

Managing Human Capital in a Knowledge Based Economy: The Role of the HR Function

Yusliza Mohd.Yusoff^a, Hazman Shah Abdullah^b

^a*School of Management
Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Minden, Pulau Pinang
Tel: 03-55435847, Fax: 03-55444131
E-mail: yusliza1977@yahoo.com*

^b*Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor
Tel: 03-55444157/4166, Fax: 03-55444131
E-mail: hazman@salam.uitm.edu.my*

ABSTRACT

The emergence of the global economy, monumental improvement in information and communication technology, and the emergence of the knowledge economy are among the forces that are resulting in the transforming the Human Resources (HR) function. There is a growing consensus that human capital (HC) is critical to an organization's success and that the HR focus must be more strategic in the new knowledge-based economy (K-economy) era. Knowledge economy and emphasis on HC provides opportunity for HR function to fundamentally alter its role in the corporation and become true value-adding partners. To achieve this HR, must understand the most valuable of organisational knowledge is embedded in the HC and it must creatively aid in its sustainable exploitation.

Keywords

Human Resources, Knowledge-based Economy, Role of the HR Function, Strategic Partner, Line Manager

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country on the move. As reported in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006), Malaysian economy has chalked up 6.2 per cent average growth per annum during the 1991-2005 periods. Furthermore, Malaysia has an exciting economic target called "Vision 2020", which envisages the transformation of Malaysia into a developed country. Malaysia is currently taking bold steps to transform from a production-based economy (P-economy) to knowledge-based economy (K-economy) (ISIS, 2002). This transformation means that the economy is going to develop 'new' industries – knowledge intensive industries. The new industries, certainly requires different human resource than what a P-economy requires. High performance organizations acknowledge human capital (HC) or human resources (HR) as their most important source of competitive advantage in this new industry. Thus, a highly

knowledgeable and highly skilled, flexible and creative HC as well as imbued with positive work ethics and spiritual values, is needed to see the emergence of the K-economy .

2.0 HC/HR FOR THE K-BASED ECONOMY

With the rapid development of the global knowledge economy, intellectual capital (IC), is increasingly the principal asset of many corporations (Bontis & Fitz-enz, 2002; Bontis, 2001). It has become the main source of competitiveness and the key resource for value creation (Haesli & Boxall, 2005). HC embodies the knowledge, talent, judgment and experience of employees (Bontis & Fitz-enz, 2002). Bontis (1999) argued that HC is important because it is a source of innovation and strategic renewal. In addition, he further argued that HC is the profit lever of the knowledge-driven economy. A knowledge-driven economy is an economy where generation and exploitation of knowledge plays a predominant path in the process of wealth creation (Goh, 2005).

In the K-economy, internal resources and competencies of companies are the focus of modern management literature (Barney, 1991; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). The analysis of internal resources has transformed to a focus on intangible resources; knowledge is seen as a crucial type (Alavi, Kayworth, & Leidner, 2005-2006; Davenport, De Long, & Beers, 1998). Malaysian researchers in particular argue that, in their business world, "knowledge is a necessity and can be used as a strategic tool against competitors" (Naquiyuddin & Heong, 1997, p. 72). The number of knowledge workers (k-workers) and new knowledge-based opportunities is expected to increase dramatically in the next few years. This new demand will force employers to further develop employees' competencies (Richer & Fay, 1995) as well as the development of organizations' HC that lead to an improvement of organizational performance.

Realizing that HC is one of the most important internal resources in organizations, HC development is a key thrust in the Ninth Malaysian Plan 2006-2010 (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006). Since Malaysia is one of Southeast Asia's most economically vibrant countries, the quality of the nation's HC will be the most critical element in the achievement of the "Vision 2020" (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006). HC development and application in the public and private sectors and in the economic at large has become the central agenda of the government. While the government policies recognize the centrality of HC and has put in place the plans and the necessary incentives, the utilization of this HC in terms of new venture creation, new product development and new systems creation occurs mostly within the context of organisations. The value creation potential of the HC will depend, in large measure, on the quality of the management of HC or HR. This entails the organisational structures, systems, policies, arrangements and cultures that create enabling and empowering work environment for the people to apply their talent to solve problems. Therefore, the effective management of HC/HR is critical to the achievement of the national plans to develop superior HC as the main driver of the emerging K-economy (Hazman, 2003). In addition, the quality of HR will be the single most important factor that will determine the pace and success of the transition toward the K-economy (ISIS, 2002).

3.0 THE ROLE OF THE HR FUNCTION

3.1 The Traditional Role of the HR Function

The traditional role of the HR function is the provision of administrative support. Historically, HRM was viewed as a collection of personnel activities including payroll, benefits, compensation, records, training, etc. Volumes of paper work, such as sick leave forms, payroll change forms, and performance review were produced, maintained, and distributed by HR. This type of day-to-day operational HR activities is what has prompted other departments to refer to HR as "administrative support" function. Further, traditional HR departments were not concerned with tying their contributions to the bottom line. According to Ulrich (1997), the dynamic business environment nowadays requires HR function to fulfill four roles, namely those of administrative expert, employee champion, change agent, and strategic partner. These roles will be discussed in the following section.

3.2 Role of the HR Function

Role of the HR department typology that is widely cited and perhaps the best known is by Ulrich (1997). The Ulrich (1997) HR role model is shown in figure 1.

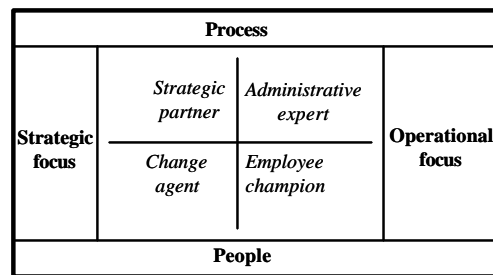


Figure 1: HR Role

Source: Adapted from Ulrich (1997)

The first role is the "administrative expert", which concerns more with process efficiency that involve people and most of the HR function's time is spent on this role. This role "requires that HR professionals design and deliver efficient HR processes for staffing, training, appraising, rewarding, promoting, and otherwise managing the flow of employees through the organization." The second role is called "employee champion". Here, it requires the HR function to know the concerns of employees and spend time talking to them and listening to their concerns rather than processes. It operates largely at an operational rather than strategic level. The third role considers as a facilitator, involving modeling change to other departments, being a positive advocate of change across the entire organization, resolving employee issues arising from change, and embedding change by implementing efficient and flexible processes. This role is called the "change agent". The fourth and the final role is the "strategic partner". In this role, it must make sure that its practices, processes, and policies complement the overall organizational strategy. It must also develop the capacity to execute that strategy in the minimum amount of time.

He observed that HR recognize the challenges of managing the new HC and seek to deliver on the four roles. The new roles encompasses managing the flow of HC into, through and out of the organisation, taking to heart the needs of the HC, constantly revitalizing the HC and finally, integrating with and facilitating the strategic goals of the business.

3.3 The New Role of the HR Function as a Strategic Partner in the K-Based Economy

The importance of HR and their management is ever more critical to organizations in the K-economy. Modern organizations are under relentless pressures to change. It is argued that organizations had to focus on the value of investments in HR as a major source of competitive advantage (Guest, 1990; Schuler & Jackson, 2005) in the face of structural changes in the organizations. HR are seen as the foremost intangible assets which composes a firm's core competence and crucial to solving organizational problems and increasing

performance (Rowley & Saaidah, 2007). This raises the question of how HR should be managed in the context of the K-economy to generate superior value including the issues organisational architecture of HR management (HRM) function.

In the mid-1980s, many theorists and practitioners called for HRM to become more business-oriented, market-minded, and change-minded (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2003; Saint-Onge, 2001; Stewart, 1997; Ulrich, 1997). As a result, the HR function is beginning to redefine its role (Wright, Dyer, & Takla, 1999) from one of administrative support to one of being a strategic partner. HR managers, by virtue of their knowledge of human performance, are well positioned to offer future competitive advantages and to exercise strategic leadership (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Lawler & Mohrman, 2003). This paradigm shift concerning the value of HR would therefore create opportunities for the HR function to develop a more strategic role.

The HR function is frequently encouraged by academicians, consultants, and practitioners to play more strategic role i.e. in shaping the strategy and in working the strategy, in their organization (Bjorkman & Soderberg, 2006). According to Ulrich (1997):

“the strategic HR role focuses on aligning HR strategies and practices with business strategy. In playing this role, the HR professional works to be a strategic partner, helping to ensure the success of business strategies. By fulfilling this role, HR professionals increase the capacity of a business to execute its strategies” (p. 26).

The new strategic roles require a major shift to managing organizational capabilities, managing relationships, and managing learning and knowledge (Coates, 2001; Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2003; Saint-Onge, 2001; Ulrich, 1997). Gloet (2004) submitted that HRM the revitalisation of the HR function requires the changes in roles, responsibilities, strategic focus, and learning. The new HR roles with particular reference to the knowledge economy have been outlined by Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall (2003) as one of HC steward, knowledge facilitator, relationship builder, and deployment specialist. Adequate HC must be channelled into the organisation with new competitive arrangements that caters the changing needs of the k-workers. To develop and exploit knowledge in an ever changing environment, HC must be constantly refurbished through active and ongoing individual, group and organisational learning Fitz-enz (in Chatzkel, 2002). Traditional organised and formalised learning is necessary but highly inadequate to cope with the learning needs in a k-economy. Additionally, HR must seek to develop relationship with not only the internal stakeholders but also supplier, intermediaries, buyers, and regulators to facilitate capabilities are distributed across these networks to maintain quality of services. Finally, HR,

according to Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall (2003) must be able to deploy resources across networks to maintain service levels by process redesign and also improvements.

As part of the revitalization and reinvention of HR to meet the challenges of the k-economy, re-architecture of the HR-line relationship is needed. This makes the HR function much more than “policy police” and regulatory “watchdog” (Aghazadeh, 2003). At the same time as the HR function is supposed to become more strategic, the day-to-day HR responsibilities is to be shifted back to line management (for example Hazman, 1999, 2002; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006; Papalexandris & Panayotopoulou, 2005; Renwick, 2003). For instance, Renwick (2003) submitted that devolve day-to-day HR responsibilities to line managers based on a rationale that encouraging the line manager to undertake the role of “front line” HR manager will free up HR professionals to undertake a more strategic role. Additionally, information technology in particular is rapidly enabling new possibilities for “insourcing”, which is the transfer of responsibilities and task previously or typically performed by HR to organizational members outside of HR (Kerr & Von Glinow, 1997). In fact, Lepak, Bartol, and Erhardt (2005) agreed that the movement toward sophisticated information systems in organizations through such vehicles as enterprise resource planning systems and applications service providers will make such “insourcing” more feasible. Hence, HR function is increasingly expected to simultaneously become much more flexible, responsive, efficient, and, ultimately, make a strategic contribution to their company in the K-based economy.

4.0 HRM AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN K-ECONOMY

In the K-economy, HR and HRM will face a number of challenges. Firstly, HR must face the rather daunting task of revising and causing the revision of the conventional mental models and paradigms of work and workers. According to Senge (1995), the mental models underpin cognition, affect and action. Unless, the paradigms are changed, the old HR will not have an easy time transforming the organisation for the new economy. In the K- economy, the new HC i.e. the K-workers must be reconceived. The inappropriability of the knowledge embodied in the HC requires new forms of control and motivation (Soo, Devinney, Midley & Deering, 2002). The meaning and understanding of work must be accordingly revised. Active advocacy may be required to ensure the legal and political institutions recognise and facilitate the new management.

Secondly, HRM will be challenged to share the functional knowledge of and about the HR systems with the rest of the organisation. Functional units with organisations are repositories of both specialized explicit and tacit knowledge that collectively forms the store of

organisational knowledge. The bane of knowledge management (KM) in most organisations is the lack of sharing and exchange of this critical information with others within the organisation. Departmentalism and functional silos have limited the contribution of various functional knowledge to business success. Strategic HRM calls for greater networking between HR and line units within organisations to facilitate the transfer of knowledge in both directions. Strategic HRM (SHRM) proponents have urged HR to maintain active link with the line to appreciate and develop amore business oriented mindset, hitherto missing in the professionally driven and introverted HR function (Guest, 1990; Wright, McMahan, Snell, & Gerhart, 2001). Knowledge transfer of the tacit type require interaction and exchange as the social context is key to effective transfer of HR or line knowledge (Roberts, 2001:102).

Thirdly, as part of the overall development of a strategic role and mindset, HR is advised to empower the line units with HR decisions (Ulrich, 1997). To make this empowerment work, HR must not only render many aspects of the functional knowledge explicit for line units to absorb the new knowledge efficiently (i.e. manuals, SOP, guidelines etc), it must also seek to transfer the corresponding tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966). Empowerment will falter if the empowered feel ill-prepared to reliably execute the HR authority devolved to them (Hazman, 1999). Effective transfer of explicit and also the tacit aspects of HR knowledge will ameliorate anxiety of about the new roles and develop greater willingness toward empowerment (Zahra & George, 2002). The exchange of the tacit elements will also diminish fears that the line units will place production and business needs ahead of human care and compassion and risk running foul of the statutory requirements.

Fourthly, HR must develop systems, policies and practices that cohere with the knowledge strategy of the new economy organisations. Lee's (1999) taxonomy of HR policies for knowledge based firms provides a conceptual guide for practitioners. Haesli and Boxall's (2005) case study of the complementarity of HR policies and knowledge strategy (codification vs. personalisation) is yet another example of HR facilitating a KM strategy.

It is obvious that HR has a critical role to play in making HC as key part of IC, to work for the organisation.

5.0 NEED FOR THE STUDY IN MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

Despite these calls for a significant strategic role for HR, HRM is a relatively new area of interest in Malaysia and less is known about its people management (Rowley & Saaidah, 2007). In fact, Hazman (1998) found that Malaysian HR managers tend to have little influence in the strategic management process. This is also evident in Rowley and Saaidah's (2007) finding that Malaysian

people management is characterized as still more like 'personnel', than 'HRM'. Moreover, Chew (2005) highlighted that although the role of the HR department and its importance is gradually expanding, the general notion is that the HR department still plays largely an administrative role. There has been a great deal of research on strategic HR roles, for example, research from India (Bhatnagar & Sharma, 2005), South Africa (Pietersen & Engelbrecht, 2005), UK (Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles, & Zaleska, 2002), USA (Lawler & Mohrman, 2003), Australia (Sheehan & Scafidi, 2005), and New Zealand (Cleland, Pajo, & Toulson, 2000). Although considerable literature is available about HRM as a strategic partner, very little empirical research has been done on this subject in Malaysia.

The biggest challenge for Malaysian companies is in developing its HR to match the rest of region (Rozhan & Teh, 2003). The transformation from personnel to HRM is necessary for Malaysian companies. The transition from Personnel Management to HRM reflects the emerging organization-wide commitment to HC development (Sheehan, 2005). A primary reason for this transition is that HR departments are being called upon to play a much more strategic role in organizations (Ulrich, 1997). No longer can HR professionals simply focus on administrative aspect of HR activities. Rather, they are increasingly expected to simultaneously become much more flexible, responsive, efficient, and, ultimately, make a strategic contribution to their company.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The development and availability of world class HC, which is a key national agenda, is necessary for the K-economy to take shape. Whether the HC results in improved national competitiveness depends, in large measure, on the effective management of HC at the micro and organisational level. Therefore, the shift from an administrative role to a strategic partner of the HR function in the knowledge organizations (K-organisations) is absolutely critical. The HR function must become more open and sharing, developed linkages both within and especially without the organisations with the whole constellation of partners in the value creation. HR must also integrate with and complement the knowledge strategy of the organisations to provide strategic alignment. To constantly renew knowledge and enhance the HC, HR must develop superior learning capacity and capabilities to remain competitive.

Unless the HRM in the emerging K-economy metamorphosises, the tensions and conflicts in the K-organisations will mount acting as a steep tax on development and growth putting the achievement of vision 2020 at risk. This paper is an attempt at exploring and analyzing the organizational roles played by the HR function in the new Keconomy era. Future research

should be conducted to validate the principles articulated in the paper.

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