

**Devolving HR to the line: An Examination of the  
Implementation Process and its Impact on Line Managers?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Devolving HRM activities to line managers has emerged in modern day businesses as essential to optimum employee and organisational performance. The line manager has always played a part in the implementation of HR processes and whilst they are at the forefront of employee engagement, a natural progression for this group would be to become champions and gatekeepers of HRM. Ulrich (1997) supported this concept when he introduced a new and effective HRM model which focused on the creation of a strategic relationship between HR and line managers to ensure optimal organisational performance.

The purpose of this study was to further explore the rationale for devolving HRM activities to line managers whilst also examining the implementation process involved and its impact on line managers. A review of the implementation process was conducted including organisational and personal factors that may affect successful HRM implementation by line managers. The study also investigated the impact the involvement of HRM activities had on line managers whilst studying the positive and negative aspects of devolution.

To complete the research objectives a qualitative methodology was used. TalkTalk plc. was chosen based on the organisations transformation and restructuring over the last decade. A single case study design was used based on the nature of the research question. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with line managers from a variety of departments and sites within TalkTalk. Semi-structured interviews were used as they allow for an element of flexibility whilst permitting the participant to talk freely and expand upon answers. Based on the exploratory nature of the investigation this method was thought to be the most fitting.

From the primary research, and findings that have emerged beyond the theoretical framework, some noteworthy conclusions have developed. The respondents have stressed that the relationship between HR and line managers has changed significantly with the introduction of a HR shared service model. It has also emerged that there has been a lack of training in key areas of devolvment and implementation whilst the

introduction of a new company HRIS system has caused issues pertaining to accessibility and accuracy of employee files.

To alleviate these issues, TalkTalk will have to restore a strong and effective working relationship between HR and the line managers. Training and development will also have to be reviewed, assessing the requirements of line managers both collectively and individually. Finally, it is essential that the company adopt a phased approach in implementing new systems and models. This would minimise confusion between HR and line managers who would embrace new processes more readily.

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband John O'Mahoney.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would not have been able to successfully complete this dissertation without the support and help of a number of people.

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## **ETHICAL DECLARATION**

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development	6
HRIS	Human Resource Information System	33
HRM	Human Resource Management	1
HR	Human Resources	1
SHRM	Strategic Human Resource Management	4
UK	United Kingdom	13

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## *Chapter One*

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to present a synopsis of the study to the reader. This section begins by seeking to provide a clear rationale for conducting this dissertation on devolving HR (Human Resources) to line managers and in particular, its focus on the implementation process and its impact on line managers. In doing so, the chapter also outlines the nature of the research question and the associated research objectives. The gaps in the literature are highlighted while a brief explanation of the methodology is presented. Following on from this the contribution of the research is reviewed. Finally, the structure for the remainder of the dissertation is outlined.

#### **1.2 Rationale behind the Study**

The motivation to commence the current study grew from the researchers own personal work experience which involved the devolvement of HRM activities to line managers in TalkTalk plc. Waterford, Ireland. What was evident throughout this process was the importance of the implementation procedure and its impact on line managers which in turn may affect overall organisational performance. Nehles (2010) notes that effective HRM depends on the quality of the HR practices and procedures but the HRM system itself may not be effective if line managers do not have the necessary tools and competencies required to implement HRM practices successfully. Therefore, the author sought to investigate the challenges that line managers face when implementing devolved HRM processes.

#### **1.3 Research Question and Research Objectives**

The main emphasis of this investigation is to examine the rationale and procedures used for devolving HRM practices to line managers whilst also identifying the process of implementation, what it comprises of, and how it may successfully contribute to effective HRM devolution to line managers. The researcher also aspires to identify the key factors involved in effective implementation of HRM to line managers. The research question which evolved from the focus of this research is:

*“Devolving HR to the line: An examination of the implementation process and its impact on line managers?”*

Arising from this, are a number of specific research objectives:

- 1. To identify what is the rationale for devolving HR practices to line managers.*
- 2. To identify in what way, if any, does the implementation process contribute to successful devolution to line managers.*
- 3. To identify the factors that impact upon the implementation and devolvment of HRM to line managers.*

#### **1.4 Gaps in the Literature**

From a current economic perspective greater importance is based on devolving HRM practices to line managers. What is also evident is the requirement to investigate further the true impact of HRM devolvment to line managers and how the implementation process is a) interpreted by line managers and b) whether or not line managers have the required capabilities to implement these HRM practices successfully (McConville, 2006). This view is also supported by Gratton and Truss (2003) who additionally note that albeit research outlines the importance of HRM implementation, there is little research conducted on the actual implementation of HRM practices.

#### **1.5 Methodology**

The nature of this study is based on the researcher developing an initial understanding about the research issues relating to this specific question. This was achieved by gaining a thorough understanding of different perspectives within a particular employee group, i.e. line managers. Furthermore, the researcher did consider a number of different techniques but due to the descriptive and exploratory aspect to this investigation the most suitable approach to use was a qualitative one. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were undertaken with line managers of TalkTalk plc., a telecommunications company, based in two separate locations in England. The line managers came from a variety of departments in TalkTalk. Each line manager had been allocated a pseudonym so as to ensure complete anonymity. The researcher has



chosen to use a single case study design as it is holistic in nature and aims to capture all of the details of a particular group who are relevant to the study within a real life context.

## **1.6 Contribution of the Research**

### **1.6.1 Academic Contributions**

The study aims to contribute to a greater understanding of devolving HRM to line managers and the factors which affect successful implementation whilst understanding the impact this process has on line managers. The investigation also aims to contribute to the academic literature relating to whether or not line managers have the necessary competencies and support mechanisms in place to perform HRM tasks successfully. Furthermore, it may offer a better understanding of how to ensure a ‘partnership’ approach is taken in all HRM activities between HR and the line managers.

### **1.6.2 Practical Contributions**

From a practical perspective this study aims to contribute to a greater understanding of what is required to ensure the devolvment of HRM practices to line managers is successful. The investigation also hopes to contribute to a better understanding of what tools and training organisations should be providing to ensure successful implementation of these HRM practices by line managers. Furthermore it may also offer a greater understanding of how the HR function and line managers can work together more effectively within organisations.

## **1.6 Structure of the Dissertation**

The study includes six chapters. This section gives the reader a synopsis of the investigation. A description of the study is offered. This is followed by the research question and objectives. The gaps in the literature are then discussed while an explanation and outline around the chosen methodology is presented. Following on from this the contributions of the research to the study is discussed.

Chapter two presents the current literature relating to the subject area of this dissertation. An overview of the role HRM plays in organisational transformation is presented. This is followed by a discussion around the rationale for devolving HRM

practices to line managers whilst the subject of SHRM (Strategic Human Resource Management) and devolution is discussed.

Chapter three captures the methodological approach adopted for this study. Initially, the gap in the research is drawn, thereafter; the research question and objectives of the investigation are acknowledged. The research methods integral to this (semi-structured interviews) is also addressed in terms of their design; data collection; validity and reliability; sampling and data analysis. Furthermore, the ethical issues associated with this research are considered.

Chapter four highlights the key findings that have arisen from the investigation into the primary research. This information was acquired through the completion of thirteen semi-structured interviews that were conducted with line managers from TalkTalk based in a variety of departments within the organisation.

Chapter five provides the interpretation and discussion of the findings from the primary research. This chapter also reviews the main themes that have materialised from the investigation. A presentation of the literature that surrounds the area of devolving HRM to line managers and also to the wider context of the implementation process and its impact on line managers is also addressed. A comparison of this is then made against the findings of the primary research.

Chapter six presents the conclusions that have been drawn from this research study on devolving HR to line managers whilst examining the implementation process and its impact on this employee group. Arising from this, a number of recommendations are proposed both for practitioners in this field and for future research.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

An overview of the research study with reference to the relevant literature in this area has been provided. The basis of the research question and objective of the study were also discussed. The gaps in the existing literature have been identified while an overview of the methodology used is presented. The contribution of this particular research has also been highlighted. Finally the dissertation structure was explained. Chapter two will examine the available literature in the wider context of devolving

HRM to line managers encompassing the implementation process and its impact on line managers.

## *Chapter Two*

### ***HRM DEVOLUTION TO LINE MANAGERS AND THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS***

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter will examine the literature to determine the theoretical exposition of HRM devolution to line managers, investigating the implementation process involved and its impact on line managers. It firstly provides an overview of the role HRM plays in organisational change. Following on from this, the rationale for devolving HRM practices to line managers is discussed while a review of SHRM and devolution is deliberated. Finally the implementation process is discussed and the impact it has on line managers is examined.

#### **2.2 Definition of Roles and Strategic Human Resource Management**

A range of definitions of Strategic Human Resource Management are available in the literature which provides a critical link to the rationale for devolving HR practices to line managers. The CIPD (2011) propose that SHRM is “An approach to the management of human resources that provides a strategic framework to support long-term business goals and outcomes” (p.1).

The role of the line manager is to assist in achieving optimal value and organisational performance, acting as executors of organisational strategy, for a team of employees, whilst reporting directly into a higher level of control within the company hierarchy (Armstrong, 2007). Their core responsibilities include transactional duties comprising of administration of company budgets, scheduling and allocation of work, performance management and ensuring all service level agreements and company processes are adhered to (Martins 2009). Storey et al., (2009) note that the role of the HR practitioner within organisations is to support business strategy while enhancing the people management aspects of the line manager’s role.

#### **2.3 HRM and Organisational Change**

HRM is an integral part of all management roles due to it being an essential organisational process. The role of the line manager focuses on direct supervision of their subordinates with the ultimate aim of optimum team and organisational

performance (Boxall and Purcell, 2008). Furthermore, HRM activities are executed successfully by several knowledge actors within an organisation including line managers Valverde (2006).

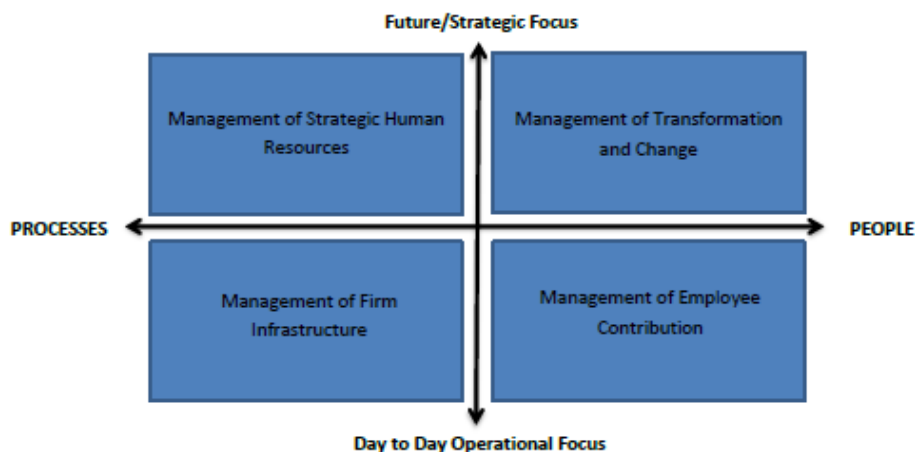
Ulrich (1998) asserts that for an organisation to be competitive the role of HR within a company must no longer focus on traditional HR activities based on a support functionality, but focus on driving and delivering results that aid in value creation to a company's key stakeholders; customers, investors and employees. Furthermore, Ulrich (1997) introduced a new and effective HRM model for HR professionals which focuses on the creation of a strategic relationship between line managers and HR to ensure optimum organisational performance. This HRM model is based on four key roles including that of change agent, business partner, administrative expert and employee champion. It is integral to the success of a business that HR practitioners partner themselves with line managers to ensure effective SHRM execution (Ulrich, 1998). Moreover, in modern day organisations, the transformation of HR roles and responsibilities lie with the line managers who have overall responsibility in ensuring business processes and outcomes are implemented successfully.

Therefore, line managers are fully responsible for integrating HR practices into organisational goals and thus become champions and gatekeepers of HRM (Ulrich 1998). This position is also reinforced by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) who have further identified that the HR function can only add value when their work helps other organisational departments and managers, i.e. line managers in achieving positive outcomes and goals. Caldwell and Storey (2007) argue that the pursuit for delivering and driving increased value through HR improvements such as devolving HRM practices to line managers has led to disorder in HR policies, procedures and boundaries. They observe that:

“Line managers might resist or reject their new role, but equally they might become positively and negatively empowered by it: they could ‘own’ HR initiatives, selectively implement them within the workplace or use offloading of HR to further marginalise the HR function” (Caldwell and Storey, 2007 p.23).

Furthermore, the implementation of Ulrich's new HR function has led to problems defining new roles for HR practitioners and line managers as well as change management issues which include the lack of core competencies required by line managers and HR practitioners (Caldwell and Storey, 2007). However, Ulrich et al., (2009) maintains that HR transformation and integration is essential due to modern day business conditions which include both economic and structural changes to an organisation, i.e. globalisation, technology, demographics, investor confidence, company profitability and inflation. A four phase model of HR transformation has been proposed which will help in driving organisational success and optimum business performance. This includes phase one, which outlines the reason for transformation, phase two which defines outcomes, which include organisational capability and efficiencies, phase three, the restructure of the HR function pertaining to role change, organisational control and change in responsibilities for HR strategy, whilst the fourth phase concentrates on engaging key stakeholders, i.e.; line managers in the implementation and ownership of HRM practices as outlined in figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1 Ulrich's HR Roles in Building a Competitive Organisation**



**Source:** Adapted from (Human Resource Champions, The Next Agenda for Adding Value and Delivering Results, Ulrich, 1997).

To ensure an effective implementation process, there is a definitive route to be followed if changes are to occur and be accepted within organisations (Kotter, 1996). This view is also reinforced by Kruger (1996) who additionally notes that due to the inherent complications in organisational dynamics in times of applied change, effective implementation of change is akin to marketing a product whilst a persuasive

approach is most effective in gaining line managers and employees acceptance of organisational change.

#### **2.4 Rationale for Devolving HRM to Line Managers**

Line managers are positioned at the front line, directly managing the employee population and unlike HR managers, their decision making process is based on value creation (Yusoff and Abdullah 2008). Therefore, issues are resolved in a more timely manner whilst the decision making process is based on each individual worker. Additionally, the changes in philosophy and organisational structure have been a key motivation in devolving HRM to line managers as companies strive to be more competitive by trying to reduce headcount i.e. the reduction of HR specialists within the HR function (McGuire et al., 2008). Furthermore, line managers have successfully and traditionally carried out certain HR activities such as dealing with disciplinary and grievance issues, performance management, recruitment, selection and mentoring to the employee population (CIPD, 2011). This position is also reinforced by the findings of a case study of the electronics firm Hewlett Packard by Ulrich (1997) who notes that line managers who were directly involved with the implementation of HRM processes such as recruitment, selection and performance management, aligned themselves effectively with the business whilst assisting the organisation in competitive advantage. Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) highlight that HR practitioners are part of a support based function that facilitate, guide and mentor line managers in HR procedures, whilst line managers have ultimate responsibility for approving and implementing HR.

#### **2.5 SHRM and Devolution**

To achieve effective strategic human resource management, it is essential that certain HR activities are devolved to the line which will aid in organisational competitiveness and performance (Storey, 1992). Organisational competitiveness is influenced by contemporary line managers through their hands-on approach in dealing with HR issues such as conflict management and problem solving (Luke, 2011).

Conway and Monks (2010) assert that the relationship between the HR function and line managers can be one of a partnership, where HR strategy enables line managers to bring their skillset to bear on HRM whilst being trained and developed in organisational and management competencies. For Conway and Monks (2010) this

approach is likely to develop HR strategy through a process of evolutionary exchange between the HR function and line managers. This position is also reinforced by Azmi (2010) who suggests that the devolution process and the decentralisation of HR responsibilities to line managers are critical to both SHRM and effective organisational strategy. Ekhsan and Othman (2011) posit that empowerment of HR activities to line managers will facilitate HR consultants in becoming more involved in strategic business orientation. This view is also supported by Guest (2011) who suggests that if "...line management values and priorities are integrated with those of the human resource strategy" (p.7) that will aid in optimum business performance while Guest (2011) also suggests that "...it is line managers, not HR managers who implement HRM" (p.7).

### **2.5.1 Role of Line Manager in Devolvment**

The fundamental role of line managers within organisations is to manage front line employees and to ensure sustainable growth in product market competition whilst providing technical expertise when required (Martins, 2009). Devolution in the HRM context is the reorganisation of certain HR responsibilities formerly managed by the HR function, combined with decision making and financial control directly succeeded by the line manager (Casco'n-Pereira et al., 2006). This view is supported by the CIPD (2011) who additionally note that the role of the line manager is based on employee management, engagement, and ensuring operational costs are managed effectively whilst striving to achieve company goals and optimal business performance.

According to Gilbert et al., (2011) line managers have always had responsibility for HRM. This view is also held by Keegan et al., (2011) whom hold that it has long been accepted that line managers are a key agency in the development, dissemination and implementation of HR policy within organisations. Marchington and Wilkinson (2005) support the notion that "...because line managers are in direct contact with their subordinates, they have always had a role in HR management" (p 142). This view is also supported by Brandl et al., (2009) who additionally note that effective HRM requires the active participation of line managers who are the most suitable conduit for communicating HR policies to staff members. However, Brandl et al., (2009) also note that when line managers take over HRM duties at the employee



interface, the companies HR practitioners are free to develop strategic HR policy. This position is also reinforced by Reilly and Williams (2006) who also suggest that one approach to be considered when devolving HR to line managers is to place high level policy formulation with HR professionals whilst day to day HRM rests with the line. This view is also supported by Torrington et al., (2008) who suggest that “...strategic direction would be developed and communicated by the HR department to line managers who would share responsibility for recruitment, training and performance management” (p. 798).

Perry et al., (2008) maintains that devolving HR practices to the line ensures that a company is performing to its optimum whilst increasing financial gains by forming a cohesive relationship between the line manager and the employee. Furthermore, these individuals are positioned strategically to adopt the most effective HR practices (Sisson and Storey, 2000, Cooper, 2001, Whittaker and Marchington, 2003, Krishnan and Singh, 2011).

### **2.5.2 HRM Practices Devolved to Line Managers**

Devolving HR practices to line managers is based on an age old managerial principle that authority must be inherent in the hands of those who implement it (Mohd and Shah, 2008). Increasingly, line managers have become responsible for the implementation of HR practices such as the disciplinary and grievance procedures within an organisation (Armstrong, 2007). This view is also supported by Casco'n-Pereira et al., (2006) who note that additional HR practices that are devolved to the line manager include HRM decisions such as absence management, carrying out performance appraisals and identifying training needs. Line managers have also become involved in the recruitment and selection process both externally and internally. Brown and Purcell (2009) have further identified that line manager responsibilities include additional HRM practices such as determining pay and bonus structures for their staff through the management of employee appraisals.

### **2.6 The Implementation Process**

The implementation process is a time of transition within an organisation which facilitates the introduction of a new idea or process until its adoption by a specific employee group (Klien and Sorra, 1996). This is supported in the observations of Khiji and Wang (2006) who also suggest that HRM implementation refers to specific

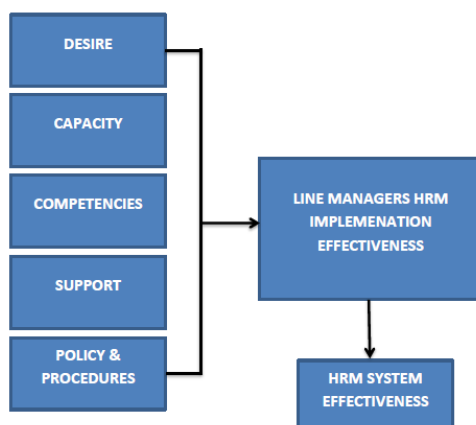
practices implemented in companies and thus, experienced by the employees. Evidence suggests that the implementation of HRM practices are being decentralised and devolved to line managers (Kulik and Bainbridge, 2006). This view is reinforced by Renwick (2002) who asserts that HRM devolvment to line managers include day to day operational HR activities such as motivating teams and transactional duties.

Effective HRM implementation by line managers can only be successful when there is a clearly defined direction pertaining to HRM strategies (Nehles and Boon, 2006). This view is supported by Hutchison and Purcell (2003) who additionally note that whilst HR practitioners are responsible for the design and improvement of HRM practices, line managers are responsible for the implementation of these practices operationally whilst playing a crucial role in employee behaviour and motivation.

### **2.6.1 Key Success Factors in the Implementation Process**

Nehles et al., (2006) has identified five factors which may contribute to the success or lack of accomplishment by line managers in the implementation of HRM practices. These factors can be divided into two groups; organisational factors which include; HR support, capacity and policies and procedures whilst the subsequent group are based around personal factors relating to line managers and comprise of desire and competence, all which are referred to in figure 2.2. Additional contributing organisational factors have been identified by Perry and Kulik (2008) and Gilbert et al., (2011) and consist of support from the executive team and training and development.

**Figure 2.2 Research Model of Five Factors that may affect HRM Implementation by Line Managers**



**Source: Implementing Human Resource Management Successfully: A First Line Management Challenge (Nehles et al., 2006)**

### **2.6.1.1 Organisational Factors**

#### **2.6.1.1.1 Support from Executive Team**

A critical factor affecting the positive outcome of the implementation process and the impact of HR devolvement to line managers includes the support from the executive team (Gilbert et al., 2011). Organisations may have quality training programmes in place, but without the backing of the companies top management team, line managers will not be trained in the HR competencies required. This view is also supported by Maxwell and Farquharson (2008) who additionally notes that the support of HR directors is critical to the devolvement process, whilst the relationship between line managers and HR directors may be challenging due to the line managers reporting structure. The executive team may not perceive this type of training as an essential requirement associated with the line manager's job performance, resulting in an inadequate implementation process causing negative consequences of devolving HR practices to the line managers and thus poor operational performance (Gilbert et al., 2011). This view is reinforced by the findings of a study by Guest et al., (2003) of 366 UK based companies pertaining to HRM and business effectiveness. They assert that albeit there is a clear link between HRM and cost-effectiveness, the findings do not support the hypothesis that HRM increase organisational productivity. Therefore, it can be argued that HR support and guidance on HR issues to the line managers may be affected if the senior management team place little importance on the HR function (Gilbert et al., 2011).

#### **2.6.1.1.2 Training and Development for Line Managers**

In reviewing the literature on training and development for line managers, due consideration is given to identifying the reasoning behind this requirement and the possible outcomes for line managers, HR practitioners and the organisation.

Perry and Kulik (2008) suggest that companies can achieve the ultimate goal of devolvement in stages, through the training and development of their line managers whilst the competencies of a company's line managers are crucial in the successful devolvement of HR practices to the line. This view is also supported by Martone (2003) who additionally notes that competencies are specific skills and abilities that are expected of employees depending on their role type. However, both HR and line managers both agree that the required competency levels line managers need to sufficiently perform HR duties are lacking (Watson et al., 2006). Line managers who

possess the required job related proficiencies will have a clear and concise understanding of what is expected of them whilst executing their role effectively (Gilbert et al., 2011). For example, Rappe and Zwick, (2007) propose that a core HR competency required by line managers is based around leadership skills which will aid in ensuring improved work performance by subordinates whilst gaining employee commitment.

According to a completed survey by Gilbert et al., (2011) HR training for line managers is essential in developing their HR competency base. The training process that was used included the explanation of HR policies and procedures whilst developing leadership abilities which equipped them with the necessary leadership competencies to successfully implement HR practices to the employee population, thus gaining employee commitment and optimum organisational performance.

However, the HR community of an organisation may be slow to train and hand over HRM procedures to line managers (Gilbert et al., 2011). Therefore, the development of a relationship between HR and the line may not transpire, leading to line managers not seeking advice or support from HR on specific HR activities. This view is reinforced by Renwick (2003) who additionally notes that HR managers, who have a propensity to reserve HRM information, may need to spend more time on the operational aspects of HR opposed to the strategic ones.

Perry and Kulik, (2008) assert that giving line managers increased HR responsibility may deter them from their core role of managing their staff from an operational perspective. Therefore, it is essential to provide line managers with the necessary resources, training and control required, to effectively perform their new HRM responsibilities (Gilbert et al., 2011). However, Longenecker et al., (2006) suggests that line managers are often requested to commence HRM activities without any form of training but to rely on the notion of 'trial and error' from an organisational standpoint. Furthermore, many organisations may not take a long-term view on developing and training their line managers in HRM practices due to budgetary requirements for training and hold the belief that line manager development is the individual's responsibility (Longenecker, et al., 2006).

#### **2.6.1.1.3 HR Support**

The process of devolving HR practices to line managers cannot be achieved without the support and facilitation of the organisations HR practitioners (Becker and Huselid, 2006). This view is supported by Ulrich (1997) who suggest that a partnership approach between line managers and HR practitioners will aid in effective HRM implementation by line managers and thus effective HRM. Equally, Perry and Kulik (2008) argue that if line managers become the sole actors of the HR function, they could not adequately perform HR practices and would need the support of HR practitioners. However, a survey completed on four multinationals by Bos-Nehles (2010) reveals that 30% of line managers feel they do not receive the HR support they require pertaining to advice on HRM practices, regulatory and organisational arrangements and competency related issues. Additionally, line managers perceive HR practitioners as being unaware of company strategy and thus the HR function does not support and deliver the relevant information line managers require. Nevertheless, line managers who were responsible for a large number of staff were generally more satisfied with HR support opposed to those with few team members asserting that HR practitioners may engage more frequently with line managers supervising larger teams (Bos-Nehles, 2010).

#### **2.6.1.1.4 Capacity**

Organisational restructuring can deter line managers from implementing HRM successfully due to higher workloads for line managers based on a wider control span encompassing a larger group of employees reporting into them (McConville, 2006). This position is also reinforced by Whittaker and Marchington (2003) who observe that "...Line managers' report frustration that they are not able to devote sufficient time to HR issues, because harder priorities tend to dominate" (p.250), while Perry and Kulik (2008) suggests that "...This short-range focus may result in people management that is fragmented, inconsistent and generally less effective" (p.263). Therefore, sufficient capacity is required to ensure successful implementation of HRM tasks by line managers.

#### **2.6.1.1.5 Policies and Procedures**

Role clarity and understanding is crucial if line managers are to execute HRM practices successfully whilst a knowledge of how to implement these practices is essential (Maxwell and Watson, 2006). Without the access to structured policies and

procedures, line managers may interpret HRM practices incorrectly which could lead to conflicting working methods Harris et al., (2002). This view is reinforced by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) who additionally note that line managers may "...adjust and fine tune" (p.40) HRM practices according to their own individual understanding. Therefore, HR practitioners must introduce specific agendas, toolkits and handbooks to ensure line managers have a clear understanding of how to use HRM practices successfully (Gilbert et al., 2011). The development of a HR manual customised for line managers, or a HR intranet site would be beneficial in communicating this information to the line whilst a HR charter outlining HR roles and responsibilities for both line managers and HR would assist in the reduction of HR duplication.

Stoker (2006) posits that modern day line managers have become key stakeholders in influencing how HR policies are interpreted and enacted by their workforce. Line managers have taken a leadership role in HRM practices and have contributed in a positive way to certain HR procedures including a positive work-life balance for employees whilst ensuring optimum employee performance (CIPD, 2011). The design of HR processes may be created by HR practitioners but the delivery of these policies and procedures should be implemented by line managers to ensure optimum performance and employee engagement (CIPD, 2011).

## **2.6.1.2 Personal Factors**

### **2.6.1.2.1 Desire**

To perform any task effectively, desire is an essential component required by an individual (Huselid, 1995). This view is also supported by Harris et al., (2002) who additionally note that employees such as line managers can sometimes be excited by the idea of HR responsibilities, but also, a proportion of line managers are not enthusiastic by these additional duties due to a lack of personal motivation and organisational incentives. However, Whittaker and Marchington (2003) assert that line managers who realise the advantages of taking on HR responsibilities such as increased employee control, are expected to willingly perform these HR tasks efficiently. However, Bos-Nehles (2010) revealed that 83% of line managers would prioritise business issues over HRM issues, favouring the opportunity to solve business problems pertaining to technical issues over people problems. Nevertheless, line managers did engage in the performance of HRM activities but deferred these actions to a later date.

#### **2.6.1.2.2 Competence**

The implementation of HRM responsibilities by line managers, require specific skills and competencies to ensure successful execution (Renwick, 2003). This view is supported by Gilbert et al., (2011) who additionally notes that the core competencies required by line managers in the performance of HRM practices are based around leadership which will aid in improved work performance by the employee population. This view is also held by Bos-Nehles (2010) who suggest that gaining leadership skills is essential for applying HR practices successfully whilst ensuring fewer mistakes in HRM practices are made by line managers. McGuire et al., (2008) argue that "...Line manager's skills and competences in HRM practices are limited and a lack of training in this area will undoubtedly affect a line managers effectiveness" (p.11). Therefore, continual training in specific competencies for line managers is essential for effective implementation (Gilbert et al., 2011).

### **2.7 Impact of Involvement in HR Practices on Line Managers**

McKenna and Beech (2008) suggest that the concept of personnel management sees the line manager as a subordinate part of the organisation subject to bureaucratic decisions formulated by the HR function. They contrast this with the more inclusive business oriented stance of HRM that has allowed line managers to influence and be influenced by progressive HRM practices. Notwithstanding developments in HR practice, there is a school of opinion that holds that line managers who have not always accepted responsibility for operational HR are not performing all their duties (Reilly and Williams 2006 ).

#### **2.7.1 Role Ambiguity**

A key issue based around the lines managers role change is role ambiguity and role overload. According to Gilbert et al., (2011) this employee group need clarity and transparency pertaining to their duties and organisational expectations. Furthermore, Fombrun et al., (1984, p. 236) proposes that "...Any attempt to redesign the role of the human resource management function requires line participation since most of the activities of

selection; appraisal, reward and development are prerogatives of the line organisation". An organisational role is a group of activities that must be performed by an employee, based on their position within the company (Kahn et al., 1964). This view is also supported by Gilbert et al., (2011) who additionally notes that workers are confronted with vague outlines of duties and responsibilities that change on a regular basis, this is often referred to as 'role ambiguity'. From a line manager's perspective HR role ambiguity is founded on unclear perceptions based on the magnitude of HR activities and responsibilities allocated to them.

### **2.7.2 Role Overload**

Role overload refers to the inconsistency that exists between agreed tasks and the allotted time given to these activities (Gilbert et al., 2011). Therefore, HR role overload is based on the failure of line managers to complete specific HR activities due to time constraints (Gilbert et al., 2011). A case study completed on six companies by Hutchinson and Purcell (2007) pertaining to line managers performance in HR practices revealed that work overload was evident as line managers took informal routes pertaining to training and development, reward strategies and performance pay. Line managers who were interviewed in these organisations observed that "...you never get anything completed, There's so much to do, covering areas....doing the work of my team" (p. 62), and "...It feels like a treadmill at times. I have lots of staffing issues, trainees and absentees...It's about keeping your head above water" (p. 62). Therefore, the increase in HRM responsibilities for line managers has somewhat contributed to work overload and role ambiguity who tend not to view HRM as important as other operational processes. However, Nehles et al., (2006) assert that the execution of devolved HR policies to the line are inherently integrated into organisational procedure and are implemented effectively. Therefore, it is essential that HR role responsibility is formalised, prioritised and rewarded whilst incorporating these core duties into the line manager's performance objectives.

### **2.7.3 Positive and Negative Aspects of Devolution**

#### **2.7.3.1 Positive Aspects**

Line managers are ideally placed to decide the appropriate HR response to a given situation because of their position on the front line of the organisation (McCarthy et al., 2010). This involvement allows the line manager the freedom to exercise their



discretion when deciding on appropriate managerial strategies. This view is also reinforced by McCarthy et al., (2010) who additionally suggest that work-life balance can potentially affect workplace issues such as productivity, employee turnover, job satisfaction and stress if not dealt with appropriately.

Torun (2007) defines work-life balance as “establishing a successful balance between working obligations and personal commitments” (p.1). Employees who have supportive line managers pertaining to WLB are content in their roles, experience less conflict at home and in the workplace, resulting in minor turnover intentions and thus aid in optimum employee performance (Ryan and Kossek, 2008).

#### **2.7.3.2 Negative Aspects**

Gennard and Kelly (1997) suggest that an increase in HR responsibility to line managers may deter them from their core role of managing staff from an operational perspective. A counter argument to Gennard and Kelly (1997) view on the negative impact of increased HR responsibility to line managers is made by Jones and Saundry (2011) who conclude that whilst HR training for line managers has increased there is a fear by line managers of legal and organisational repercussions in the event of an employment tribunal. Line managers identify that they are required to operate in an area subject to complex legal regulation without the necessary background in employment law. Therefore, a devolution strategy and implementation process can only be measured on its effectiveness by the level of support and facilitation HR affords the line (Perry and Kulik, 2008).

#### **2.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the role HRM plays in organisational change whilst reviewing the rationale for devolving certain HRM practices to line managers. Subsequently, an analysis of SHRM and devolution is presented. This then led to an examination of the implementation process and the impact it has on line managers. Following on from this, the next chapter will discuss the methodology for this research study.

## *Chapter Three*

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents an overview of the research question, objectives and methodology. The research gap identified is explained as the basis for the research question and the research objectives. The process used to gather the primary research is discussed and a description of the method of data collection and the qualitative interview is presented. This chapter concludes with an explanation of qualitative data analysis and the limitations of the research.

#### **3.2 The Research Gap**

The research gap may be created through the synthesis of new concepts which are formulated through the study and investigation of existing literature (Gatrell et al., 2012). This view is supported by Sekeran (1992) who notes that “a problem is any situation where a gap exists between the actual and the ideal desired state” (p.67). The objective of this research is to gain an understanding of the perceived and actual effects of devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers.

According to McConville (2006) the issue of whether or not line managers have the competencies required to perform HRM tasks effectively is an obvious area for exploration. From the literature consulted it is evident that knowledge of the real experiences of line managers within a devolved HR environment is the key to exploring its ramifications. McConville (2006) asserts that until the questions of how and why line managers should engage with the process are addressed, our understanding of devolved HRM will be incomplete. Indeed McConville (2006) states that “The lack of research attention paid to this matter is almost embarrassing” (p.638).

#### **3.3 The Research Question**

One of the key components of a research project involves “...formulating the research question and evaluating its feasibility” (Monsen and Van Horn, 2010) whilst “a concise, simple, straightforward statement of the research question focuses the research design process” (p.10). Having identified a research gap from examination of

literature, the following research question was formulated. “Devolving HR to the line: An examination of the implementation process and its impact on line managers?”

### **3.4 Research Objectives**

Research objectives are based on the researchers proposed and anticipated conclusions from the study (Jankowicz, 2005). A view supported by Saunders et al., (1997) who note that “...research objectives are evidence of the researcher’s clear sense of purpose and direction” (p.121). For the purpose of this study, the main objectives of this research are:

*Objective One: To identify what is the rationale for devolving HR practices to line managers.*

*Objective Two: To identify in what way, if any, does the implementation process contribute to successful devolution to line managers.*

*Objective Three: To identify the factors that impact upon the implementation and devolvment of HRM to line managers.*

### **3.5 Research Design**

Bryman and Bell (2010) assert that research design provides an outline for the data collection and analysis process. The researcher must ensure that the appropriate design for the investigation is used and thus will best fit the nature of the study. For the purpose of this study a case study design has been chosen. Case study research enhances our understanding of complex issues or matters whilst adding strength to

what is known through former study and exploration (Gerring, 2007). This view is supported by Yin (2009) who defines cases study research as “...an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p.23). Yin (2011) asserts that, depending on whether a researcher uses single or multiple cases, the researcher may also choose to keep the case ‘holistic’ or have embedded subcases within the overall holistic case.

The subject of the study will be TalkTalk plc., based on data collection from a specific sample survey of the company’s line manager population. The primary reason

the researcher has chosen to use a single case study design is based on certain criteria to be considered; a) why has the organisation decided to devolve HRM to line managers? and b) how does the implementation process impact devolvment on line managers? Yin (2003) notes that a case study approach is most relevant when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are asked combined with the knowledge that the researcher cannot influence the behaviour of those involved in the study. This view is supported by Miles and Huberman (1994) who note that the case is “...a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” and thus the case is in effect, your “unit of analysis’ (p.25). For this study the case is based on the analysis of a sample of the organisations line managers and the impact of devolvment on this group. What is also being analysed is the implementation process that is currently used in devolving HRM to line managers.

### **3.6 Research Methods**

Research methods are specific approaches used by researchers to collect evidence for construction and testing of hypothesis (Frey et al., 1991). This view is supported by Silverman (2010) who note that most research methods can be used either qualitatively or quantitatively. Research can be broken down into two categories; Descriptive and Analytical. Descriptive research methods are based on describing situations as they presently exist whilst descriptive research methods are based on the lack of control the researcher has over certain variables and thus can only report on the findings (Kumar, 2008). Analytical research makes use of facts or information that is already available and analyses this information prior to making a critical evaluation of the material.

#### **3.6.1 Qualitative Research versus Quantitative Research**

Research methodology is the philosophy which will guide research whilst also deciding on the specific approach taken to studying the subject. It is important to note that the research methodology will also review certain issues that must be addressed such as constraints and ethical choices pertaining to the research (Dawson, 2002). This view is reinforced by Kothari (2006) who note that research methodology “...is a way to systematically solve the research problem” whilst research methods are the “...analytical tools of research” (p.8).

There are key questions a researcher must address early on in the process such as ‘How to research?’ and ‘What to research?’ (Remenyi et al., 1998). This is supported by Hennick et al., (2011) who note that determination of the relevant research methodology pertaining to the research question is based on choosing a methodology be it qualitative or quantitative. Furthermore, as a researcher reviews the philosophical literature relevant to their investigation, their understanding of the importance of choosing a research methodology becomes evident, based on a logical explanation to a core question; ‘Why research?’ (Holden and Lynch, 2004).

Hennick et al., (2011) note that quantitative research is based on large random samplings of respondents to specific questions, formulated by the researcher, predominately in survey format whilst Bryman and Bell (2010) maintain that quantitative research is “...entailing the collection of numerical data” (p.45). The result of quantitative research aids in identifying statistical trends, patterns and frequencies. This type of research method is used to recommend a final course of action and or to test specific hypothesis and examine specific relationships.

Qualitative research pursues knowledge through understanding the subjective experience of individuals and groups. According to Bryman and Bell (2010) qualitative research is “...an approach that allows you to examine peoples experiences in detail” (p. 202). Qualitative research is inductive endeavouring to discover the real world meaning of the phenomena under investigation (Anderson 2004 and Bryman and Bell 2010). Methods of qualitative research include focus groups, ethnographic observation and interviews.

### **3.6.2 Data Collection**

Hair et al., (2011) asserts that “...if your objective is to understand why something happens, then you will need to interview people” (p. 186). The data collection method chosen was the semi-structured interview, employing open ended questions. This allows an element of flexibility which may include unstructured questions which are qualitative in nature. This research method enables the researcher to study line managers in the organisational environment, leading to the formation of testable hypothesis.

The interviews were digitally recorded ensuring accurate recording and transcription. According to King and Horrocks (2010) the use of an audio recording device "...may be seen as a sign of the 'serious' nature of the project and encourage participants to make an effort to provide the interviewer with what she wants" (p.44).

### **3.6.3 Types of Qualitative Interviews**

Qualitative interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. The structured interview is formal and limited in the range of responses. Unstructured interviews are informal open-ended conversations, allowing the participant to answer questions any way he or she wishes, whilst the semi-structured interview is based on a series of specific questions composed in a general format which allows the interviewer some scope to probe more deeply based on the responses to the initial question but with a degree of uniformity (Rubin and Rubin 2005 and Bryman and Bell 2010).

### **3.6.4 Semi Structured Interviews**

The elements of a semi structured interview are based on a one to one method of data collection which includes an in-depth discussion between an interviewer and interviewee, addressing a specific topic (Hennick et al., 2011). Each topic area that is discussed is introduced by an open question and concluded with a challenging question (Flick, 2009). The main purpose of this is to gain an understanding of key issues using a conversational style which may help at putting the interviewee at his/her ease and thus gathering invaluable and relevant data (Bryman and Bell, 2010). However, to ensure a useful semi structured interview process Kvale (1996) posits that a thorough investigation should take place prior to the interview which includes obtaining knowledge of the subject material. A clear rationale for the interviews should also be formulated whilst gaining familiarity with the different interview techniques at the interviewer's disposal (Kvale, 1996).

### **3.6.5 Merits of Semi Structured Interviews**

Currie (2005) suggests that semi structured interview's permit the participant "...to talk freely, expand upon answers and even change the theme of the interview" (p.100). Grix (2001) note that semi structured interviews allow for an element of flexibility, whilst the data collected from this type of interview can still be compared, contrasted and statistically analysed. Furthermore, Wengraf (2003) asserts that albeit

semi-structured interviews are high preparation, in the correct conditions the yield “high gain” (p.5).

### **3.6.6 Limitations of Semi Structured Interviews**

Wengraf (2003) argues that the semi structured interviews must be planned and during the interview a rapport must be obtained with the interviewee to allow relevant data collection. Bryman and Bell (2010) caution that inadvertent signalling by the interviewer may lead the interviewee to answer questions “correctly” leading to skewed responses. Wengraf (2003) notes that semi structured interviews require more discipline and creativity during the session and states that “...more training and more mental preparation is required before each interview, than simply delivering lines prepared and rote-learned in advance” (p.5). Burns (2000) and Wengraf (2003) assert that interviews can be extremely expensive and time consuming when activities pertinent to the interview include travel, developing schedules and the interview itself.

### **3.6.7 Interview Protocol**

Esterberg (2002) notes that in the case of semi <sup>1</sup>structured interviews, the interviewer is given the opportunity “...to explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (p.87). A series of open ended questions were employed in order to gather a comprehensive set of data while the tone was conversational allowing rapport to be established. This facilitated the interviewee to fully express their thoughts and feelings (Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Building trust and establishing rapport were essential to counter possible psychological constraints associated with conducting the interviews within the workplace.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview Questions – Appendix B.

### **3.6.8 Validity and Reliability**

Hammersley (1990) describes validity as the “...extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (p.57). This is supported by Cohen et al., (2007) who note that the most successful way to ensure interview validity is to reduce the potential for bias within the interview. Saunders et al., (2009) argue that interview bias can be created by both parties through subjective responses and perceptions. Therefore, “...it is crucial that researchers choose their actions with a self-conscious awareness of why they are making them, what effects are likely to be upon that relationship and whether their values are getting in the way of understanding those of the respondents” (Seale, 2004, p.259). Cognisant of this, the researcher took appropriate action to eliminate bias from the process which included:

- a) assuring all interviewees that the process was confidential and ethically sound and
- b) by ensuring the interview questions were structured to reflect the research question in an impartial and non-opinionated manner in order to enhance interview reliability.

Hammersley (1992a) defines reliability as “...the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (p67). In order to avoid bias or error the researcher rigidly adhered to correct protocols to ensure both validity and reliability.

### **3.6.9 Sample**

The research question addresses the devolvment of HRM processes to line managers and examines the implementation process and its impact on the case study line manager population. Because of this the researcher concluded that the target population and sample must be drawn from the line manager group. A population is simply based on every probable case that can be included in a study (David and Sutton, 2011) whilst a sample “...contains every unit in the population and the subsequent sample is drawn from it” (p.226).

Based on the research being investigated it was evident that the line manager population played a pivotal role in the study. Thirteen face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted with line managers over a two day period based in separate locations. The sample interviewed came from a number of different



departments including customer service, technical support, home-movers and customer loyalty.

Convenience sampling was chosen due to its “ease of access” (David and Sutton, 2011 p.231) and because line managers suitable for the case study was amenable to participate. Hair et al., (2011) defines convenience sampling as “...selecting sample elements that are most readily available to participate in the study and can provide the information required” whilst also “...they enable the researcher to complete a large number of interviews quickly” (p.175). To ensure complete confidentiality the author allocated each participant a pseudonym so as to ensure complete discretion as indicated in Table 4.1.

**Table 3.1 Profiles of Participants**

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Tenure</b>	<b>Site Location</b>
<b>Anne</b>	Line Manager	Technical Support	3-5 Years	Preston
<b>Mary</b>	Line Manager	Technical Support	6 months – 2 Years	Preston
<b>John</b>	Line Manager	Home Movers	6 months – 2 Years	Preston
<b>Sarah</b>	Line Manager	Technical Support	6 months – 2 Years	Preston
<b>Jill</b>	Line Manager	Home Movers	6 months – 2 Years	Preston
<b>Tom</b>	Line Manager	Customer Service	3-5 Years	Preston
<b>Matt</b>	Line Manager	Customer Loyalty	3-5 Years	Preston
<b>Elizabeth</b>	Line Manager	Customer Loyalty	3-5 Years	Warrington
<b>Corina</b>	Line Manager	Technical Support	6 months – 2 Years	Warrington
<b>Anna</b>	Line Manager	Customer Service	3-5 Years	Warrington
<b>Peter</b>	Line Manager	Technical Support	3-5 Years	Warrington
<b>Sophie</b>	Line Manager	Home Movers	3-5 Years	Warrington
<b>Clare</b>	Line Manager	Technical Support	6 months – 2 Years	Warrington

**Source: Adapted from the Primary Research**

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

The data gathered was subjected to thematic analysis. Eisner (1998) posits that thematic analysis is a holistic strategy where themes identify recurring messages within the data and may be viewed as “...dominant features of the situation or person,

those qualities of place, person or object that define or describe identity” (p.104). The audio data collected was transcribed giving the researcher a primary insight into line manager’s experience of HRM devolution. Following on from this, themes were identified from the data using <sup>2</sup>NVivo software which analysed the information in a consistent, reliable and deductive manner whilst creating analytical models. Additionally, the NVivo software applied rigour to the identification of opinion, belief and sentiment pertinent to the research problem (Bazeley (2007), Mackey and Gass, 2007).

### **3.8 Limitations**

Qualitative data analysis derived from case studies is subjective due to the case specific nature of such studies. This analysis is also subject to the vagaries of the individual researcher (Ruhe and Zumbo, 2009). This could be applied to the case study in this research as the researcher was previously employed as a HR consultant by the organisation that was the subject of research. While the researcher was aware of the risks and took rigorous measures to remain objective the facts must be noted. The sample size was also a limitation in regards to the research process and outcome.

The completion of more interviews by the researcher was indeed a preference, which in turn would have inevitably given the researcher a more comprehensive level of data relevant to the research but time constraints ruled this out. Nevertheless, the researcher is content that the thirteen semi-structured interviews provided a precise account of the wide range of perspectives pertaining to the research question.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

The objectives and methodologies for the study have been clarified and deemed appropriate. There was a review of the research problem and the research question and objectives were identified. The rationale for choosing a qualitative research strategy was deliberated upon based on the nature of the study. Following on from this, an explanation of the chosen methodology was undertaken which involved data collection techniques, the process involved in sampling and the steps involved in qualitative data analysis. A discussion of the suggested limitations of the research investigation also took place. The next chapter will present the key findings from the primary research.

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<sup>2</sup> Data Analysis Model – Appendix C.

## *Chapter Four*

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The objective of this chapter is to present the findings derived from this investigation organised by themes. The data sources were thirteen semi-structured interviews where line managers were invited to share their knowledge, experience and perceptions of the implementation of a HR devolvement process to the line. The main objectives of this research study were to identify the rationale for devolving HR practices to line managers whilst also identifying the ways, if any, the implementation process contributes successfully to the devolution process. Additionally, a study of the factors that impact the implementation and devolvement process of HRM to line managers was addressed.

#### **4.2 Overview of the Organisation**

TalkTalk plc. is one of the leading fixed line voice and broadband telecommunication service providers in the UK with a customer base of five million and an employee group of 10,000 spanning across retail outlets and call centres in the UK. The company operates its call centres in London, Northampton, Preston, Warrington and Stornoway where its key functionality's are based around customer service and technical support services.

#### **4.3 Rationale for Devolving HRM practices to Line Managers**

The following section presents the key findings relating to the rationale for devolving HRM to line managers in TalkTalk plc. This section relates to the line managers understanding as to why certain HRM practices have been devolved to them whilst also reviewing the themes that have emerged in relation to this particular question. What has also emerged is that traditionally the HR function and line managers have always had a good working relationship and this is a key factor in devolving certain HR practice to the line.

##### **4.3.1 Traditional Role of Line Manager in HRM**

Over the course of the interview process it appeared that all thirteen line managers concluded that certain HRM practices have always been part of their role and

responsibilities which in their opinion was one of the main reasons for devolving additional HRM practices to them. What was also apparent was that the HRM responsibilities that were traditionally assigned to line managers were primarily based around absence management, conducting disciplinary meetings, performance management and return to work meetings. Anne, a technical support manager maintained that *“We have always been very active in return to works, absence management and performance and disciplinaries”*. This opinion was also reinforced by Jill a line manager in the home movers department; *“The implementation of HRM practices is not new to us, since I have been working as a line manager, this has always been part of my role”*. However, a number of the line managers did intimate that although they have always played a pivotal role in implementing HRM practices, they were always supported by the HR function regarding mentoring and advice relating to complex issues and cases. Matt, a customer loyalty manager felt very strongly about this and valued the support the HR team gave him on a daily basis: *“I was always involved in disciplinary and absence management with the support from HR in regards to complex issues and decisions”*.

#### **4.3.2 Creating Efficiencies and Reducing Cost**

Reducing cost and creating efficiencies featured heavily in terms of the rationale for devolving HRM practices to line managers. Out of the thirteen line managers interviewed, nine of the participants assumed that the key reasoning behind devolvement of certain HRM practices to line managers was based on cost and creating efficiencies. They believed that efficiencies would be created by placing more control with the line manager in terms of the decision making process regarding employees behaviour and performance. Issues would be dealt with in a real-time scenario by a group of managers who are at the cold face of company and employee performance. This view was reinforced by Anna a customer service manager *“I think we have more control over our team and we are best placed to know them all and so the decision making process has been strengthened and this is good for overall agent and business performance”*. Throughout the interview process the introduction of the companies new HR shared service model was discussed by all of the thirteen line managers interviewed as a deciding factor in the devolvement process. Shared services had become centralised to one location which reduced HR headcount whilst also ensuring that all HR policies and procedures were uniform across all company

sites. Anna, a customer service manager felt that the shared services model “*created efficiencies, it’s all centralised now and all processes we use are the same, before each site had their own way of doing things, especially from a transactional perspective, now everything is uniform*”.

However, out of the nine participants that assumed that cost reduction was a basis for devolving HRM practices to line managers, six of these line managers voiced their preference in having HR on site as a support function that was easily accessible relating to HR advice and guidance, especially in the event of a line manager making a ‘*costly mistake that could bring about a tribunal*’ (Sophie, home movers).

#### **4.3.3 Relationship between HR Consultants and Line Managers**

The relationship between HR consultants and line managers in TalkTalk plc. has always been a positive one. Corina, a technical support manager has always had a good working relationship with her on-site consultant; “*we have always relied on the support from our on-site HR consultant and because they have originally been on site, we have got to know them and they us, as well as knowing the employees, it’s always worked well*’. This view is reinforced by Peter a technical support manager who views his on-site HR consultant as a friend and colleague; “*I have always felt very comfortable chatting to Mary, our on-site HR person about different cases, she has always been so supportive*’. What is also evident is that the HR team have always been willing to impart their knowledge and expertise to the line managers and go the extra mile to seek out complex information when they don’t have immediate answers; Elizabeth who is a customer loyalty manager said that “*It’s really great talking to HR about employee cases, they don’t hold back, they are so helpful in the information they give us and if they don’t have certain information to hand, they will look into it and come straight back to us*”.

#### **4.4 The Implementation Process and Successful Devolution to Line Managers**

The following section identifies in what way, if any the implementation process contributes to successful HRM devolution to line managers. What has become evident is that based on the implementation process, line managers have been given a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities including both operational and HRM practices. Anne, a technical support manager feels that “*the actual execution process*

*has gotten me to stand back and to re-evaluate my own role and what my core responsibilities are, it's given me clarity and additional confidence in myself".*

#### **4.4.1 Role Clarity**

What has emerged throughout the interview process is that there seems to be a greater transparency regarding role clarity of line managers pertaining to all their responsibilities including traditional and newly acquired HRM responsibilities post the introduction of the implementation process. Matt, a customer loyalty line manager from Preston concludes that *"I've always know what my responsibilities are but with the introduction of the new shared services system and the communication that we are now taking on more HR responsibility like extra HR paperwork and running our own HR meetings, I have more clarity around my own responsibilities, I tended to lean a little too much on our on-site HR consultant"*.

#### **4.4.2 Empowerment of Line Managers**

The implementation process also seems to contribute successfully to empowering line managers in dealing with agents. John, a home mover's manager said that *"our teams see that we have more responsibility and control when it comes to HRM decision making which in turn seems to bring additional respect from the employees"*. This view was supported by Sarah, a technical support manager who firmly believes that *"additional HR duties empower team managers when dealing with agents, they trust us more and it also empowers the agents"*.

### **4.5 Factors that Impact upon the Implementation and Devolvment Process of HRM to Line Managers**

Over the course of the interview process a number of themes emerged pertaining to factors that impact upon the implementation and devolvment process of HRM to line managers. These included transactional responsibilities, training and development and HR support.

#### **4.5.1 Transactional Responsibilities**

Out of the thirteen interviews conducted, ten participants cited additional paperwork as a negative factor in the implementation process. Many of the line managers also felt that the process involved in scanning the newly acquired paperwork was very time consuming. Elizabeth, a customer loyalty manager echoed this viewpoint; *"I understand that we have additional paperwork that was traditionally done by the on-*

*site HR consultant but because we now have to scan in all our paperwork and send them to shared services, it is so time consuming”.*

What was also evident was the fact that many of the line managers missed the filing system that was in place when HR was on site. John a home mover’s manager said that *“traditionally you could swing into the HR office and access an employee’s HR file, now everything is centralised on ‘People Services’ paperless system, it’s hard to access this system, so I save a hard copy of all my teams files”*. Many of the managers also voiced their concerns over not having immediate access to employee’s files. They felt that the paperless system was not working due to the lack of accessibility to employee data which on many occasions was required to complete investigations or run disciplinary meetings; *“If you are doing an investigation for a colleague and they are not on site to discuss you have to ring shared services for a copy of the case as you don’t have automatic access. This could take hours, sometimes days, because of this I tend to keep my own hard copy”* (Mary, technical support).

#### **4.5.1.1 HRIS System**

It is evident that the newly introduced ‘People Services’ system has caused some frustration within the line manager group, primarily based around ease of use, transparency, visibility and access of employee files and cases. Clare, a technical support manager was adamant that her life was made easier by *“keeping a hard copy file or spread sheet regarding my own team, it’s at my fingertips, the new system is complex, you have to tie in with HR first to get access to a case and nine times out of ten the information is not up to date on the employees”*.

A positive feature of the new HRIS system did include the storage of all uniform HR policies and procedures which meant easier access and consistency across all sites. Jill, a home movers line manager felt that the positive aspects of the new system was that *“all policies were stored in one place”* but you also had to go through HR for access which took time. Jill also argued that the information they receive through HR is not always accurate and up-to-date whilst many of the line managers felt that saving a hard copy of each employee file was the best possible route to take as they had immediate access to this data.

#### **4.5.2 Training and Development for Line Managers**

As represented in the conceptual framework for this study, training and development maybe a factor that impacts upon the implementation and devolvment of HRM practices to line managers. As the primary research has explored several features of this, the key findings are presented under a number of sub-themes in the following sections.

##### **4.5.2.1 Formal Training and Development**

The findings indicate that many of the interviewees have said that there was a lack of formal training given in the key areas of understanding how to implement HR policies and procedures. Tom a customer service manager said that *“there wasn’t any specific classroom training; it was learn as you go”*. This view was supported by the majority of line managers who said that the only training they received was on how to navigate the new HRIS system. They were also shown where all the companies’ policies and procedures were kept on this system but were given no formal training on how to implement new and existing policies. Jill, a home mover’s manager felt very strongly about the lack of training in HR policies and procedures; *“we need some sort of formalised training especially regarding HR procedures, what happens if we put a foot wrong, it could ultimately cost the business a fortune”*.

What was evident over the course of the interviews was that out of thirteen interviews twelve participants indicated they received no training whatsoever in HR competencies such as leadership, conflict resolution and decision making. This view was reinforced by Peter, a technical support line manager who highlighted the fact that they never received training in leadership skills and he believes that *“this is extremely important to ensure we are doing things right”*.

Furthermore, many of the line managers interviewed believed that the introduction of a formalised ‘policy handbook’ aimed at assisting line managers in the steps to policy implementation would be very beneficial. Many of them felt that this would assist in their understanding of how to implement HR practices successfully.



### 4.5.3 HR Support

Since the introduction of the devolvement of transactional duties to line managers combined with the restructuring of the HR function, line managers have intimated that there has been a significant change in HR support relating to the advice and guidance they receive from shared services and the turnaround time for receiving this advice. What is also evident is the lack of case awareness the HR community seem to have regarding employees. Matt, a customer loyalty manager was very frustrated at the lack of understanding the HR team had regarding individual employee cases. He was annoyed that HR *“doesn’t know the employees involved and seem to give out generic advice”* whilst pointing out each case is different.

#### 4.5.3.1 HR Shared Services

Line managers have concluded that the advice given by HR consultants whilst on-site was more effective and consistent than the support given through the shared services model. Clare a technical support manager said that *“when HR was on site, they were here for me, personally, to approach and talk to, to get guidance regarding disciplinaries, absences etc.”*. Clare went on to say that the on-site HR team were very helpful in dealing with issues such as absenteeism whilst the shared services group are extremely slow in coming back to her with HR advice.

What is also evident is that the shared services model eliminated any type of relationship building between the HR consultants and the line managers which has seemed to affect the line manager’s confidence in implementing HR practices successfully. Sarah, a technical support manager seemed somewhat disheartened about this; *“you don’t have that personal touch, no body language to gauge something on, particularly when you are talking about someone on your team, and HR on site knew everyone on your team. It’s simpler to have a HR consultant on site”*.

What is also apparent is the lack of quality and consistency regarding the information given to the line managers through the shared services model. Elizabeth, a customer loyalty manager came across as being very irritated and somewhat disheartened because of this *“I might ring up to speak to a HR consultant about a case and the next day call again about the same case and be given completely different advice by*

*another consultant, where's the consistency? ". Because of these inconsistencies many of the line managers interviewed have decided to seek advice from a colleague. Anne, a technical support manager found that "the advice can be slow in coming which is frustrating and it may be inconsistent with what I have been told previously, I tend to discuss issues with another line manager on site, they also know the employees".*

Many of the line managers interviewed also felt that there was an urgent requirement for a quarterly meeting between the HR consultants and the line manager group. Due to the introduction of the new shared services model many of the on-site consultants left the organisation and new HR practitioners were recruited. The line managers felt that these meetings would enable issues to be raised by both parties as well as knowledge sharing by tenured employees relating to HR issues. Anne a technical support manager said that *"the only way I see this shared services model working is to meet with the HR team every couple of months and for both parties to get to know each other and to raise issues and concerns"*. Several of the line managers also felt that these meetings would boost their confidence in implementing HR practices correctly.

#### **4.6 Process Synchronisation**

The importance of correctly synchronising the new HR shared services model, HRIS system and devolvment process has been voiced by many of the line managers as key to their overall success. Ten out of twelve of the line managers have said that the timing of introducing these new systems and procedures have greatly impacted the implementation process. Clare, a technical support manager said that *"everything was rolled out all at once, there were no pilot runs, it was chaotic and we found it hard to understand"*. Furthermore, many of the line managers were frustrated by the lack of communication by their own managers and the support teams involved as to when and why these new processes were being introduced.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

The results from the primary research have been identified and clarified in this chapter. This chapter has presented the findings arising from the research method deployed during this study on HRM devolvment to line managers. In doing so, it has focused on the key themes integral to the implementation process whilst reviewing the factors that impact devolvment from an individual basis and team type as reflected in

the conceptual framework. Chapter six now moves to address the interpretation of these findings and their meanings in the context of the literature review.

## *Chapter Five*

### *DISCUSSION*

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The objective of this chapter is to thoroughly examine the findings from chapter four and to interpret these, with reference to both the literature review, as presented in chapter two and the research design and methodology in chapter three. This ensures that both the reader and researcher are able to understand and identify on what basis, if any, the key findings pertaining to this investigation relate to the current academic work within this area of study.

Furthermore, the implications of these findings will be discussed.

#### **5.2 Summary of Main Findings**

The significant findings from chapter four are highlighted whilst the discussion is organised as follows:

- Rationale for Devolving HRM practices to line managers
- The Implementation Process and Successful Devolution to Line Managers
- Factors that Impact upon the Implementation and Devolvment of HRM Processes by Line Managers

Furthermore, the treatment of the discussion extends beyond the conceptual framework based on the results and evidence found elsewhere in the body of findings to include the effect the introduction of a HR shared services model and HRIS system has had on the implementation of HRM practices by line managers. What has also emerged is the importance of synchronising the roll out of these new processes and systems and the impact this may have on the implementation process by line managers.

The question of this research study is:

**Devolving HR to the line: An examination of the implementation process and its impact on line managers?**

### **5.3 Rationale for Devolving HRM practices to Line Managers**

#### **5.3.1 Traditional Role of Line Managers in HRM**

The majority of line managers interviewed believed that the reasoning for devolving HRM practices to their employee group was based on the fact that they have traditionally carried out HR activities. This is the position of CIPD (2011) and Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) who note that line managers have traditionally carried out HRM activities including performance management, grievance and disciplinary issues.

It emerged that the line managers in TalkTalk have always embraced certain HRM practices as part of their core role with a caveat relating to on-going HR support, guidance, mentoring and direction given to them by the HR consultants. This is the view of Sophie, a home mover's line manager who commented that "*HR practices have always been part of our role*" Sophie went on to emphasise the fact that HR have always be there to provide on-going support and advice. Tom a customer service manager supported this viewpoint saying "*It's a kind of partnership we have with HR*" he added that the input and advice from HR was essential and without it "*we may find it difficult*". These practical experiences of line managers with devolved HRM responsibility echo Ulrich's (1997) philosophy on a partnership approach between line managers and HR.

#### **5.3.2 Cost, Control and Efficiency**

The literature reviewed proposes that process efficiency and cost reduction are key justification for devolving HRM practices to line managers. According to Ulrich (1997) this process is directly linked to building a competitive organisation. The devolvment process will offer line managers more control over employee performance which will in turn contribute to effective employee engagement as line managers are at the forefront of all operational activities (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). Furthermore, the devolvment process will increase the line manager's involvement in HR processes reducing the requirement for HR practitioners, decreasing HR headcount and cost (McGuire et al., 2008).

It is apparent from the research that the majority of line managers believe that the additional responsibilities they have been given in the decision making process offers them more control over their teams and expedites resolutions. This is the view of

Elizabeth a customer loyalty line manager who said that “*We now have more control over the decision making process regarding HR activities*”, she viewed this as being very positive as issues could be dealt with in a more timely manner while line managers also know their teams better than anyone else in the organisation.

Many of the line managers suggested that the introduction of the HR shared service model was one of the main ways the company hoped to create efficiencies and reduce costs in conjunction with devolving additional HRM practices to the line. Bondarouk et al., (2009) described HR shared services as a centralised team designed to promote efficiencies while creating value through a uniform and consistent message for internal customers. The majority of line managers believed this could increase cost in other areas if not addressed correctly. Mary a technical support line manager supported this view; she concluded that “*having an on-site consultant who was competent in all aspects of employment legislation was instrumental in not making costly mistakes that could lead to a tribunal*”. According to Corina a technical support line manager, shared services “*centralised everything from policies, processes and advice*” but also raised concerns about inconsistency in the advice she was given per case by a variety of different HR consultants.

This suggests that there may be an issue with the HR consultants understanding of the line manager’s cases or it could also suggest that the line managers are not giving the HR consultants the correct and relevant information required to evaluate each case correctly. What is evident is that the communication between both parties is lacking and must be addressed. This may also unearth other issues on both sides relating to additional training in specific HR practices, competencies, relationship building and company strategy which will in turn aid in creating efficiencies whilst reducing costs.

### **5.3.3 Relationship between HR Consultants and Line Managers**

A key finding from this study was the overall positive and effective working relationship between the line managers and HR prior to devolution. The majority of line managers felt that this was based on having a HR consultant on-site who was known by both the line manager and employees alike. Clare a technical support line manager supported this view and reiterated the opinions of the majority of line managers; “*It was a pleasure dealing with Lisa, our on-site consultant, I got to know*

*her as a person and really respected and valued her HR knowledge, we worked well together*". This is in agreement with Conway and Monks (2010) who emphasise the effectiveness of the 'partnership approach' between HR and the line in achieving company strategy. This suggests that the company was confident in the devolvement of HRM practices to line managers based on the existing positive relationship between HR consultants on-site and line managers. It is evident that little consideration was given to how the restructuring of the HR function would impact the relationship between the line and HR and thus affect the effectiveness of the devolvement process.

## **5.4 The Implementation Process and Successful Devolution to Line Managers**

### **5.4.1 Role Clarity**

A key finding from this study is the understanding and awareness the majority of line managers have regarding their roles and responsibilities. Peter, a technical support line manager feels confident in what his core duties consist of "*My role has become much clearer since I have been implementing my additional HR responsibilities*", he goes on to say how he is now more aware of what is expected of him which has reinforced his self-confidence. This view is supported in the available literature as Maxwell and Watson (2006) note that role clarity, a key feature of the implementation process contributes to successful devolution to line managers.

### **5.4.2 Empowerment of Line Managers**

Guest (2011) asserts that line managers become empowered through their newly found HR responsibilities based on the additional control and decision making capabilities they are awarded through the implementation process. The research findings suggest that this empowerment has contributed to successful devolution by giving line managers in TalkTalk enhanced status which has assisted the process of devolution. Tom a customer service line manager put it aptly when he spoke about the way their teams are so aware of the line manager's additional responsibilities and that this has "*given us more kudos and respect, it's refreshing*". This also suggests that TalkTalk as a company have communicated the changes in the line manager role and their place in the implementation process. However, although the line managers understand what is expected of them, if the implementation process is to be successful it is essential that they are equipped with the required tools to perform these tasks effectively.

## **5.5. Factors that Impact upon the Implementation and Devolvment of HRM Processes by Line Managers**

Within the available literature key factors that impact upon the implementation process are primarily based on how additional responsibilities such as further transactional duties are accepted and viewed by the line managers whilst training and development in these and other areas including new HRIS systems and the on-going support of HR is essential to its success (Nehles et al., 2006 and Perry and Kulik, 2008). What has emerged as a key finding in this research is that the synchronisation of new business processes including shared services, the new HRIS system and the devolvment process impacts upon the implementation process. This view is shared by Shrivastava and Shaw (2003) who note that an incremental delivery phase combined with clear and candid communications with key stakeholders is essential to a projects success.

### **5.5.1 Transactional Responsibilities**

The study has indicated that the majority of line managers accept the additional paperwork that has been devolved to them as they believe that this should have always been part of their core role. Corina, a technical support line manager says that *“we now have to type up our own HR letters, which is something we should have always been doing”*. However, many of the line managers have voiced criticism regarding a lack of resources. Some sites do not facilitate electronic transfer requiring paperwork to be sent by an inefficient postal route. Others have taken it upon themselves to duplicate all of their paperwork so that if it does not arrive to shared services they will have immediate access to employee files themselves. John a home mover’s line manager spoke about his need to duplicate team’ files so that he can ensure immediate access to all information. He noted that *“sometimes shared services don’t have the data I’m looking for”*, he also voiced his concern and frustration saying that if adequate resources were in place and processes were clearly defined he would not have to do this.

#### **5.5.1.1 HRIS System**

Waddill and Marquardt (2011) define a HRIS system as “A powerful accessible tool that is used to handle labour intensive paperwork associated with people care” (p.45).

The HRIS model called “people services” employed at TalkTalk has not been successful; it is not user friendly and suffers from accuracy and reliability issues.



These shortcomings have forced line managers to duplicate files and create their own bespoke databases. The findings concur with literature that addresses the disadvantages of HRIS systems. Reilly and Williams (2003) note that for a HRIS system to be successful, the system must be tailored to its users requirements in terms of speed and stability whilst being user friendly. The new process dictates that line managers must contact HR to access any employee file and the turnaround time is taking up to three to four days. The literature suggests that effective implementation by line managers can only be successful where there are clearly defined processes which are transparent and accessible to this employee group (Nehles and Boon, 2006). The lack of well-defined processes, accessibility and inaccuracy of employee files on the companies HRIS system may cause inconsistencies in aspects of HRM including poor decision making by HR and the line regarding employee issues.

### **5.5.2 Training and Development**

Perry and Kulik (2008) maintain that devolvment can be achieved in phased stages through training line managers in how to implement HR policies and procedures whilst arming them with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform these new responsibilities successfully. What is evident is that although the line managers in TalkTalk have an understanding of what is expected of them they have not received training in leadership skills and conflict resolution which are essential in successfully implementing HR practices.

Training was superficial, consisting of a *“quick run through”* of HR policies and procedures that they would be implementing such as absenteeism, performance management and the issuing of sanctions. Line managers were also shown where to find new and updated HR policies and procedures on the new HRIS system. There is dissatisfaction amongst line managers because of inadequate training. This has manifested itself through a lack of confidence in implementing complex HRM processes and decision making. This is highlighted by John, a home mover’s line manager who said *“I could cost the business money if I don’t make the correct decision, I need training around this”*.

The lack of training has led to line managers feeling conflicted, on the one hand they feel empowered by the potential benefits of their HRM responsibilities, however, the lack of training has led many to fear the practical application of these new powers. It

is evident that the organisation does not appreciate the importance of training in HRM for effective policy implementation. Although the emphasis on HRIS understanding is somewhat commendable it suffers from adequate formalised training which could increase line manager's understanding and confidence in the system and eliminate the duplication of work.

### **5.5.3 HR Support**

The literature suggests that the devolvment of HRM practices to line managers cannot be achieved without the support and assistance of the HR function (Becker and Huselid, 2006). However, the research suggests that since the introduction of the shared services model the confidence of line managers in the quality and efficacy of HRM advice has suffered a marked decline. The line managers felt confident in the advice they were given by the on-site HR consultants who according to Elizabeth, a customer loyalty line manager "*knew each employee case thoroughly*" and so gave "*sound advice*" in a fair and consistent manner.

The consensus amongst the line managers is that the HR shared services practitioners are ill equipped to offer consistent and relevant HR advice due to their lack of rapport with both the line managers and their employees. What is also evident are the strong views the line managers have regarding the absence of case awareness the HR team have and its negative impact on the implementation process.

A large number of the line managers believe that lack of case awareness by HR is based on this group not meeting or getting to know the employees and thus awarding them relevant advice. There is also concern amongst the line managers about lengthy delays before HR respond with advice and guidance. It is apparent that these findings do not relate to the academic literature regarding the key features of a HR shared services model. Bondarouk et al., (2009) asserts that the core function of a HR shared services model is to ensure "Clarification of communication lines while minimising response times" (p. 166).

### **5.5.4 Process Synchronisation**

According to Martin et al., (2008) to ensure a successful roll out of new systems and processes a phased delivery approach is preferred. They assert that clear and candid communications around the impacts and benefits of the new systems and models with

key stakeholders are vital to ensure overall success. This view does not relate to the key findings of this research regarding process synchronisation. The majority of line managers noted that the HRIS system, shared services model and the devolvement of HRM practices all came about simultaneously. Matt a customer loyalty manager noted that *“everything came at once, it was a little confusing”*. The same manager also said that familiarisation of the systems prior to roll out would have given the line managers a greater understanding of the new processes which would have helped integrate these new systems into the organisations culture more effectively.

This suggests that there was a lack of communication relating to the impact and benefits these new systems would have on line managers. It also suggests that the “Big Bang” approach which was taken, which includes all systems going live with all key functionalities across all sites was not successful.

A common theme that has emerged throughout the research is the lack of training for line managers in key areas pertaining to the introduction of new systems and business models. What is also evident is that if the company adopted a phased approach in implementing new systems and processes this would minimise confusion between key stakeholders who would embrace the new practices more readily.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The key findings pertaining to the primary research of this study have been examined. This section of the study has also demonstrated how the academic literature within this specialist field relates to these findings. It has also discussed findings that have emerged beyond the conceptual framework that are pertinent to this study which included the introduction of a HR shared services model and HRIS system. The chapter also explained how the synchronisation of processes impacted upon the implementation process whilst outlining the implications of these findings. The next chapter will provide deductions from the investigation. It will also offer the limitations and recommendations of the study for future research.

## *Chapter Six*

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

The basis of this chapter is to draw the dissertation to a close whilst summarising key conclusions in the investigation. The objectives of the study were reviewed which were central to the research question on devolving HR practices to the line and the examination of the implementation process involved. Based on the completion of thirteen semi structured interviews, a summary of these findings were highlighted. Following on from this, recommendations were offered to practitioners in the field of HRM. Finally a reference to future research was presented in this chapter.

#### **6.2 Objectives of the Study**

This chapter reviews the objectives of this research investigation which include the following:

*Objective One: To identify what is the rationale for devolving HR practices to line managers.*

*Objective Two: To identify in what way, if any, does the implementation process contribute to successful devolution to line managers.*

*Objective Three: To identify the factors that impact upon the implementation and devolvment of HRM to line managers.*

#### **6.3 Summary of Key Findings**

A summary of the key findings are highlighted which also include discoveries that extend beyond the theoretical framework based on substantiation and results found elsewhere in the body of the findings. Information on the companies HR shared services model, HRIS system and the effect the synchronisation of these systems has on the devolution and implementation process may be very significant to the successful outcome of decentralisation.

The interviews revealed that the rationale for devolving HRM practices to line managers was based around the fact that HRM has traditionally been part of the line manager's role in conjunction with on-site HR support. Creating efficiencies and reducing cost was also a key factor in the devolvement process. A direct effect of this was that line managers were allocated additional control in the decision making process of their teams which they reacted positively to and felt that they were placed in the right position to manage HRM activities as they "*knew their people better than anyone*". Also, the introduction of the HR shared services model reduced HR headcount thus achieving cost reduction. However, the HR shared services model seems to have created inconsistencies in HR advice to line managers while also negatively affecting the relationship with HR and the line. This is due to HR being centralised which has eliminated any rapport or relationship building that was present and effective when HR were on-site. The majority of line managers believe that this HR model could possibly increase costs and reduce efficiencies through a lack of guidance and advice to the line manager regarding employee matters which may lead to an increase in grievances and tribunals.

Additional key findings that emerged from the primary research was that line managers had more clarity around their roles. The devolution and implementation process helped to reinforce what their core responsibilities were which in turn gave them newly found confidence to implement these duties. Nevertheless, the company may not have adequately armed their line managers with the necessary training, competencies and HR support to successfully implement their newly acquired HRM activities. These key findings are present in the available academic literature.

What is also evident is the important role the company's new HRIS system played in the implementation process. Due to the lack of formalised training in this application, the line managers did not understand how to access data on this system successfully and duplicated files to ensure they could perform their duties in a successful and efficient manner which defeated the purpose of introducing a companywide HRIS system. Furthermore, the decision to introduce new systems and models concurrently does not seem to have been effective as the majority of line managers found this "Big Bang" approach confusing and "*hard to come to terms with*" in the time frame it was rolled out.

## **6.4 Recommendations for Practitioners**

Based on the findings of this research the author has outlined four recommendations for practitioners within the field of HRM which include the following:

### **6.4.1 Relationship Building**

It is essential that there is a strong working relationship between HR and the line managers. To ensure that this relationship is maintained throughout any transformation process, monthly or quarterly meetings are essential between HR and the line to air any issues or concerns between both parties. These meetings should take place offsite and there should be an open forum where both parties can contribute to the formation of HR policies and procedures within the organisation. HR practitioners who work in a shared services centre should also visit company sites regularly to build up rapport not only with their line managers but also with the company's employees. This will also offer the HR community a better insight into how to manage and deal with employee cases.

### **6.4.2 Recruitment and Selection**

Line managers who have core HRM responsibilities should be involved in the recruitment and selection process of HR personnel. Tenured line managers within an organisation should be involved in recruiting and selecting HR staff based on their in-depth understanding of employee engagement and performance. This will help ensure that the HR staff recruited not only have the relevant experience for the role but are the right 'fit' for the company. This may also eliminate any hierarchical perceptions HR has regarding their role and that of the line. Furthermore, this will create a 'Partnership' approach between HR and the line.

### **6.4.3 Bespoke Courses On-Site**

The creation of tailored courses for line managers in relation to specific HRM activities and competencies would be very beneficial to the devolvement and implementation process. It would be in the interest of the company to discuss this with a third level institution who can offer on-site tailored classes and accreditation to line managers pertaining to complex HR issues that they may have to deal with such as employment legislation and conflict management.

#### **6.4.4 Steering Committee**

In the event an organisation is reviewing its HRM processes and procedures a steering committee should be created to include both line managers, HR practitioners and employee representatives.

Notwithstanding company strategy will be the deciding factor regarding the decision making process this committee can contribute extensively to a) what should be devolved to line managers and why, b) how and when to implement these new processes and c) what support mechanisms need to be put in place for all key stakeholders including line managers.

#### **6.5 Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the information gathered and analysed, the researcher has identified a number of areas for future research. The researcher conducted a single case study where thirteen semi structured interviews were conducted. To gain more of an extensive insight into this area and develop the existing data the researcher recommends that a doctoral study is completed within this specialist area. This would ensure that a greater volume of interviews are completed, across all sites and locations within an organisation and allow for more detailed data analysis due to the increased timelines offered through a doctoral study. The researcher also proposes that a longitudinal case study approach is taken which can establish change over time within an organisation. This type of case study would be very pertinent to TalkTalk plc. as the company has gone through a number of changes in the past two years including the restructuring of the HR function and the decentralisation of HRM activities to its line managers.

What is evident from this research was the lack of existing literature on the experiences of line managers within the devolvement process and understanding how and why they engage with this process. A core theme that has emerged from these findings is that the relationship between HR and line is essential to the success or lack of line manager engagement in HRM practices. Furthermore, to gain more of an insight into this complex relationship, the researcher recommends that interviews are conducted with not only the line managers but also with the companies HR practitioners.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This, the concluding chapter of the dissertation has examined the objectives of the study. The key findings of this investigation have also been highlighted. Finally, recommendation for practitioners and future research has been discussed by the researcher.



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## **APPENDIX A**

### **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE DISSERTATION PROCESS**

The research process commenced for me when I decided upon my research topic. I completed the Masters programme over a two year period and so, I had time to think about the topic I wanted to investigate. My own professional background lies in Human Resources so it was a natural progression for me to complete an MBS in HR. What was also significant for me was the fact that part of my core responsibilities as a HR consultant in TalkTalk, Waterford, was the training up of the company's line managers in certain HR policies and procedures. I became very involved in this training and devolvement process at work and felt that it would be a very interesting topic to investigate further. Subsequently, I began to delve further into the area of devolving HRM activities to line managers through studying the available literature in this field. This information helped me gain a better understanding of the concept of devolvement whilst enabling me to identify a research gap and develop a research question. I felt that the working knowledge I had within a HR function and my day to day activities of devolving HR activities to line managers who give me a greater insight into the devolvement of certain HR activities to this employee group whilst gaining an understating of the impact this process would have on line managers.

The secondary research I completed for the literature review chapter helped me greatly in identifying a research gap within the available literature. This was essential in structuring my research question and objectives in a clear and transparent way. However, what was very interesting to me was the fact that as my dissertation progressed my research title, question and objectives could and did change somewhat based on the information I gained throughout the process.

What I also learned was the importance of choosing the correct and relevant research design. This was primarily based on my research question and what I wanted to gain from the overall investigation. What was also interesting was that the research design would impact greatly on the methods I would use for data collection and analysis.

The findings chapter thought me to only present the relevant findings to the overall investigation. I initially found this difficult, as I wanted to present all my findings, but

as I worked through the process I began to understand the relevance of the key findings to answering my research question. It is all about quality and relevance, not necessarily about quantity.

The discussion chapter was the key learning stage of the entire process for me. I was very conscious that this chapter was about how I interpreted and discussed the findings whilst referring back to the academic theory in the literature review. What I also learned was how the key findings, in some instances, challenged the secondary research. I felt at this stage that my own research could contribute in some small way to future research in this area.

The conclusion chapter taught me how to review and examine the key findings whilst referring to the interpretations from the academic literature. This process enabled me to offer practical and pertinent assumptions for experts and future research in this field.

Upon reflection of this experience, I would do a number of things differently. The main feature of the study I would change is the single case study approach I had taken. My preference is to have conducted my primary research on a number of organisations thus using a multiple case study style. In doing so, I would be able to compare and contrast two organisations that have devolved certain HRM activities to line managers. This would have enabled me to access additional viewpoints and information on HRM devolvment by increasing my research sample and thus contributing more effectively to the investigation. I would also look at interviewing HR practitioners within both organisations as well as line managers which would give me a broader view and perception on a) why to devolve and b) what to change in the process.

For the past ten years I have worked as a senior recruiter and HR consultant within a number of different organisations. My responsibilities have included training line managers in certain HRM practices so as to devolve these responsibilities to this employee group. I have learnt that it is essential that HR listen to the issues and concerns of each employee group i.e. line managers who are taking on additional HRM responsibilities. I believe that prior to devolvment HR should include line

managers in the design process regarding a) what is being devolved and b) how these activities are being implemented. The line manager's insights will be invaluable to the whole process. What may be uncovered is certain specialist training that the line managers require whilst relationships between both parties may improve throughout this process. Traditionally the HR functions have perceived themselves to be more prominent on the hierarchical structure than the line manager group. This has caused a breakdown in the relationship between both parties. I believe that involving line managers not only in the implementation process but the design process of HRM activities will put them on an equal footing with HR and improve relationships. I have also learned that key stakeholders within the business must take time to investigate the justifications in introducing a shared services model within the organisation. The return on investment in such a model may not always be cost reduction but may cost the business dearly if not rolled out correctly and for the right reasons.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

#### **Line Manager Interview framework**

**Name:**

**Organisation:**

**Department:**

**Location:**

#### **Introduction of Interviewee**

1. Name:
2. What is your role within the company?
3. What department are you working in?
4. How long have you been working in TalkTalk within this role?
5. What was your previous role in TalkTalk?
6. Prior to working for TalkTalk, where did you work and what was your job title?.
7. How many direct reports are you currently responsible for?

#### **Line Managers Role and HRM Devolvment**

##### ***Understanding of Devolvment***

1. Can you describe in your own words what your understanding of HRM devolvment is?
2. When did the HRM devolvment process start in TalkTalk?
3. How have your priorities changed on a daily people management perspective?
4. Prior to the devolvment of HRM practices to line managers, who role did line managers play in implementing HRM practices?
5. In your opinion, what is the rationale for devolving HRM practices to line managers? Do you support this strategy?
6. How is TalkTalk's company strategy and HRM strategy affected by the devolution process of HRM to line managers?
7. Have line managers traditionally played a part in the implementation of HRM practices? If Yes – what practices have they had responsibility for?
8. From a business perspective, why do you think HRM has been devolved to the line managers? Do you think this will/has created efficiencies? How and what are they
9. What are the implications for the business, overall, in devolving HRM to line managers?

10. TalkTalk plc. has moved to a shared services model of HRM recently. Can you outline for me how your role as a line manager has changed, if any, and what, if any, HRM responsibilities have been devolved to you as a result of this?
11. What are your core duties as a line manager?
12. Are there incentives (financial/non-financial) based on your execution of HRM practices?
13. What is your performance appraisals based on? (does this include HRM practices)
14. Do you find this fair? Or not? Why? What could/should be done differently
15. Is there anything that is hindering you in executing HRM practices successfully? If yes – please explain?
16. Do these HRM practices you are implementing help you to reach your business goals? (short-term/long-term)? How?
17. What in your opinion are the positive outcomes (if any) of HRM devolvement for your role as a line manager?
18. What are the negative outcomes (if any) of HRM devolvement for your role as a line manager?

#### ***Rationale for Devolving HRM practices to Line Managers***

1. In your opinion has employee perception of line managers competencies changed since HRM has been devolved to them? If yes – in what way
2. In your opinion, have external factors (if any) played a role in the decision to devolve HRM practices to line managers in TalkTalk?

#### ***What the HRM devolvement process means to each individual Line Manager***

1. Approximately how much time per week do you spend on HR issues? (can you give me examples of the HR issues you deal with?)
2. Has the inclusion of HRM duties to your role effected the time you spend on other core duties? (If yes – can you give me examples?)
3. How would you describe your relationship with the HR function?
4. Has your relationship with the HR function changed since the devolvement process has taken place? If so in what way?

#### **Implementation Process**

1. Can you describe for me in your own words, what are the barriers (if any) to effective implementation by line managers of HRM practices?

#### ***Training and Development for Line Managers***

2. Can you give me an overview of the training you were given to help you implement HRM practices? (and support in the devolution of HR to you)

3. When did this training commence and how long did it go on for?
4. Who was involved in giving you this training?
5. How (if any) was your understanding of HRM practices and the implementation process assessed?
6. Will you be given on-going training regarding the implementation of HRM practices?
7. Can you give me an overview of the competencies you were trained in?
8. In your own opinion, how will these competencies help you in implementing HRM practices?
9. Have you been or are you involved in HR policy making? How? Do you think you should be? Why?
10. What type of guidance/mentoring and facilitation have you received from the companies HR practitioners in regards to the implementation process of HRM practices? Could this be improved? How?
11. In your opinion do you think the training and development you received in regards to the implementation of HRM practices is adequate? (if no) how can this be improved upon?

### ***Planning and Managing the Implementation Process***

1. What part did the line managers in TalkTalk play in regards to managing and planning the implementation process of devolving HRM practices to the line managers?
2. How confident do you feel in implementing your newly acquired HRM responsibilities?
3. Who is the main business owner when it comes to implementing HRM practices, HR or the Line Managers?
4. Who in your opinion is most suited to manage and own the implementation process and why?
5. As per your experience to date of devolving HRM to line managers, are there any things you would do differently to enhance the process? And if yes, can you give me examples?

### **Impact of HRM devolvment for line managers**

1. In your opinion what is the impact of HRM devolvment for you as a line manager? In your opinion has your role changed significantly and with positive/negative implications? What are they? Why?
2. Has the devolvment process impacted on your relationship with your team? If yes How?
3. What type of control measures are in place for you in regards to managing your team? Has this changed since HRM has been devolved to you?

4. In your opinion, will the devolvment of HRM practices to line managers have an impact on employee performance and engagement? (if Yes) How?
5. What, in your opinion has been the most significant impact on a) the business, b) your team and c) your role since HRM practices have been devolved to you?
6. In your opinion, who is best positioned strategically to deal with employee issues such as employee turnover, retention, work-life balance, and performance and employee engagement? Why?

Are there any other comments in relation to the devolvment process of HRM to line managers and the implementation process, which you would like to add? No

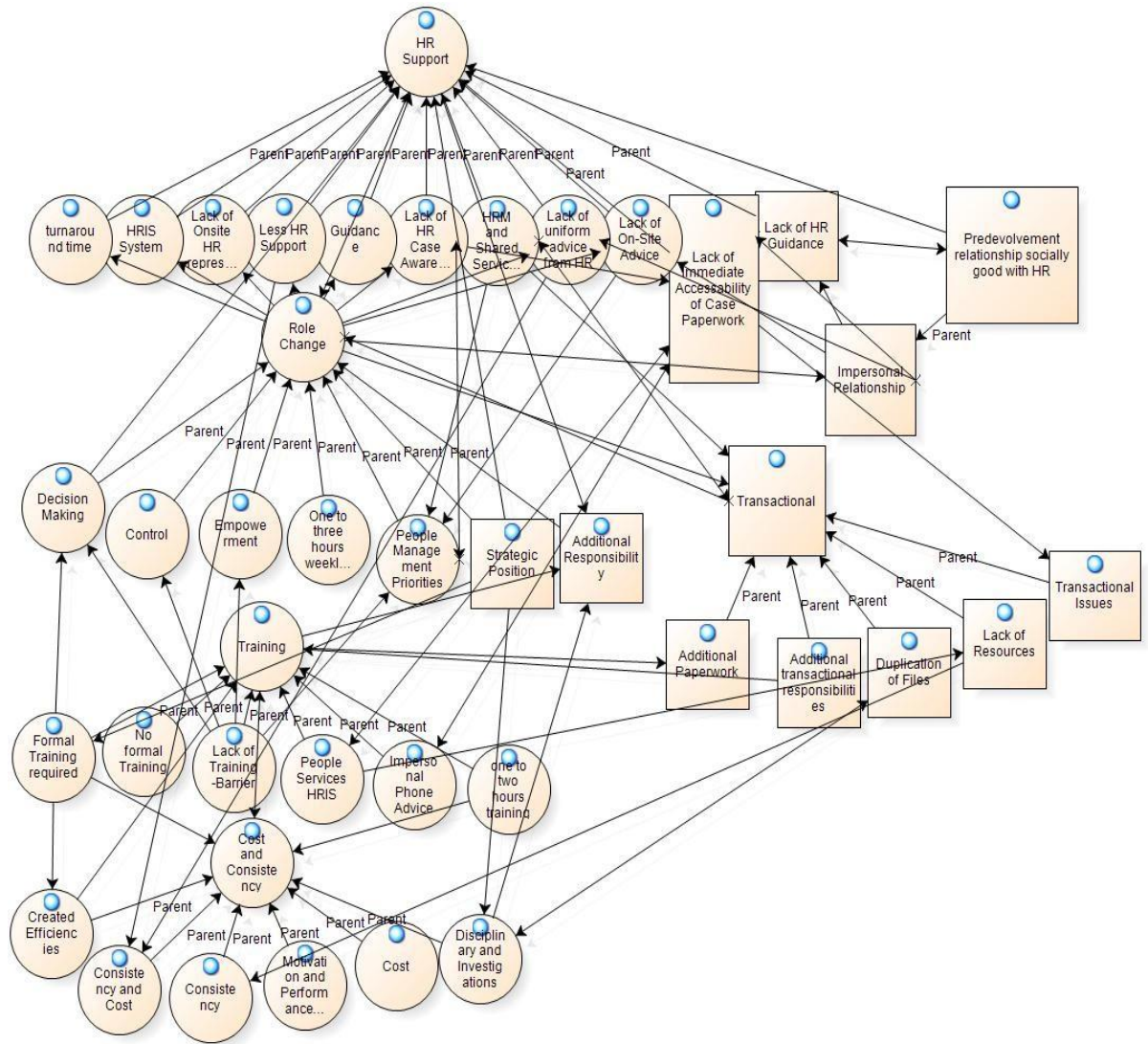
I would also like to reiterate that this interview is completely confidential.

Thank you for your time



## APPENDIX C

### DATA ANALYSIS MODEL



## **APPENDIX D**

### **LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY**



Waterford Institute of Technology

Dear Interviewee,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project investigating 'Devolving HR to the Line: An Examination of the Implementation Process and its Impact on Line Managers'.

Prior to commencing the interview, I would like to take this opportunity to assure you that as a participant in this project your involvement is entirely voluntary. You are also permitted to decline answering any questions throughout the process. At your discretion you are also permitted to extract yourself from the interview.

All information that is collected through any form of participation in this investigation will be treated in a private and confidential manner. This includes research records be it paper or electronic and will be confidentially retained until the study is complete. Thereafter, all research records will be deleted.

Based on your agreement, I would like to use a Dictaphone to record this discussion. The reason for this is to guarantee that I represent your opinions fairly and accurately. Any references pertaining to your name will be erased from all interview records. To ensure you are completely comfortable with this process, I can offer you a copy of the interview record.

**Signature of Research Participant:**

I have read the information provided for the study described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

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Name of Participant (please print)

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Signature of Participant

---

Date

Should you have any other questions or queries, please do not hesitate to contact me:

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