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## **Armani Suits and Lab Coats: Can HRM and Science co-exist?**

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## **Armani Suits and Lab Coats: Can HRM and Science co-exist?**

### **ABSTRACT**

The current paper considers the special case of the uptake of, and support for, HRM initiatives in scientific research organisations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) HRM professionals to review the level of HRM integration and acceptance. Results indicated that as a group, scientists pose quite a challenge to HRM professionals. Furthermore, examples of HR representation as a senior strategic partner were limited and the devolution to the line of HR responsibilities has met with some resistance. Overall divergent priorities and different career backgrounds posed significant hurdles for HR professionals.

# **Armani Suits and Lab Coats: Can HRM and Science co-exist?**

## **Introduction**

Scientific research work demands technical skill, curiosity and creativity. Unfortunately the managerial realities of financial accountability and the burden of administration are often seen to be a constraint on this work, slowing the path to scientific breakthrough (Turpin & Deville, 1995; Gaines, 1994; Williams 1993). Within research based scientific organisations what many scientists see as ‘brakes’ on progress are often embodied in the support functions associated with finance and personnel matters. For the traditional personnel department this poses a particularly difficult challenge as the area currently struggles to re-invent itself as effective human resource management (HRM), serving a more strategic and far-reaching function within organisations.

In the broader world of organisations, the transition to HRM has met with varied success. In larger organisations the HRM function is being taken more seriously but in general there has been resistance to the transition from personnel to human resources and a lack of top management support for the new role that HRM seeks to take on (Armstrong, Edwards, Purcell, & Hubbard, 1993; Beer 1997; Lawler, 1995; Marginson, Hope-Hailey, Gratton & McGovern, 1997; Sisson, 1995). As yet, however, there has been little research into the successful uptake of, and support for, HRM initiatives in scientific research organisations and this presents our research opportunity and question: what characterises the transition from personnel to HRM in the difficult environment of a research organisation? The aim of the study at hand is to address this gap in the literature and provide some insights into the factors that assist and detract from the progress of the work of the HRM function in such an environment. The key areas to be considered include acceptance of the HRM manager as a strategic business partner, and the readiness of line managers to incorporate a HRM perspective into their decision-making (Guest, 1989: 42). Before launching into this analysis, however, the following section will provide some background of the role of HRM managers within CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation), the major Australian scientific research organisation under investigation.

## **The role of HRM managers within CSIRO**

CSIRO is one of the world’s largest multidisciplinary research organisations. This organisation employs over 7000 scientific and technical staff, enjoys strong international status and a rich research tradition spanning over 60 years (Turpin & Deville, 1995). Furthermore, the recent economic and political challenges that have faced CSIRO reflect the challenges and changes facing research institutions throughout the world (Tuininga, 1990, Rip, Misa & Schot, 1994, Turpin & Deville, 1995). Resultant organisational responses, that have broadly involved the uptake of a more commercial orientation, have led to a reassessment of the role of HRM. Specifically, CSIRO’s HRM function was reviewed extensively in 1994, and then reorganised in line with the following principles:

- the HRM function should have a support role driven by CSIRO’s mission and diverse business needs at all levels within the organisation;
- there should be a strong line management focus for the HRM function, with shared ownership of HRM issues between line managers and HRM professionals; and
- there should be fewer HRM staff at the corporate level and a stronger role for HRM professionals at the business unit (divisional) level.

These changes, that position HRM as a key strategic partner and also devolve HRM responsibilities to the line, make this organisation a fertile site for research into the role of HRM in a scientific organisation.

## Research Methodology

The complexity of issues we sought to investigate required a rich data source. Semi-structured interviews provide the best means of data collection in this situation because they allow the use of extra questions to build upon a standard list of questions and reveal experience (Neuman, 2000; Babbie, 1990). In this case a schedule of 8 questions was used as the basis for telephone interviews that lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Use of the telephone reduced research costs and minimised disruption of the work schedules of busy HRM people without jeopardising the aims of the research. The schedule was developed and then tested in a pilot study before finalisation. An experienced professional interviewer was used in the process. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed before analysis using Atlas Ti software.

The sample consisted of 17 CSIRO HRM professionals, 11 females and 6 males. Of these 15 were employed at manager level and 2 at officer level. Prior contact with HRM managers at CSIRO meant that all managers contacted agreed to be interviewed. The longest period of CSIRO employment was 37 years and the minimum one year, while the average length of employment was 13 years. This sample represents a good cross section of CSIRO HRM people and the extent of experience reflected in it allowed us to explore historical issues connected with the transition from personnel to HRM at CSIRO

This is not a quantitative study, we do not seek to test hypotheses or reach definite conclusions. Rather, our aim has been to undertake exploratory research in an interesting and important area, yielding insights that build on existing theory and lead to further research.

## Results

### HRM managers' perceptions of scientists

During the interviews respondents were asked if there were unusual challenges faced by the HRM professional working within the scientific environment. It became clear that there is indeed a unique set of circumstances that impact on the HRM function. Specifically, responses focussed on the personal characteristics of scientists and their style of communication. A total of 11 out of the 17 respondents made reference to a perception of superior intellectual ability in the CSIRO scientific staff and the challenges that this presents for HRM people. The picture presented was of a self consciously intelligent, focused and dedicated group of workers. In response to such demands, the HRM professional has to be logical, credible, focussed on outcomes and prepared to face thorough questioning. HR managers made the following comments:

*[It is] quite a demanding HR environment to work in ... They are dismissive of management and HR people... they don't think management is a very clever thing. They don't think it is a skill.*

Person 5

*They like to pull things apart; it feels very much like you are being pulled apart!*

Person 8

*I find them all to be very, very focused on outcomes and that sometimes can mean that they are a bit "bug-crushing"(?) in their approach.*

Person 4

Generally these comments support the perception that the scientific research environment presents HRM managers with a difficult and demanding set of challenges. The subsequent sections explore these challenges in greater depth. First, the acceptance of the HRM function as a strategic business partner and the factors that support and detract from its success are outlined, and second, the readiness of line managers to embrace a HRM perspective is reviewed.

## The HRM function as a strategic business partner

Representation at the senior decision-making level was quite weak. In the case of 15 respondents who were working at management level, only 3 reported they were directly line managed by the divisional head, and only five reported they were formally members of the senior management committee in their Division. In responses from four divisions, however, respondents were quite clear that a HRM strategic role was a possibility. Examples include:

*There is a valid role for human resource management; not just in putting out fires but in addressing issues and coming up with strategies too.*

Person 2

*My role is now increasingly strategic planning, policy advice, policy interpretation and people problem solving of whatever nature.*

Person 17

More commonly, however, the transition to the HR strategic role was gradual. The quest for recognition of the HRM function within the organisation, as a business partner, emerged as a major area of concern. Respondents identified problems with legitimacy and the constant challenge to prove that HRM can add value. Other 'bread and butter' operational activities absorbed a great deal of time and there was often little time left for strategic matters. When time was available it seemed that the HR professional's personal lack of experience in strategic decision making was a problem. Relevant comments were as follows:

*We live in a vacuum a lot of the time and you are pushing at the edges all the time, trying to make yourself relevant.*

Person 13

*The managers tend to see H.R., including my more senior role, as a reactive thing ... rather than getting in at the front end, listening to the business issues and maybe contributing something valuable to help their business.*

Person 6

*The challenge is to balance strategic issues ... with operational input; it is almost an impossibility.*

Person 11

*It is slow moving [strategic involvement]. The reason for that is perhaps my lack of experience and also the division [not] knowing what experience I do have.*

Person 13

Clearly then acceptance of the strategic HRM function varied between divisions. This raises the question of what determines success in one division and not in another. Analysis of responses revealed that there were several key determinants. Time and the pressures of balancing competing operational and strategic priorities, for example, appeared as a reason why some managers did not immerse themselves in strategic concerns. Largely, however, responses indicated that the primary difficulties faced by the HRM function were connected with credibility: perceptions by scientists of the ability of the HRM manager and perceived status and pay differentials. Comments included:

*You must have your credibility and it is a very tough place to prove it. There is no good saying, "I don't think that is right. Why not? What are the good logical and analytical reasons?"*

Person 4

*A lot of it hinges on credibility of the HR Manager as an individual ... you really need to show them that you do understand their business, their work, their constraints*

Person 6

*You have to earn your stripes. You have to have the knowledge and the persuasive ability to win that recognition. The organisation doesn't empower it on you.*

*Person 11*

*You have a credibility problem - you need to be able to present arguments that people can accept and to show that it is well researched*

*Person 7*

*I think one of the on-going issues ... [is]credibility with senior management and with other staff*

*Person 8*

*The limitation is the classification and ... recognition of the HR Manager ... is not equal to that of the other members of the senior management team ... it isn't regarded necessarily as a peer.*

*Person 11*

Although the HRM function was clearly respected as a business partner in four of the seventeen divisions, in the remaining divisions it was still struggling with successful integration within the central decision making group. The barriers to recognition were primarily connected with credibility issues and a requirement that HRM managers be able to think and argue in a scientific manner.

### **Line managers' acceptance of HRM**

The final area of analysis concentrates on the relationship between HRM personnel and line managers as the HRM perspective assumes a readiness of line managers to incorporate human resource priorities into their decision-making. Again the following responses indicate mixed acceptance of HRM activities. The general perceptions among HRM managers, however, revealed that HRM activity and the HRM professionals took up time that scientists believed could be used more effectively elsewhere.

*I think they feel that it is taking over a large part of their time where they really should be doing research and that is a reason why they resist.*

*Person 3*

*Many scientists have become "fatigued" with management activity. It's a fatigue that has its roots in cultural differences. It also stems from what many scientists perceive to be the failure of "management" to add value to the scientific enterprise.*

*Person 11*

When HRM managers were asked to be more specific about what could improve the situation, suggestions focussed on improving the credibility and skills of the HRM manager and developing skills in the scientists themselves. With respect to the contribution of the HRM function to the relationship the following comment was made:

*I don't really think we [HR] understand them in terms of motivators. I think HR hasn't got a good grasp on that, or may be it is a tension between managing the budget and managing the people.*

*Person 8*

The respondents also suggested that the scientists should develop stronger people management skills. There was evidence that generally scientists were not perceived as being well equipped to deal with people issues.

*They are often not very good in personal ways - just in general - and they have no management training at all ... but they are absolutely brilliant scientists.*

*Person 9*

An interesting observation made by several of the respondents, was that the age of the scientific line manager made a difference to their preparedness to absorb HRM related responsibilities.

*Younger people ... being exposed to HR principles ... in their uni studies or in other work places might be more willing to accept help.*

*Person 10*

*Scientist line managers, they vary. ... Many of them here have been converted ... they are quite interested, particularly the younger ones, and probably in some shape or form recognise that they are developing their own capability for ... roles beyond this place.*

*Person 11*

Another factor that contributed to greater success was connected with the scientific line manager's experience outside of the organisation

*If you get a manager, who has worked outside the organisation, who comes in at a senior level ... they recognise that there is a lot that HR can help them with. They will come and have a talk to you about things, whereas other line managers only come if there is something wrong and even then they will struggle on for a while [by themselves] and then you find we are thrust into a hole!*

*Person 13*

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

First, with respect to strategic involvement by the HRM manager there was limited reported success. Respondents generally struggled to be fully absorbed within central decision-making processes. This is not a novel finding. Writers such as Hope-Hailey et al. (1997) and Beer (1997) have lamented that, in general, the recent trends in people management have been piecemeal and have lacked the determined strategic shift initially envisaged by Beer et al. (1984) and Tichy et al. (1982). Within the scientific divisions under investigation, the primary reason given by those working within the HRM area was perceived lack of credibility. There is some evidence of involvement within central decision making processes but the overriding perception is that acceptance is a struggle. The perceived negative impact of management in general upon the scientific process does not assist with acceptance. More importantly, as a group, the scientists arguably because of cultural differences between them and the HRM professionals and their perceived high intellect, are a particularly difficult group of professionals to establish credibility with. This being the case, HRM professionals are largely seen as an outgroup and find informal networking and political interplay particularly difficult.

Elsewhere in the broader business environment there is concern that in order to operate as a business partner the HRM manager needs to be able to understand the process and language of business strategy development. A narrow understanding of the business issues, a specialist professional education, and career that has primarily focussed on HRM issues, is not enough if there is the expectation that those working in the HRM area are to be active advisers and participants in business decisions (Lawler, 1995; Beer, 1997). It is interesting to note that 13 of the respondents had experience outside CSIRO. Within scientific organisations there seems to be an added level of difficulty, however, as not only do HRM managers need to have a solid business orientation, they also need to have an understanding of the science upon which their credibility can be built.

With respect to the second major area of review in the research, the acceptance of HRM by line managers, HRM managers within the scientific divisions reported considerable resistance on the part of line managers to be involved with HRM processes. The respondents report that

the highly structured approach favoured under the managerialist approach towards strategic HRM planning seems not to have found favour with many scientific line managers, many of whom appear unpersuaded that it can add value to their research.

These tensions might be the result of the conflicting cultural drivers of the professional HRM manager and the scientific line manager. In the non-scientific business environment conflict may arise because line management is caught up with a short-term business focus while HRM professionals may be focussing on a longer-term, softer orientation (Kirkpatrick et al., 1992). Specifically, the short-term focus of line managers may be driven by budgetary planning and control. Armstrong (1989) describes the influence of the 'clammy hand of the accountant' that sets management accounting priorities for line managers and displaces priorities that do not return immediate financial rewards.

While this may be the case in scientific organisations, that is the 'clammy hand of the accountant' response may be similarly exhibited by scientific line managers, there is an additional layer of complexity. The scientific culture itself contributes to a dislike of anything that is not totally committed to the direct furthering of 'good science'. This personal commitment to the scientific process may not have a counterpart in the normal workplace. As one respondent commented:

*Unlike, other organisations where people have a clear delineation between home and their work, this is their life; if you stopped payment, they would still continue doing it.*

*Person 17*

The literature also suggests that personal differences between supervisors, who will be called upon to operationalise HRM policy, and HRM professionals, may contribute to a lack of line commitment and respect for HRM matters. The gap in educational backgrounds coupled with inadequate training and development may discourage supervisors from approaching HRM related tasks as supervisors may not feel equipped to deal with HRM demands (Lowe, 1992). The current research has highlighted the significance of this issue in the acceptance and integration of the HRM function. Respondents did provide some insights, however, into factors that may help to lessen these gaps. It was reported that age and career backgrounds of the line managers made a difference. Younger scientists were able to appreciate that the exposure to HRM management skills may be of use later in their career and scientists who had worked outside of the research environment had a greater appreciation of the benefits to be had from the application and integration of HRM principles in what they do.

Overall however, line and HRM managers within the scientific research environment appear to have quite divergent priorities and different career backgrounds. Lawler (1995) has argued that for successful integration to be realised in business in general, the relationship between line and HRM personnel needs to improve. Indeed both line and HRM managers need to become HRM champions. The current research suggests that HRM staff in CSIRO have yet to move from the lesser role of support providers to that of strategic business partner. That this transition has yet to occur may be explained in part by the cultural and power differential that exists between the scientists who have the professional knowledge which drives the organisation's core business, and the HRM professionals who do not.

It is extremely important that a partnership be developed between line managers and HRM professional that breaks down the traditional staff and line barrier (Ulrich, 1997). For this to occur both groups need to pursue broader organisational experiences and actually work in other departments to break down perceptual barriers. They also need to acknowledge that the definition of purpose for public sector organisations may have broadened to include process outcomes in response to the government and community demands for greater organisational accountability. This in turn entails acceptance by scientific line managers of the legitimate role that non-scientific professional staff have to play in achieving those outcomes.

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