The Pursuit of Multiple and Parallel Organizational Flexibilities: Reconstituting Jobs

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A consideration of the changes driving the move towards flexibility forces us to broaden our conception of what flexibility actually means. Two such drivers are the shift away from jobs-based work structures, and the re-engineering of business processes as more attention is paid to quality, service, cost, and time. As a consequence, employees are now expected to work smarter across areas of operational knowledge, collaborate more effectively with others, deal more with customers, and solve more problems. The implication is that flexibility of contract has to be accompanied by a range of other flexibilities if business needs are to be met.

RECONSTITUTING THE RELATIONSHIPS AND LINKAGES IMPLIED BY WORK

As HR practitioners and occupational psychologists try to find an acceptable path through the many dilemmas they face in dealing with the issues raised by flexibility, the fields of knowledge that will carry weight in their respective fields are changing rapidly (Sparrow & Marchington, 1998). This analysis is intended to highlight the new fields of knowledge associated with the phenomenon of what is called “jobs-based flexibility”. The knowledge that is now needed to help organizations cope does not currently reside within the sphere of influence of psychologists. Why? Because many of the articles in this issue are concerned with different facets and consequences of the drive for flexibility. The generic consequence is the breakdown of work and the traditional relationships and linkages that are contained within. We are witnessing a fragmentation of the employment relationship, and seeing a breakdown of several linkages that have previously guided our thinking about human resource management (HRM). Work is being reconstituted in totally new ways and this makes it difficult for practitioners to put their trust in knowledge based on the old relationships and
linkages. We have to give renewed consideration to many relationships that are now being changed (Sparrow & Marchington, 1998):

1. Our links with ourselves in terms of what we want out of work, how we maintain a sense of individuality in a world where we either increasingly subsume our life to more intense employment, or face no employment at all;

2. Our relationships with other individuals in a work process that can be altered in terms of social interactions, time patterns, and geographical location;

3. The co-operative and competitive links between different internal and external constituents of the organization in their new more flexible forms;

4. The relationships between key stakeholders and institutions such as governments, unions, and managers.

Reflecting the “human resources” versus “resourceful humans” critique of HRM, there has been an increasing tension between the human resource requirements of a flexible organization and the organization requirements of a flexible human resource. One of these tensions has arisen because of broad changes to the shape and form of organizations. The dilemma this has created concerns the need to change the level of analysis at which HR practitioners operate. At what level of intervention should they design and aim their policies, tools, and intervention techniques? Should they direct their attention to mediating the impact of change on the individual and their skills and attitudes? Do they focus instead mainly on the design of jobs and on the issues raised in fitting the person to the job? Should they become involved in understanding how jobs are best fitted together and co-ordinated? Should they be the architects of organizational competitive advantage? Depending on the answer, there are very different implications for the sort of “armoury” they should bring to bear in terms of HRM policies, tools, and techniques.

**CHALLENGES TO THE OLD PARADIGMS**

Not surprisingly, then, flexibility is an issue of interest to many people. Moreover, the main parameters to the problem are not particularly new. In 1994, the US Human Resource Planning Society set up a State-of-the-Art (SOTA) Council to consider what the main change drivers and challenges would be at the millennium (Eichinger & Ulrich, 1995). The tensions were felt to be around those issues associated with globalization and internationalization. At that time these issues were seen mainly as “soft” problems, as were the implementation problems associated with the drive for flexibility. Flexibility was being achieved through structural change (rationalization, downsizing and delaying) and horizontal management techniques. The SOTA exercise also highlighted the need to build trust and confidence (so that individuals inside and outside the organization believe what managers say) and the need for organizations to
become boundaryless (with information and ideas moving across hierarchical, horizontal, and external boundaries effortlessly) also featured in their analysis. Flexibility, then, was seen as a problem of there being potentially limited capacity for change. As we shall see, these issues are still central at the millennium, but perhaps the main difference is that they are all now recognized as “hard” problems, because it is time to deliver.

The problem is that exactly what is meant by flexibility is still a concept in transition, even though it has been discussed now for nearly 20 years within the HRM literature. The link between changes in technology, how these affect the organization structure and process, and the impact that the resultant structural changes and new organizational forms have on the integration, organization, and distribution of tasks lie at the heart of this issue. Changes in the content of jobs, the form in which they are designed, and the way in which they need to be coordinated by HRM systems, have both made the construction of existing jobs “unsafe” and have rendered obsolete much of the armoury and technical education of HR practitioners. Most of the business literature points to a series of deep qualitative shifts taking place in the nature of work. There is a tension that exists between the organization’s need for versatility in its production or service strategy and the existing outcomes that result from the way that jobs are currently designed and constructed. Organizations are therefore seeking to increase their versatility by tapping (and better matching) the skills, capabilities, adaptability, and creativity of the workforce through a range of interventions such as communication, multiskilling, team building, and horizontal process redesign. Phrases such as “process re-engineering”, “delayering”, “downsizing”, “right-sizing”, “recession-fatigue”, “down-shifting”, and “dejobbing” have all entered the HR practitioner’s vocabulary. In combination, these phenomena have significant implications for what is now meant when we talk of a “job”.

Not only are there fewer of the old-style jobs in existence, but in the work situations encouraged by the current economic and technological realities, it is harder to package work into discrete “jobs” (Davidow & Malone, 1993). And herein lies the problem. Much of the flexibility debate still focuses at the job level on the process of negotiation about job conditions and changes in the various tasks or work elements that are bundled up into “jobs”. The traditional view of job design argues that in making choices about how best to differentiate, coordinate, integrate, and allocate tasks to individuals or groups, the challenge for organizations is how to break the task down into parts that are small enough to be within the competence of individual job holders, but also challenging enough to motivate performance (Parker & Wall, 1996). Flexibility across jobs has been seen as the need to manipulate the bundle of tasks allocated to a single job and is described as “functional flexibility”, which refers to an organization’s ability to deploy employees between activities and tasks to match changing workloads, production-methods, or technology. It is loosely connected with the topic of multiskilling, although in practice this has become the preserve of manufacturing
operations in highly unionized environments. However, in many cases the managerial philosophies associated with flexible production were implemented in a way that still required limited “jobs-based flexibility”. The changes that were wrought were driven by an internal focus. The improvements to operational efficiency through productivity improvements, reduced lead times, product inventories, and cost of quality were localized to small parts of the organization. The information systems and performance management systems that surrounded jobs were still designed along functional lines, and therefore the focus was to “optimize” individual functions. Traditional flexibility concerns of multiskilling, financial flexibility, or time flexibility were felt sufficient to handle the changes to the content of jobs in the early 1990s. There are two developments at the organizational level which challenge the relevance of existing flexibility paradigms and therefore raise difficulties for HR practitioners:

1. The shift away from jobs-based systems to person-based systems;
2. Radical changes in the location and nature of co-ordination within the organization structure.

**SHIFTING FROM JOBS- TO PEOPLE-BASED HRM SYSTEMS**

The task facing HR practitioners at the millennium is made more difficult because much of their armoury is based upon and targeted at jobs-based systems (Lawler, 1994). The majority of the personnel management systems—such as job and role descriptions, job evaluations, payment systems, and selection and promotion systems, are based on the historical existence of a formal hierarchy of jobs, which have been brought together under a formal organizational structure and design, which has in turn helped to clarify: the reporting relationships between one job and another; the number of levels or bands into which jobs are classified; and the spans of control associated with a particular job. Therefore, pay systems could compare different jobs in terms of their complexity and place labour market valuations on jobs by comparing like with like, and selection systems could match the person to the job based on assumptions of predicted performance. But the rhetoric from the management gurus is that the end of the “job” is nigh. Organizations are experiencing high levels of rewards failure because most of their pay systems do not reflect strongly enough strategic thrusts towards quality, team working, and competition based on time. The rewards systems—and most of the other jobs-based personnel management systems—break down under pressure from technological change and downsizing. These changes have combined to reduce the “half life” of the technical and functional skills associated with a task-based view of the job, and therefore, the job evaluation systems. This distorts appraisal systems and leads to a break down of
the pay-for-performance relationship. As organizations reallocate knowledge, information, power, and rewards in response to this failure, a shift to person- as opposed to job-related performance management systems becomes inevitable because the evolving set of tasks and activities built into internal roles can no longer be accurately priced in the labour market. According to this argument, it is no longer jobs which have value, but people. This forces organizational psychologists to junk much of the job—person fit paradigm that underpins their work on selection and assessment (Herriot & Anderson, 1997) but still leaves them in familiar territory—people and the management of their behaviour. Clearly, we must take a much broader perspective and understand a new field of what has been called “jobs-based flexibility” (Sparrow, 1998).

UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTS OF JOBS-BASED FLEXIBILITY

Regardless of the debate over how many jobs will eventually be lost, what the new balance between internal labour markets or external or peripheral forms of employment will be, or which forms of work will no longer be organized into discrete jobs and which will remain, there is a general trend towards what is best described as jobs-based flexibility. The very title expresses the problem for HR practitioners and academics alike. What is it? Organizations are currently structured around jobs, but the flexibility they seek is far more profound than simply considering new time patterns of work, multiskilling, and new forms of pay. Although all these issues have to be considered, increasingly this is just as part of a total package, and as part of a process which is forcing flexibility in the very definition of what a job constitutes. This new field has become important because there is a fundamental realignment and re-ordering of jobs taking place, and this is impacting both the content of jobs (through the tasks, operations, and work elements that are deemed still necessary) and the way in which they relate to each other (through the roles assigned to jobs, the information and control systems, the relative levels of power they possess).

Jobs-based flexibility as a concept captures a kaleidoscope of ad hoc and opportunistic initiatives that organizations are making, such as multiskilling, job enlargement and upskilling, labour intensification and core–peripheral job strategies. It is required when organizations choose to repackage significantly the work elements, tasks, duties, and positions that are together bundled into definable “jobs”, or when they redesign the relationship between jobs or the context into which jobs are placed. Jobs-based flexibility involves the simultaneous manipulation of four elements:

1. The various components that are bundled together into definable “jobs” (through the tasks, operations, work elements, and duties that are deemed still necessary);
2. Redesign of the context into which jobs are placed and the position of the new job in the broader organization design (through the family of jobs to which it is deemed to belong, the occupation of the job holder, the career stream to which jobs belong, and the work process of which it forms a part);

3. The way in which jobs relate to and interact with each other (through the roles assigned to jobs, the information and control systems, the relative levels of power they possess);

4. The way in which HRM systems integrate the new bundles of jobs into the strategic process (through the way in which employee contributions to the jobs are co-ordinated, controlled, and committed to).

In combination, such changes have both made the construction of existing jobs “unsafe” and have rendered obsolete much of the armoury and technical education of HR practitioners. HR practitioners need detailed technical insights into each of these four fields of knowledge, much of which resides with other specialists or line managers. It is by necessity a very broad concept that captures deep and significant changes being made to the structure of organizations and the purpose of individual work. However, there is no clear academic understanding of what is happening to guide practitioners. As a concept, jobs-based flexibility crosses the work of traditional job analysis academics (who consider the partitioning of work into manageable units), organization design academics (who understand the co-ordination of work across important vertical, horizontal, and external boundaries), and HRM specialists (who ponder over the creation of HRM systems to control and gain commitment to the implementation of the new systems).

RENEWED ATTENTION TO FLEXIBILITY IN INTRA-FIRM FORM

HR practitioners therefore now have to digest the messages coming out from the many disciplines that contribute an understanding of what is going on and then make immediate, but long-lasting, decisions about the job and organization design issues. In applying their knowledge, HR practitioners have to consider what is now meant by a job. This is because in many cases it makes more sense to see the organization as a collection and complex pattern of interrelated roles, for which there is a broad blueprint to ensure that the combination of activity is still co-ordinated.

The logic underlying the differentiation, co-ordination, integration, and allocation of tasks to individuals or groups is rarely clear or analysable. Experience also shows that initiatives aimed at changing the nature and location of organizational co-ordination risk high levels of failure if the job design and work organization implications are not considered properly. Few HR practitioners have understood the issues raised by radical changes in the location and
nature of organizational co-ordination. These issues perhaps create the biggest challenge to our knowledge and therefore form the remaining focus of this analysis.

If work is increasingly “de-jobbed”, then many of the structural and organization design assumptions that were used to delineate separate jobs should be thrown to one side and treated as a relic of the early industrial age. We need to understand the implication of the new organizational forms. Organization form refers to the combination of strategy, structure, and internal control and co-ordination systems that provide an organization with its operating logic, its rules of resource allocation, and its mechanism of corporate governance (Creed & Miles, 1996; Pfeffer, 1992). Managers are the primary designers of this “form”, through the choices they make about the organization and job design. There are two main changes taking place in organizational form:

1. intra-firm form,
2. inter-firm form.

Changes in *inter-firm form* are the most visible and obvious to detect and flow from the mergers, joint ventures, strategic alliances, outsourcing, virtual organization, and cross-sector co-operative arrangements. All act to serve as opportunities (whether intentional or not) to break up existing HRM patterns, roles, and responsibilities and to reconstitute them against a new set of priorities. The new priorities soon become clear within the joint venture, or the outsourced or privatized unit that is under new ownership. However, the greatest challenges for HR practitioners stem from changes in *intra-firm form*, that is: changes in organization design and co-ordination systems; downsizing and delayering, the design and co-ordination of jobs; and the consequent level of trust built into the organization.

One reason for continued attention to intra-firm form is that international research in the mid-1990s showed that work organization was the main factor in labour productivity—far more important than the workers’ skills or motivation. This has highlighted the need to consider the learning from a comparison of international differences and their implications for HRM, such as the relative performance of the German system, with its high number of job classifications (specialization) that compartmentalizes workers and prevents them from assuming broader roles, in contrast to the Japanese system, which stresses integration, with high levels of teamwork and front-line empowerment, as well as group co-ordination rather than craft-based individual excellence (Sparrow & Hilltop, 1994, 1997). The McKinsey Global Institute studied nine manufacturing sectors (such as automobile manufacture, car parts, metalworking, steel, computing, consumer electronics, processed food, and pharmaceuticals). In most industries, German productivity was lower than that in the US. Japanese
productivity was significantly higher than that in the US in the cars, metal-working, and consumer electronics sectors (by up to 45% in steel), although across all nine sectors Japanese productivity was only 83% that of the US. The important finding was that most of the things that caused differences in productivity were subject to the control of managers—how the workplace was organized in terms of working practices and the manufacturability of products. In some instances these initiatives have accumulated over a period of time. For example, Ford Motor Company has reduced the number of workers needed to make each car per day from five to two over a period of 15 years. In other cases, sweeping productivity improvements have been claimed. Similarly, Lucas Industries’ automotive business reduced manufacturing lead times from 55 to 12 days, cut order-to-dispatch lead times from 105 to 32 days, and doubled inventory turns, thereby increasing productivity by half and reducing floor space requirements. There has been considerable critical analysis of attempts to improve work organization, but attention in one form or another will not go away (Willmott, 1994).

**RADICAL CHANGES TO THE NATURE AND LOCATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CO-ORDINATION**

In order to deliver such productivity improvements, changes in intra-firm form have involved significant redesign of organizational co-ordinating systems. Under the burden of economic and competitive pressure, a range of organizational strategies has been aimed at competing not just on cost, but on quality and speed of response. The 1990s witnessed a proliferation of business philosophies intended to improve the efficiency of operations. New organizational forms are being created through horizontal processes of re-engineering, as well as changes to the vertical structure of organizations based on processes of rationalization, delayering, and downsizing. A series of wonderfully named prescriptions to improve the design of organizations entered our vocabulary. These include:

1. “Business process re-engineering (BPR)”, also known as “work effectiveness” or “process management”, which provides a new emphasis on the underlying service or production process from the perspective of customer interactions (Hammer & Champy, 1995);

2. “Fractol and modular factories”, in which complex industrial enterprises are broken up into smaller divisionalized production units each with a (different) level of autonomy (Warnecke, 1993; Wildemann, 1994);

3. The “atomized organization”, (Ryf, 1993);

4. The “virtual corporation”, in which new patterns of co-operation are developed within a company and across different companies, but no longer limited to sequential time flows (Davidow & Malone, 1993).
Although these are rich concepts, the specification of many of the associated organizational designs is still very vague and, as Willmott (1994, p.35) notes, the BPR approach has not concocted a novel recipe, but has “put a name to an emergent trend in business organization”. However, the changes invoked by the various attempts to implement them are considerable and wide-ranging. “Process” thinking means that HR practitioners have to consider the management of a set of linked activities that take an input to the organization and transform it to create an appropriate production or service output. These processes may be physical, may involve paperwork, be undertaken by computer, or may simply be a logical sequence of events. They tend to combine both physical activities with information flows. Most organizations are it seems designed de facto around five or six such processes, both as a business philosophy and also as a means by which the organization can potentially achieve a radical change in performance. As a consequence, HR practitioners are having to re-educate themselves to understand how these work effectiveness tools and techniques may be applied to jobs. These tools focus on the organization as a core set of customer-oriented business processes rather than as a set of functions or tasks that have to be carried out. The techniques that HR practitioners have had to master include data modelling and process mapping instruments such as flow diagrams, multiple activity charts, computer process simulation programmes, business modelling, systems engineering, and analysis techniques.

Such education has created an imperative to radically reform HRM systems. Why is this the case? Because existing HRM systems are, as noted earlier, designed largely around the person–job fit, but the new organization designs require a very different form of co-ordination and operating culture. For example, BPR “(re)-constitutes” the human dimension of organizing (Willmott, 1994, p.35) and has very significant implications for the sorts of HRM practices that are successful. New HRM systems are required because (Sparrow & Hiltrop, 1994):

1. Employees are exposed to new sources of information and new networks of relationships;
2. There are changes to the roles that employees are expected to play;
3. Managers think differently about the tasks that needed to be done;
4. Required decision-making processes are altered;
5. The time spans of discretion before the consequence of an inappropriate decision became known are altered;
6. The criteria for effectiveness, such as the judgement and leadership capabilities needed by employees, are altered;
7. There are shifts in the actual work content and business process flow;
8. The choice of performance management criteria and measurement metrics is changed;
9. There are changes to career aspirations, problems created by the natural inclination of people not to break the habits of their past and present roles, and significant shifts in their power, influence, and credibility.

In considering the HRM policies and practices more suited to these new forms of co-ordination the common elements to current organization design ideas should be clarified. They all require new ways of linking work horizontally. These horizontal and vertical management philosophies generally involve offering more diverse products and services, greater customization in design and production, and more rapid response in the design and delivery of production and services. For HR practitioners, the most common implications (Creed & Miles, 1996; Drumm, 1994; Johansson, McHugh, Pendlebury, & Wheeler, 1993; Parker & Wall, 1996; Pfeffer, 1992) stem from the need to:

1. Create a radical view of decentralization in terms of the responsibilities, levels of discretion, and accountabilities;
2. Increase both behavioural and role focus attention towards those performance metrics associated with horizontal business “processes”;
3. Make appropriate changes to the design of jobs, in the light of their associated competencies;
4. Understand the alterations to the levels of trust that are designed into the new control systems.

REDIRECTING BEHAVIOURAL AND ROLE FOCUS TOWARDS NEW PERFORMANCE METRICS

The rest of the analysis considers the implications discussed previously. A major commonality is the increased need for both employee behaviour and performance management systems to be focused on horizontal business processes. Why do some of the new forms of co-ordination have such a powerful impact on the employee behaviour and performance management? First, initiatives such as BPR are being used to cut across formal organizational boundaries. BPR differs from previous horizontal management philosophies such as TQM (total quality management), JIT (just in time), or MRPII (manufacturing resource planning) because it takes a zero-based approach to HRM, i.e. it first asks if a process should be eliminated. The philosophy is one of wiping the slate clean, starting from scratch in designing a business process, and pretending that there are no systems or procedures in place to constrain the ideal flow of work. The approach, if conducted properly, analyses many of the cultural issues that have previously reduced the level of effectiveness of many flexibility initiatives, such as reporting relationships, performance measures, and rewards. However, those who are
responsible for shaping the new systems often drag the cloak of the old business into the new. The managers on the BPR teams are often guilty of attempting to design outward-facing processes by applying an inward-looking and cost-saving mindset, and so many opportunities are missed (Oram & Wellins, 1995). We recreate in the new systems a microcosm of the very mentality that caused the problem in the first place, only now we have designed such tenets of performance management into the very design of jobs and organizations.

Second, to the extent that radical changes have been made in the structure of a business process, it entails dramatic changes in all other aspects of the organization, most notably the content and definition of jobs. BPR redefines jobs because roles are understood in the broader context of the business process. It closes the distance between supply points, production, assembly, and customers. In relying on decentralization, work simplification, streamlining of information systems, the eradication of functional barriers and the promotion of involvement, it inevitably results in the streamlining, deletion, or change in the content of jobs. The roles of lower level managers are especially affected by BPR, but those in higher levels are also affected. Considerable flexibility is required in the effort to ensure that the right people talk to each other, only appropriate information is considered, decisions are made at the right level, and technology is used to carry out mundane or basic control steps.

Third, BPR changes the corporate performance criteria against which jobs are being designed. In a highly uncertain environment organizations are identifying stable business processes in order to help clarify the architecture into which jobs should be fitted, such as the reporting relationships, responsibilities, and control systems. BPR often views the present construction of jobs as an obstacle to change and so is not only associated with a fundamental reappraisal of the content of jobs, but also alters the broader context to which flexibility is focused (Grint & Willcocks, 1995). As organizations blur the distinctions and boundaries between functions, people, the organization, its suppliers and its customers, they are making notable changes to the performance indices against which roles are measured. Roles are now being calibrated against a series of new value-based indices, such as:

1. **Quality**: meeting customer requirements, fitness for use, process integrity, elimination of waste, continuous improvement;
2. **Service**: customer support, product service, product support, flexibility to meet customer demands, flexibility to meet market changes;
3. **Cost**: design and engineering costs, conversion, quality assurance, distribution, administration, inventory, materials;
4. **Time**: time to market, response to market forces, lead times, materials, inventory.
CHANGES IN THE DESIGN OF JOBS AND NATURE OF WORK CARRIED OUT

When organizations attempt to introduce less rigid structures, extensive decentralization, and delegation of control, they do so through the design of jobs (Legge, 1995). A second consequence of changes in intra-firm form, therefore, can be seen in the response made by organizations at the level of the job, in terms of how jobs are designed. The shift in performance criteria by which work is judged to be effective or not comes hand in hand with a series of underlying shifts in the nature of the actual work. Experience has shown that such initiatives risk higher levels of failure if the job design and work organization implications are not considered properly. We need to unravel the organizational implications of these changes. Initiatives such as BPR impact the design of jobs in two ways:

1. The control of work activities is usually put under a single umbrella, which views the work that jobs are designed to process as part of a continuous and simultaneous set of actions, rather than a sequence of elements that flow from one task to another.

2. Changes are made either to the formal structure, occupation, or career stream into which the job is based, or to the design of the work or business process into which the various tasks and elements that have been bundled together as jobs may be placed.

Job redesign imperatives fall into three clusters: (1) “informating” of the workplace; (2) speed of manipulation and the production of data not products; (3) and communications as a multiplier (Bridges, 1994). Information technology inserts data in between the worker and the product or service he or she is delivering. For example, in a traditional industry such as steel, employees no longer manipulate the steel itself but instead manipulate data about a sheet of steel. Work is increasingly seen as a tangible sequence or pattern of information that can be handled and changed. Each business service or product triggers a chain of data events, which may now require a minimum of human intervention, or at the very least a major redesign of the discrete work elements, tasks, and duties that are needed. Several work functions along the production–delivery route, such as purchasing, logistics and dispatch, process control, accounting, and sales management, have been strongly “informated” in recent years.

It is this process of “informating” work that means that our views about jobs-based flexibility should not be based on current narrow conceptions of functional flexibility, such as multiskilling. These debates, although relevant to much manufacturing work in highly unionized environments, form only part of the large scale changes to jobs that are being witnessed. As information is pushed down the organization, it transforms the underlying decision-making process,
and therefore the level of jobs-based flexibility. The most radical changes are being seen in white-collar occupations, where the mental elements of the job are being redesigned. Moreover, the changes to the nature of jobs are not necessarily dictated by an automation of things past, but by the creation of totally new work elements.

Technology has also rendered many jobs obsolete because of the speed of manipulation that is now necessary and possible. The concept of what constituted a job fitted task-patterns that were dictated by an old division of labour, where things had to be assembled or processed from raw materials before being stored. In such jobs, the specification of discrete tasks (which could be bundled up into jobs) was possible. Where data forms the basis of work, it requires minimal space, is maintained by users, can be replicated quickly, and manipulated individually. The nature of duties changes in relation to the interests and expertise of the individual (Parker & Wall, 1996). The speed at which data may be manipulated or worked upon means that there is more work to be done than the individual is capable of, and so the role of choice and purpose in the selection of appropriate tasks that may be deemed to constitute a job has become more important.

In reaction to the primary changes of work informing and ease of data manipulation, communication technology has created a “multiplier effect” interlocking the new groups of transformed workers so that time and distance are no longer an automatic constraint on the design of jobs. The volume of information and the interactions that need to take place around it has exploded, again requiring considerable flexibility in the nature of jobs.

Parker and Wall (1996) point to five common developments in job content. The first is the increased relevance of operational knowledge. Jobs-based flexibility has tended to place employees in a better position to see the interrelationships between their actions and the consequences of them. A broader perspective on the “work process” is called for so that job holders can catch errors and make corrections that might otherwise have gone undetected. This requires broader and more proactive role orientations as well as the deployment and learning of more specific job knowledge. In order to “work smarter”, employees need to have knowledge of not just one but several specialist areas of technical knowledge, functional skill, or administrative process.

The second change is the need to design HRM systems that can cope with increased work interdependence. The extent to which employees are dependent on each other and the need for collaboration in the execution of work creates a more immediate reliance on the performance of others. This change in job content is forcing HR practitioners to place greater emphasis on the performance management systems of the organization to integrate work and understand the relationships between the internal customers and suppliers that surround resultant jobs.
The third change is the shift in production/service responsibilities, where the roles and activities associated with operations that cover the direct internal or external customer interface now form a higher proportion of the job content. Similarly, the increase in responsibilities tends to be associated with increased significance and contribution of individual performance to the resultant output. This change in job content is forcing HR practitioners to attend to the greater costs associated with failure of newly designed work systems and processes, such as the increased costs of damage to technology, downtime, and individual error.

Fourth, there has been an increase in the requirement for cognitive-abstract qualifications such as decision making, judgement, accuracy, an understanding of the organization, and the ability to analyse and solve problems in unexpected situations. These demands have increased in two ways: (1) attentional demands (the passive monitoring of aspects of work); and (2) problem-solving demands (the requirement for more active problem solving and fault prevention). In itself, this change in job content may have few adverse effects on employees, but in combination with the other factors such as perceived threats to the psychological contract, research suggests that it does lead to higher levels of strain.

Finally, more attention is being placed on social competencies, which enable the job holder to integrate the various tasks they are assigned both on their own or in conjunction with others. These include punctuality, loyalty, creativity, customer-orientation, responsibility, and co-operation. There are some common issues faced by organizations whatever developments they are making in their organizational form. They are increasingly buying what is tentatively called “fitability”, that is the fit of the individual with the team. This stresses the importance of attitudes over functional knowledge. As organizations start to resource according to a “fit to team” and not the traditional “fit to job” model, we can expect to see the development of a new selection orthodoxy as a consequence. Again, this raises deep questions for HR practitioners about how to resource, develop, and retain such competencies in a period when employees are themselves reappraising the employment relationship.

UNDERSTANDING THE IN-BUILT CHANGES IN TRUST AND COMPETENCE

Changes in intra-firm form have therefore created a very large HRM agenda indeed. This agenda has brought with it difficult and intractable problems concerned with the problem of competence, commitment, and trust. HR practitioners face major problems when they consider the sort of people needed to manage in the new organizations, the depth of available talent, and the ability of organizations and society to resource the appropriate competencies (Sparrow, 1998). Many organizations are being driven towards new organizational designs and solutions, but still have to operate within the bounds of what is possible as a
consequence of their history and inheritance (Humes, 1993; Ulrich & Lake, 1990).

Moreover, it is clear that recent changes to the shape and design of organizations and jobs have either designed in or designed out trust. Specifically, this occurs through the choices made by managers about empowerment and the design of control systems, co-ordination systems, and associated business processes, and through the levels of information sharing and the shape of reward systems associated with the operation of team working. Trust is a pervasive feature of organizational design (Bradach & Eccles, 1989, p.104) and there is “a clear and compelling link” between the two. Trust is reflected in the control and co-ordination systems, and the use of incentives to direct behaviour. The higher the level of trust, the fewer the controls and therefore the lower the “transaction costs” that the organization has to incur. There are two important trust-related judgements that managers make when they redesign the organizational form:

1. Do they believe there is implicit employee “task reliability”, i.e. do employees have the capabilities and potential to exercise responsible self-direction and self-control?

2. Is there sufficient “values congruence” with the purpose of the organization, i.e. is there a dominant written and spoken philosophy that will guide the ultimate way in which employees will act?

There is, however, a conflict between the higher levels of trust that are both implicit in and a necessary ingredient of the operating logic of many of the new organizational forms (such as network organizations) and the levels of trust as reflected in the attitudes and psychological contract of employees. The decentralization afforded by recent changes in organizational form also forces HR practitioners to consider the nature of the employer–employee relationship. It is therefore legitimate to raise questions about the relevance and ability of existing corporate HRM systems, business processes, competency, and attitudinal sets to deliver effective performance in today’s organizational environment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, HR practitioners are having to pursue multiple and parallel forms of flexibility. Where jobs are concerned, changes to their content cannot be introduced without parallel flexibilities in structure, information systems, rewards, and so forth. It is recognized that organizations cannot achieve one form of flexibility without tackling all the others. As a consequence of broader attempts to create jobs-based flexibility, organizations seem to be seeking seven discrete but parallel flexibilities: numerical, financial, functional, temporal, geographical, organizational, and cognitive (Sparrow & Marchington, 1998).
The reality is that far from being discrete issues (as they are often treated in the management literature), organizations may chose to pursue one of these flexibilities for one set of roles, a combination for another, or be attacking the whole organization across a series of fronts. Yet each flexibility tends to be associated with a different type of “battle” or struggle between interested parties, and each draws upon its own set of knowledge. The common challenge that these flexibilities bring to HR practitioners is how “to get more from less”, that is, how to create more added value, and not just more effort. HR practitioners have to accelerate this process of creating added value if they are to free up enough resources in the organization to deliver the more positive aspects of restructuring—the autonomy and the challenge. Therefore, the role of HR practitioners needs to be one of directing the change process, by drawing upon the principles of their functional knowledge and their technical and psychological insights into the problem. Their business process insights carry more weight now than does their knowledge about organization structures, systems, and cultures.

REFERENCES


