CHAPTER

Human resource management and diversity

9

Aim

To provide an evaluation of the theory of human resource management in terms of what it means for equality and diversity policy and practice.

Objectives

- To show why human resource management (HRM) is salient to a discussion of equality and diversity approaches.
- To present the main normative models and theories of HRM, looking at the impact on the equality and diversity agenda within organisations.
- To critically appraise the capacity of HRM to advance equality and diversity.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

HRM has been a popular management concept since the early 1990s, and its continued popularity is evidenced by the proliferation of texts and the number of university courses bearing the title. However, equality and diversity issues are often absent from the debate, with the theory, policy and practice of HRM tending to assume a 'generic' universal employee (Dickens, 1998; Benschop, 2001). This gap is significant because the human resources (HR) function is most likely to hold the main responsibility for equality and diversity policies. However, there are interesting debates about the extent to which the HR function can be the main driver of progressive equality and diversity change (Gooch and Blackburn, 2002; Cattaneo et al., 1994; Gooch and Ledwith, 1996). Also, many writers agree that there is considerable 'fit' between the theory of HRM and diversity management (DM). Indeed, Miller stated that '*Managing diversity can arguably be classed as the HRM approach to equality initiatives in the workplace*' (1996: 206). Looking through editions of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD) journal *People Management* indicates that more than a decade later, equality and diversity issues have become a central part of HRM practice. Indeed the CIPD proclaims, '*Managing diversity is central to good people management in the view of the CIPD*' (CIPD, 2004). Further, the shift to DM reflects the shift in thought about people management more generally. Webb pointed to the 'fit' between the theory of HRM and DM, seeing the move towards diversity approaches as capturing '*the wider*

political shift from collective models of industrial relations, state regulation and associated bureaucratic control procedures to deregulation, free market competition and notions of human resource management based on maximising the contribution of the individual' (1997: 164).

Thus, the scene is set for a discussion of what the theory and practice of HRM offer the organisational equality and diversity project. This chapter begins by briefly presenting the most widely known normative models of HRM. This will highlight the similarities between HRM and DM and will critically appraise HRM as a force for challenging inequalities. We suggest later some key texts which offer a more extensive discussion of HRM. Specific HRM policy areas will also be analysed in more detail, drawing on Guest's (1987) model, in order to frame an analysis of what the theory of HRM has to offer the equality and diversity project. Potential advantages and benefits for equality and diversity will be discussed, as well as a critique of the theory of HRM, pointing to weaknesses of both theory and practice in advancing the position of disadvantaged groups of workers.

9.2 A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF HRM

Like DM, the theory of HRM originated in the US, building on theories of motivation and of human behaviour (Guest, 1987; Sisson and Marginson, 2003). HRM moves away from general management theories that prescribe policies and management styles which should be applied to *all* employees to take account of the *individual*. The theory of HRM is predicated on the notion that some workers will seek out and respond to work environments that provide challenging work, above average pay and conditions, increased levels of autonomy and opportunities for learning and training. Thus, HRM is based on the assumption that managers need to foster the kind of motivation within the workplace that would attract and retain the 'right' kinds of employees either through appropriate management style or by careful recruitment and selection (Guest, 1987: 511).

HRM is also essentially based on a 'business case' approach to people management (see Chapters 5 and 8). Increased competition in national and global arenas forced managers to reconsider the management of all resources within the organisation. While traditional approaches to managing people were built on bureaucratic power structures, money-based incentives and Taylorist-style work organisation, HRM emphasises the role of the individual, motivated worker, focusing on fostering a sense of involvement in, and commitment to, the organisation. The shift in people management from control to commitment strategies is felt to lead to increased productivity and greater success in meeting organisational objectives, thus making the organisation more competitive through more effective management of HR (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1989, 1992). The link between this and the business case for valuing diversity is clear. For example, it is assumed that the organisation will benefit from making people feel comfortable and motivated at work so that they can be more effective; that mixed work teams give competitive advantage; that drawing on a diverse range of skills and viewpoints will enhance the potential to understand a wider range of customer needs (Cornelius, 2002; Kirton, 2002). The need for many multi-national organisations to manage cross-cultural teams in international settings is also highlighted (Iles and Kaur Hayers, 1997). All of this fits into the remit of the HR function and underscores the need for effective people planning.

9.2.1 A normative HRM model

Defining HRM in theoretical terms is not, however, an easy task. A good starting point is what has been widely viewed as the 'original' conception of HRM from Michael Beer and his colleagues at the Harvard Business School in the early 1980s. At the centre of Beer et al.'s model is the view that HR should be seen as being as important (if not more important) to the success of the business as any other organisational resource. Therefore, it follows that effective management of HR is directly linked to business success. Beer et al. place an emphasis on HRM policies such as employee influence, HR flow, reward systems and work systems, which should be designed to promote the development of flexible, adaptable and highly committed employees. Most significantly, however, there is an emphasis on the need for HR policies to be integrated within the overall organisational business strategy. This has echoes of the mainstreaming approach to equality, except that here the concern is that all HRM policies (including equality and diversity) should be integrated into all business decision-making.

In addition, equality and diversity issues are an explicit element of the model. Beer et al. (1984) highlight the positive long-term consequences that HRM could have for individuals and for society. Managers are advised to track the long-term trends in the labour market in order to be able to identify potential opportunities and difficulties in acquiring skills in the future. As part of this, equality and diversity issues are highlighted and managers are advised to take account of the increased participation of women and minority ethnic groups in the labour force, as well as the ageing population. In addition, managers should recognise the changing values and aspirations of the workforce by offering education and training (Beer et al., 1984: 31). While the primacy of managers and their role is clear in this conception of HRM, it also explicitly recognises the importance of different stakeholder interests, potentially offering space for equality and diversity issues to be raised as organisational concerns by employees, trade unions or other pressure groups. The view taken is that in order to be successful, management needs to mobilise the support of various stakeholders including shareholders, employees, unions, government, customers and community groups.

There are other features of the theory of HRM which DM shares (see also Chapter 5). Most significant of these for discussion later in this chapter is the individualistic focus of HRM. HRM is directed towards the individual employee; the task of the HR function is seen as the need to harness individual commitment and talents. This stands in contrast to collectivist approaches to people management that saw employees as members of occupational groupings to which standard terms and conditions could be applied, usually negotiated with the relevant trade unions. In contrast, the theory of HRM is usually viewed as denying a role for trade unions (Guest, 1987) and indeed exemplars of HRM practice have commonly been non-union firms such as Marks and Spencer or IBM (Turnbull and Wass, 1997). However, there has been much debate about whether or not in practice union exclusion has been an aim of HRM or indeed whether the presence of unions actually encourages more practices associated with HRM (Kessler and Purcell, 2003; Guest and Conway, 1999).

In addition, like DM, HRM highlights the role of management in initiating action and mobilising support for policies. Indeed Dale (1997) stated that a specific parallel could be drawn between DM and HRM, where HRM is regarded as the discovery of personnel

management by chief executives, and 'managing diversity' is regarded as the capturing of the territory of equal opportunities by managers. The idea of senior level leadership and management commitment is central in many DM textbooks and practitioner guides (see Kandola and Fullerton, 1998; Cornelius et al., 2001).

Overall then, there are many similarities between HRM and DM. Characteristics integral to DM echo those of some versions of HRM, notably the strategic integration of people as a resource to be managed towards the achievement of business goals, and the valuing of workforce diversity as a direct contribution to the success of an organisation. The HRM emphasis on the role of individuals and their involvement and commitment also has resonance with DM.

9.2.2 'Hard' and 'Soft' versions of HRM

Another feature of HRM relevant to our discussion of links with equality and diversity is the existence of 'hard' and 'soft' models of HRM (see Storey, 1992). Beer et al.'s model is widely seen as 'soft' HRM because employees are positioned as highly valued assets. Within 'soft' HRM, policies are directed towards skills development and high levels of commitment, adaptability and competence (Hollinshead et al., 1999) – the emphasis is on the *human*. It is probably this version of HRM that has most potential for progressive equality and diversity initiatives. However, at the time Beer et al.'s model was published, so too was a different version that has been characterised as 'hard' HRM (Frombrun et al., 1984). Here, principles of cost effectiveness hold primacy and HR are seen as a business expense just like any other organisational resource – the emphasis is on the *resource*. In the 'hard' version, HRM policies are primarily directed towards meeting organisational objectives rather than the development of employees (see Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995 for a more extensive discussion). As will be discussed in greater detail later, there is some parallel here between 'short' and 'long' agendas of equality, where 'hard' HRM would be viewed as following a 'short agenda' and 'soft' HRM a 'long agenda'.

Key learning points

- The theory of HRM is based on the premise that paying attention to HR and making use of appropriate HRM policies to engender increased commitment and satisfaction of employees would be directly linked to competitive advantage.
- There are strong links between the theory of HRM and the theory of DM. These include the link between the need for HRM policies to be integrated within the overall business strategy and 'mainstreaming' approaches to equality; the need to mobilise the support of diverse stakeholders within an organisation to be successful and considering the interests of a diverse workforce; and the individualistic focus of HRM and the DM focus on individual differences.
- A distinction has been made between 'hard' and 'soft' forms of HRM. It is the 'soft' version which seems to offer the most potential for progressive equality and diversity policies, with its focus on employees as valued assets and the premium placed on engendering high levels of employee commitment.

9.3 KEY DIMENSIONS OF HRM AND EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Guest's (1987) article provides a useful summary of the evolution of the theory and practice of HRM and its relevance to the British context. It is useful here to outline the main dimensions of Guest's theory because it provides a useful way of tapping into the constituent parts of the theory of HRM, allowing us to appraise each dimension with reference to its utility for promoting equality and diversity in the workplace. The overlap between these dimensions and the characteristics of the Harvard model will be apparent. Guest (1987) views HRM as encompassing four main dimensions or goals: strategic integration, employee commitment, flexibility and quality, each of which will be discussed below as they relate to equality and diversity.

9.3.1 Strategic integration

The first dimension of Guest's theory of HRM is strategic integration. HRM is characterised as having a concern with organisational performance as its long-term primary strategic goal (Wilson, 2007). To achieve this, the HR function and HRM policies and practices must be fully integrated into the organisation's strategic planning process. There is a need for both vertical integration (of HRM with other strategic functions and business concerns, for example sales, production and so on) and horizontal integration (ensuring that HRM policies form a coherent entity, for example, that payment systems and work organisation complement each other). Additionally, there should be integration of the HRM strategy into the responsibilities of line-managers. The idea here is that the HR function devolves tasks and activities, such that line-managers are directly empowered to take responsibility for managing people (mainstreaming people management) rather than responsibility only residing within the HR function (see Cornelius et al., 2001). Finally, employees should be fully integrated within the organisation by fostering a strong sense of company identity.

It should be clear from this that an attempt to make effective management of HR a concern throughout the organisation offers potential equality benefits. At the very least, employees are recognised as an important asset to the organisation which should be nurtured. Indeed, despite her overall pessimism with regard to the ability of new managerial approaches to deliver equality, Webb (1997: 167) argued that in the era of HRM there is at least a greater awareness than formerly of how to achieve effective organisational change towards equality (even if the evidence is limited). This includes the need for senior level commitment and resources and the need for regular monitoring of progress (a key feature of DM – see Kandola and Fullerton, 1998).

However, there are critiques of this dimension of HRM in terms of its potential to advance the equality and diversity project. First, how effectively can HRM issues be 'strategically integrated' into mainstream business strategy? There is little point debating the potential for equality and diversity of a strategically integrated HRM policy if strategic integration cannot occur in the first place. The initial criticism is the assumption that managers can be rational and strategic. Many of the prescriptions of HRM rest on free market-based assumptions where management has the key role in initiating action and mobilising support for policies. Within the theory of HRM, there is emphasis on the need to change corporate cultures. Within the corporate culture literature (and

connecting to HRM), it becomes the role of the idealised 'symbolic manager' to take the lead in shaping the culture. However, there is much discussion about whether managers are able to be 'strategic'. The general picture is that there is great variation in managerial activities and much of managerial work is reactive, rather than strategic (Hales, 1986), meaning that the notion of the manager as primarily a strategist may be misconceived. Managers often have a pragmatic approach to their work because they have differential access to information and resources, depending on their position in the hierarchy and the culture of the organisation. Thus, individual managers are often limited in their ability to make strategic decisions. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) argue that it is not the quality of HR practices per se that is important, but the behaviour of line-managers in translating and delivering those HR practices. They found that employees who were dissatisfied with the way HR policies were applied had more negative attitudes about the organisation and organisational performance was weaker. It is suggested therefore that the design of HR policies should include consideration of how line-managers can apply them (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007: 17).

Another factor is that managers are a heterogeneous group and may be highly divided across functional, spatial or hierarchical lines. Armstrong (1986) stated that managerial control lies in the knowledge and techniques possessed by professional groups. Such groups are in competition for key positions and resources within the organisation. Different managerial professions (for example accountants, marketing managers) aim to maintain their positions of influence in the organisation by retaining a monopoly of, and excluding others from, such techniques and knowledge. For example, an implicit part of the strategic integration or 'mainstreaming' of HRM is the idea that HR specialists should 'give away' some of their power and responsibility as professionals to other management functions (Gooch and Blackburn, 2002; Cornelius et al., 2001). Further, Guest (1987: 519) discusses the difficulty of line-managers accepting what they might see as an abdication of responsibility by HR specialists – why should other managers do HR specialists' job for them? Gooch and Blackburn (2002: 145) summarise research that suggests that line-managers are selective about which aspects of HRM they choose to be involved with (Brewster and Hegewich, 1994). They tend to choose aspects that involve the setting of short-term business targets. In contrast, effective equality and diversity policies would need a long-term, 'long agenda' approach. Thus, issues of inter-professional competition and disagreements surrounding who should take responsibility for HR matters may prove to be obstacles to the strategic integration of HRM (and by extension of equality and diversity issues), even if managers are able to act strategically in the first place. In terms of the reality of line-management practice, while certain surveys indicate that line-management roles are expanding and taking on more people management tasks, traditional day-to-day operational responsibilities remain the norm, with broader HRM responsibilities being the exception rather than the rule (Hales, 2005).

Nevertheless, another associated problem is that the primacy of management appears contradictory to the simultaneously held view within the HRM model of the importance of other stakeholder interests. Hollinshead and Leat (1995: 22) point out that often the interests of, for example, employees as stakeholders are conceptualised as the need for forms of employee participation that would gain increased commitment, not that would allow any real sharing of decision-making. Thus, what relative standing do the different stakeholders have and whose voices are heard, given the unequal nature of the

employment relationship and its domination by white, male hegemonic power? (See discussion in Chapter 4.)

Another debate relates to the contingent nature of strategic integration. The effectiveness of integration depends on the role of the HR function within the organisation, which often does not hold equal power in comparison, for example, to marketing, production, finance or sales (Cattaneo et al., 1994). Evidence from the late 1990s clearly showed a marked decline in the presence of the HR function on company boards of directors (Cully et al., 1999). Gooch and Ledwith (1996) provided a detailed analysis of the way in which equality issues become constrained and controlled when they are anchored within the powerless HR function. More recently, a CIPD survey (Brown, 2003) indicates that only two-thirds of organisations have a defined HRM strategy. Furthermore, in terms of stakeholder voice in strategy, less than half involved line-managers (who would be expected to implement it) and less than 10% involved employees.

Cattaneo et al. (1994) identified four different levels of strategic integration depending on the place held by the HR function. The first level is an 'ad hoc' strategy, where the HR function holds a place of low prestige. Here, any gains for equality and diversity rely on committed individuals, who make a concerted effort to ensure that equality and diversity remain on the organisational agenda, even if the structures and systems are not encouraging. The 'traditional' strategy relies solely on the business case argument, where the pursuit of equality and diversity initiatives derives from defensive responses to external pressures (for example, legislation or market competition). It involves mainly a 'numbers game', where the aim is to increase the amount of employees from disadvantaged groups. The 'results oriented' strategy is also related to the business case, and is similar to a 'hard' HRM approach, where the bottom-line concerns of profit remain the prime concern. The latter two forms of strategic integration have limited ability to deliver greater equality, even if they deliver workforce diversity, because they ultimately defend the status quo and do not challenge the existing organisational culture (which has been discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 as a factor perpetuating segregation and discrimination).

The last form, the 'transformational' strategy relates more to the ideal of strategic integration within the HRM model, where equality is seen as a strategic imperative in its own right and where equality and diversity issues form part of a continual development of, challenge to, and adaptation of organisational culture and processes. Thus, there are 'short' (ad hoc, traditional and results-oriented strategies) and 'long' (transformational strategies) agendas of strategic integration (Cockburn, 1991; Rees, 1998).

One issue is that the business case tends to support only the short equality agenda, which militates against being able to strategically integrate HRM policies, including equality policies. Hoque and Noon (2004) demonstrate that while most companies have formal equality policies in place, these tend to be 'empty shells', with only 50% of workplaces adopting any back-up policies, and 16% having no support policies at all. This is seen as crucial to effective equality outcomes, and in line with HRM rhetoric. Policies would need to be part of an integrated and coherent system. Kossek et al.'s (2003) research endorses the need for horizontally integrated support policies for diversity initiatives. In their study, aims to increase workforce diversity through hiring policy may have negative consequences for group/team cohesion, and will lead to detriment for the minority groups recruited whether women, minority ethnic workers,

disabled workers, etc., if this policy is not supported by additional HRM policies. Such policies would need to ensure that sufficient numbers of 'minority' individuals were recruited to avoid their isolation and that they were provided with the resources (training, information) to allow them to enter work groups on an equal footing.

9.3.2 Commitment

Linked to the need to integrate employees into the organisation is the concern with developing in individual employees a feeling of commitment to the organisation. The assumption is that committed employees will be more satisfied, more productive and more adaptable, thus leading to improved organisational performance (Guest, 1987: 513). Beer et al. comment that organisational commitment is important, leading to '*more loyalty and better performance for the organisation…self-worth, dignity, psychological involvement, and identity for the individual*' (1985: 20). This last comment has resonance with DM, with the emphasis on the need to nurture the individual worker and focus on job design and intrinsic conditions of work which will allow individuals to achieve greater satisfaction from their work.

What implications does the emphasis on the individual employee feeling 'included' in the organisation have for equality and diversity? To engender such a feeling might involve ensuring that individual (and differing) needs are taken into account, that unfair discrimination is challenged, and that employees have equal opportunities in terms of pay, promotion and training. This would point to a range of possible policies including careful recruitment and selection, good job design and sensitive management of organisational culture (Guest, 1987: 514). The focus on commitment to the organisation also links to DM with its individualistic ethos where commitment to other organisations such as professional bodies or trade unions or identification with social groups on the basis of class, gender, or ethnicity is de-emphasised.

The first problem with this dimension of the HRM model is that HRM focuses primarily on organisational commitment. Committed employees are seen as those who have internalised the corporate vision, perhaps even at the expense of their own interests (Legge, 2007). The issue of employee commitment is actually far more complex. There are many other 'commitments' which might play a part within an organisational context; for example, employees might feel commitment to their profession, trade union or family. The competing loyalties demanded by these multiple commitments are downplayed within the theory of HRM. What are the equality implications of prioritising organisational commitment? HRM is essentially a unitarist theory (see Edwards, 2003: 10 for a general discussion) within which conflicts and competing interests are often seen as deviant. This means that individual employees' differing identities and loyalties are often viewed negatively rather than valued. It is likely that other loyalties and responsibilities beyond the organisation (such as domestic responsibilities) would not necessarily be accommodated and valued if they were seen to conflict with organisational objectives and goals. The likelihood is that only people who can meet the dominant norm (of the white, male, full-time employee) would benefit from the goal of commitment within the theory of HRM, because they would be the ones seen as most committed to the organisation.

Commitment within HRM is essentially individualistic. It involves the commitment of the individual employee to the organisation. This has implications for equality issues

because it excludes the possibility of collective action. A unitarist approach has little room for trade unions and indeed the theory of HRM has been positioned by many as involving an implicit attack on the role of trade unions within organisations. In comparison, Colling and Dickens (1998: see also Dickens, 1999) highlighted the importance of unions and collective bargaining in maintaining a focus on equality issues within organisations. They discussed how the equality agenda declined in the firm they studied, when new market imperatives led to restructuring which marginalised the role of the union and in turn narrowed the collective bargaining agenda. The equality agenda is easily marginalised with a move from joint regulation of employment conditions to managerial prerogative. This was also a feeling expressed by trade union officers in our research, where a typical comment was:

> *'There's a suspicion that managing diversity is all about individuals…rather than the commonality of disadvantage that some groups can experience…the concept that we still cling to…is overcoming disadvantage and getting rid of discrimination [which] is not something that employers feel comfortable with'.*
>
> **(Kirton and Greene, 2006)**

This quote illustrates, from a trade union point of view, the problems which were discussed in Chapter 5, associated with the individualistic focus of the diversity approach, which we argue are also applicable to the individualistic focus of HRM. Emphasising individual commitment to the organisation weakens the ties between people through common experience of other commitments and identities. This can have negative implications, denying the similarity between people's experiences in the workplace and the importance of the collective. If we also consider that the ideal HRM approach has no place for trade unions or other representative bodies, then this leaves the individual employee very isolated. Thus within HRM practice: '*the position of individual employees is in fact quite precarious, with a high degree of dependency on the benevolence of employers*' (Hollinshead and Leat, 1995: 24).

9.3.3 Flexibility

The ability of managers to implement an (integrated) strategy requires a capacity to adapt and respond to pressures from both inside and outside of the organisation. According to this, the organisation must avoid rigid bureaucratic structures and more significantly for a discussion of equality and diversity issues, must avoid the development of powerful interest groups which might lead to divisions and demarcations (job boundaries) between groups of employees, and break down the commitment to the organisation (Guest, 1987: 514). Additionally, there is a requirement for employees to be both temporally and numerically flexible (hours of work and type of contract) and functionally flexible (types of task) in order that a multi-skilled workforce can be developed which can adapt and respond to changes in production and demand and therefore gain competitive edge (Walsh, 1990). Thus, within the business case for HRM, one of the solutions to the challenges facing organisations lies in the flexibility and adaptability of labour.

On the one hand, the move towards flexibility holds potential benefits for promoting equality in the workplace (Dickens, 1997). For example, acceptance and encouragement of flexible working arrangements could be a challenge to the dominant norm of the long hours culture and full-time employee. This would potentially have particular

advantages for women, facilitating their integration into the labour market (Dickens, 1997: 283). Widespread encouragement of temporal and numerical flexibility could allow a re-conceptualisation of what is seen as 'standard' working time, avoiding the negative categorisation of part-time and temporary workers as 'atypical' or 'non-standard' (equalling less committed). This re-conceptualisation might in turn facilitate a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid labour between men and women, and lead to a breakdown in the pay and status differential between full-time and part-time work. Finally, encouragement of functional flexibility could potentially challenge existing employment segregation, where job territories are racialised and gendered.

However, the opportunities for these kinds of positive equality outcomes from flexibility policies do not appear to have been realised. Indeed much research indicates the adverse implications of flexibility policies on employment equality (Dickens, 1997; Purcell, 1997; Walby, 1997). Numerical flexibility has not been used by organisations as an equality strategy; instead part-time work has been increasingly 'ghettoised' as low-paid, low-grade jobs, further perpetuating gender and race segregation (Dickens, 1997: 284; Stanworth, 2000). Inequalities in pay, employment rights and opportunities for promotion and training are seen as the price which women and minority ethnic workers are expected to pay for flexible jobs. Even the trend for family and work–life balance policies has not attempted to challenge the prevailing trend for childcare to be seen as a female responsibility. While the 'family-friendly' lobby stresses that these issues are of concern to all employees, the evidence of the introduction and implementation of work–life balance policies suggests that this is still seen as a women's issue (Purcell, 1997; see additional discussion in Chapter 10).

Thus, flexible work arrangements tend to operate to the disadvantage of the women and men employed on this basis, evidenced by poorer pay and conditions, and limited access to training and promotion (Stanworth, 2000; Fagan and Burchell, 2002). As Walby comments, '*the strategy of numerical flexibility…is one which provides employment opportunities…albeit under worse conditions of service*' (1997: 74). Furthermore, flexible work arrangements are usually only initiated when they meet organisational needs – that is flexibility on employers' terms: '*flexibility by workers to suit operational needs, and not flexibility for workers or families'* (Dickens, 1997: 284). Again, this does not reflect a transformational approach as the status quo of the segregated labour market is not challenged. All the evidence suggests that the encouragement of flexibility by employers usually reflects a business case orientation rather than a social justice one. The most important reasons employers usually see for having flexible working arrangements include being able to respond to variations in trade, to reduce labour costs and developments in new technology. Only a few organisations regard equality issues as a factor in moving towards increased flexibility.

With regard to the practice of functional flexibility, most of the evidence points to approaches centred on job enlargement (adding more similar tasks) and work intensification (expecting more in less time), rather than the multi-skilling approach which could potentially break down traditional gendered and racialised employment segregation (by adding skills to allow upward progression). While eroding demarcations might be attractive to managers (particularly demarcations that foster employee or trade union solidarity), multi-skilling will not necessarily be a key issue for them. The qualitative benefits of training are often regarded as secondary to meeting immediate organisational objectives and offering higher wages to recruit skilled workers from

outside might often be preferred to training up existing employees. Most so-called multi-skilling initiatives involve the addition of lower level tasks, rather than up-skilling. Where attempts have been made to break down traditional job demarcations, the focus has been on breaking down segregation within rather than across boundaries (Dickens, 1997: 284). This means, for example, that the opportunity for someone to move out of low-graded, low-skill work is severely restricted. In summary, functional flexibility rarely offers any real challenge to the status quo that excludes disadvantaged workers from higher-quality jobs.

Atkinson's (1986) model of the 'flexible firm' demonstrates how flexibility policies are implicated in the perpetuation of a segregated labour market. This model identifies a core group of full-time, functionally flexible employees, who will receive relatively good terms and conditions and opportunities for training and development. At the same time managers will also actively pursue a policy of hiring peripheral groups of numerically flexible employees who will have a more precarious and disposable status. Critical commentators argue that the core workforce is often predominantly white and male, whilst the peripheral workforce often comprises 'minority' workers (Legge, 2007). Walby (1997) concludes that if employers are seeking to increase numerical flexibility, the evidence indicates that they are likely to create categories of employment which will be filled by less protected workers. Within this, critics of Atkinson's flexible firm have observed that the tendency has been towards increasing the use of the peripheral workforce rather than on nurturing the development of the core (Sisson and Marginson, 2003).

Thus, flexibility policies side step equality issues and the rights embedded in equality legislation by increasingly employing workers on contracts with less legal protection. Chapter 6 discusses the role of the more recent legislation that has sought to address this problem by extending employment rights to workers with 'atypical' hours. On balance the evidence seems to indicate that much HRM practice does not use flexibility in a way that promotes equality and therefore, arguably, there is a need for increased regulation to protect more vulnerable workers. With legislation now in place providing a right to request flexible working, equality issues have been more prominent in employer decisions on flexibility. However, the legislation only offers the right to *request* flexible working. The features and reports on the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Working Life web site (http://www.tuc.org.uk/work_life) are testament to the difficulties faced by employees in persuading employers to think about new ways their jobs could be carried out.

9.3.4 Quality

This dimension of HRM refers to the quality of employees, quality of performance and quality of HR policies. Thus, it brings together many inter-related elements and connects the other three dimensions of Guest's model. The idea is that considerable attention should be placed on recruitment, selection, rewards, training, appraisal and goal setting so that high-quality staff are attracted and retained (Guest, 1987: 515). High-quality staff in HRM terms means people who are committed to the organisation, strategically integrated, and flexible and adaptable. In assessing the role that the quality dimension of HRM could play in promoting equality, arguments discussed earlier can be reiterated. For example, there are undoubtedly potential benefits for employees to come from the recognition that HR are important and should be developed and nurtured. In terms of

organisational benefits, if the organisation has a reputation for high-quality treatment of the workforce, this will have a positive impact on future recruitment of staff and on customer choice. This argument links to the business case for diversity and the ways in which a focus on developing and retaining quality staff can aid organisational competitiveness.

However, while the organisational benefits of attracting and retaining high-quality employees seem unquestionable, there are problems with the conception of 'quality employees'. Let us refer back to a statement made earlier about the evolution of HRM – that HRM is predicated on the notion that some workers will seek out and respond to work environments that provide challenging work, high levels of autonomy and opportunities for learning and training. On the one hand, this implies that organisations seek to recruit a particular type of 'quality' employee through methods that will attract this type of employee. On the other hand, HRM is insular in that many of the policies and practices deal with issues internal to the organisation; consequently, if there are to be any equality benefits from HRM, these will tend to be for people already within the organisation. Thus reflecting the critique of DM, HRM may only help employees already within the organisation rather than seek to challenge disadvantage outside of the workplace (Miller, 1996).

The significant point is that HRM policies are usually incapable of tackling the wider societal structures and systems which perpetuate disadvantage in the labour market. To begin with there is rarely any acknowledgement within HRM policies that the gendered, aged, sexualised and racialised roles within the labour market reflect wider social inequalities. Instead, the theory of HRM tends to emphasise employee choice and agency – that is, people seeking out and obtaining the roles they aspire to. In contrast, we have previously discussed the ways in which people are 'socialised' into 'gender appropriate' roles at work, meaning that the notion of 'choice' becomes restricted (Chapters 3 and 4). All of this suggests that HRM initiatives may not benefit all workers. Some studies indicate employee resistance to so-called enriched jobs (multi-skilled, increased autonomy) because they often mean extra work without increased pay and the addition of unwanted extra responsibility (Corbett, 1994; Maher, 1971). The belief that all workers want an enriched job (of the HRM 'quality' type) makes generalised assumptions about personal characteristics and work motivation, which are seen as invariant across people. In addition, such a view ignores the fact that people's choices are constrained by external factors such as domestic roles and responsibilities. For example, women's 'choice' to work part-time usually derives from time management concerns to fit work around care responsibilities, preventing them from seeking out better pay and conditions that usually come with full-time jobs (Glover and Kirton, 2006).

Secondly, the statement that 'quality' employees will seek out 'quality' jobs and will be attracted by 'quality' HR practices belies this insular view of disadvantage in the labour market. It may not be a question so much of whether people *seek* out or are *attracted by* 'quality' jobs, but more of whether disadvantaged workers will *get* 'quality' jobs if they do seek them out or whether they will be barred by stereotypes within 'acceptability' criteria identified so often in recruitment and selection exercises. Organisational and wider societal values continue to be gendered, sexualised and racialised. Therefore, we argue that it is people who can most easily meet the dominant norm of the 'quality' employee, (namely the full-time, under 40, white, heterosexual, male, non-disabled employee) who will benefit most from HRM policies within this framework.

Key learning points

- The main dimensions of HRM in Guest's (1987) model are strategic integration, commitment, flexibility and quality. These dimensions offer potential advances for equality in the workplace. However, the theory and practice of this model also demonstrate significant barriers to the fulfilment of this potential.
- The need to mainstream HRM issues within wider organisational strategy could provide a positive justification for progressive equality and diversity policies. However, the potential benefits are often not realised because of competing demands on managers, issues of inter-professional competition and the relatively low status of the HR function.
- The emphasis placed on highly committed, satisfied and motivated employees can provide a business case for equality and diversity policies. However, potential benefits are often not realised due to competing commitments which lessen the success of HRM initiatives together with the individualistic nature of commitment expected within HRM.
- Flexibility policies within HRM offer opportunities to make real challenges to employment segregation. However, in practice, functional and numerical flexibility policies tend to be more detrimental to many groups of workers, placing many in vulnerable, insecure employment.
- HRM policies, with their focus on the internal organisation, often ignore the wider societal systems and structures which perpetuate disadvantage.

9.4 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY – WEAKNESSES OF HRM

9.4.1 Gap between rhetoric and reality

First, any potential benefits that the theory of HRM may seem to offer for the promotion of equality and diversity seem undermined by the lack of evidence that distinctive HRM even exists in practice (Guest, 1987; Hollinshead and Leat, 1995; Legge, 1989). Research supporting the claims of strategically integrated HRM is scarce and largely anecdotal, with much of the evidence relating to 'excellent' companies. These firms are usually foreign-owned, and on 'greenfield' sites and are not considered to be typical of British firms. An analysis of the take-up of 15 HRM practices revealed that just 14% of firms had more than half of these practices in place (TUC, 2001). Even in the 'best case scenarios' where there is an HR specialist and an integrated employee development policy, only 6 of the 15 practices are in place in the majority of UK workplaces (Sisson and Marginson, 2003). Research indicates that while the rhetoric of HRM is often 'soft' (which as stated would have most potential for the promotion of equality), the more frequent reality is of 'hard' HRM (Truss et al., 1997; Legge, 2007) in which DM will not figure very strongly. Kessler and Purcell summarise the developments in approaches to managing people and employee relations: '*evidence suggests that management are driven more by a cost-minimization and opportunistic approach to employees, reflecting more than anything a traditional style*' (2003: 335). This obviously does not bode well for the advancement of equality and diversity agendas or for realising some of the potential benefits for employees found within the theory of HRM. Further, if, as Wilson (2007) puts it, DM is viewed in isolation from other strategic HR decisions, then

the 'human' could end up being missing from HRM, which would undoubtedly be detrimental for equality and diversity.

9.4.2 Dangers of the business case

This takes us to consideration of the dangers of the business case. In line with the business case, many of the prescriptions which underlie Beer et al.'s influential model of HRM rest on free market-based assumptions, where firms need to be flexible and responsive to the market (Hollinshead and Leat, 1995). According to this, HRM policies should be designed and implemented with the prevailing contextual factors in mind (a 'best fit' approach – Sisson and Marginson, 2003). Thus the practice of HRM is contingent on the particular organisation and the internal and external influences and challenges faced by it. As discussed earlier with regard to flexibility, matching HRM policy to business strategy generally calls for labour costs to be minimised rather than for employees to be treated as a valuable resource. For example, in their eight case study firms, Truss et al. (1997) identified training policies which demonstrated the significant gap between HRM rhetoric and reality. Training was tailored to meet specific organisational objectives rather than to create a 'quality', multi-skilled workforce. Training and development initiatives were seen as necessary investments in human capital only insofar as they improved bottom-line competitive advantage. In none of the firms, did HR concerns take precedence over other strategic business considerations.

As is also reflected in DM, the bias within the HRM paradigm is to put organisational needs before those of disadvantaged workers. Under these terms, the potential for HRM to promote equality and diversity will be limited (Miller, 1996). Colling and Dickens (1998) pointed to the fact that the business case for HRM emphasises the most easy to tackle areas of the equality agenda – cleaning up recruitment and selection procedures and concentrating on external image, rather than the more difficult issues of power inequalities, low pay, part-time rights and so on. While commentators highlight the ways in which the business case could be expanded to include social justice concerns (see discussion in Chapter 8), generally the business case simply maintains the status quo, with the emphasis on tailoring employees to the needs of the organisation, rather than the other way around. In addition, the business case orientation of HRM leads to workforce diversity only being valued if it results in market advantage; there is no conception of a wider social justice concern for equality and diversity (Webb, 1997; Liff, 1996). HRM policy and practice are based on organisational contingencies, not wider social problems which still need to be regulated by law even within an HRM framework.

Another related problem is that the business case approach to HRM is typically focused on the short term, particularly in the British context where the priority is often to satisfy immediate performance goals demanded by shareholders and other investors (Newell and Scarborough, 2002; Guest, 1987). In contrast, equality and diversity initiatives which aim for transformation in organisational culture require a long-term strategy (Colling and Dickens, 1998). The contradictions within the HRM model are revealed again as from an equality and diversity perspective the goal of strategic integration would undoubtedly require a longer-term approach. The business case focus on short-term organisational objectives will in practice only result in 'tinkering' and 'tailoring' approaches to equality (Rees, 1998) – the short, rather than the long agenda (Cockburn, 1991; Richards, 2001). The primacy of the (short term) business case within

HRM can also serve to reinforce employment segregation and inequalities. For example, Biswas and Cassell (1996) investigated HRM initiatives within the hotel industry and identified requirements for particular workforce characteristics as forming part of the business case within HRM strategy. The 'quality' of employees required by the industry's specific business objectives encouraged the perpetuation of 'acceptability' stereotypes in recruitment. For example, being 'attractive' was seen as a necessary requirement for women in the role of receptionist. The equality implications are clear for 'faces that do not fit', possibly excluding disabled, older, or minority ethnic workers.

Thus, it can be argued that HRM initiatives will tend to help only certain groups of disadvantaged workers. For example, Miller (1996) argued that the business case for HRM and DM helps people at the 'glass ceiling', rather than people at the 'sticky floor'. The objective within the business case for DM tends to be based around a 'numbers game', increasing the proportions of certain previously under-represented groups of worker (the short agenda), rather than seeking to challenge the organisational and societal norms and values (the long agenda) that excluded them in the first place. The earlier discussion about flexibility focused on how this 'numbers game' could increase the proportions of numerically flexible and vulnerable workers without addressing equality issues. In summary, the theory and practice of HRM has most to offer 'high fliers' at the upper levels of the hierarchy (for example increasing the numbers of women and minority ethnic managers) rather than meeting the needs of the workforce at the lower levels. For example, so-called 'family-friendly' policies (that go beyond legal requirements) are often restricted to the higher grades in the organisation and so only benefit people who are less disadvantaged to begin with (Colling and Dickens, 1998; Liff and Dickens, 2000).

9.4.3 Valuing women's difference

In the 1970s, Schein identified managerial sex-typing as a major barrier to the advancement of women in the US, with her main finding being that '*think manager, think male*' was the predominant view held by both men and women (for a summary of these studies see Schein, 2001). This perception was found, through replicating the study in different national settings, to be a global phenomenon. A similar study some 20 years later found that while the perception was no longer held by women in the 1990s, it was still held by men. According to these findings, to succeed in management, women would have to take on masculine behaviours and characteristics (Wacjman, 1999). In comparison, what is known as the 'feminine-in-management' thesis aims to emphasise that in the new era of globalisation, women's unique 'feminine skills' can make important contributions to organisational management in the competitive and demanding external context (e.g. Maddock, 1999; Webb, 1997; Calas and Smircich, 1993; Rosener, 1990). Women's 'special contribution' is considered particularly important in the context of flatter organisational structures and the dismantlement of traditional hierarchies that is supposed to go hand in hand with HRM strategies such as team working and flexible working (Davies and Thomas, 2000). The argument goes that these supposed changes may offer up new opportunities for female managers and herald increased female representation in management through the utilization of and search for 'feminine' skills such as communication and co-operation, interest in affiliation and attachment and female views of power as being transforming and liberating rather than controlling (Calas and Smircich,

1993; Hatcher, 2003). The possession of 'feminine' skills may make women managers more 'suitable' for the flexible, non-hierarchical structures, team working and high-trust employment relationships that have become the new organisational norm (fitting with the HRM goals of commitment and flexibility) (Rosener, 1990).

However, there are serious problems with these arguments. Let us think back to the discussion in Chapter 5, where we discussed how an emphasis on the differences between individuals and groups could reinforce stereotypes and employment segregation and therefore do nothing for the promotion of equality. Focusing on women's 'unique' skills implies essentialist claims about female characteristics (Davies and Thomas, 2000); that is the idea that *all* women naturally have certain skills, talents and dispositions. Added to this is the fact that the feminine-in-management thesis is a business case model where diversity is only valued if it offers the employer more efficient, committed labour. Thus, '*the appropriation of "women's difference" discourse by management writers is merely another episode in a long history of economic reasoning that ends up valuing women out of economic necessity*' (Calas and Smircich, 1993: 75). This leads also to the danger that negative essentialist notions of women as passive or weak may also be used to justify gender segregation and their exclusion from certain types of work. In this case women are viewed as inferior because of their difference (Davies and Thomas, 2000: 1129). Moreover, the 'feminine' skills found within the feminine-in-management thesis encourage the fulfilment of a public version of womanhood defined by patriarchy (Webb, 1997). The focus is on a stereotype of woman as caring, nurturing and co-operative. This approach does nothing to challenge the existing gender divisions between paid and unpaid labour (e.g. why women do most of the household chores) and only supports and naturalises the existence of gender-segregated jobs. It does not challenge the wider causes of female disadvantage, and women who are successful have to give in to the dominant expectations in a '*self-interested pursuit of market opportunities*' (Webb, 1997: 166). It is chiefly middle-class, highly qualified, white women who have made the most gains from these widely held beliefs and stereotypes of women.

Key learning points

- There is a lack of evidence that the theory of HRM is translated into organisational practice, particularly the 'soft' version which offers most space for progressive equality and diversity initiatives.
- The primacy of the business case within HRM means that there is often no wider social justice concern attached to equality and diversity. The business case results in a short, rather than long, agenda.
- HRM initiatives tend to help people who need less assistance in the first place, for example those who are highly qualified and at middle-level management. The theory of HRM seems to have more to offer people who can most easily meet the dominant norm of the white, male, full-time worker.
- The feminine-in management thesis provides an example of the potentially detrimental consequences of the celebration of difference within HRM (and DM) where stereotypes and employment segregation can be further perpetuated rather than challenged.

9.5 CONCLUSION

Sadly, despite the fact that HR practitioners are usually seen as the guardians of good employment practice, this chapter offers a relatively negative appraisal of the potential that HRM theory and practice have for the pursuit of equality and diversity. This is not to deny the potential advantages that the theory of HRM could have for promoting equality and diversity. Strengths include the recognition within HRM of the importance of paying attention to the ways in which individual employees are managed and highlighting the importance of HR for organisational effectiveness. However, the evidence shows that the practice of HRM does not seem to match up to the ideals of the theory. This chapter has briefly discussed the gap between the rhetoric and reality of HRM (Legge, 1989, 1995; Truss et al., 1997) and the issues of power and resources which can undermine the positive potential that HRM may have for equality and diversity, particularly where the business case is used to justify HRM policy and practice. However, there are also fundamental weaknesses inherent to the theory of HRM that cannot be escaped. In particular, the individualistic focus and business case assumptions militate against the development of a long, transformational equality and diversity agenda.

Activity 9:1

Developing and implementing equality and diversity policy at ServiceCo

ServiceCo is a multi-divisional company with a central HRM function. Diversity issues became part of ServiceCo's formal policy agenda around 2004. A launch campaign for the equality and diversity policy took place in mid-2004 with the intention of rolling it out to all areas of the business from 2005 through 2006. The female Head of Employee Relations (ER) within the HR department explained how she had come to take over responsibility for equality and diversity from a senior management colleague:

> *I volunteered to pick up the equality banner from one of my colleagues who was dropping it because he'd got some other pressing issues to deal with from a work perspective. So I stuck my hand in there and that's how I got equality.*

It should be noted that this woman took on diversity responsibilities in addition to her other ER and HR duties. Whilst this is not an unusual practice – recent research by the CIPD found that 53% of those with responsibility for diversity in their organisation reported that they were not contracted to work exclusively on diversity (CIPD, 2006: 8) – it does beg the question about the extent of the resources the company was prepared to invest in equality and diversity. From this point, reporting to the Group HR Director, the Head of ER together with two assistants in the HR office developed the company's equality and diversity policy. The Head of ER – who had had no background or training in these issues – said that she and her assistants focused on what they could

learn from 'best practice' advice from ACAS, from ServiceCo employment lawyers and from relevant web sites:

> *We got examples from past lives and all sorts of stuff. So anywhere we could grab bits of information from, obviously the Internet is abound with this stuff. So primarily that's where we were coming from, in terms of putting a policy together… And we just swamped ourselves with information and then went into a darkened room and wrote a policy.*

The policy developed in a fairly ad hoc fashion and notably with little stakeholder involvement. No formal input was requested from the recognized trade unions, from line-management or non-management staff, despite the existence of employee involvement mechanisms such as consultative Staff Forums.

According to the Head of ER, there were a number of 'drivers' for the development of this policy. One was awareness of the costs of falling foul of anti-discrimination law (there had been some high-profile and costly cases taken against the company in the recent past) and a perception that nowadays employees were both more aware of their rights and more ready to take action through Employment Tribunals. Other important drivers included the desire to be an 'employer of choice' in a tight labour market for skilled workers; extensive work with the public sector and that sector's expectation of equality and diversity policies; and the increasing importance to City investors of equality and diversity measures as indicating a 'sustainable organisation'. The Head of ER also, however, expressed the opinion that this was 'the right thing to do'.

After drafting the policy on the basis of a self-taught approach, it was sent to other senior HR directors within the company for feedback. This was a process that, according to the ER manager, was carried out 'quite quickly, because everyone was particularly mindful that what we'd got at that time was not particularly robust'.

The DM policy

About a year after the company's DM policy development project started, the Head of ER decided to change the policy title from solely 'diversity' to include 'equality'. She said that this was because she had discovered that people in the company understood the idea of equality but had no understanding of 'diversity'. This amendment was therefore based on helping understanding and so presumably acceptance within the organisation – it did not reflect a paradigm change. The final version of the document was labeled the Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy. Its main aims were stated as follows:

- At ServiceCo we operate and make every effort to ensure that a working environment exists where all employees are treated with courtesy, dignity and respect irrespective of gender, race, colour or sexual orientation.
- All efforts are geared to eliminating all bias and unlawful discrimination in relation to job applicants, employees, our business partners and members of the public.
- To complement ServiceCo's 'core values' of 'openness, collaboration and mutual dependency'.

The objectives were to:

1. Match the diversity of our society.
2. Create a working environment free from discrimination, harassment, victimisation and bullying.
3. Ensure that all employees are aware of the Group Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy and provide any necessary ongoing training to enable them to meet their responsibilities.
4. Strive to become an organisation that will recognize, value and understand diversity and provide its employees with genuine opportunities to improve and reach their full potential.

Responsibility for DM policy implementation was not placed directly with HR in ServiceCo, but was supposed to be given to Heads of the different business groups and then 'cascaded' down through the organisational hierarchy. Nobody on the ServiceCo executive board had any formal association with the development of the DM policy. The person designated responsible for employee-focused issues was not a member of the executive board. Nevertheless, the Head of ER made it clear that her task was to 'sell' the policy company-wide, particularly to senior managers. She did not seem to seek to use her resources to push through any radical organisational change, but seemed to regard modification to existing structures as sufficient. There was a significant level of unionization at ServiceCo, but the unions were not perceived as potential partners in developing and implementing DM or even useful communication conduits for management practices relating to equality and diversity issues. There was certainly no consideration of unions affecting ServiceCo's cost/benefit analysis of equality and diversity issues.

Most ServiceCo managers seemed to have positive perceptions of what they knew of the equality and diversity policy and there were very few criticisms. However, awareness of policy objectives and initiatives became more limited further down the managerial hierarchy, to the point where supervisors and line-managers with direct responsibility for non-managerial employees were almost completely unaware of any specific initiatives. Some managers saw the DM policy as simply *labeling* existing managerial practices that they had carried out for years and had thought of simply as managing people, trying to treat people fairly and, as one line-manager put it, 'staff welfare, HR-side issues'.

(*Source*: Edited extract from Greene and Kirton (2009))

Questions

1. Would you say that ServiceCo's approach to equality and diversity fits into a 'soft' or 'hard' model of HRM?
2. Would you characterise ServiceCo's approach to equality and diversity as strategic?
3. Discuss the role of line-managers and other stakeholders in ServiceCo's equality and diversity policy.
4. How far is the business case a justification for ServiceCo's work on equality and diversity? What are the implications of this for a discussion of how HRM can advance equality?

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What benefits do you think there would be in ensuring equality and diversity within an HRM framework? Think about how equality and diversity issues might fit into an HRM business strategy.
2. Think about the conceptual fit between HRM and equality and diversity approaches discussed in Chapter 5. To what extent and how are HRM and DM theoretically compatible?
3. What segments of the workforce benefit most and why from the theory and practice of HRM?
4. Discuss the difference between 'hard' and 'soft' versions of HRM and the potential that each offers for equality and diversity in the workplace. Think about 'soft' and 'hard' elements of the four dimensions of HRM discussed earlier.

FURTHER READING

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An edited collection exploring aspects of the human relationships embedded in the practice of HRM.

Guest, D. 1987. Human resource management and industrial relations. Journal of Management Studies, 24 (5), 503–521.

A key article for the HRM model in Britain that summarises the evolution of the theory of HRM and its distinctiveness from personnel management.

Winstanley, D. Woodall, L. 2000. Ethical Issues in Contemporary Human Resource Management. Macmillan, London.

A collection analysing contemporary HRM practices through the use of business ethics concepts. Issues of equality and inequality issues are implicit in most of the articles.

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