationship, these discussions are also relevant and needs careful evaluation. The third category of literature directly pertains to the HLR. Most of the research material in this category emerges during the current decade. There are few papers that may be categorized in more than one category work. The purpose here is to have maximum understandability by providing a collection of the scattered comments on HLR. This review presents the three categories to cover all important works.

#### First category

The literature in this category emerges during the last two decades. HLR automatically comes under discussion in every HRM research on devolution or devolvement. The knowledge about a) the causes of devolution, b) its impact on HR and line managers, c) the problems it creates for the two and d) the remedies for these problems presented in the literature enhances our wisdom about HLR. These four aspects are now presented here in more detail.

a) Brewster and Larson (2000) list main reasons behind devolution. First is the development of profit-center based

**Table 2.** Journal-wise distribution of the academic papers.

<b>Name of journal</b>	<b>No of papers</b>
International Journal of Human Resource Management	14
Personnel Review	11
Employee Relations	10
Human Resource Management Journal	09
Human Resource Management	06
Journal of European Industrial Training	04
Human Resource Planning	03
Administrative Science Quarterly	02
Human Resource Development International	02
Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources	02
Other Academic Journals (one for each)	15
Total	78

approaches. Second is a need for a comprehensive approach to people management. Third is decision making in front of the customers and in real time due to growing influence of the services and fourth, is the changes in the philosophy and organizational structure – an alternative to outsourcing. The power relationship between line managers and top management reflects in devolvement to the line managers. Teo (2002) believes that HRM is too important to be left to the specialists; therefore, it has to be shared. Line managers are in the best position to take an active role in developing people whose performance they have to manage (Heraty and Morley, 1995). The key factors inhibiting complete devolvement to the line include the importance of the activity from a strategic perspective, the issue of ownership, differing perspectives between HR and line managers and the organizational support for line managers. Without addressing these issues, the joint responsibility between the HR specialist and the line managers is best option.

b) The causes for devolution may be important but questions that are more serious are to determine its effects upon HR professionals and line managers. Hoogendoorn and Brewster (1992) argue that devolution creates both threats and opportunities for the HR specialist. Tasks and responsibilities may fall on to line management that cause a loss of influence, but it might also facilitate the concentration on those HR tasks that really matter. MacNeil (2003) finds that the encouragement of knowledge sharing in work teams facilitated by line managers can permit the organization to capture tacit knowledge because line managers are in a position to influence the experience of workers, their attitudes to, and willingness to share know-ledge in teams. Bond and McCracken (2005) investigate how line managers make decisions about employee requests for time-off at short notice. Interestingly, they note that except for extraordinary situations there is a little reference from line managers to HR specialists. However, they believe a

central role for HR specialists in communicating company policies and procedures and to ensuring avoidance of excessive inconsistencies. In project-based organizations, Bredin and Soderlund (2007) believe that being a legitimate player in the HRM of a firm, a line manager should be given HR-oriented management role as against the traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic role. This new approach also affects the organizational structure, content and the fundamental role of line managers. They have to look upon their work as the extended arm of the HR department and acquire 'compe-tence coach role' (Bredin and Soderlund, 2007: 816), to operate in the intersection between the HR department and the firm's operations and move away from managing and supervising functional activities to manage compe-tencies and people. While discussing consequences of devolution, Hyman and Cunningham (1996) observe that line managers regard themselves competent in hard HRM- 'common-sense backed by experience', but their HR colleagues are far more skeptical about this ability. The perceptual gap between the two over line manager abilities is even wider for soft HRM; so much that HR managers frequently state that line managers try to avoid these tasks. Line manager perceptions of their levels of preparation for HRM fall considerably below their perceptions of their capabilities in undertaking these tasks. They actually struggle with additional HR responsibilities devolved to them. HR specialists often point deficiencies and have serious doubts about line managers' capabilities in applying hard HRM as well. There are complaints from HR that line managers either do not take advantage of preparatory training and development opportunities or acquire general management skills rather than specialist employee relations responsibilities. Devolution has a positive effect on HR managers' constructed image (that is, the HR's perceptions of their unit's reputation among line managers) and changes in the HR function mediate this effect (Kulki and Perry, 2008). They do not agree with the fears of many HR specialists that

devolution may make the HR unit obsolete, contrary to Renwick (2003). They are also not for outsourcing and web-based HRM, as it may distance HR units from line managers. The positive effect of devolution on perceived HRM effectiveness qualifies by an interaction between devolution and line support. This interaction reveals that providing line managers with training and support in HRM has a greater positive impact on perceived effectiveness in organizations that have not devolved compared to those that have (Perry and Kulki, 2008). Conway and Monks (2010) finds that the increased bureaucratic layers adversely affect the decision making by both HR and middle managers. HR managers are emerging as regulators. They retain control of information systems that slow down middle management decision making and leading to the creation of new databases by the managers themselves.

c) Problems, tensions, difficulties and differences among HR specialists and line managers are also a byproduct of devolvement. According to Hope-Hailey et al. (1997), devolution to the line is still problematic, and that access to strategic decisions remains to be contingent on the ability of the senior HR managers or directors to influence people. Nevertheless, there is a rising awareness or recognition of the strategic importance of HRM to business performance. Devolution is a major factor by organizations that report a decline in HR influence (Gennard and Kelly, 1997). As a result, HR departments lack overall control over issues, such as training budgets and operational strategies. Even then, they face criticism from line managers for the perceived shortcomings in the directions of HRM or in the provision of training support. Further, line managers expect to receive assistance from HR over operational work force issues, which are no longer formally part of HR's responsibilities. This results in an accelerated decline in the role and status of HR specialists. Line managers' heavy workload, deficient supervisory role may affect the moral of employee and senior management may have to review their HR role. Cunningham and Hyman (1999) find that devolvement promotes integrative culture of HRM and works to secure employee commitment. However, they observe that tensions exist between line managers and HR specialists. There may be a danger of further reduction of the HR function. There is uncertainty about the prospects for HR following devolution. Wright et al. (1998) indicates that involvement of HR executives in strategic management strongly relates to line managers' perception of the effectiveness of the HR function. HR executives need to be true strategic business partners if they desire that their line colleagues perceive them as effective. There are four possible explanations for HR-line difference: (1) the HR function is not delivering the services expected, (2) traditional line-staff conflict, (3) line managers' failure to implement well-designed HR systems, and (4) the lack of line managers' involvement in HR activities (Wright et al., 1998; Mitsuhashi et al., 2000). Line involvement in HR is

not without its difficulties (Reddington et al., 2005). The results about the process of devolution and the competence of line managers in HR work are mixed (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003; Renwick, 2003). The devolution of transactional HR work to the line and HR department orientation towards strategic issues means employees are losing day-to-day contact with HR specialists. Employees have to rely on line managers who may have neither the time nor the training to give HR work the priority it needs. 'HR have retreated to the strategy bunker to think great thoughts and discuss the shape of the world with like-minded people consuming endless cups of coffee, while the appraisal and the selection and the communication is left 'to the line' (Torrington et al., 2005). Kulik and Bainbridge (2006) indicate that HR and line managers have different views of the devolvement trend, with HR managers being more optimistic that the trend has had positive organizational outcomes and anticipating more devolution to occur in the future. They stress clarification of HR responsibilities, solid HLR, open communication, rewarding line managers for HR activities and training initiatives. McConville (2006) find that a lack of control of line managers over rewards, financial or otherwise is a factor in recruitment and retention problems and is a major obstacle in getting the best from their staff. There are evidences of widespread HR involvement in Europe and the movement receiving 'wisdom' (Brewster, 2007), but its problematic nature (Brewster and Larsen, 2000; Renwick, 2000) still prevails. Line managers lack time, ability, training, updated knowledge, strategic focus and policymaking skills to handle the 'patchy' situation (Brewster, 2007). Interestingly, in small organizations, line managers may formally accept their HR role without pointing any problem of competency, time or support. But formally they do not place much reliance on written HR policies (Hunter and Renwick, 2009).

d) In the facilitation and sharing of knowledge, the line is dependent on both HR managers and other line managers to share their knowledge and experience of facilitating knowledge sharing. Moreover, to be effective this process needs to take place in a series of work relationships between these managers based on mutual trust and non-duplicity (MacNeil, 2003). Reinforcement of this process needs wider organizational value systems, HRM processes and senior management support; otherwise, the line manager cannot be effective. The organization that invests in the provision of appropriate development and support for line managers will ensure their effectiveness as facilitators of knowledge sharing in teams. Brandl et al. (2009) observe that HRM success requires the involvement of all managers and that the personal motivation of line managers for conducting HR duties plays an important role in their successful involvement. The increased line involvement may require line managers to lead the way in fully integrating HR into the company's real work. Line managers may achieve

this through working in partnership with HR and holding HR more accountable in delivering organizational excellence (Ulrich, 1998). Alternatively, a partnership between HR, line and employee may be needed to manage HR issues (Jackson and Schuler, 2000). Balancing the HR responsibilities between HR and line is a key issue, the former has this responsibility across the organization and the latter have it in their areas only. Practically, line may not want HR responsibility and may not have time, ability, updated knowledge, strategic view of the organization and policymaking expertise (Larsen and Brewster, 2003).

According to Martins (2007), HR performance of line managers is more likely through a 'holistic strategic framework.' A group of four key factors influence this phenomenon. This includes their perceptions and attitudes of the role, the degree to which their new role is adequately defined and clearly communicated, the extent to which they receive appropriate training and the overall development opportunities made available, and how far broader organizational systems and structures serve to facilitate or hinder their role/performance. They believe that firms with the multifaceted framework to assist with the close coordination of business and HRM activities, more specifically HRM devolution and the strategic management of line managers are likely to perform better.

Cunningham et al. (2004) analyze the line manager's role in facilitating the employment security of employees who have contracted serious illness, injuries or disabilities. They find that line managers' weaknesses in training, lack of support from relevant internal and external specialists, contradictory policy requirements, and various work and budgetary pressures militate their ability to comply with the policies. They suggest effective separation of the handling of these issues from disciplinary processes, adequate training to line managers regarding handling of ill-health and disability issues, improvement of their coordination with other organizational actors and consultation of line managers over the policy formulation.

Case study findings of Whittaker and Marchington (2003) show that line managers are working closely with HR and see the configuration moving towards a partnership. Lack of support is their main concern and at junior level, this concern is even more. Higher status of a line manager in an organization and the nature of HR-line partnership may associate, resulting in better HLR. Anyhow, they recommend this partnership and consider HR support and advice a crucial factor in maintaining it.

McGuire et al. (2008) observe a closer relationship between line managers and employees in public services organizations, fast decision-making and effective resolution of workplace problems. They believe that HR-line partnership is becoming increasingly common and wants adequate support to line managers to take on new HR responsibilities. They argue that modern HR has become complex and fragmented, therefore, HR has lost its status of 'referee.' Devolvement thus requires clear structures

adjustments to allow line managers to seek guidance and advice, but also allow employees to appeal decisions made. HR specialists should proactively engage with line managers and bring about partnership HR approaches to managing employees. For the success of devolvement, HR practitioners need to work with line managers to build their competencies (Zhu et al., 2008).

## **Second category**

In this category, useful remarks on the relationship are available. These observations are relevant in the present review. Zupan and Kase (2007) examine structural positions of HR actors (line managers and HR specialists) within relational networks for knowledge creating and sharing in knowledge intensive firms. Their social network analysis shows that line managers have central position, while the HR specialist has not. Therefore, HR specialists should relate strongly to line managers for successful HR design and implementation. Archer (2005) observes that HR departments have become more involved with organizational strategy than day-to-day line management issues. Gordon and Witchurch (2007) focus on key issues, challenges in HRM in higher education, and stress the importance of managing the relationship between institutional policies and the translation of these into day-to-day operations by line managers.

Only line managers have a chance of keeping track of project workers in R&D operations (Bredin and Soderlund, 2006). They are in a better position to become important coordinators responsible for keeping the individual competencies up to date. Their unique position enables them to follow every coworker's path from project to project basis and guide them in their professional development. However, line managers find it difficult and are not always happy to take on this HR responsibility. Line managers need to improve their 'soft skills' and their HR competencies. They may have HR-oriented role, task-oriented role or balancing role. McCarthy et al. (2010) believe that line managers are a critical determinant of work-life balance policy effectiveness. Therefore, they need to adapt their attitudes and abilities to employees' expectations. Harney and Jordan (2008) find that line managers can serve as the central bridging mechanism reconciling the pressures of external control and the requirement for internal motivation to sustain performance. They suggest that exploring line management behavior is a promising avenue for more extensive research in the field of HRM.

HR strategy is a set of processes and activities jointly shared by HR and line managers to solve people-related business issues (Schilit and Locke, 1982; Schuler, 1990). Wei and Lau (2005) find that HR managers can exert influences on strategic decisions and improve cooperation climate, innovation and high morale. However, this is only possible when they can persuade top managers to pay more attention to HR issues. In addition, they provide

critical information and insights on HR related business issues and interact through social and collaborative discussions with line managers to solve HR problems.

Dany et al. (2008) finds that HRM integration is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for HRM to positively affect organizational performance. They suggest a more prominent role for HR specialists than line managers to ensure quality implementation of HR policies.

Pitcher (2009) reports that only thirty percent of the 858 managers surveyed think that HR is adding value to their organization and HR professionals are too reactive. However, a CEO believes that HR is making a greater contribution to business performance than ever. And senior HR figures have urged the profession to stick to its guns after line managers attacked its performance during the economic downturn.

Harris (2001) finds that a lack of involvement of the line managers in designing reward process results in a loss of ownership of the schemes they are implementing. If the policies are not agreed upon, they may feel that these policies are imposed. Performance management system, should therefore, provide real incentives to encourage line managers to invest time in supporting, encouraging and developing employees.

Lee and Chee (1996) find that amongst the characteristics of organizations at the top end of the HRD maturity scale, HRD is perceived as supporting business strategy and HRD specialists and line managers work in partnership with each other. Lervik et al. (2005) argue that implementation efforts guided by the re-creation perspective increase the prospects of HRD best practices succeeding as a useful tool in the receiving firm. The probability of new ideas or knowledge being put to use is higher when the learning mechanisms are integrated with the core task performance in the organization, and when conducted by line manager rather than HR. Anderson (2009) finds that the alignment of strategic HRD is associated with participation by HRD practitioners in regular business planning and progress meetings, development of productive informal working relationships with line managers, taking their needs as internal customers seriously, and ensuring their involvement in monitoring learning processes.

With the increase of focus on strategic partner models, the line managers who are actually the targeted partners, have gained attention. According to US office of personnel management report (1999: ii), "the relationship between HR and management is becoming more collaborative. HR executives are beginning to earn a seat at the management table. HR offices are becoming consultative and involved in day- to-day line management activities. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go if HR is to become a strategic partner at all levels. To do so, HR needs to build its own internal competencies to deal with organizational issues, educate itself on agency and program missions, and find ways to offer creative and innovative solutions to organization wide issues."

However, the challenge of becoming a strategic business partner to line managers is a major barrier to effective strategic HRM (Teo, 2002). He suggests that the HR department should form a partnership with line managers in order to provide relevant services for their business operations. The value-adding contribution of HR is through business partnership roles by providing strategic advice to line (Galang, 1999; Gennard and Kelly, 1997; McConville and Holden, 1999).

Kates (2006) highlights the operational challenges created by the business partner model (Ulrich, 1997). He argues that delivery of organizational development services depends upon the quality of personal relationships between the generalists and organizational development specialists. Good working relationships and mutual respect are necessary but not sufficient in the absence of a clear process and set of roles and responsibilities. To adopt the roles of strategic partner and a change agent, the HR department should play a key role in implementing and managing these changes, assessing potential sources of resistance to change, and collaborating with line managers to overcome these barriers (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2003). While discussing various roles described by Storey (1992) and Ulrich's (1997), Caldwell (2003) argues that in two out of the four roles, line managers have to develop regular relationship. Playing an 'Advisor' role, HR actively offers advice and expertise to senior management and line managers. Whereas, under a 'Service Provider' role, line managers call in HR to provide specific HR assistance and support as required.

Caldwell (2008) observes that business partner role for effective performance focus invariably on generic moves, rather than organization specific solutions. Moreover, most competency models over emphasize observable behavioral indicators rather than any hard or measurable performance results. In addition, the HR function not line managers or the organization often define and own performance of a behavioral attribute (Brockbank and Ulrich, 2003). All these factors create disjunctions between competencies and organizational performance and further complicate HLR.

In order to realize the central role of line managers in HRM implementation, making them business partners and involving them in other organizational change activities, a change in their role is required. Storey (1992) argues that the changing role for line managers affects HR specialists and employees. Along with integration, they pursue other outcomes related to organizational commitment – flexibility, adaptability and quality. This involves use of 'soft' version of HRM that may improve employees' commitment. However, the lack of integration among line managers and between line and top has negative implications for the positive HR outcomes that may decrease commitment, reduced flexibility and adaptability. The absence of a designated HR specialist role may have a significant negative effect on the organization's ability to achieve strategic integration in relation to HRM and have negative consequences for commitment to

the organization, flexibility and quality. The solution to the problems may lie either in the creation of a specialist HR role, or through specifically tasking one of the organization's top managers to undertake this role. In the absence of this, line managers deal with employees, as they deem appropriate, without clear strategic direction from top management.

Beer (1997) discusses the transformation of the HR function and resolving tension between a traditional administrative and a new strategic role. He argues that the older administrative, compliance and service oriented HR activities be differentiated from the new strategic HR activities. Therefore, companies are creating geographically decentralized HR service centers responsible for providing traditional administrative services. Unlike the strategic HR professionals, typically called 'HR partners,' there is no affiliation of HR specialists in these centers with a particular business unit, branch or plant.

Truss and Gill (2009) investigate HR functional roles in public sector and finds that there is a link between HR social capital and perceptions of HR functional performance on the part of both HR staff and line managers. Teo and Rodwell (2007) find in Australian public-sector agencies that 'the pendulum has swung too far in terms of the pressure on HR to be involved more strategically, and that HR needs to build its strategic value from its core operational activities.' They advise that HR managers should consider adopting strategies to improve their relationships with line management.

The question arises here whether line managers have the desired skills, abilities and competencies to switch over to the new requirements. Line and HR managers differ significantly in their perception of strategic HR roles and organizational learning capability (Bhatnagar and Sharma, 2005). Defining clear roles and accountabilities between HR and line is still a topic of discussion as perceived by Ulrich (1997). He observes that line managers have to perform traditional HR work due to more strategic focus and wants HR to return to HR work. There has been concerns over whether line managers and supervisors are sufficiently competent to take on demanding roles required under change programs, and the difficulties in attempting to transfer an HR vision, which is senior management-led, down to the line (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995).

Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) observe that there is substantial discussion on 'returning HRM to the line.' They see clear evidence that the role of line managers in HRM, and generally in management, has broadened while maintaining their traditional supervisory duties. Some HR policies may influence employees directly; most rely on line manager action or support. They note distinction between 'espoused' and 'enacted' HR practices with the gap often explained by line managers' lack of training, lack of interest, work overload, conflicting priorities and self-serving behavior (Nehles et al., 2006). Watson et al. (2007) observes that 'one of the key

influences on line managers' attitudes to HR activities is the extent to which they perceive HR is considered important by the organization.' Strategic managers rate their working relationships with HR specialists higher and feel organizational support in HRM activities but first-line managers do not. Line managers have usual problems like heavy workloads, short-term job pressures as hindrances to HR involvement.

There is a fundamental tension between HR managers and line managers (Tsui, 1987). This is because of the short-term orientation of line managers in responding to concerns of the present employees and HR managers' mediating position in balancing the immediate problem solving and long-term HR development strategy. The assumption that line management 'could and would' fulfill the employee champion role is shown to be 'flawed.' Line managers are 'neither capable nor motivated' to take on people management responsibilities and the authors conclude that 'the failure to recognize the criticality of employee champion role is a mistake' (Hope-Hailey et al., 2005). Thus seeking a more balanced agenda is the key to shaping future successful HR work.

Siddique (2004) examines the impact of job analysis on organizational performance. He finds that line managers consider job analysis to be unnecessary paperwork and employees resent it as a discreet performance evaluation mechanism that management might use as a justification to get rid of certain employees. These views are clearly detrimental to developing a close partnership between line managers, HR professionals and employees.

Maxwell and Farquharson (2008) find limited evidence of challenging relationships between HR specialists and line managers. Bond and Wise (2003) find a lack of organization support in training about family-oriented HR policies to the line managers, who consult HR only in extraordinary situations and exercise considerable discretion in operation of these policies. Nevertheless, line managers have positive view of their relationship towards HR specialists.

Lawler III and Mohrman (2003) find that the use of joint HR-line teams to develop HR systems and policies strongly relates to HR being a strategic partner. Joint line/HR task teams improve business understanding of HR professionals and combine their expertise with the expertise of the line. In this way, knowledge barriers on both sides minimize. HR-line partnership requires from HR professionals to focus on planning, organizational design, and development. In addition, there is evidence of increased trust in line managers and transfer of HR accountability to them in many areas previously controlled by HR. Due to their well-documented tendencies toward inflexibility and unresponsiveness to line managers, HRM is one of the major targets of today's reformers (Coggburn and Hays, 2004). This means empowering line managers to make many of the operational decisions traditionally taken by HR managers. Jenkinson (2009) further suggests that HR professionals

should reduce direct HR communication to employees because they undermine the role of line managers.

Van Gestel and Nyberg (2009) observe that the local groundings in Dutch law firms reinforce unequal power relations among HR and line managers along with other categories of employees. They suggest that a diverse range of actors should be included to develop additional knowledge of the interaction in the translation process the HR policy into practice.

McConville and Holden (1999) observe that the central role of line managers in implementing HRM is widely acknowledged in the literature. However, the growing workload has increased the tension and role conflict inherent to their position. In addition, their perception is that they lack resources and time to manage their staff effectively. Khilji and Wang (2006) find that implemented HRM may be substantially different from intended HRM. Therefore, it is crucial that HR departments and managers remain committed and supportive to the development of effective HRM systems by focusing upon actual implementation within their organizations.

Bondarouk et al. (2009) observes difficulties and conflicts in HRM innovation implementation. Their empirical findings illustrate how the nature, value and reasons behind the HRM innovation are interpreted by HR professionals and line managers, and that dissimilar frames resulted in outcomes that deviated from those expected. Kuvaas and Dysvik (2010) suggest that line managers are of vital importance in implementing developmental HR practices. Either they influence how such practices are perceived by employees, or because positive experiences with both line managers and the HR practices seem to be needed in order for these practices to positively influence employee performance.

### **Third category**

This literature directly pertains to HLR. The literature in this category starts coming in the present decade and is far less than the previous two categories. Renwick (2000) observes that while attempting devolvement and reconfiguration of HR work in general, the state of HR-Line work relations have received relatively little attention. He concludes that HR and line managers exercise their power, expertise and strategic positions to engage in both conflictual and consensual relations, and are emerged in a dialogue on reconfiguring HR work between them. He suggests to derive a wider research agenda than that which presently exists for HR-line work relations, and to stress the need for further theory development in the field. He stresses to develop research on the attitudes and motivations of both HR and line managers.

Gennard and Kelly (1997) suggest that extensive participation between HR and line managers can create mutual benefit for both as they jointly contribute to solve

business problems. There is concern that barriers remain to the adoption of general joint arrangements (Renwick, 2000). Line managers may resist empowerment initiatives and fail to see the benefits of the changes. There may be a perception that HR managers do not understand the real business of the organization and only serve to create a distraction rather than add value to the bottom-line. This may marginalize HRM issues, as the line manager, driven by budgetary pressures, chooses to concentrate more on their original responsibilities (Armstrong, 1989; Kirkpatrick et al., 1992; Cunningham and Hyman, 1999). On the other hand, HR specialists consider that line managers may not have the skills to take on personnel responsibilities effectively (Torrington and Hall, 1996).

Mitsubishi et al. (2000) finds that there are no significant differences between HR and line executives' perceptions of the importance of each functional area in HRM. However, there are significant differences between line and HR executives' perceptions of the effectiveness of these areas. Line managers do not perceive HR to be a strategic partner. Wright et al. (2001) indicates that both line and HR executives agree on the potential importance of HRM to the firm's competitive advantage and HR's strengths and weaknesses in service delivery. However, line executive give low marks than HR executives when it comes to evaluating HR's effectiveness. They further identify four factors for this low rating; non delivery of the expected services, roles and contribution; the traditional line-staff conflict; line managers failure in HR implementation; and lack of ownership of line executives over HR services if they are not involved in their design.

Currie and Procter (2001) again observe that there is lack of understanding of the process of enhancing the willingness and ability of line managers to take on responsibility for HR issues. They suggest that this 'relationship is one of partnership'; and proposed that middle managers should be allowed to cross functional boundaries within the organization, there should be significant investment in their development, HR strategy should consist of broad themes rather than tight prescription and the HR functions should operate alongside middle-level line managers.

Renwick and MacNeil (2002) suggest that line involvement in career development may raise prospect of building HR- line partnership in working on career development but there may be problems in maintaining the balance of power between HR and line specialists. In addition, HR managers may not help line managers by providing the required training or support as advised (Brewster and Larsen, 2000). The four HR roles required under business partner model: Administrative Expert, Employee Champion, Change Agent and Strategic Partner (Ulrich, 1997, 1998) have interestingly different implications for HLR. Larsen and Brewster (2003) argue that the HR specialists acting as "administrative expert" may be either good or less good at their jobs. The good

are likely to be seen as a valuable source of advice and the less good may be seen as the worst kind of bureaucrat. HR specialist in “employee champion” role may have to face opposition from line managers. Conversely, in a “strategic partner” it may well be that it is the line managers who take on an “employee champion” role; trying to protect their staff from the hard-nosed interventions of HR, or ensure, for example, training, even when the HR department believes that it is not directly justified. On the other hand, HR as “change agent” and “strategic partner” should be closely involved with their line management colleagues if they want to perform that role successfully. Therefore, HLR has different implications depending on the nature of the role of HR department.

In knowledge-intensive environment HR becomes a more crucial part of the operation and a more critical role for the immediate manager. Under devolvement, it is not long before HR departments find it necessary to start monitoring the line managers’ actions and line managers may start asking for HR specialists’ help with “exceptional” cases. Larsen and Brewster (2003) conclude that this relationship is not simple; rather it is complex, ambiguous and dynamic one. Caldwell and Storey (2007) identify that business partnering roles are complex, ambiguous and confusing, with business partners sometimes coming into conflict with HR specialists and line managers leading to a fragmented HR provision. Renwick (2003) finds that significant organizational benefits and cost exists in line involvement in HR work. He suggests re-assessment of participation of both line and HR managers in HRM. On the basis of line managers’ HR experience in doing HR work, he finds that they see HR as positive helpers in HR work; are taking this responsibilities and accountability; are keen and serious; are relatively happy in some HR work; are already managing large employees; see careers benefits in doing HR work; and are considerate of employee needs and wishes. Besides these ‘positives’, there are ‘negatives’ as well. Tensions exist between HR and line managers over transfer and completion of HR duties. Line managers are reliant on HR to do HR work properly. They lack time, expertise, authority, HR focus and are offered no appreciation from the firm. In the absence of HR taking the initiative, an HR -line partnership is unlikely to develop, as line managers are generally reluctant to ask HR for help (Bond and Wise 2003).

Papalexandris and Panayotopoulou (2005) note an increasing tendency for HR-line collaboration, with the main responsibility increasingly falling on the HR department. However, they observe that ‘neither HR managers have offered the necessary support and advice to line managers nor have the latter willingly accepted involvement in HR issues.’ HR managers feel fear of reduced influence, fear of replacement and difficulties in training line managers to HR work properly. Whereas, line managers being under pressure to introduce new (time

consuming or difficult to apply) HR practices, fear criticism for poor performance, fear of neglecting main job demands due to extra HR burden, fear of disputes with subordinates, and poor advice from HR specialists, which may lead to lower employee performance.

Maxwell and Watson (2006) describe that the perspectives of HR specialists are different from line managers’ in five aspects: understanding and ownership of HR strategy; line managers’ involvement in and rankings of HR activities; HR specialists’ support of line managers; barriers to line managers’ involvement in HR activities; and the competence of line managers in HR activities. They propose that ‘three types of line managers’ buy-in are central to their active involvement in HR, namely: conceptual understanding of the rationale for their involvement; implementation effectiveness through HR role clarity and capability; and affective commitment in believing in the value of their involvement in HR.’

According to Francis and Keegan (2006) current models of HRM suggest that expectations about HR roles are changing as organizations are striving to make the HR function leaner and more ‘strategic.’ They explore the changing roles of HRM, as different stakeholder groups within the HR profession perceive them. They conclude that there is a need for a more balanced HR agenda addressing human and economic concerns in current and future models of HRM. The credibility of HR function is often questioned by line managers (Brockett, 2009). Without filling this credibility gap it would be very difficult to maintain smooth HR-line relationship. Casciaro and Lobo (2008) argue that negative interpersonal affect renders task competence virtually irrelevant in a person’s choice of a partner for task interactions but that positive interpersonal affect increases a person’s reliance on competence as a criterion for choosing task partners, facilitating access to organizational resources relevant to the task. The efforts to improve multiple competencies of HR professionals or line managers would be not effective until the two have a high quality relationship.

## CONCLUSIONS

The chronological presentation of literature and adoption of researcher letters at many places in this paper may be limitation of this study. This has been done intentionally to provide the reader an evolutionary picture of the issue. This study concludes that HR-line relations are likely to maintain its importance in future. The whole body of literature is unanimous in developing high quality of the relationship. The importance given to HRM; supports, barriers for line managers to take on HR responsibilities and level of line involvement in an organization may have implications for the relationship. The attitudes of HR managers towards their line counterpart and vice versa, HR role type played by an HR department and competencies of HR department shape this relationship. The

attitudes, experiences, role understanding and abilities of line managers towards HR managers are equally important in studying the relationship.

Besides HR specific working relations, general relationship between HR specialists and line managers may also be relevant. Different expressions like consensual, conflictual, collaborative, partnership, trade-off etc are available to express the nature of this relationship. However, these prefix lacks measurability aspect. This lack of measurability of HR-Line relationship increases the uncertainty about its management. Drawing on relationships in psychology and marketing, a new variable HR -line relationship quality may be used for measurement. The variables should measure general as well as HR specific relationship quality among HR professionals and line managers. It is proposed that elements like trust, satisfaction, commitment and operational relation may be grouped in the measurement of the first dimension that is, general relationship quality. For measurements of HR specific relationship quality, the second dimension, the proposed perceptual elements are HR focus, coordination (of line managers); contribution, distraction (of the HR) and team partner (for the both).

Future research should focus on developing items for measuring attitudes of HR professionals towards line managers and vice versa. The confirmation of the explanatory/predicting variables of HR-line relationship quality is also required. More empirical research is needed in addressing both of these issues.

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