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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critical assessment of the impact of HR strategies on employees' performance

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Abstract: Line managers are considered as one of the greatest assets of a company. Therefore, it is vital to satisfy them and keep them actively engaged so that they can add value to the organization. This research explores the alternative Human Resource (HR) strategies to support line managers at Sainsbury's Southern. The research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with line managers at various levels and across different departments of the company, aimed at exploring the perceptions and experience of the line managers in terms of HR devolution and the level of support provided to them by HR. Secondary data have been used to identify previous works on the topic of HR devolution as well as HR support to line and to also identify the various strategies to facilitate the line managers so that they can perform their new role more efficiently. The findings revealed that the trend of devolution has been successful as the employees interviewed are satisfied with the level of support provided to them by HR. However, some employees raised a few concerns i.e. inadequate training, unclear perceptions regarding the policies, increased workload, ineffective HR practices, etc., and feel that these need to be improved so that they can perform their new role more effectively.

Subjects: Arts & Humanities; Science; Technology

Keywords: HR strategies; line manager; employee performance

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Organizations generally have line managers who are considered as a vital asset for the firm, by keeping them in loop, company can generate high productivity. Present research is conducted so different HR strategies can be explored that would support line managers. Line managers were interviewed so that their experiences could be revealed in terms of HR devolutions. Findings showed that employee were satisfied with terms of HR support. Beside this research some of the elements still needed to be catered e.g. high training, flexible working hours implementation of HR practices.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Increased global competition, the privatization of once-publicly-owned firms, and higher unemployment in the last decade have changed the role of Human Resource (HR) function from administrative to more strategic in an attempt to maintain competitive advantage (Gennard & Kelly, 1997; Renwick, 2000). These changing work practices have significantly affected not only the role of HR, but the role of Line managers (LM) as well (Truss & Gill, 2009). Due to these changes in recent years, there has been a lot of tension between the HR function and Line Managers (CIPD, 2012). Indeed, one major reason for this tension is the de-layering of organizations and the transfer of HR responsibility to line management as HR seeks to become a strategic partner in the business (Halcrow, 2002). Other reasons for line manager's involvement in HRM are to reduce costs, provide a more comprehensive approach to HRM and lastly, speed up decision-making (Brewster & Larsen, 2000). Moreover, Brandl, Madsen, and Madsen (2009) state that devolving HR responsibility to Line managers helps build a strong sense of responsibility among managers for their team members and allows the HR practitioners to better play their strategic role (Kulik & Perry, 2008; Maxwell & Watson, 2004). Nevertheless, the perception regarding the devolution widely varies between HR and the LM (Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006), as HR managers are believed to be more optimistic than the Line managers regarding the benefits of devolution in terms of employee satisfaction and overall organizational performance (Maxwell & Watson, 2006). On the other hand, LMs seem reluctant to take on the responsibility for HR work due to the lack of knowledge, skills as well as inadequate support from the HR to carry out these tasks (Valverde, Gerard, & Soler, 2006). However, the purpose of this study is to investigate the level of HR support to Line managers at Sainsbury's Bitterne, Portswood, and Shirley, respectively, as well as the strategies that could be adopted by the company to maximize the HR contribution to support Line managers in these branches.

2. Literature review

2.1. HR and the line

Line managers are those managers who directly manage other employees and are subordinates to a higher level of management, CIPD (2012). They not only oversee the work of other employees but also play a key role in ensuring that employees are motivated, productive, and competent (Briscoe, Schuler, & Tarique, 2012). Nehles et al. (2006, p. 256) define first line managers as Managers at the operational level, who manage a team of operational employees on a day-to-day basis and are responsible for performing HRM activities. Line managers play a key role in accomplishing the organizational objectives (Qadeer, Shafique, & Rehman, 2011). In fact, the role of line managers consists of both a management component and a leadership component (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). The management component involves, carrying out specific HR practices such as recruitment and selection, training and development and performance appraisals of staff. Whereas, the leadership role focuses on providing support and direction to subordinates in order to influence their attitudes and behaviors (Wright & Nishii, 2007). Wai-Kwong, Priem, and Cychota (2001, p. 1325), suggests that line managers occupy a position between "the strategic apex and operating core of organizations" and therefore, have a direct impact on the motivation, commitment and discretionary behavior of their staff. Indeed, survey by CIPD of 1300 HR managers found that the people who are closely involved with the day-to-day work of the staff had the most influence over the attitudes, behaviors, and performance of their employees (People Management, 2001). Although the role of LM is predominantly concerned with controlling and providing direction to a relatively narrow operational unit (Hales, 2006), they are also responsible for monitoring performance, managing the human and physical resources, and translating strategy into practice (Nohria, Joyce, & Roberson, 2003). On the other hand, HR function is an organizational resource (Roehling et al., 2005), that helps the organization create value and achieve competitive advantage. It constitutes a myriad of functional areas, including responsibilities for recruitment and staffing, compensation and benefits, as well as training and development. However, the changing nature of HR makes it difficult to define the HR function, as it is very different from the days when it was seen purely as a personnel department (Pass, 2006).

However, HR was traditionally defined as a function within an organization whose responsibilities range from records maintenance, to recruitment and management of, and providing direction to people who work in the organization (Torrington, Hall, & Taylor, 2005). Overall, the main objectives of any HR function are Recruitment and Selection, development of competencies, and maximizing employee involvement and engagement (Armstrong, 2005).

HRM is usually conceptualized as a set of HR practices developed by the HR function in an organization (Boselie, Dietz, & Boon, 2005). These practices are assumed to have a uniform impact throughout the organization (Francis & Keegan, 2006). In fact, line managers' role is vital to the success of HR policies and practices (Armstrong, 2009) and HR strategies cannot be successfully implemented without their involvement, commitment, and cooperation (McConville, 2006). This is because they are considered the “doers” who make things happen within the organization (Budhwar, 2000). Research has shown that first line management can greatly influence the way people behave and carry out their work in an organization (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) and in order to positively influence the firm performance, the HR practices should be effectively and efficiently enacted by line managers (Paauwe, 2009). Nevertheless, distinction can be made between intended, implemented and perceived HR practices (Wright & Nishii, 2007). Intended practices are developed by the policy-makers of the organization so as to accomplish the desired attitudes and behaviors (Gilbert, De Winnie, & Sels, 2011). Due to both external and internal influences, the actual practices carried out in the organization rarely match the intended ones (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). One reason for the perceived differences in the HR practices is the implementation of HR practices by various Line managers (Hall & Torrington, 1998), according to their varying levels of competence (Wright & Nishii, 2007). A complementary factor may be the lack of communication between HR and line. The latter is essential in counteracting differences between HR and line expectations (Tubre & Collins, 2000). Furthermore, according to Currie and Procter (2001), people management activities can be most effectively carried out, when HR and Line hold similar views regarding the conduct of activities in the organization. Nevertheless, many line managers nowadays find it difficult to fulfill their duties due to lack of appropriate tools and support from HR (Torrington, Hall, & Taylor, 2008). It is also believed that in most organizations, the implementation of HR strategies and practices by Line managers is often taken for granted (MacNeil, 2006). In fact, in a CIPD (2011) survey 80% of respondents agreed that if better equipped, they can add more value to the business. On the contrary, from an organizational perspective, line managers have a fundamental role in implementing and monitoring the HR strategies and practices (Hales, 2006) and also in fostering a supportive work environment (Macky & Boxall, 2007). Research by Larsen and Brewster (2003) revealed that effective execution of HR practices by line managers gives employees a feeling that they are supported by the organization. Similarly, they will be more attached to the organization if the environment is supportive (Eisenberger et al., 2002) and will hence show positive attitudes and behaviors (Harney & Jordan, 2008). The support provided by line managers can be in the form of effectively carrying out appraisals, giving feedback, offering training when required etc. (Harris, 2007). According to Gratton and Truss (2003), line managers are responsible for executing the following HR activities:

2.2. Recruitment and selection

Recruitment and selection is recognized as a key activity in HR (Millmore, 2003). Recent literature points out significant developments in recruitment and selection processes, specifically in terms of their focus and sophistication (Hassan, 2011). Caldwell (2003) claims that the focus of recruitment and selection has become more strategically driven. On one hand, increased emphasis is being placed upon selecting employees against organizational criteria rather than job-specific criteria (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). While on the other, it is argued that the strategic orientation requires greater involvement of Line managers in the process (Truss et al., 2002). Indeed, many organizations nowadays, are giving line managers much more leeway to carry out the process of recruitment and selection themselves. According to a study conducted by Hsu and Leat (2000), there is a general desire among HR professionals in contemporary organizations that the HRM policies should be integrated with the corporate strategy and that line managers should not only carry out the recruitment and selection process but also have a particularly influential role in decisions regarding the selection

of their staff. Furthermore, 40% of respondents of the same study indicated that they preferred shared responsibility of recruitment and selection rather than making line managers solely responsible for the process. Similarly, survey conducted by Cranet on New Zealand organizations, and founded that recruitment and selection was the only area where line managers had major influence (Rasmussen, Andersen, & Haworth, 2010). However, research by Cunningham and Hyman (1995) found that line managers' involvement is least in the area of recruitment and selection. In addition, critics like Mullins (2007) and Milmore et al. (2007) argue that in most cases, line managers lack the appropriate knowledge and skills to carry out the recruitment and selection process which will undoubtedly affect their overall performance (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). This argument is supported by McCracken and Wallace (2000) who are convinced that incapability and misunderstanding of HR practices may expose the organization to lawsuits and tribunals. Even so, it can be argued that since line managers are very close to the daily operation and customers, they might possess good knowledge regarding organizational facts and needs and hence make appropriate decisions regarding recruitment and selection and the size of the workforce working for them.

2.3. Learning and development

In today's turbulent business climate, line managers have a crucial role to play in encouraging, facilitating, and carrying out the learning and development (L&D) of their staff (Garavan, Barniclen, & Heraty, 1993). They are the strong link between learning and development and the business strategy of their organization (Leisink & Knies, 2011). A survey conducted, which asked HR professionals to rank the priority of their organizations' top three critical HR functional areas and 57% of the respondents reported that L&D was the top-ranked priority for their organizations. Moreover, according to a survey by CIPD (2007), 90% of the respondents agreed that line managers play a key role in supporting L&D whereas 12% among them felt that line managers take L&D seriously. Similarly, although line managers play a critical role in "setting the weather" for development (Knight & Sheppard, 2011), they are not wholeheartedly engaged in the training process (Maxwell & Farquharson, 2008) and are usually reluctant to take responsibility for the learning and development of their staff. There is also evidence of success regarding line manager's involvement in the L&D. Since there is a growing trend of devolving many HR functions to line managers, it is critical for line managers to recognize the importance of their involvement in the L&D (Renwick, 2004). Moreover, their responsibility and participation should not just be confined to the operational aspects of L&D but they should also be involved in the policy and planning aspect of it (Heraty & Morley, 1995) as it results in the overall improvement of the organizational performance (Mindell, 1995).

2.4. Reward management

Although Reward schemes are believed to be an important means of attracting and retaining employees (Brown & Purcell, 2007), determining the pay and how the staff will be rewarded is among the most challenging HR tasks (CIPD, 2007). Furthermore, the literature on line manager's contribution in reward management is largely confined to their influence on performance-related pay though the broad definition of reward encompasses many other aspects including financial and non-financial rewards. Bloom and Milkovich (1998, p. 22) define rewards as "a bundle return offered in exchange for a cluster of employee's services."

In addition, businesses are continuously developing ways to retain their workforce but due to lack of knowledge and line manager's limited involvement in the process, it is not effectively communicated to the employees (McMullen, Stark, & Jensen, 2007) e.g. CIPD's (2005) survey showed that organizations may not fully benefit from their reward schemes if it is not properly communicated to the workforce. The survey further revealed that although 60% of the organizations expect line managers to communicate the reward strategy to their staff, less than a third involve them in its development. Similarly, another survey by CIPD (2006) based on 535 organizations found that although line managers had very little say in determining the salary rises, bonuses and other benefits, they were still expected to inform their staff regarding these decisions. Furthermore, while researches have pointed out the growing trend of involvement in the people management activities by line managers, the role of HR in providing support in the delivery and monitoring of these practices have

been largely ignored (Hope, 2006). Therefore, it is important to involve line managers in the process of determining rewards right from the start when a new pay and grading structure is being decided and must also be provided support in the delivery of these practices (Kerr, 1985).

2.5. Performance management

According to ACAS (Thomson & Thomson, 2012), it is highly important for businesses in today's competitive and unstable environment, to get the best out of their employees. This can be done by understanding staff motivation and establishing an effective performance management process. Armstrong (2009) suggests that line managers play a pivotal role in each stage of the performance management (PM) cycle from planning and designing to implementation of the process. Their role at the planning stage is to discuss with team members about their roles and personal development plans. They then monitor the achievements against the plans and provide coaching where necessary. Lastly, they conduct formal review meetings and provide feedback so as to plan forward. Researchers such as Hutchinson and Purcell (2003) and Coens and Jenkins (2002) have identified a key relationship between employees and their immediate line managers and argue that line managers have a great impact on the performance of their staff as they are the ones who translate the organization's core business goals into departmental goals (Renwick, 2003).

On the other hand, research by Harris (2001) found that PM is the most disliked management activity among line managers and they regard it as a mere bureaucratic and administrative chore that has nothing to do with their job (Carlton & Sloman, 1992; Lee, 2005). Although they find themselves good at it (Guest & King, 2001), the process is often poorly carried out by them (Redman & Wilkinson, 2009). Similarly, PM according to line managers can be no more than a means of carrying out compliance and considered as a managerial burden rather than an effective strategy to improve business results (Furnham, 2004). But though there is lack of decisive evidence that it leads to improved performance, proponents of PM, such as Armstrong (2000) and Molleman and Timmerman (2003), in their research have provided evidence that firms who include line managers in the PM process outperform firms who take no input from the line in the process, in terms of productivity. Therefore, it is necessary for the HR function to ensure that the line managers are involved in the process and they should not only possess the right knowledge and skills but also the right attitude to carry out the process.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research strategy

According to (Yin, 2004), the above strategies can be employed for exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research. A case-study strategy has been adopted by the author for this research in order to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of the HR strategies and its contribution in supporting the line managers at Sainsbury's Limited. Also, another reason for using case-study approach is that the boundaries of the HR support and also because the context of Sainsbury's is not clearly evident (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). The case-study strategy is appropriate for this research since it entails practical analysis of a particular current observable fact in its actual existence through various sources of data (Yin, 2004).

This technique was found useful as the participants were able to answer the questions without any specific restrictions, which enabled the researcher to gather rich amount of data. Ten interviews were conducted in total and participants were randomly selected from different departments of the organization. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed to evaluate as many points as possible. Atkinson and Heritage (1984) suggest that recording and transcribing interviews not only helps to correct the natural limitations of the memory but also allows thorough examination of what people say. The interview questions were divided into several key themes such as:

- (1) Areas of strong HR support
- (2) Areas of weak HR support

- (3) Frequency of contact
- (4) Nature of partnership between HR and Line Managers
- (5) Effectiveness of HR policies and the contribution of LM to Policy formulation
- (6) Main People management problems

Various questions were asked under each key theme. Out of these six themes, two of the following areas were selected to form a part of this research publication:

- (1) Areas of strong HR support
- (2) Areas of weak HR support

These themes were sent out to the interviewees one week before the actual interview so as to ensure that they have a clear understanding of what the interviewer intends to ask them. Each interview approximately lasted for about 30–35 min. Besides, company reports, a thorough review of text books, research articles, academic journals articles, websites, blogs, magazines, and newspapers was carried out to extract information as a source of secondary data.

4. Findings and analysis

This section of the research aims to analyze the alternative HR strategies to support line managers at Sainsbury's and focuses on the data that have been collected through semi-structured interviews from three stores of Sainsbury's in the Southern region. Ten individuals from across various departments including one HR manager were interviewed in total. Each interview lasted for about 30–35 min. The individual interviewees have been working for Sainsbury's since 3–15 years so they all had some experience of the HR restructuring in the organization. The information collected has remained anonymous for ethical reasons and the respondents are identified as P1, P2, P3, and so on. The data are divided into three key themes which were as follows:

4.1. The areas of strong HR support to line managers

Under this theme, the researcher asked a total of one question.

Q: In which areas are you provided strong HR support?

As a result of the interviews, 60% were the ones who said they get strong support in Recruitment and as Selection. Similarly, 70% said HR supports them in learning and development; whereas, 40% said they get strong HR support in rewards and 40% said that they have strong HR support in terms of Discipline and Grievance.

In terms of discipline, the HR managers had similar views as above and so, 40% said that HR support is highest in terms of other policies such as working hours, health and safety. Lastly, 20% said that they get support in terms of Performance management as HR provides them guidance as well as proper training in order to carry out the process in the most effective manner.

As mentioned earlier, line managers play a crucial role in terms of encouraging, facilitating, and carrying out the learning and development of their staff, Garavan et al. (1993). Similarly, it is clear from the above data that the highest support that line managers get is in the area of learning and development. Most of them said that HR not only helps them in the process of imparting training to their colleagues but also develops them as a manager so that they can manage their own staff in the best way possible. The above findings echo the work of Andersen, Cooper, and Zhu (2007), who suggested that line managers should be given adequate training before devolving HR role to them so that they can manage their work effectively as HR agents. As 70% of the respondents agreed that they get strong HR support in terms of L&D, it can be assumed that line managers have not only accepted but are also happy in their new roles, as Hales (2005) said that the extent to which line managers are willing to accept their new roles depends on the extent to which the organizations invest

in their training and development. This proves that the new HR role hasn't been pushed upon them as said by Kulik and Bainbridge (2006) in the literature review, rather have been given sufficient support in terms of training so that they can easily carry out their new roles effectively.

Furthermore, the area where line gets the second highest support is that of recruitment and selection which is recognized as the key activity in HR (Millmore, 2003). Most of the respondents agreed that HR supports them in the process of recruitment and selection right from the start when the vacancy is advertised. Although HR supports line managers in the whole process, there are some respondents who feel that they need proper training on recruitment and selection so that in future when HR dissolves completely, they can do it themselves without the support of HR. This statement can be supported by Hsu and Leat's (2000) study, who found that HR professionals in many contemporary organizations also believe that line managers should not only make decisions regarding the selection of the staff but also learn to carry out the recruitment and selection process on their own. But since the devolution trend recently started at Sainsbury's, line managers haven't completely taken over the HR responsibility. This can be supported by the HR managers statement who also agreed that the devolution is taking place step by step and they are currently sharing the responsibility of the HR work with line so that line managers can learn the appropriate knowledge and skills from them and later use the same skills to carry out the process on their own.

Reward Management is believed to be another area where line managers get strong support from HR. According to Brown and Purcell (2007), rewards are an important means of attracting and retaining employees. The findings above show that although line manager has some say in the process as HR encourages them to recognize the colleagues who perform their job/role well so that they can be rewarded, they do not have too much say in the development of the reward strategy as it is developed at the head office and gets fed to them by HR. Therefore, HR supports line managers in the process of rewards by communicating the process via meetings and then ask line managers to put forward their nominations so that HR can reward those colleagues accordingly. Moreover, according to one respondent, although line managers are also involved in determining the wages and salaries of their colleagues to some extent as they can give their recommendations, the final decision of it lies with the HR and senior management. This can be co-related to Kerr's (1985) study who stated that it is important to involve line managers in the process of determining rewards right from the start when the new pay and grading structure is being decided and HR should also provide them support in the delivery of these practices.

According to the data, 40% of the respondents believe that they get highest support in other policies and practices. The main policies highlighted in this context were health and safety, working hours, and holidays. They said that HR provides them support in terms of advice and training, to perform all these tasks. They added that HR also supports them by communicating these policies to them, incase of updates from the head office. The communication helps them know which training had already been conducted and which training are they going to take next so as to make sure that they carry the same pattern forward. This can be supported by Zupan and Kase's (2007) argument, which suggests that HR support in terms of policies and practices can highly influence line managers' attitudes toward carrying out their new role and also their perception regarding the importance of HR practices within organizations. Lastly, in terms of Performance management, the data show that only a few interviewees agreed that they get strong HR support in that area. This can be related to the findings of Harris (2001), which form an integral part of the literature review of this research. According to them, the Performance management is one the most disliked management activity as it is considered as a bureaucratic and administrative chore that has nothing to do with their job.

4.2. The areas of weak HR support to line managers

Under this theme, the researcher asked one question.

Q: Do Line Managers get support from HR in terms of Policies?

Again as a result of the interviews, 50% of the respondents recognized the fact this was a weak area. Only 10% of respondents replied that they are happy with everything as they have strong support from HR in most of the areas. From the data, it is clear that line managers get the least support from HR in terms of policies because most of them are not even aware of all the policies and the ones, who are aware of them, do not know how to follow or implement them. This implies that most of the policies are not communicated to them in a proper manner. Harris et al. (2002) study can be linked to the case under discussion as it suggested that unclear perceptions in terms of policies and practices lead to variation between actual and enacted policies, as line managers implement/use the policies according to their own perception and understanding. This may consequently result in decreased performance of the overall organization. Therefore, not only should the policies be properly communicated but HR should also arrange a refresher training for the line managers so that if they have forgotten anything relating to the policy, they can revive their memory regarding that. Another problem faced by most line managers is the rigid mind set of the long-serving employees who only do and follow policies in their own ways. Hall and Torrington's (1998) also argue that one of the major reasons for perceived differences between HR practices is the implementation of it by various line managers according to their own level of competence. Therefore, HR should make sure that the policies are communicated equally to all staff and ensure that they are being followed in the right manner. Tubre and Collins (2000) also agreed that effective communication between Line and HR is an important factor to counteract differences between their expectations.

Learning and development is identified as another area where line managers aren't provided adequate support. Though there is also evidence of success regarding line manager's involvement in the L&D, the data show that the major concern regarding the learning and development is the training conducted by store trainers as they only cover the shifts from 8 am to 5 pm. Similarly, another concern regarding learning and development is the inability to carry out the training sessions due to increased work load. This statement reflects the study by Brewster (2007) mentioned earlier, who states that one of the major reasons for line managers' frustration regarding their new role is the increased work load, lack of time, and inappropriate HR support to perform the HR tasks. The respondent further suggested that HR alone should design and perform these training sessions so that they can work on other important things. This, however, contradicts the findings of a survey by CIPD (2007) where 90% of the respondents agreed that line managers play a key role in supporting learning and development in an organization. Indeed, according to Garavan et al. (1993), it is line managers' job to encourage, facilitate, and carry out the learning and development of their staff. But taking into consideration Renwick's (2003) work, since there is a growing trend of involving line in the HR function, they may not recognize the importance of their involvement in the L&D of their staff. Therefore, in order to facilitate the line managers, HR should share the responsibility of L&D process with them so that line manager can focus more on their people management role as well.

The next significant area of weak HR support identified by some respondents is Discipline and Grievance. The data showed that one of the major concerns is regarding the inadequate training on the discipline and grievance process. This is also evident in Whittaker and Marchington's (2003) study, who concluded that line managers in most organizations are unsure about the skills they need, to manage the behavior of their staff which may be due to insufficient training provided by HR function. One respondent said that instead of providing physical or visual training, they are provided with packs on discipline and grievance to read and follow, while managing any similar situation. This is in line with the findings of Whittaker and Marchington (2003) which suggested that in order to carry out their devolved role more effectively, line managers need proper guidance from their HR professionals rather than an interpersonal training course or handing a script to read. On the other hand, Harrison (2002) explains that due to financial pressures, organizations may not make significant investments with regard to learning and development of their staff; although, this may not be true in terms of Sainsbury's. In addition to this, another respondent who although seemed satisfied with the amount of training and

guidance from HR in terms of discipline and grievance, said that HR should involve more people in the process rather than giving the whole responsibility to line managers for executing the process.

Rewards and recognition is another area of weak HR support identified by a small number of respondents. The data showed that although the respondents are satisfied with the actual process of reward management, they feel that there is no recognition for the amount of work that they do. This may lead to feeling of dissatisfaction among line managers and consequently may cause them not to perform to the best of their abilities. This statement can be supported by Eisenberger et al.'s (2002) work, who stated that employees will be more attached to the organization if the environment is supportive and will hence show positive attitudes and behaviors (Harney & Jordan, 2008).

Lastly, another 10% interviewees raised their concern regarding the recruitment and selection process. The findings showed that some managers are not satisfied with the process of recruitment and selection and feel that it should be redesigned so that the right candidate is chosen for a certain job, they further said that the process should include a role play so they can see how the person would behave in a particular situation and perform a certain task as agreed by McCracken and Wallace (2000), who said that incapability of staff may expose the organization to lawsuits and tribunals. Therefore, it is important that HR should not only change the recruitment policy but also involve line managers in the process of designing as they are the ones working directly with the employees.

5. Conclusion

This research is aimed at critically assessing the alternative HR strategies to support line managers at Sainsbury's Southern. The objectives of this research were accomplished through primary as well as secondary data. The literature review discussed the findings by several authors regarding HR devolution to line and the support that HR gives to line in the transition and how it affects the overall performance of the organization. In the beginning, the significance of line managers and the HR function in the organization has been discussed. It was analyzed that line managers play a fundamental role in people's management and their role is vital to the success of HR policies and practices as HR strategies cannot be successfully implemented without their involvement, commitment, and cooperation. The research indicated some positive links between HR support to line managers and higher organizational performance. It was also found that strong HR support to line enables organizations to achieve higher competitive advantage. The literature review also discussed the major HR practices enacted by line managers i.e. Recruitment and Selection, Performance Management, Learning and Development, Reward Management, Discipline and Grievance, and other HR policies.

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, based on six key themes, out of which three were selected for this report. It revealed that majority of the line managers interviewed were satisfied with the level of support they get from HR. From the author's perspective, one reason for the satisfaction could be the open and friendly atmosphere of the stores as well as the non-hierarchical culture of the organization that fosters creativity and encourages collaboration.

The research further revealed that majority of the line managers in the three sites were happy with the devolution trend as they acknowledge that they are the ones who work closely with their colleagues and can therefore manage them more effectively than HR. They also believed that they have adequate support from HR in terms of training and guidance to perform their new role. On the other hand, a few numbers of managers said that either they are not provided with any training or the kind of support they are provided is very poor, due to which they feel ill-equipped to perform their devolved role. One reason for the inadequate training and support may be the wrong perception of HR managers who believe that since line managers have always had the responsibility for people management, they have sufficient knowledge to carry out their devolved role. Similarly, another reason for dissatisfaction highlighted by some line managers is the increased workload that holds them from performing their other duties.

The research also found that the communication and frequency of contact between HR and Line is very good as HR not only communicates with them on a daily basis but is also very approachable and keeps them informed regarding the new policies and procedures of the company. Furthermore, in terms of HR policies and practices, although most line managers agree that the HR policies are effective and help them in their new role, the sickness and absence, recruitment and selection, and the bonus policy according to some managers needs improvement so that they can fully benefit from it.

Further, the main people management problems recognized by majority of line managers are their own unclear perception of HR policies, lack of efficiency, and low morale of staff due to their changing working pattern, the rigid mind set of long-serving employees and alienation. It is assumed that that lack of physical/visual training and inadequate support may be one of the main reasons for all these problems. Nevertheless, a very limited number of managers said that HR has trained them in the right way to tackle all these problems.

Although all the (interviewed) line managers agreed that they work in partnership with HR to accomplish the overall goals of the organization, it was found that since HR policies are made at the head office, and that they do not contribute in the policy-making. HR in the store and the Line managers are only the implementers of the policies. However, some of respondents said that even though they do not contribute, their opinion does count and is also recognized.

Next, learning and development was identified as the area where line managers get the most HR support. It was revealed that HR not only supports line managers in imparting training to their colleagues but also provides them training and courses to prepare them for future. The area where line managers get the second highest support was recruitment and selection. It was found that HR does most of the initial bits of the recruitment and selection process i.e. the advertising of vacancy, getting the slots filled, and preparing the interview pack, etc. The responsibility of interviewing and selecting the employee lies with the managers. However, the final decision is always made by the HR rather than the line. Although most line managers interviewed said that they are satisfied with the process, one respondent said that he needs some more training for recruitment and selection so that in future when the HR completely vanishes, he is able to carry out the process himself. Similarly, Reward management was classified as the third area of strong HR support. It was revealed that though line managers have some autonomy in the actual process, they are not involved in the formulation of the reward strategy. It was discovered that HR communicates the process to them via meetings and then asks them to put forward their nomination. Therefore, it can be said that line managers contribute a little in the process rather than giving their recommendations and determining the wages and salaries of their colleagues. After reward management, discipline and grievance were recognized as the next areas where HR supports the line managers. It was found that HR not only guides line managers but also supports them by providing them a note taker for the disciplinary meeting. Moreover, it was also revealed that line managers get support in terms of working hours, holidays, and health and safety. The support provided by HR is in terms of communication, advice and training in this context was also highlighted by the data analysis. Furthermore, a low number of people said that they get strong HR support in terms of Performance management.

On the contrary, HR policies were identified as the area of weakest HR support as most as most managers claimed that they are not fully aware of the policies and that they are not even properly communicated to them. Further it was also found that due to unclear perception and poor communication, some manager follows the policies according to their own understanding which affects the performance of the organization. Another area of concern highlighted by most managers was that the store trainers do not cover all shifts. Also, it was found that some managers were unable to carry out the training sessions of their staff due to increased work load. It was also suggested that HR should alone design and run the training sessions so that the line managers can concentrate on other tasks. In addition to this, it was discovered that due to lack of training, most managers are unsure of the skills they need for managing their staff as the only support they are offered is the pack of policies to read through rather than providing them with proper training. It has also been suggested the HR

should share the responsibility of discipline and grievance process with line managers instead of giving them the whole responsibility to carry out the process. Lack of recognition was another weak area identified by some line manager as they said that they do not get recognized for the amount of work that they do. Lastly, it was suggested by some respondents that HR should redesign the process of recruitment and include a role play in the process so that they can determine how a person will behave in a particular situation and hence select the most suitable candidate for the job. The forgoing findings show that the aim and objectives of the report have been fully achieved.

Since the three branches of Sainsbury's i.e. Bitterne, Portswood, and Shirley have recently gone through HR restructuring, it is important for the stores to satisfy its line managers as they are the core of their organization and without their cooperation, the company wouldn't be able to perform well. This study will help the stores, understand the importance of HR contribution to support the line managers. It will be beneficial for the company in a way that it will highlight the different perspectives of the line managers, with regard to HR devolution and also their perceptions regarding the HR policies and consider new ideas and opinions as a feedback into its existing policy, so as to attain a higher level of business success.

To conclude, this study covered the alternative HR strategies for Sainsbury's branches and highlighted probable solutions to enhance its success in business. However, all these findings should be viewed in the light of various limitations of the study including the small sample and the results may differ in case of a larger sample size. Also, since the authors were constrained by time and information accessibility limitation, there certainly is further scope for research on this topic.

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