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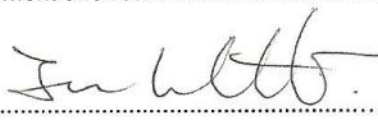
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HRM in Practice:

An Application of Actor-Network Theory to

Human Resource Management in Retail

by

Juan Pablo López-Cotarelo Pérez

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Management

University of Warwick – Warwick Business School

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF VIGNETTES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMO   Ability, motivation and opportunity

ANT   Actor-network theory

EOR   Employee-organisation relationship

HR   Human resources

HRM   Human resource management; human resource manager

KSAs   Knowledge, skills and abilities

MGR   Manager

PM   Performance management

POS   Perceived organisational support

PR   Progression

SHRM   Strategic human resource management

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father

José Benito López-Cotarelo Villaamil

Doctor Ingeniero de Minas

ABSTRACT

HRM practices have predominantly been seen as means put in place by top management to achieve certain ends. This thesis argues that approaching the HRM phenomenon in this way is limiting because it establishes a divide in HRM activities between those aspects that conform to top management intentions, contribute to consistency of HRM practices, and produce desired effects; and those that are not part of top management design, are a source of variability in HRM practices, and are at best irrelevant, at worst detrimental to the efficacy of HRM practices. Variability in HRM practices within organisations has become an important focus for debate in the strategic human resource management (SHRM) literature. This thesis argues that an alternative view of HRM is required for the field to move forward.

Practice perspectives in organisation and management studies provide the basis for an alternative approach to studying HRM. Actor-network theory is particularly well suited for examining patterns of repetitive activity across time and space, and thus constitutes a useful framework for understanding consistency and variability in HRM practices.

This thesis presents empirical research that applies actor-network theory to provide a 'flat' description of HRM activities in a large UK-based fashion retailer. Through an innovative research design that uses participant narratives of HRM episodes (n=112), HRM activity in the company is characterised as distributed, emergent and patterned. It is distributed in the sense that employment outcomes were produced through assemblies of heterogeneous –human and nonhuman– elements. It is emergent in the sense that the set of associations that were made in order to produce an employment outcome was not predictable, nor was the outcome itself. Both were the result of the associations that became stabilised during the flow of activity. Finally HRM activities were patterned through the standardising actions of central actors and their associated artefacts. In particular members of the HR department found ways to retrieve information from the field, transform it into standards, and deploy these standards back to the field in order to produce repetitive patterns.

This alternative view of HRM implies a novel understanding of the nature of HRM practices, the role of variability and consistency, and the ways in which the effects of HRM may be produced. Such understanding acknowledges that effects of HRM are produced as much through variability as through consistency, and that these must not be understood as opposite, mutually exclusive features of HRM systems.

The implications for research and practice are wide-ranging. This thesis strongly advocates a case study research programme that provides rich descriptions of HRM activities in diverse settings, as the best way to advance the field and produce practitioner relevant knowledge and advice. Practitioners are advised to pay attention to the processes through which HRM outcomes are produced in their organisation, and to the means by which they themselves deploy their agency to create patterns in those processes.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Locating the thesis

Variability in human resource management (HRM) practices within organisations has become an important focus for debate in the strategic human resource management (SHRM) literature. Nishii and Wright (2008) recently asserted that ignoring within-firm variability in HRM practices, as most SHRM research in effect has done, is likely to produce misleading empirical results and obfuscate the relationship between HRM and its possible effects. They therefore urged scholars to "give fuller consideration to the sources of variability" (2008: 227).

Within the SHRM field, HRM practices have predominantly been seen as means put in place by top management to achieve certain ends. In this view, only those elements of HRM activity that are part of top management design are deemed relevant to producing desired outcomes. This understanding therefore establishes a divide in HRM activities between those aspects that conform to top management intentions, contribute to consistency of HRM practices, and produce desired effects; and those that are not part of top management design, are a source of variability in HRM practices, and are at best irrelevant, at worst detrimental to the efficacy of HRM practices.

This thesis argues that approaching the HRM phenomenon in this way is limiting and that attempts to account for variability within this framework are hampered by overly complex theories and empirical research methods. It further proposes that practice perspectives of organisations can offer the basis for alternative approaches that enable exploration of the dynamics of consistency and variability in HRM practices in a more comprehensive way.

1.2   Towards a practice-based approach to human resource management

Recent decades have seen a surge in practice-based research in management and organisation studies. Organisation scholars have developed practice perspectives on knowledge, technology and routines; whilst management fields such as accounting, strategy and information systems have established extensive practice-based empirical literatures. Part of the broader 'practice turn' in social sciences, practice perspectives consider organisational outcomes as the product of people's day-to-day activities and their interactions with the material arrangements around them (Orlikowski, 2010). Rather than looking for the causes of phenomena in the properties of entities, practice perspectives investigate what organisational members actually do to bring about outcomes in the world (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). A practice perspective on HRM therefore implies a shift in focus away from examining the properties of HRM practices as discrete entities, to being concerned with the everyday activities that organisational actors call HRM. Consistent with this view, the research presented in this thesis took as its starting point participants' actions in specific episodes of HRM activity. This is a departure from the dominant perspective which typically identifies HRM practices first, and then explores the complications of their implementation.

One of the most interesting practice-based literatures for the purpose of studying HRM activities is the practice perspective on organisational routines (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011). Organisational routines are repetitive patterns of organisational actions, a definition which encompasses a wide range of activities in organisations, including HRM. The practice perspective has helped re-conceptualise routines as flexible and changing, rather than stable and static (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Still, it has clearly been more successful in elucidating stability and change along the time dimension, than in providing an understanding of consistency and variability along the spatial dimension. Since this is the central concern of this thesis, exploring ways of extending the practice perspective on routines has become part of the research programme.

The result of this exploration has been the adoption of actor-network theory (ANT), as systematised by Latour (2005). ANT overcomes the limitations of the previous approach which, like most practice perspectives in management and organisation studies, was based on two related theories of social action, Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) theory of practice and Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration. These two theories postulate a recursive relationship between agency and structure and highlight the importance of shared understandings that render action meaningful to practitioners. While this framework has been useful in explaining stability and change in routines over time based on practitioners' shared understandings of the routine, it has limited applicability to the analysis of consistency and variability across locations. This is because Feldman and Pentland's model, even as later partially amended with elements of ANT, still requires some sort of macro abstract entity –the ostensive aspect– which is formed by the individual performances and enacted in each of them. The mutually constituting recursive mechanisms that link the abstract understanding of a routine and its enactment are easier to explicate when moving along the time dimension, keeping locations and actors constant, than over the spatial dimension, when actors are distributed across many locations whose links are not obvious.

Actor-network theory by contrast posits a flat description of the social world, which locates structural effects in the actions of specific actors, who devise standards and quasi-standards and put them in circulation. This framework can describe patterns in actions across space as well as over time. Within management and organisation studies, actor-network theory has often provided elements to complement or extend existing practice or structuration perspectives, but has seldom been fully deployed to produce a flat description of an organisational phenomenon. Thus the approach taken in this thesis represents a significant innovation within the field.

1.3 Research objectives

The goal of this research is to examine how HRM activities are carried out in organisations; how and why they vary and repeat themselves across an organisation; and

how variation and repetition may impinge on the outcomes of HRM activity. Through the deployment of actor-network theory, this thesis develops a flat description of HRM activities within a retailing organisation, which accounts for consistency and variability in HRM practices across sites.

In order to avoid privileging consistency over variability, this thesis will focus its attention on the individual courses of action through which employment terms are produced –a promotion, a hire, a dismissal– rather than on overall descriptions of action, where variability is already averaged out. This approach is operationalised in the following research question:

Research question 1: How are individual employment outcomes produced?

One of our main concerns with the top-down view of HRM is its difficulty in treating variability in HRM practices. This thesis aims at an even treatment of variability and consistency as integral elements to HRM. This aim is operationalised in the following research question:

Research question 2: What are the sources of variability and consistency in HRM activities?

Although the main goal of this thesis is to develop an alternative conceptualisation of HRM, the top-down view has dominated SHRM research for decades and retains a strong commonsense appeal. This thesis will aim to integrate the concepts of intended, actual and perceived HRM practices within its new theory of HRM, thus providing some commensurability between the two approaches. This aim is operationalised in the following research question:

Research question 3: How do intended, actual and perceived HRM practices relate to the production of individual employment outcomes?

1.4   Methods

The methods used in this thesis are consistent with three central elements of practice research. First, practice research needs to be grounded on a detailed examination of situated

participant activities (Nicolini, 2009b). This inevitably implies the use of <u>qualitative data collection methods</u> that can provide the material for rich descriptions of the phenomena under investigation (Weick, 2007). It also highlights the importance of locating activity in space and time, and for researchers to engage in fieldwork at "the sites of accomplishment" (Nicolini, 2011).

Second, practice research needs to identify patterns of interest in situated activities, and trace the connections that account for their production (Latour, 2005, Nicolini, 2009b). Actor-network theory locates the source of patterned activity in the circulation of actors and artefacts over time and across sites. Thus, following the actors and artefacts as they travel from site to site allows researchers to trace the network of connections that explains collective action (Latour, 2005, Czarniawska, 2007).

Finally, practice researchers need to write up a description of practice that succeeds in representing it to others (Czarniawska, 2004, 2007, Latour, 2005, Nicolini, 2011). Writing up is as much a part of the research strategy as the fieldwork, insofar as composing an account cannot be viewed as a mere reflexion of the world out there, but as the creation of a new object that may or may not be successful in advancing an understanding of the world. As Latour put it, "we [social scientists] write texts, we don't look through some window pane" (Latour, 2005: 123). The challenge therefore is to produce a text where practices 'show up' (Nicolini, 2011), so that readers are made to "feel as if they were there, in the field" (Czarniawska, 2004: 118).

The rest of this section elucidates the choices made in this research with respect to setting, data collection and writing up, and links these choices to the three elements of practice-based methods described above.

1.4.1 Research setting

The research sites for this thesis were 13 stores and the HR department of a large multi-store fashion retailer. I first completed all fieldwork in the stores before moving to head office. This choice was significant for a number of reasons. First, it identified the stores as the main 'site of accomplishment' for the HRM activities that I wanted to study.

This not only positioned the research closer to the actors who 'do' HRM –line managers–, rather than those who 'own' it –HR and top management–, it also made easier to detect the connections to other activities accomplished in the same sites, including the very outcomes of HRM.

Moreover, retail was chosen as an ideal setting for uncovering the dynamics of consistency and variability in HRM activity: thirteen different but comparable business units, sharing the same management job roles and applicable HR policies, and being geographically separated from each other and from head office, offered the ideal setting for identifying the sites where activities were performed and for tracing the movements of people and artefacts. Moving to head office at the end of the fieldwork helped trace the connections between the activities in the periphery and those in the centre.

1.4.2   Data collection

Most –though by no means all– practice-based studies of organisations have relied on ethnographic observation as their main method for field data collection (Nicolini, 2011). The research reported in this thesis however has made extensive use of participant interviews, and this has been an important strength of the study. First, the use of interviews enabled the research to cover a larger number of HRM episodes (n=112) than would have been possible through observation. Analysis of a larger and more diverse set of cases was crucial in developing the insights that underpinned theory production in this thesis. Second, interviews helped overcome some of the challenges inherent to the study of practices that span across different spaces and times (Czarniawska, 2007). Participant narratives contained within the interviews considered elements of HRM activities that were located far in space and time, and which would have been virtually impossible to directly observe. Third, using participant narratives as the main source of data allowed for participants' own 'theories of action' to be taken into account (Latour, 2005: 57), thus transcending the role of mere informants given to them in other research designs. Finally, Czarniawska (2004) noted that in any interview situation three types of logic –of theory, of practice and of representation– were intertwined in interviewee responses. In this research, the combination of questioning

techniques targeted at eliciting specific episodes of HRM activity, and the single focus of data analysis on situated narratives ensured that theories were developed from data that privileged the logic of practice over the other two.

1.4.3   Writing up

Latour (2005) described the role of text in social science as the equivalent of the laboratory in natural sciences. Social scientists compose texts in which they experiment at retracing and reassembling bits of the social world. Their texts –like natural scientists' experiments– may fail in that the social does not show through. A good text however, succeeds in deploying the wide range of heterogeneous elements that produce any social outcome. Czarniawska (2004) has suggested that two elements are crucial to a good write up. First is rich description that deploys the complexities, contradictions and differences in the world, while avoiding summaries and "formulations that strip out most of what matters" (Weick, 2007: 18). This thesis attempts just that through the description of HRM activities in chapter 6 and 7. Second is the use of theory as the means to give the text the structure that helps make sense of the phenomenon reported. This thesis uses actor-network theory, particularly as put forward by Latour (2005), as a common thread throughout. In particular, the discussion in chapter 7 is firmly structured around Latour's (2005) ideas.

1.5   Thesis outline

Chapter 2 reviews past strategic human resource management literature and locates the problem of within-firm variability in HRM practices. The chapter argues that the SHRM literature has been dominated by a top-down view of HRM, which has fundamental limitations to account for variability in HMR practices.

Chapter 3 lays out the theoretical framework that informs this thesis. First, it introduces practice-based research in management and organisation studies, and the three main sociological theories that underpin such research – the theory of practice, the theory of structuration and actor-network theory. The chapter then presents prior research on organisational routines, and establishes its relevance for developing a practice-based view of

HRM activities. It is argued that current approaches within the routines literature, while successful at explaining endogenous sources of change in routines over time, have limitations in explaining variability of practices across sites of a single organisation. It is further suggested that a 'flat' description of HRM, based on Latour's (2005) actor-network theory, could overcome such limitations and provide a robust explanation of consistency and variability across sites as well as stability and change over time.

Chapter 4 expounds the research design and the methods used in this research. First, it describes and justifies research design choices, establishing a rationale for undertaking qualitative research, for the selection of a retail organisation as the research setting, for the use of interviews as the main source of data, and for the specific approach to writing up. Second, it details the steps followed for obtaining access, carrying out the interviews and analysing the data.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of HRM practices in the company under study. First is a description of how the HR specialist function was structured. Then follows a description of each area of HRM activity as either centralised or decentralised HRM activity, according to the extent to which decisions were taken with or without significant input from actors based in the stores. Centralised HRM activities at the company included store structure, staffing levels, salary and bonus; whereas decentralised HRM included two major areas of activity which respondents called progression and performance management. Because decentralised HRM offered the best opportunities to examine the interactions between the centre –HR department– and the periphery –the stores–, these two areas of activity were chosen for further detailed analysis in chapters 6 and 7.

Chapters 6 and 7 set forth the details of 112 participant narratives on specific episodes of progression and performance management. Each chapter presents a set of narratives in three ways. First, they are classified by topic in order to facilitate a quick review of the content of each narrative. The next section introduces the main actors and artefacts in the narratives, along with an analysis of their roles in the set of narratives. The final section describes and discusses the interactions of actors and artefacts at specific moments that are

common to most narratives in each set. By combining three different ways of presenting the data, the chapter conveys a thorough description of the narratives, while avoiding the loss of rich detail that would come as a consequence of summarising by abstracting common features.

Chapter 8 takes a further look at these participant narratives in order to achieve a deeper understanding of how individual employment outcomes were produced. The first section zooms in on some selected respondent narratives to establish 'doing HRM' as a distributed and emergent activity. It was distributed in the sense that there was a wide range of actors involved in the production of HRM decisions, including but not limited to line managers, HR officers, employees, and material elements such as artefacts and physical spaces, all of which shaped decision outcomes in important ways. Further, doing HRM was emergent in the sense that the outcome of each decision could not be anticipated at the outset, but was constructed every time through the actions of the wide range of actors and materials involved. Finally doing HRM is not only distributed and emergent, but at the same time patterned.

The second section zooms out of HRM activity and identifies the origin of such patterns in the activities of the members of the HR department, who found ways to retrieve information from the field, transform it in different ways to produce standards and quasi-standards, and finally re-distribute these back to the field, to be assembled into new courses of action.

Chapter 9 develops an alternative understanding of HRM as *situated action* (Suchman, 2007). First, section 9.2 builds on the insights of chapter 8 to develop a 'flat' (Latour, 2005) description of HRM activities. Then, section 9.3 discusses the role of intended, actual and perceived HRM practices, as *representations of* HRM action. Finally, section 9.4 provides new theory on the link between HRM actions and organisational performance. Section 9.5 summarises the conclusions reached in the chapter.

The concluding chapter 10 discusses the contribution, implications and limitations of the thesis. The first section summarises the thesis. The second section describes the

empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions of this research. The third section

discusses the implications for research and practice in HRM. The final section

acknowledges the limitations of this thesis and suggests areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF PRIOR RESEARCH

2.1   Introduction

Peter Boxall recently described the strategic human resource management (SHRM) literature as "something of a 'curate's egg': good in parts" (2012: 50) [1]. He echoed others (e.g. Nishii and Wright, 2008, Guest, 2011) in pointing out that the field lacks an understanding of how HRM is implemented and that this poses a major limitation to its advancement. Such assessments have been accompanied by calls for improved research methods (Boxall, 2012), more careful design of empirical studies (Guest, 2011), and better measurement that is able to tease out the effects of variation in the implementation of HRM practices by line managers, and in employees' perceptions of the practices they are subjected to (Nishii and Wright, 2008).

This chapter offers a novel critique of the SHRM literature, which has investigated the organisational effects of human resource management activities (Wright and Boswell, 2002). It supports the idea that attention needs to be given to [so-called] 'implementation' of HRM practices (Guest and Conway, 2011). However, my core criticism is precisely that past approaches have been limited by a conception of HRM as a set of managerial interventions that are *then* implemented, enacted or put into practice. I will show that this is at the root of major unresolved problems in the literature, particularly those related to the definition and measurement of the HRM construct, and its potential causal relationship with organisational performance. It is argued that, rather than refining research techniques within this paradigm, progress could be made by exploring alternative views of organisational activity that introduce a 'practice lens' (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011) into the analysis of human resource management.

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[1] Since he went on to comment on the good as well as the bad parts of the SHRM 'egg', he presumably meant this without the irony of the expression in its original source, an 1895 cartoon by George du Maurier, which described as 'good in parts' something that was irredeemably bad.

The chapter is structured as follows. First is a review of the strategic human resource management field that draws attention to the historical antecedents of its emergence, and presents its major findings. Second is a review of assessments of these findings, which explains the main controversies that have been discussed in the literature. The third section argues that the SHRM literature has universally adopted what I describe as a 'top-down' view of HRM, where HRM practices are seen as discrete entities originating in management intentions, which are subsequently enacted by line managers, and perceived and reacted upon by employees. The section further discusses extant research on the implementation and communication of HRM practices. Section 2.5 explores the issue of variability in HRM practices within organisations, and suggests that it poses a more difficult problem than has been acknowledged in the literature. In particular, the section argues that attempts at addressing HRM variability within the top-down view of HRM are unlikely to produce workable research programmes that are conducive to definitive results on the HRM-performance link or to advice that is relevant to practitioners. Finally, and following from the critique of the SHRM literature contained in this chapter, the last section states the goal of this thesis and its research questions.

2.2   The strategic human resource management literature

The beginnings of strategic human resource management research can be traced to the 1980s (Wright and Boswell, 2002). During that decade, attention increased among US academics towards 'strategic' aspects of management, and many functional fields – including HRM – sought to define their contribution to the strategic management process (Wright and McMahan, 1992). After some years of mostly conceptual and practitioner oriented publications, by the middle of the 1990s a major empirical research effort gathered around the goal of measuring the effects of HRM on firm performance. Such effort in SHRM contributed to the wider literature that explored how possession of strategic resources might impinge on organisational performance, thus attempting to test the propositions of the resource-based view of the firm (RBV; Barney and Arikan, 2001).

Although drawing on earlier theories, RBV formally appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s through the works of Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984), among others. RBV states that firms can utilise resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable to achieve sustained superior performance (Barney, 1991). While not uncontested (Priem and Butler, 2001), over the next decade RBV established itself in the strategy literature as the dominant framework for explaining differences in performance among firms, displacing previous explanations based on relative market position (Teece et al., 1997). This shift of attention from external to internal determinants of performance gave HRM practitioners and academics the prospect to improve their standing within the management profession (Kaufman, 2007). It was argued that resources that rely on the makeup of the workforce are likely to be valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable because they tend to be socially complex, causally ambiguous and path dependent (Wright et al., 2001, Becker and Gerhart, 1996, Barney and Wright, 1998). More specifically, HRM activities were proposed to help establish the workforce as a strategic resource by building the skills and encouraging the behaviours that drive business performance (Wright et al., 1994, Boxall and Steeneveld, 1999).

Two contemporaneous publications gave a definitive thrust, and shaped most SHRM empirical research for the following decade. On the one hand, Pfeffer's (1994) book – written for a general management audience but also summarised as a journal article (Pfeffer, 1995) – made the RBV-based argument that "employees and how they work" are increasingly important sources of competitive advantage, as other resources such as technology, protective regulation and finance become more accessible to all, and therefore less relevant in differentiating competitors. 'Effective' people management was thus becoming an increasingly important way in which firms would achieve strategic success. The book went on to list 16 "practices for managing people" selected on the basis of "extensive reading of both the popular and academic literature, talking to numerous people in firms in a variety of industries, and the application of some simple common sense" (1994:

30-1). The potential fruits to be obtained from the adoption of these practices were illustrated with vivid examples of iconic companies and business leaders of the time.

On the other hand, Huselid (1995) provided the first empirical evidence of a link between HRM and financial performance in a large sample of firms from multiple industries. The article received several important academic awards and has been widely considered the most influential empirical study on the performance effects of HRM (Wright and Boswell, 2002, Paauwe, 2009). The study was based on a large sample survey of American publicly-held companies using mailed questionnaires. A single HR respondent in each firm was asked to report their organisation's use of a set of 13 practices, which were adapted from a set of practices that had been identified in a U.S. government report as representing 'sophistication' in HR management and thereby labelled as 'high-performance work practices' (US_Department_of_Labor, 1993). Working with data from close to one thousand companies, the study used multivariate statistics to explore the relationship between the extent these practices were used and different measures of performance. It concluded that "investments in [these HR] practices are associated with lower employee turnover and greater productivity and corporate financial performance". Moreover, the article quantified the 'substantial' returns for investment in these practices in annual dollar sales, profit and market value per employee, and suggested that "at least in the near term, such returns are available for the taking" (Huselid, 1995: 668). Leaving aside the hyperbole in some of its claims, the strength of Huselid's paper resided in the comprehensiveness of its approach. The study included measures of performance at multiple levels, evaluated the influence of internal and external policy fit, and formally addressed some methodological issues inherent to survey research designs. Each of these elements on their own have rarely featured in the later SHRM literature, let alone in combination. Indeed even authors that have been critical of Huselid's findings have recognised the paper's groundbreaking nature (Wright et al., 2005), unmatched sophistication (Purcell and Kinnie, 2007), or notable treatment of multiple measures of performance (Legge, 2005).

For the following decade, the SHRM field was dominated by the goal of establishing and measuring the causal effects of HRM activities on firm performance (Purcell and Kinnie, 2007). In what remains the most comprehensive review to-date, Boselie and his colleagues (2005) analysed over a hundred studies published during that period. Their findings highlighted the eclectic nature of this body of literature and its substantial theoretical and methodological shortcomings. First, they found there was wide variation in both the conceptual makeup of the HRM construct and the choice of specific measures. Although the most common research design was by far the statistical analysis of survey data, there was no consensus on which practices needed to be included, and what the best way of measuring them was. Second, most studies failed to devote sufficient attention to explaining how HRM activities might produce their alleged effects. Elements from a range of theoretical frameworks were often blended to provide a general rationale for the study or to produce a-posteriori explanations of its findings, but very seldom were theoretically-driven propositions formulated and then tested. Likewise, only a few studies included mediating variables in their statistical models. Boselie and his colleagues concluded their review stating that "no consistent picture exists on what HRM is or even what it is supposed to do" (Boselie et al., 2005: 81), and stressing that the literature's findings are affected by serious methodological limitations which will not be overcome without the support of better theory.

A very different summary of largely the same literature was carried out by Combs and colleagues (2006) who aggregated the results of 92 SHRM studies using meta-analytic statistical techniques. They found sufficient support to establish .20 as a "conservative point estimate" of the effect of HRM practices on organisational performance, that is, "increasing use of [high-performance work practices] by one standard deviation increases performance by .20 of a standard deviation" (2006: 517-8). This, they claimed, dissipated "any doubt about the existence of a relationship" between HRM practices and firm performance (2006: 524). Their results, however, come with an important caveat. Meta-analytic techniques rely on the assumption that much of the variance found in the results of the different studies is due to the effects of sampling and measurement error, which can then be 'averaged out' to

produce more accurate estimates. To the extent that a good portion of that variance may in fact be due to differences in the definition and operationalisation of the constructs involved, as shown in Boselie et al.'s (Boselie et al., 2005) review, the value of Comb et al.'s (2006) aggregation is put into question.

In the years since Boselie et al.'s (2005) review and Combs et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis the empirical effort in SHRM research seems to have substantially diminished. Recent reviews have discussed new theoretical contributions, but have included little in terms of fresh empirical evidence (e.g. Boxall, 2012, Batt and Banerjee, 2012, Guest, 2011, Paauwe, 2009). Guest (2011) characterised this latest period as one of 'growing sophistication and complexity', which can be observed on two fronts. First, there have been attempts at broadening the set of theories mobilised to explain the relationship between HRM and performance, particularly by incorporating theories from social psychology. For example, Nishii and her colleagues (2008) developed and tested a model based on attribution theory. They found support for the proposition that employees' attributions of the intentions of management in adopting HRM practices have an impact on their attitudes and behaviours. Similarly, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) theorised that organisational climate mediated the relationship between HRM system characteristics and firm performance – although Guest and Conway's (2011) empirical study failed to find support for at least part of their theory. Second, the statistical techniques used in quantitative studies of SHRM have become increasingly complex, facilitated by the generalisation of data analysis software packages, and methodological innovation in other management research fields, notably marketing research. For instance, in the study mentioned above, Nishii and her colleagues (2008) used structural equation modelling, which has recently become a standard in testing complex causal models in marketing research (Hair et al., 2011). Likewise, Liao and her colleagues (2009) used hierarchical linear modelling to analyse the relationship among constructs spanning three nested levels in an organisation. Such developments suggest that, far from the 'big science' called for by Wall and Wood (2005), research on the HRM-performance link has moved from a broad effort to prove and measure the relationship between HRM

activity and performance in large samples of firms, to more specialised – even niche –
studies that test relatively small extensions of theory using data from multiple levels and
respondents in one organisation.

2.3   Assessing the SHRM literature

Assessments of the SHRM literature's findings have ranged from concluding that
significant progress has been made, to dismissal of extant results as inconclusive and lacking
any causal implications. Positions on either end of the continuum seem to be largely a
consequence of the research tradition in which the commentator is placed. Thus, as might be
expected, the harshest criticism of the SHRM field has come from authors in traditions
generally condemnatory of its positivist and managerialist stance. Thus, critical management
scholars (e.g. Legge, 1995, 2005, Keenoy, 1999) have denounced HRM's failings as
managerial rhetoric, its unitarist discourse, and its thinly veiled affirmation of managerial
dominance; while post-structuralists (Townley, 1993, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) have
decried HRM as an identity control mechanism. Critical realists for their part have exposed
the literature's simplistic treatment of causality and its poor theorising (Edwards and Wright,
2001, Hesketh and Fleetwood, 2006).

Also unsurprisingly, the strongest advocates of the literature's achievements have
been adherents of a strongly empiricist research agenda, who have seen value in
accumulating 'point estimates' of the relationship between HRM and firm performance, in
order to build a 'cumulative body of knowledge' (Becker and Gerhart, 1996) that may yield
increasingly precise estimates of the size of 'the HRM effect' (Gerhart et al., 2000, Gerhart,
2007) – a goal which indeed provided the rationale for Combs et al.'s (2006) meta-analytic
study. Such favourable assessments include Becker and Huselid's, for whom SHRM boasts
"two decades of solid academic progress" (2006: 898-9). They shared Combs et al.'s (2006)
conclusion that the link between HRM practices and firm performance has been established
beyond doubt, and further argue that practitioners themselves have been persuaded, but are

now in need of guidance on effective implementation of HRM systems, in order to realise their fruits.

Other authors who have similarly emphasised the achievements of the SHRM literature have nevertheless made more cautious assessments. For instance, Paauwe (2009) concluded that progress has been 'modest', and that no more than a weak relationship between HRM practices and firm performance can be established. Similarly, Wall and Wood (2005) concluded that empirical results were still insufficient to establish a causal link, but that the theoretical underpinnings of the literature provided strong grounds for 'believing' there should be such a link. In order to move forward, they advocated the deployment of 'big science' studies that would overcome the unresolved methodological issues.

The line of criticism that will be pursued here, however, builds on the position of a group of scholars gathered under the label 'analytical HRM' (Boxall et al., 2007). These authors have been significant contributors to the SHRM literature at different stages, but have nevertheless expressed strong scepticism about the suitability of extant empirical research to support any claim of a link between HRM and performance. Boxall, for instance, recognised the value of the literature's concern with performance implications of HRM activities, but was critical of its "confusing definitions, unjustified assertions, and weaknesses in research methods" (2012: 170). Purcell, for his part, expressed disappointment at the literature's failing to produce a sound model of HRM which includes a clear definition of its remit, and a chain of causal links to performance (Purcell and Kinnie, 2007). Finally, Wright's work has exposed the literature's important methodological shortcomings in establishing a causal relationship between HRM and firm performance (Wright et al., 2005). A further important author who might be included in this approach is David Guest, who recently wrote that "after hundreds of research studies we are still in no position to assert with any confidence that good HRM has an impact on organisation performance" (Guest, 2011: 11).

Much of the scepticism of analytical HRM scholars stems from the fact that most empirical SHRM research has relied on analysis of cross-sectional survey data (Boselie et al., 2005), and the inadequacy of such research design to establish causal relationships. For Wright and colleagues (2005) causality can only be reasonably inferred when, besides there existing statistically significant covariation, two other conditions are met. First, there needs to be evidence of temporal precedence. In their ensuing examination of temporal precedence in 68 empirical SHRM studies they reached a devastating conclusion: the research design in only 10 of the studies was consistent with temporal precedence of HRM; in 50 of them, HRM practices were actually measured after the performance period (Wright et al., 2005). Moreover, the few longitudinal studies that have been published have failed to find support for a causal link between HRM and performance (Cappelli and Neumark, 2001, Guest et al., 2003, Wright et al., 2005). Rather, they have consistently shown that controlling for past performance eliminated any impact of HRM practices on future performance.

The second condition for inferred causality is that all other possibilities be theoretically rejected. While for Huselid and Becker (1998) the use of corporate-level financial measures of performance is a strength of the literature, the conceptual distance between HRM activities and firm-level performance outcomes weakens causality claims: a host of variables other than the use of HRM practices may have an influence on measured firm performance (Guest, 1997), so that without sufficient theoretical development it is impossible to rule out simultaneity or omitted variables (Edwards and Wright, 2001). At any rate, research on the 'HRM black box' –what happens between the adoption of HRM practices and the performance effects they allegedly produce– remains a crucial topic of research for the advancement of the literature (Boxall, 2012, Guest, 2011, Nishii and Wright, 2008, Purcell and Kinnie, 2007).

The following section examines the literature's dominant framework for understanding the HRM black box and discusses one of the most elaborate models that have been put forward to-date (Nishii and Wright, 2008).

2.4   The top-down view of HRM

For all the debates and criticism about theory –or lack thereof– in SHRM, the field

shares a fairly standardised framework for understanding HRM activity and the way it

generates organisational outcomes. First, the SHRM literature conceives of human resource

management as a set of managerial interventions, that is, HRM practices are means put in

place by top management to achieve certain ends[2]. In this view, top management –with the

help of HR specialists– prescribe the HRM activities to be adopted by the organisation, and

set the necessary incentives –positive and negative– for other organisational members,

notably line managers, to perform the prescribed activities. Since there exists the possibility

that line managers do not perform the actions as specified, SHRM research has differentiated

between *intended* and *actual* HRM practices.

Second, the performance effects of HRM are produced through its impact on

employees' ability, motivation and opportunity (AMO) to perform[3] (Bailey et al., 2001).

The ability element focuses on how HRM practices, such as training and employee selection,

contribute to augmenting the human capital of the organisation, that is, the pool of

knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) embodied in the workforce. The motivation element

refers to the role of HRM practices in fostering willingness from the part of employees to

exert themselves and apply their KSAs to prescribed behaviours that make up the productive

processes of the organisation. Finally the opportunity element refers to the impact of job

design –e.g. multidisciplinary teamwork– and employee participation schemes on the

organisation's ability to tap into and make productive use of employees' KSAs. Whereas

much of earlier SHRM research focused on the effects of HRM on ability and opportunity

(e.g. Arthur, 1994, Ichniowski et al., 1997, Guthrie, 2001), it is the motivation element that

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[2] Cf. Wright and McMahan "we define strategic human resource management as the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals" (1992: 298), and Boxall, Purcell and Wright "the management of work and people towards desired ends" (2007: 1).

[3] The AMO framework can be traced back to Blumberg and Pringle (1982), who proposed a model of individual performance as a function of capacity, willingness and opportunity. The explicit introduction of the framework into the SHRM literature has been attributed (Boselie et al., 2005) to Appelbaum and her colleagues (2000).

has received most attention in recent SHRM research, particularly through the introduction

of organisational behaviour theories and constructs –such as the psychological contract,

attributions theory, and perceived organisational support–, which posit an exchange

relationship between individual employees and their employer (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2004).

Since such exchanges can only be based on employees' perceptions of HRM practices, rather

than on the actual practices they are subjected to, a further distinction between *actual* and

perceived HRM practices has been introduced.

This standard view, which I label 'the top-down view of HRM', has recently been

summarised by Nishii and Wright (2008) in the diagram reproduced in Figure 2.1. Their

model illustrates the differentiation between intended, actual and perceived HRM practices,

and identifies implementation and communication as critical mediating processes between

them. First, HRM practices originate in the intentions and designs of top management and

HR specialists. Second, these designs are enacted by line managers in specific situations.

Third, line manager enactments of HRM practices are perceived by individual employees

through the lens of their individual cognitive schemas and, through social interaction, those

perceptions may become shared. Finally employees react to their perceptions of HRM

practices with attitudes –e.g. commitment, job satisfaction– and behaviours –e.g.

continuance, job behaviours, discretionary behaviours– that support organisational

performance outcomes.

Figure 2.1: Mediating links in the HR practices-performance relationship (Nishii and Wright, 2008: 227)
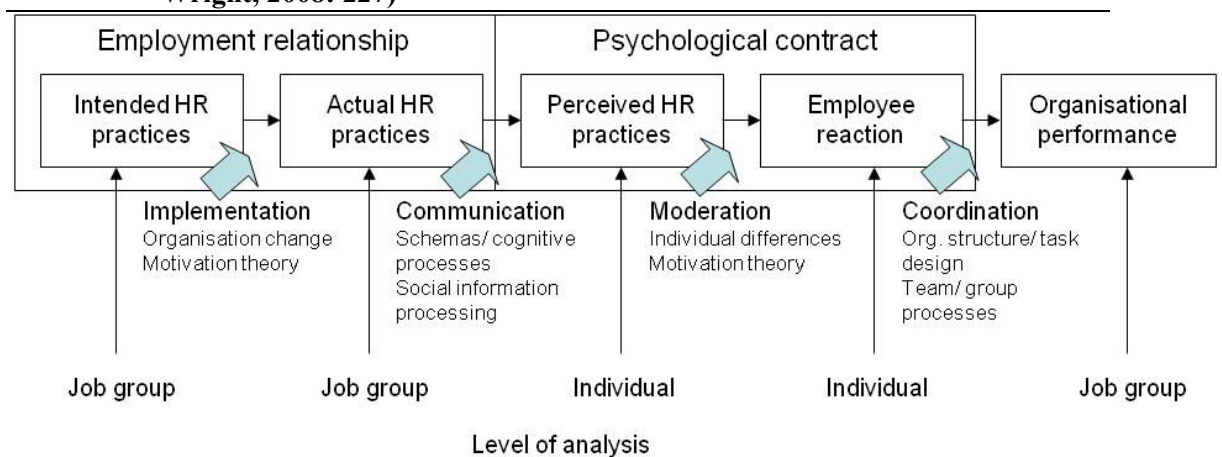
The rest of this section discusses extant research on the implementation and communication of HRM practices.

2.4.1   Implementation

The notion of a gap between *intended* and *actual* HRM practices was initially introduced by Dyer (1985) as an extension of Mintzberg's (1978) *intended* and *realised* business strategy. Intended HRM referred to practices as designed and articulated by top management, whereas actual HRM referred to "those HR activities that take place within the organization, regardless of whether or not they are in response to any articulated HR strategy" (Truss and Gratton, 1994: 681). McGovern and his colleagues (1997) were among the first to report evidence of the intended-actual HRM gap, which they attributed to line managers' inconsistency in the implementation of HRM practices. Later, in a detailed case study of the British subsidiary of an American multinational, Truss (2001) found 'a strong disconnect' between formal HRM practices and those experienced by employees. Although she presented her findings as support for the critique of human resource management as managerial rhetoric (Legge, 1995) , and mostly attributed the mismatch to pressure from the external context and the inertia of the informal organization, she also acknowledged "the role of each individual manager as agent, choosing to focus his or her attention in varying ways." (Truss, 2001: 1145).

Thus, the general view in the literature is that HRM practices are largely designed by top management and HR specialists, but they are *implemented* (Boxall, 2012, Nishii and Wright, 2008, Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007), *enacted* (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007, Boxall et al., 2007) or *translated into practice* (Truss, 2001) by line managers. What exactly is behind by these terms, however, is not entirely clear. There are at least three approaches the literature has taken to exploring the impact of line managers on HRM implementation; we review them in the following paragraphs.

The first approach to researching the role of line managers in HRM has looked at the degree to which line managers engaged or not in the specific HRM activities prescribed by their organisation, and the antecedents of their involvement. Smith (1990), for instance,

showed how bank branch managers "muted or reinterpreted" coercive corporate policies in order to maintain employee consent; which not only was in the managers' own interest, but also helped attain the long-term corporate productivity goals in a way not foreseen by top management. Another research stream has looked at line-manager engagement in HRM as part of the debate on the limitations of HR 'devolution' to the line (Brewster and Soderstrom, 1994, McGovern et al., 1997). In a representative study, McGovern and colleagues (1997) analysed interview and survey data from seven UK organizations and found that there was a wide variation within organisations in the consistency of implementation and the quality of HR practices, due to line manager involvement. Many line managers in each of the organisations did not perform their HR role, or did so in a cursory way, because of time pressures and competing priorities. This led to an uneven spread of intended HRM practices within organisations, so that a practice was present or absent in different departments and units depending on its manager's personal willingness to devote effort to their implementation. Some recent quantitative research has attempted to extend this literature by exploring the determinants of such line manager involvement in HRM activity, looking at the effects of manager, practice and organisation characteristics (Bos-Nehles, 2010, Gilbert et al., 2011, Sikora and Ferris, 2011).

A second approach has examined the impact of line managers on procedural and interpersonal aspects of HRM practice implementation. For instance, managers in Truss's (2001) study were found to pre-write performance appraisals, rather than draft them jointly with the employee over the appraisal interview, as company policy required. In a more recent study, managers similarly conducted appraisals with less frequency than required by HR policy (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). In both these instances, managers followed procedures that were different from those set by policy makers, with negative implications for employee perceptions of procedural justice and satisfaction with HR processes. Conversely, line manager actions were found to have a positive impact in Bartel (2004), where differences in employee satisfaction with three areas of HR activity (skills, communication and rewards) were attributed to discretionary branch manager actions, such

as on-going communication, frequent positive feedback and recognition. Finally, Nishii and Wright (2008) appear to refer to procedural and interpersonal aspects when they note that managers influence perceptions of HRM through their leadership style, personality and behaviour.

A final, third approach has been to look at the impact of line managers on the distributive aspects of HRM practices, that is, on the actual individual employment outcomes that are produced through HRM decision processes. Here, the 'functional' or 'micro' HRM subfield (Wright and Boswell, 2002) has produced abundant evidence of the influence that line managers have in the outcomes of the different HRM processes. Much of this work has focused on identifying the various sources of cognitive bias in manager decision making. Such research assumes the existence of a 'psychometrically correct' outcome – i.e. an accurate rating that reflects an employee's true performance, or a candidate that is objectively the best person for a specific position – and tries to uncover the reasons why managers may make 'wrong' decisions. For instance, the performance appraisal literature has at least three decades of research on rater antecedents that influence performance appraisal outcomes (Feldman, 1981, Landy and Farr, 1980). Among the many different variables that have been put forward as sources of bias, supervisor affect or liking for subordinates has featured highest in the agenda (Lefkowitz, 2000, Levy and Williams, 2004). Likewise, the personnel selection literature has shown that the behaviour of interviewers influences the performance of applicants (Liden et al., 1993), and that interviewer similarity and affect towards the interviewee is linked to perceived job suitability of the applicant (Howard and Ferris, 1996). Separately, some research has uncovered line managers' role in surreptitiously compensating for the negative distributive effects of prescribed practice. For instance, Purcell and his colleagues reported that, in organizations where managers seemed to have little discretion over formal rewards, there were "'unofficial' practices creeping in as a means of motivating people such as allowing time off, access to training, and providing more challenging work." (Purcell et al., 2009: 63). Similarly, Nadisic (2008a, 2008b) found that managers allocated benefits for "uses other than those for which they were formally

intended", particularly to compensate for unfairness in HRM policy areas outside their influence.

In summary, the gap between intended and actual HR practices remains mostly attributed to line managers' actions (Nishii and Wright, 2008, Purcell and Kinnie, 2007). Moreover, the actions of line managers have been overwhelmingly portrayed as detracting from the efficacy of HRM. Line managers are a source of slippage (Boxall and Purcell, 2008: 220) or undesired variability (Nishii and Wright, 2008); they distort the uniform application of the policy as designed by top management and HR specialists, thus potentially "undermin[ing] the contribution which HR policies are supposed to make towards organisational success" (McGovern et al., 1997: 12).

2.4.2   Communication

Attention to a possible gap between the practices employees are subjected to and their perceptions of those practices derived from organisational behaviour research on the employee-organisation relationship (EOR) (Shore and Coyle-Shapiro, 2003, Shore et al., 2004). EOR scholars see HRM practices as representing an organisation's offering to its employees (Rousseau and Greller, 1994). Through mechanisms based on the norms of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and social exchange (Blau, 1964), employees reciprocate their organisation's offering with attitudes and behaviours that drive organisational performance (Hannah and Iverson, 2004). The gap between actual and perceived HRM practices is seen to arise because the practices may be ambiguous –different practices send conflicting messages–, or because individual employees may filter the practices they receive through their own idiosyncratic cognitive schemas (Nishii and Wright, 2008).

The EOR has been operationalised through different constructs that have given rise to different empirical literatures. First, the psychological contract literature posits that employees define their relationship with their organisation as an exchange agreement –the psychological contract–, which "encompasses the actions employees believe are expected of them and what response they expect in return from the employer" (Rousseau and Greller, 1994). Employees' beliefs are shaped by their experience of interacting with the

organisation, often through multiple individual 'contract makers'. Inconsistencies among individual HRM practices or among different contract makers send mixed messages to the workforce, and this opens the door for divergent and contradictory interpretations of practices to take hold. Thus, "until HR practices are aligned and contract makers operate on the same wavelength, the effectiveness of the organization and the success of its relations with employees will be diminished" (Rousseau and Greller, 1994: 398)

A second construct in the EOR literature is perceived organisational support (POS; Eisenberger et al., 1986, Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003). POS focuses on the affective attachment or commitment of employees to their organisation. According to this literature, employees form beliefs about how much their organization "values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Eisenberger et al., 1986: 500), and this belief is reciprocated as feelings of organisational commitment that underpin discretional effort. HRM practices that provide recognition of employee contributions may foster a "heightened sense of obligation among employees to help meet the organisation's objectives [resulting in] greater work effort and heightened performance" (Eisenberger et al., 2004: 220)

Finally, the EOR has also been operationalised through the construct of organisational climate (Ferris et al., 1998, Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). This stream of literature emphasises the role of *shared* perceptions of "what is important and what behaviours are expected and rewarded" (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004: 205). The key to achieving the intended performance effects of HRM practices is to create a strong climate for targeted strategic behaviours through the deployment of a 'strong HRM system'. Similar to psychological contract research, Ostroff and Bowen (2000, Bowen and Ostroff, 2004) proposed that systems of HRM practices constitute messages to employees about which behaviours are favoured and which are discouraged by the organisation. Using "social cognitive psychology and social influence theories" (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004: 207) they further elaborated to suggest that HRM systems that are high in distinctiveness, consistency and consensus are likely to provide unambiguous messages. Bowen and Ostroff characterise such systems as strong, and argue that they "can enhance organizational performance owing to shared meanings in

promotion of collective responses that are consistent with organisational strategic goals"
(2004: 213).

In summary, the top-down view of HRM characterises HRM practices as signals that
employees interpret to form perceptions of the value their organisation gives to their
contribution, and of the likely rewards that can be obtained for certain behaviours. These
perceptions can also be formed at the group level through processes of social interaction.
Based on these perceptions, employees develop attitudes towards their organisation and
gauge their contribution to it. Efforts to make the messages conveyed through HRM
practices more coherent, clear and forceful will enhance the likelihood that the intended
employee behaviours are obtained.

2.5   Limitations of the top-down view of HRM

Nishii and Wright (2008) have recently drawn attention to the need of the SHRM
literature to address the issue of within-firm variability. Their preoccupation is twofold: that
actual practices vary across groups within an organisation; and that perceptions of HRM
practices vary across individual employees, even when they are exposed to the same
practices. Their ensuing discussion on the sources of variation is structured by levels of
analysis. At the individual level, they suggest that each employee is likely to develop a
different perception of HRM practices based on their 'perceived instrumentality' of such
practices in helping achieve personal goals and needs, and the attributions they make about
management's intentions in devising the practices. Both instrumentality and attributions are
the result of cognitive processes which are likely to be affected by a wide range of employee
characteristics, including their "values, personalities, goals and needs, social roles and
identities, and past experiences, competencies and expectancies" (Nishii and Wright, 2008:
232). At the group level, Nishii and Wright identified two main sources of variation. First,
there may be differences in the way supervisors implement HRM practices prescribed by the
organisation. Second, there may be group effects in the way group members perceive HRM

practices, stemming from social interaction, the attraction-selection-attrition process, group identity, and group affective constructs such as cohesion and group efficacy.

Nishii and Wright (2008) affirmed the likelihood that within-firm variability in HRM practices may be linked to variability in individual or group performance outcomes in a way that is relevant to HRM theory and practice. Thus, ignoring within-firm variability in HRM research, as has mostly been the case in the past, is likely to produce misleading empirical results and obfuscate the relationship between HRM and its possible effects. Their recommendation is for researchers to deploy more sophisticated methods that can measure the extent and effects of variability, and for practitioners to minimise variability through stronger implementation, in line with Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) own advice.

The argument of this thesis, however, is that the problem of within-firm variability in HRM practices is larger in scope. The difficulty lies in reconciling the emphasis on consistency and managerial design that is inherent in the top-down view of HRM, with the observation that variation is pervasive in HRM activities. As we saw in the previous sections, according to the top-down view of HRM, practices originate in the intentions of top/HR management, who define the anticipated outcomes of HRM activities, and the elements of HRM practice design that will foster those outcomes. In implementing and communicating HRM practices, line managers introduce variation, and then a further layer of variation is added by employees' differing cognitive schemas. Regularities that can be found in HRM practices at any of their subsequent stages –intended, actual and perceived– are due either to their single origin –some kernel that has made it through the distortions of implementation and individual cognition–, or to the social processes at work at the different stages –e.g. organisational climate, collective sensemaking, attraction-selection-attrition. Furthermore, since only elements of HRM activity that are part of top management design are deemed relevant to producing the anticipated outcomes, the full potential of HRM is achieved when variation is minimised. Any amount of variation is seen as detracting from the presumed efficacy of intended HRM practices.

The top-down view of HRM therefore establishes a divide in HRM activities between those aspects that conform to top management design, contribute to consistency of HRM practices, and produce desired effects; and those that are not part of top management design, are a source of variability in HRM practices, and are at best irrelevant, at worst detrimental to the efficacy of HRM practices. This constructed dichotomy has problematic implications for HRM research as well as for practice.

In SHRM research, the top-down view has implied that HRM practices are treated as discrete entities with abstract properties, among them the potential to produce particular effects. For instance, certain practices have been deemed to *be* high-performance, high-involvement or high-commitment. Within what Sandberg and Tsoukas called "the framework of scientific rationality" (2011: 350), researchers have tried to link the presence of practices with these abstract properties to organisational outcomes, perhaps taking into account a few contingencies which act as moderators in the realisation of the practices' potential effects . Variability, that is, aspects of HRM activity that are not part of management design, has been left out of the model, unmeasured and unaccounted for.

Furthermore, when the top-down model has been extended to incorporate variability within it, as Nishii and Wright (2008) have done, major difficulties have arisen in both theory and method because of the proliferation of contingencies –and therefore mediator variables– that need to be accounted for. Table 2.1 lists the mediators identified by Nishii and Wright (2008) in their self-admittedly non-exhaustive review of sources of variability in HRM practices at three different levels.

Table 2.1   Predictors of employees' perceptions of HRM practices in Nishii and Wright (2008)

Individual level	Group level
1. Values	15. Manager's values
2. Personality	16. Manager's perceptions of HRM practices
3. Goals and needs	17. Group shared meanings and attitudes
4. Social roles and identities	18. Group cohesion
5. Past experiences	19. Group task interdependence
6. Competencies	20. Race, gender and other membership groups
7. Expectancies	21. Group transactive memory and learning levels
8. Recruiting and socialisation experiences	22. Collective efficacy
9. Organisational role	23. Group coordination and cooperation
10. Position in the hierarchy	**Job level**
11. Formal reporting relationship	24. Value-creating potential
12. Patterns of informal interaction	25. Uniqueness
13. Position in informal networks	26. Technological and skill complexity
14. Exchange relationship with manager	27. Abundance of labour supply
	28. Occupational ideology
	29. Occupational status

It is evident from the length and the content of this list that the complexity in both theory and methods suggested by this research programme is extraordinary. David Guest recently described the latest 'phase' in SHRM research as that of "growing sophistication and complexity" (2011: 5). The risk of this added complexity is not only that "a growing number of researchers may feel excluded from the field"(Guest, 2011: 6), but that by ever expanding the number of variables to be considered at multiple levels, this research programme may never produce any definitive results on a causal link between HRM practices and performance.

And yet, even if this research programme were successfully addressed, the relevance of its findings for practice may not be clear because, as Sandberg and Tsoukas have shown, "in following scientific rationality, the enactment of organizational practice is obscured and the logic of practice is closed off" (2011: 350). Indeed, SHRM practitioners have in the past been advised to choose carefully which HRM practices to adopt and design them to fit among themselves and with other elements of strategy, so that the resulting HRM system has the potential to produce specific desired effects in employees' behaviours and attitudes. Such single focus on practice choice and design was recognised as insufficient as it became

evident that within-firm variability could not be ignored (Ostroff and Bowen, 2000, Boxall et al., 2007, Nishii and Wright, 2008). The consequence has been an emphasis on minimising variability, for instance through the deployment of a 'strong' HRM system (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). We find here again the emphasis on entities and their abstract properties, characteristic of the top-down view of HRM. Table 2.2 lists the *features* of a strong HRM system suggested by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). As with Nishii and Wright (2008), obtaining empirical support for this theoretical model seems a complex and risky research programme. Moreover, even if such research were successfully undertaken, it is hard to see how its findings might be translated into advice for practitioners, since what any of these nine features actually looks like *in practice* is not evident, let alone how such an HRM system may be achieved. Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) own recommendations –e.g. their suggestion that pay secrecy undermines the strength of the HRM system and by implication organisational effectiveness– should obviously be taken with caution.

Table 2.2   Features of a strong HRM system in (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004)

Distinctiveness
1. Visibility: salient and observable (e.g. transparent performance criteria and no pay secrecy)
2. Understandability: lack of ambiguity and ease of comprehension
3. Legitimacy of authority: HR as a high status, high credibility function
4. Relevance: alignment of individual and organisational goals

Consistency
5. Instrumentality: unambiguous cause-effect between behaviours and outcomes
6. Validity: HR practices must do what they intend (e.g. selection test must screen for desirable employee characteristics)
7. Consistent HRM messages: consistency between organisational values and HRM practices; internal consistency among HRM practices; stability in HRM practices over time

Consensus
8. Agreement among principal HRM decision makers: top management and HR
9. Fairness: distributive, procedural and interactional justice

More generally, the top-down view of HRM has fostered a negative depiction of line managers and employees as problems to be dealt with in HRM, rather than as important actors in their own right. One of the alleged distinct features of human resource management, as compared to its predecessor personnel management, was the prescription of

high involvement by line managers (Tichy et al., 1982, Guest, 1987, Edwards, 1987). In David Guest's words, "the management of human resources […] is too important to be left to often marginally located personnel managers" (1987: 504). This early enthusiasm for line manager involvement seems to have quickly turned into a source of frustration as line managers did not seem willing or capable to do what HR specialists were asking them to do (McGovern et al., 1997). More recently employees, who were hitherto considered passive recipients of HRM, have been found to be busy interpreting the meanings of messages conveyed by the organisation's system of HRM practices (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004), and making attributions of the actions of HRM policy makers and line managers (Nishii et al., 2008). The instinctual reaction of SHRM research has been to *prescribe* uniformity as the only way to drive such deviance from management designs out of the system. If all goes well –managers are kept in line, and employees are sufficiently conditioned–, HR practitioners may hope to achieve a smooth transition of their intended HRM practices, into actual, and finally perceived HRM practices. Since employees will then hold a strong shared perception of the organisation's practices that is a close resemblance of the original design, HR practitioners may further hope that employees will react with the attitudes and behaviours they originally anticipated, and that organisational performance effects will follow suit.

2.6   Research questions

The top-down view of HRM relies on the assumption that only consistency delivers valuable HRM effects; that consistency is the ideal state of affairs, while variability is undesirably introduced by line-managers with poor skills or spurious goals. This thesis argues that this assumption is only tenable within a policy-implementation paradigm that privileges *prescriptions* of HRM over *everything else* that goes on in HRM activity. A different view is possible, one in which variability is an integral component of HRM activities, and the agency of actors other than top/HR management contributes to their efficacy.

Following from the above critique of the strategic human resource management literature, the main goal of this thesis is to **develop a theory of HRM** that overcomes the limitations of the top-down view.

In order to avoid privileging consistency over variability, this thesis will focus its attention on the individual courses of action through which employment terms are produced –a promotion, a hire, a dismissal– rather than on overall descriptions of action, where variability is already averaged out. This approach is operationalised in the following research question:

Research question 1: How are individual employment outcomes produced?

One of our main concerns with the top-down view of HRM is its difficulty in treating variability in HRM practices. This thesis aims at an even treatment of variability and consistency as integral elements to HRM. This aim is operationalised in the following research question:

Research question 2: What are the sources of variability and consistency in HRM activities?

Although the main goal of this thesis is to develop an alternative conceptualisation of HRM, the top-down view has dominated SHRM research for decades and retains a strong commonsense appeal. This thesis will aim to integrate the concepts of intended, actual and perceived HRM practices within its new theory of HRM, thus providing some commensurability between the two approaches. This aim is operationalised in the following research question:

Research question 3: How do intended, actual and perceived HRM practices relate to the production of individual employment outcomes?

2.7   Conclusion

There have been numerous calls for research on the implementation or enactment of HRM practices by line managers, as a crucial component in theorising the HRM-performance link (Guest, 2011, Paauwe and Boselie, 2005, Purcell and Kinnie, 2007). This

thesis answers these calls, but proposes a change of focus. It argues that, due to the prevalent top-down view, past research has emphasised aspects of HRM activity that are part of management design and neglected everything else. The view thus provided is incomplete and presents shortcomings that hinder deeper understanding of HRM activities in organisations and their effects. An alternative approach is therefore needed that can overcome these difficulties. Its formulation is the goal of this thesis

The following chapter explores so-called practice perspectives in management and organisation studies. Practice perspectives are grounded on the study of situated activity as the basis for organisational outcomes. Such a study would therefore examine HRM as something organisational actors do, rather than as a set of abstract entities that precede action. HRM is therefore not defined as a set of managerial interventions, but as courses of organisational action: action is the starting point; it is not subsumed under a-priori definitions. This constitutes a break with most previous research which typically identified HRM practices first, and then explored the complications of their implementation. A practice perspective of HRM opens the possibility for a more fruitful consideration of variability in HRM

CHAPTER 3: TOWARDS A PRACTICE[4] VIEW OF HRM

3.1 Introduction

Practice-based approaches have attracted increasing attention from scholars of management and organisation studies over the last two decades (Orlikowski, 2010a, Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Practice views have provided insight into the understanding of knowledge (Tsoukas, 1996, Orlikowski, 2002, Nicolini et al., 2003), technology (Orlikowski, 1992, 2000, 2010b), and routines (Feldman and Pentland, 2003, Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011) in organisations, and there are established literatures in such management subfields as information systems (Jones and Karsten, 2008), accounting (Englund et al., 2011), and strategy (Johnson et al., 2003, Golsorkhi et al., 2010a). Part of the wider 'practice turn' in social sciences (Schatzki et al., 2001), these bodies of research avoid conceiving the social as a set of discrete reified entities whose characteristics can be ascertained. Rather, they aim at examining how organisational outcomes are created through the day-to-day activities of actors and their interactions with the material world around them (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Practice views of organisation therefore provide a basis for a reformulation of HRM as situated organisational activity, rather than a set of discrete 'practices' with specific purported properties, as the top-down view of HRM asserts.

Writing in 2011, Wanda Olikowski described the theories of technology and technology implementation that dominated the field of organisation studies in the early 1990s:

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[4] Note that the concept of 'practice' in practice views of organisations is far from the common use of the term in the SHRM literature. As discussed in chapter 2, the SHRM literature has viewed HRM practices as discrete entities with stable properties, which remain invariant across and within organisations. This usage of the term is similar to that of the capabilities perspective on organisational routines (see section below), which has used routine and practice as interchangeable terms since at least Nelson and Winter (1982). Practice perspectives by contrast use the term practice to refer to "regimes of performance" or sets of "organised sayings and doings" as reproduced over time by a specific social group (Nicolini, 2011).

These theories assumed that the technology that was planned and designed would be built, that the technology that was built would be used in particular ways, and that the technology that was used would produce specific anticipated and intended outcomes.

(Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 7)

Her assessment echoes many of the features of the top-down view of HRM that I have reviewed in chapter 2. In her subsequent work, Orlikowski formulated a model of 'technology in practice' (2000, 2010b), where she concluded that it is not the technologies themselves, nor even the use they are given in general, but "the specific technologies in practice (enacted technology structures) that are recurrently produced in everyday action" (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 8) that have consequences for organisational outcomes. Likewise, a practice-based model of HRM will help us move away from conceiving of HRM practices as entities having effects in themselves or through some measure of their general use, to being concerned with the everyday activities that organisational actors call HRM. We are particularly interested in the organisational routines literature whose focus on the repetitive nature of activity in organisations is directly applicable to the study of HRM activities.

The chapter is organised as follows. The first section discusses commonalities among practice views of organisations, including a review of three of their most important theoretical foundations: theory of practice, theory of structuration and actor-network theory (ANT). The former two of these theories have many elements in common and have underpinned most practice-based approaches to management and organisation studies. ANT on the other hand is a more distinct approach which has influenced specific aspects of practice views of organisations, but which has rarely been fully deployed as the framework of choice for organisational scholars. The second section reviews the development of practice-based research on organisational routines. As "repetitive patterns of interdependent organizational actions" (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011), routines embrace much of organisational life, including HRM activities. Thus, this section suggests that Feldman and Pentland's (2003) performative model of organisational routines provides a helpful starting point for developing a practice-based view of HRM. However, the third section of this

chapter, identifies some limitations of Feldman and Pentland's (2003) model and suggests actor-network theory provides a basis for overcoming them.

3.2 Practice-based approaches in management and organisation studies

3.2.1 What is a practice view

Practice-based approaches in organisational studies are varied and often use a mixture of diverse sociological and philosophical approaches (Orlikowski, 2010a). For instance, Nicolini (2009) drew insight from 'Wittgenstenian' and 'Heideggerian' views, ethnomethodology, activity theory, actor-network theory, and the theories of practice and structuration. Likewise, contributors to a recent strategy-as-practice volume (Golsorkhi et al., 2010a) reviewed six different theoretical sources for their field, including structuration and activity theories, 'Bourdieusian', 'Wittgensteinian' and 'Foucauldian' perspectives, and a narrative approach. Amid such diversity, two elements can be identified as common to most practice-based theory and research (Golsorkhi et al., 2010b, Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). First is a focus on social reality as made up through the situated actions of people. Structural elements of social action – orders, structure, practices, etc. – are constituted or created through courses of action, and are thus seen as on-going collective accomplishments, rather than static, permanent entities. The corollary of such a view is an interest in studying the micro-level activities that constitute the social. A second common element of practice views is the rejection of *dualisms*, or conceptual oppositions (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Thus, practice approaches reject the idea that pairs such as structure and agency, mind and body, cognition and action, and objective and subjective, refer to independent and antithetical entities, with separate sources, dynamics and outcomes. Rather, practice studies look for ways to overcome such dualisms by suggesting that social life is produced though *dualities* (Giddens, 1984), or *entanglements* (Suchman, 2007), of such supposedly opposed elements.

In what follows, I review three of the sociological theories that have been most influential on practice views in management and organisational studies. Most such views have been based on two connected theoretical approaches to understanding social phenomena: the theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), and the theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984). Rather than summarising each of them separately, I will focus on their similar views on three specific elements of the social: repetition, practicality and recursiveness. The third sociological approach I will discuss is actor-network theory (ANT) whose core ideas can be traced to the works of Michel Callon (1986), Bruno Latour (1991, 1992) and John Law (1992). While ANT shares many of the concerns addressed by the theories of practice and structuration, the solutions it has offered to the three elements discussed above have been quite distinct.

3.2.2   Theoretical foundations: theories of practice and structuration

The theory of practice and the theory of structuration have been the common theoretical source for most practice-based views of organisations (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Strongly linked to the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Heidegger (Chia and Holt, 2006), they can be defined through their similar understanding of repetition, practicality and recursive relationships in collective action.

First, the theories of practice and structuration share a focus on the repetitive nature of social life, and its explanation outside the rule-execution paradigm. Bourdieu denounces the "fallacy of the rule" (Bourdieu, 1977: 22) whereby practice is seen as execution and regularities are due to the application of rules. In opposition to such objectivism, Bourdieu explains the pervasiveness of repetition in social life through the concept of *habitus*. Habitus is a "system of durable, transposable dispositions" which generates regularity in actions without the existence of rules or "the orchestrating action of a conductor." (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Rather than a consequence of rules or leaders, habitus is the product of the conditions to which individuals have been subjected in the past, that is, a product of their history.

In a similar manner, for Giddens, "routine […] is the predominant form of day-to-day social activity" (1984: 282). Repetition is so ever-present in daily life that the one-way flow

of time can be said to give way to "reversible time" (1984: 282). In contrast to Bourdieu's concept of habitus however, for Giddens repetition is "made to happen" by reflective actors who seek to minimise "unconscious sources of anxiety" and achieve a sense of "ontological security" in such repetition (1984: 23).

A second theme in the theories of practice and structuration is *practicality* as the basis for action. The pervasiveness of repetition in social life does not imply that the behaviour of social actors is predetermined or mindless. On the contrary, Giddens stresses that actors are generally quite knowledgeable about what they do and why they do it, and that they reflexively monitor their own and others' actions. This ongoing monitoring of action is performed through *practical consciousness*, which is different from both discursive consciousness and the unconscious. Practical consciousness consists of "all the things which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life" (1984: xxiii), a concept similar to Wittgenstein's (1953) notion of "knowing how to go on". Like Giddens, Bourdieu rejects the dualistic vision of action as being either fully conscious or fully determined. What he calls the 'logic of practice' again builds on the concept of *habitus*: "the habitus is spontaneity without consciousness or will" (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). Action does not presuppose intentionality or even operational mastery on the part of the actor, but is biased towards what is economical, convenient and easy to master and use (Bourdieu, 1990: 86).

The third and final theme is the recursive relationship between agency and structure. Giddens called this *the duality of structure*: "the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction" (Giddens, 1984: 19). In other words, structure constrains and enables actions, which at the same time create and recreate that same structure. A similar notion of recursiveness forms part of Bourdieu's definition of *habitus* as "*structured* structures predisposed to function as *structuring* structures" (Bourdieu, 1977: 72; emphasis added). For Giddens and Bourdieu the recursive relationship between agency and structure implies overcoming the controversy between positivist and interpretative views of social science:

rather than needing to give precedence to either structure or agency in social analyses, they can now be considered together as a duality.

3.2.3   Theoretical foundations: actor-network theory

ANT shares with the theories of practice and structuration their critique of earlier objectivist approaches, but has arrived at a different understanding of the three elements discussed above. Like the other theories, ANT also dismisses rule-based explanations of repetition in social life and, similarly to the concept of habitus in Bourdieu (1977), underlines the role of disciplined humans in producing and maintaining such repetition (Law, 1986). However, ANT scholars also strongly emphasise the role of material elements in sustaining patterns of collective action, to the point of insisting on the symmetrical treatment of human and nonhuman actors in the analysis of social patterns (Callon and Latour, 1981, Latour, 1991, 2005, Law, 1992). Attributing agency to 'nonhuman actors' has indeed been one of the best known –and most controversial– aspects of ANT.

Such a stance however can only be understood in conjunction with ANT's conceptualisation of action. ANT resolves the problem of the rule-action gap through a mechanism that is quite different from Bourdieu's (1990) *logic of practice* or Giddens's (1984) *practical consciousness*: when we say an actor has followed a rule, it is because both actor and rule have been transformed through what ANT has called a process of *translation* (Latour, 1991). Because translation implies a transformation of both actor and rule, ANT in effect collapses, rather than bridges, the gap between rule and action. After translation, actors 'conform' to the rule because "they cannot do otherwise" (Latour, 1991: 105).

Translation is thus a crucial concept in ANT: it is the basic mechanism by which "the social and natural worlds progressively take form" (Callon, 1986: 224). Individual actors, both human and nonhuman have programmes of action. As they engage in the world, they translate each other and become assembled into collective courses of action which, as they endure and become increasingly irreversible, form reality. All entities are therefore defined by their relationships to the other entities which have become assembled in their making. This radical relational ontology applies to all 'social' entities, as well as to material objects

and even to the definition of a human being: "analytically, what counts as a person is an *effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting, materials*" (Law, 1992: 383, original emphasis). Law further explains:

> *If you took away my computer, my colleagues, my office, my books, my desk, my telephone I wouldn't be a sociologist writing papers, delivering lectures, and producing "knowledge." I'd be something quite other–and the same is true for all of us. So the analytical question is this. Is an agent an agent primarily because he or she inhabits a body that carries knowledges, skills, values, and all the rest? Or is an agent an agent because he or she inhabits a set of elements (including, of course, a body) that stretches out into the network of materials, somatic and otherwise, that surrounds each body?*
>
> (Law, 1992: 383-4)

This is the meaning that the expression *actor-network* should convey: all actors – human and non-human– are the effect of a network of heterogeneous elements. Action does not originate in the actor that is seen to act. Rather, it is the result of the translation of many other agencies that may not be co-located with the actor, but relayed from sites that are distant in space and time. Action is therefore akin to "a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies" (Latour, 2005: 44).

Further clarification of ANT's understanding of action can be obtained by examining what Suchman (2007) described as ethnomethodology's[5] view of action. This is contrasted with the 'planning view' of action, prevalent in modern social science, which defines action as the enactment of a plan or an abstraction, that is, an imperfect or adapted realisation of intentions. The major problem with such a view is that it needs to rely on a concept of commonsense knowledge as the ultimate basis for 'filling in the gaps'. For instance, Wittgenstein's (1953) 'knowing how to go on', Bourdieu's (1990) 'logic of practice', and Giddens's (1984) 'practical consciousness', provide the final source of knowledge that allows an actor to act in the world. The need for the existence of this base of rather indeterminate shared knowledge creates a host of new problems for the social scientist,

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[5] Ethnomethodology, a branch of sociology based on Harold Garfinkel's (1967, 2002) work, is acknowledged as one of the principal antecedent sources for ANT (Latour, 2005)

which, in the case of Bourdieu and Giddens, have been resolved through their particular understanding of repetition, practicality and recursivity discussed above.

For ethnomethodologists by contrast, situated action is not the enactment of a pre-existing plan or abstract understanding. Plans are *projective representations* of action (Suchman, 2007). They are articulations that represent actions as imagined prospectively. Such articulations are obviously very different in nature from situated action itself. Moreover, although plans are often used as a prescriptive resource in situated action, they do not –cannot– determine action 'in any strong sense' because "the efficiency of plans as representations comes precisely from the fact that they do not represent those practices and circumstances in all of their concrete detail." (Suchman, 2007: 72). Any articulation of practice (a plan in Suchman's terminology) is a *representation* –prospective or retrospective– of a varied set of courses of action, and such representation necessarily omits a great deal of what needs to happen or has happened in situated action. Indeed:

> *Just as it would seem absurd to claim that a map in some strong sense controlled the traveller's movements through the world, it is wrong to imagine plans as controlling actions.*
>
> (Suchman, 2007: 186)

An ethnomethodological view of action therefore, sees all action as *situated* action, that is, as the product of the particular configuration of materials and human actors in a specific time and place. This is the insight that underpins ANT's concept of action as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements.

Note the contrast between this view of action and that of the theories of practice and structuration where action is carried out by reflexive human agents as they enact the structures they are embedded in. In ANT, action does not stem from any pre-existing structure, even one with which it is recursively related. Action is always a new accomplishment of the whole set of actors and artefacts that assemble themselves in it. Repetitions occur not because of a structure, but because durable and replicable artefacts and actors assemble themselves repeatedly in many different courses of action.

Thus, like the other theories, ANT sees structure as an *effect* of the repetitions present in everyday action; but contrary to them, it does not seek an explanation to such repetitions in a recursive relationship with structure. Instead, patterned action is explained by the repeated presence of durable artefacts and humans in different courses of action. Moreover, in collective action, particularly within organisations, such repetitive presence of artefacts and humans often originates in the actions of a specific actor who has found a way of relaying his or her own agency to the multiple sites where action takes place. It is therefore possible to identify the source of *structuring activities* by tracing the connections between the sites of everyday activity and "other places, other times and other agencies" (Latour, 2005: 166). Latour and Hermant (1998) called the sites of such well-connected actors *oligoptica*. An oligopticon is a well-connected site where knowledge of other sites is gathered, accumulated, transformed into new knowledge, and disseminated back to other sites in the shape of standards, quasi-standards and collecting statements[6] inscribed in artefacts or embodied in disciplined humans (Latour, 2005). Such activities constitute "cycles of accumulation" (Latour, 1987: 219-33) which are the means for *agency at a distance*, and explain how patterns in activity are formed and maintained.

The analytical potential of ANT resides in that, through the combination of a view of actors as networks of other agencies, of action as a node, and of patterns in activity as originating in the actions of specific situated actors, it provides a parsimonious, thoroughly realist explanation of recurrent collective action in organisations. Moreover, such explanations apply to the examination of stability and change over time, as well as to the study of variability and consistency across sites. This is the valuable insight that will be exploited in this thesis, by extending current practice-based views of organisational routines in order to provide an alternative understanding of variability and consistency in HRM activities.

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[6] Latour uses the expression 'collecting statement' to refer to any kind of utterance that describes the social, including everything from popular sayings and aphorisms, to social scientists' writings.

3.3   Organisational routines

This section introduces the organisational routines literature, which has studied repetitive collective actions in organisations. For decades, organisational scholars have noted that much of what goes on in organisations entails repetition over time and across space. Organisational routines have been defined as "a repetitive, recognisable pattern of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors" (Feldman and Pentland, 2003: 96). HRM activities, understood as the set of organisational activities that lead to individualised employment outcomes, fall squarely within the remit of this definition: each instance of HRM activity –a hire, a dismissal, a promotion, a pay rise– involves multiple actors, and is recognisable as similar to other instances performed at other times and sites. Indeed, HRM activities have been used as examples of organisational routines by several key contributors to the literature. For example, Nelson and Winter used "procedures for hiring and firing" as an example in their definition of organisational routine (1982: 14). Likewise, in her first approximation to a practice view of routines, two of the five routines studied by Feldman (2000) were hiring and training staff. Finally, Feldman and Pentland (2003) used the example of "the academic hiring routine" to illustrate their original formulation of the performative model.

Organisational routines have been examined from two different perspectives, recently summarised by Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville (2011) as the capabilities and the practice perspectives on routines. The former has mostly been the work of organisational economists and includes such established and extensive literatures as behavioural theories of the firm (March and Simon, 1958, Cyert and March, 1963), the evolutionary theory of economic change (Nelson and Winter, 1982), and the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991). The capabilities perspective typically takes a black-box approach to organisational routines, looking at their impact on firm outcomes. This perspective on routines functions within the same paradigm as the top-down model of HRM, and there are many parallels between the two literatures, not least their links to RBV research.

The practice perspective, on the other hand, has developed over the past decade, largely through the works of Martha Feldman and Brian Pentland (Feldman, 2000, Feldman and Pentland, 2003). The practice perspective looks at the internal workings of routines and the role of actors in their stability and change (Pentland and Feldman, 2005, Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011). Although it has mainly focused on theorising the endogenous sources of variation in routines over time, rather than across space, their conceptualisation of routines is useful for the analysis of variability in HRM activities.

3.3.1 Capabilities perspective on organisational routines

The earliest proponent of the concept of organisational routines relied on it to explain how organisations achieve coordination of activities (Stene, 1940). Two decades later, routines were part of the behavioural theories of the firm developed at the Carnegie School, which elaborated the concepts of bounded rationality (March and Simon, 1958) and organisational learning (Cyert and March, 1963). Later, organisational routines were at the heart of Nelson and Winter's (1982) evolutionary theory of firms, playing a role analogous to that of genes in biological evolution. More recently, organisational routines have been the stuff of organisational capabilities in resource-based views of the firm (Barney, 1991), and the related dynamic capabilities literature (Teece et al., 1997, Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000, Winter, 2003, Teece, 2007).

All these literatures have studied routines as 'black boxes': they deal with inputs and outputs of the routines as a whole (Pentland and Feldman, 2005, Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011). This approach has three main implications. First, routines are seen as inherently stable and inertial. In March and Simon's (1958) conception of routines, once a set of behaviours or responses to stimuli have been learned, they are consistently performed until some form of change is forced upon the routine. In the context of evolutionary theory (Nelson and Winter, 1982), the stable character of routines is the basis for their durability, as well as their capacity to be replicated, both key elements for routines to be considered analogous to genes.

Second, actors, the people actually doing the routine, are absent from the analysis (Feldman and Pentland, 2003); they are assumed to execute the routine more or less as it has been designed (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011). Routine execution is seen as mindless acting by organisational members. March and Simon for instance recognise that executing a routine does require "a considerable amount of reconstruction of the programme details" (1958: 177), but this is deemed 'routine' problem-solving, which does not require any amount of cognitive exertion.

Third, change in the routine is exogenous to the routine itself. It is the result of conscious design decisions by leaders and managers (Stene, 1940), as they ascertain the performance of the routines against their own expectations (Cyert and March, 1963). From an evolutionary standpoint, Nelson and Winter (1982) insist that "undirected change" –"an organisation member trying to do a better job"– is unlikely to produce general benefits for the organisation, so the firm's control system must be deployed to repress such "deleterious mutations" (1982: 116). This focus on routines as a product of managerial action is also preeminent in the RBV literature where enormous attention has been given to capabilities that are *endowed* upon an organisation by their founder (Leiblein, 2011). Capabilities (routines) are *owned* by firms who modify them through high-level (manager-driven) dynamic capabilities and ad-hoc problem solving (Teece et al., 1997, Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000, Winter, 2003).

From the above, parallels are readily apparent between the capabilities perspective of organisational routines and the top-down model of HRM. Both conceive of routines and practices as black boxes and focus on their inputs and outputs rather than the details of how they operate. Both have dismissed the relevance of variation in the routine/practice, be it over time or across space. Both play down the agency of individual participants whose role is limited to applying, enacting or implementing the directions of others. Finally, both see routines/practices as products of managerial design, and stress the importance of control processes in ensuring compliance.

3.3.2   Practice perspective on organisational routines

Whereas the capabilities perspective has viewed routines as rigid and static entities, the practice perspective has questioned their stability and explored how routines can also be sources of flexibility and change (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011). The most influential practice-based theory of organisational routines is arguably Feldman and Pentland's (2003) *performative model of organisational routines*. Their starting point was a definition of routines consistent with those previously made in the literature: routine is "a repetitive, recognisable pattern of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors" (2003: 96). They argued however that the view of routines as stable, unchanging entities is only tenable when they are seen as a black box (Pentland and Feldman, 2005). When the elements and internal workings of routines are examined, organisational routines appear as a richer phenomenon, and they can be a source of change as well as stability.

In order to describe how endogenous change is generated in routines, Feldman and Pentland (2003) conceptualised them as consisting of two parts: ostensive aspects and performative aspects. The ostensive aspects of a routine are "the abstract, generalised ideas of the routine" (Feldman and Pentland, 2003: 101). They must not be understood as a single idea or a shared understanding; on the contrary, they are multiple because they encompass the diverse subjective understandings embodied in many participants (Feldman and Pentland, 2003).

Alongside abstract understandings of a routine are each of the multiple instances in which the routine is enacted across time and space by organisational actors – its performative aspects. The performative aspects of a routine are the sets of "specific actions taken by specific people at specific times when they are engaged in what they think of as an organisational routine" (Pentland and Feldman, 2005: 796). Performances of a routine are never automatic; they are enacted by mindful actors who improvise ways to deal with specific situations, against a background of rules and expectations. Each performance therefore varies and is different from all others.

The performative and ostensive aspects of an organisational routine interact in a recursive way (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Participants use the ostensive aspects to guide, account for, and refer to their performances of the routine. More specifically, the abstract understandings of the routine (ostensive), embodied in the different participants, are *acted out* in each specific instance or performance of the routine (performative) (Feldman and Pentland, 2008). At the same time, participants' actions create, maintain and modify abstract understandings of the routine. Each performance is an opportunity to adjust the routine in order to adapt to contextual variations, improve outcomes or obtain different outcomes than before (Feldman, 2000). Some of these adjustments may obtain legitimacy and be retained as part of embodied understandings (Feldman and Pentland, 2008). This interaction between abstractions and performances, in which variation is generated, retained and re-enacted, is an endogenous source of change in the routine. In this sense, routines are "generative systems in which actions produce and reproduce structures and the structures produce, enable and constrain action" (Feldman and Pentland, 2008: 305).

The above description of organisational routines is closely modelled on Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration and its conception of a recursive relationship between structure and agency. In later work however, Feldman and Pentland (2008) acknowledge their dissatisfaction with structuration theory in that it does not help specify what structure is and how it is created, other than as an unintended by-product of action. Thus, in their more recent work (Feldman and Pentland, 2005, 2008, Pentland and Feldman, 2007, 2008) they have sought to specify parts of their model by incorporating elements of actor-network theory into the general framework of their original formulation. One of the most significant new elements is the redefinition of the ostensive aspects of routines as narratives that are overlaid by participants on flows of actions, actors and artefacts (Feldman and Pentland, 2008). These narratives establish associations between actions, actors and artefacts. Each participant creates his or her own narrative, so that some of the associations may become contested. Those associations that are repeated in many narratives obtain legitimacy and are stabilised. Change in the routine occurs when new associations become widespread enough

to be legitimised and therefore find their way to the ostensive aspects that guide individual performances. These developments have helped Feldman and Pentland put some 'flesh' on the 'bones' of their initial formulation, and have led them to reach some interesting conclusions. For instance, they have changed their emphasis from a view of routines as a discrete phenomenon made up of two mutually constituting parts, to asserting that there is no such thing as an underlying phenomenon or routine, that it is constructed by actors who establish associations as they weave their narratives of the routines (Feldman and Pentland, 2008). Likewise, they have paid more attention to the role that artefacts in general, and representations of the routine in particular, have in organisational routines (Pentland and Feldman, 2008).

Feldman and Pentland's (2005, 2008, Pentland and Feldman, 2008) understanding of actor-network theory, however, does not fully exploit its potential to provide a comprehensive explanation of organisational routines. One particularly limiting aspect is that Feldman and Pentland do not recognise ANT as a theory of action:

> *It is important to remember that actor-networks do not describe patterns of actions. They describe the pattern of associations among a set of actants. Thus, they are the wrong conceptual tool for describing what Cohen (2007, p. 781) aptly calls the ''pattern-in-variety'' that is characteristic of any live routine.*
>
> (Pentland and Feldman, 2008: 244)

Because of this perceived limitation of ANT, Pentland and Feldman (2007, 2008) developed the concept of 'narrative networks'. A narrative network is the set of "actual and possible patterns of action that can be generated by an organisational routine" (2008: 244); a sort of repository of all possible courses of action that actors draw upon and enact. This adds unnecessary complexity to their model because, in fact, ANT is precisely intended to describe and explain patterns in collective action. Actor-networks come together *in* action and do not endure outside of it: "a network is not made of […] any durable substance but is the trace left behind by some moving agent. […] [An actor-network] has to be traced anew by the passage of another vehicle, another circulating entity" (Latour, 2005: 132). The networks of associations must not be understood as political alliances of sorts –a common

misunderstanding of ANT– but as provisional assemblages of actants that construct courses of action and only live on in the material traces –notably inscriptions– they leave behind. For Feldman and Pentland, however, routines are networks that endure in the abstract understandings of participants, independent of action, a kind of infrastructure of connections that enables action, "networks of actants that may be recognised as stable entities in themselves" (Feldman and Pentland, 2008: 312). Thus, they seem to have understood ANT as a theory about networks, something Latour has warned against: "now we are stuck with 'network' and everyone thinks we mean the World Wide Web or something like that" (2005: 143).

3.4   Towards a practice-based view of HRM

Feldman and Pentland's model of organisational routines is a useful first approximation to a practice-based view of HRM. It encourages examination of specific instances of HRM activity as central for understanding HRM practices, as opposed to analysing the abstract properties of the practice, such as its 'content'. It also helps draw attention to the collective nature of HRM routines and to the important role of human as well as nonhuman elements. However, there are two important limitations that need to be addressed to make their model useful for conceptualising HRM. First, the model has focused on the repetition of activities over time, but has given little attention to repetition across space, in different sites of an organisation at the same time. Thus, routines are described as sources of stability and change, but they have not been examined in relation to consistency and variability. As discussed in chapter 2, the latter is the greater concern for the study of HRM.

Second, the model only addresses 'endogenous' mechanisms of stability and change in routines, as separate from 'exogenous' mechanisms, which are left to be explained through the logic of the capabilities perspective: routines are subject to the control of managers and the pressures of the economic and social environment (Feldman and Pentland, 2008). In terms of HRM, the separation of exogenous and endogenous mechanisms of consistency and

variability would perpetuate the separation of top/HR managers as designers of intended HRM practices and line managers as implementers of actual HRM practices. The result would not be so different from current conceptualisations, such as Nishii and Wright's (2008) model, and little additional light would be shed on what HRM implementation actually entails.

3.4.1 A 'flat' view of HRM?

There are two elements of actor-network theory that help overcome the above limitations. First, ANT explains repetitive action patterns as the result of the actions of specific actors who relay their agency through durable artefacts and disciplined people (Law, 1986, Latour, 2005). This explanation applies just as well to temporal as to spatial repetition. Second, by adopting an ethnomethodological (Suchman, 2007) view of action as "a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies" (Latour, 2005: 44), ANT breaks any distinction between internal/endogenous or external/exogenous agency: each individual course of action can be analysed as the confluence of all its relevant agencies, independent of their nature or location in space and time.

This thesis therefore will explore a 'flat' description of HRM consistent with Latour's exhortation for social scientists to "keep the social flat" (2005: 165-72). Such a flat description will explain order in organisational HRM activity without recourse to higher-level entities.

3.5   Conclusion

A practice-based view of HRM can help overcome important limitations faced by the SHRM literature, as has done in other management research areas. In particular, the practice perspective on organisational routines offers a valuable starting point for theorising HRM, but does not provide adequate theoretical foundation for examining variability in activities across space, which must be a crucial element in a theory of HRM. Actor-network theory on the other hand proposes a flat description of organisation in which the source of patterns in organisational activity can be found in the actions of central actors and the artefacts they put

into circulation. Thus, ANT provides an explanation for patterned activity which is applicable to repetition across sites as well as over time.

This thesis therefore endeavours to develop a flat description of HRM activities. Chapter 4 describes the methods used for investigating HRM activities in a large UK-based retailer. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 develop an ANT-based description of HRM as distributed and emergent, but patterned through the actions of members of the HR department. The resulting view provides an explanation for consistency and variability in HRM, outside the policy implementation paradigm.

CHAPTER 4: METHODS

Every single interview, narrative, and commentary, no matter how trivial it may appear, will provide the analyst with a bewildering array of entities to account for the hows and whys of any course of action. [...] The mistake we must learn to avoid is listening distractedly to these convoluted productions and to ignore the queerest, baroque, and most idiosyncratic terms offered by the actors, following only those that have currency in the rear-world of the social.

(Latour, 2005: 47)

The above quote from Latour's *Reassembling the Social* summarises some key elements of the methodological approach taken for this research. Latour's was an invitation to seek the accounts of actors in the field, and to take them seriously as plausible explanations of collective action, without prejudicing them according to the extent to which they fit social researchers' theories. This research has taken as its main data source a set of over a hundred narratives (n=112) of HRM episodes, collected in interviews with line managers in several stores of a British fashion retailer. These narratives, as anticipated by Latour, provided a wealth of entities that contributed to HRM activities, thus providing a valuable landscape of variability, as well as regularity, in HRM.

This chapter describes the methods used in the research reported in this thesis. The first section provides an overview of three important research design choices, and puts them in relation to other practice research. Then follow an account of how access was secured and a description of the company where research was carried out. Finally, there is a detailed explanation of the steps taken for data collection and for data analysis.

4.1 Research design

The methods deployed in this thesis are consistent with those proposed by scholars within practice-based studies who have stressed the need for practice-based research to integrate three elements. First, practice research needs to be grounded on a detailed examination of situated participant activities (Nicolini, 2009b). This implies the use of qualitative data collection methods that can tap into the richness of real-world phenomena

and "coax it into view" (Weick, 2007: 14). It also implies sensitivity for the importance of locating activity in space and time, and for researchers to engage in fieldwork in "the sites of accomplishment" (Nicolini, 2011), or as Weick put it, to "go to the scene of the accident […], and to locate [it] inside one's own head" (2007: 16).

Second, practice research needs to identify patterns of interest in the examined activities, and trace the connections that account for the production of such patterns (Latour, 2005, Nicolini, 2009b). In order to achieve this, Latour (2005) proposed that social researchers perform three 'moves': (1) *localising the global* , that is, locating the sites where standards and quasi-standards are put together and sent into circulation; (2) *redistributing the local*, that is, identifying the many agencies that are present at each site of accomplishment; and (3) *tracing the connections*, that is, following the actors and artefacts as they travel across space and over time, thereby transporting the agencies that generate patterns in activity. More recently, Nicolini (2009b) has proposed the twin 'metaphorical movements' of zooming in on and zooming out of practice to achieve a similar analysis. Thus, in the same way as Latour's (2005) second move, zooming in entails close examination of situated activities; whereas, similar to his first and third moves, zooming out involves trailing the connections of those activities to other places and other times.

Finally, practice researchers need to write up a description of the practice that is successful in re-presenting it to others (Czarniawska, 2004, 2007, Latour, 2005, Nicolini, 2011). In practice research, writing up the thesis is as much a part of the research strategy as the fieldwork, insofar as composing a textual description of the practice cannot be viewed as a mere reflexion of the world out there, but as the creation of a new object that may or may not succeed in advancing knowledge of the world. As Latour put it, "we [social scientists] write texts, we don't look through some window pane" (Latour, 2005: 123). The challenge therefore is not to fix the world in the text, but to produce a text where practices 'show up' (Nicolini, 2011).

Latour (2005) described the role of the research report in social science as the equivalent of the laboratory in natural sciences. Social scientists compose texts in which

they experiment at retracing and reassembling bits of the social world. Their texts –like natural scientists' experiments– may fail in that the social does not show through. A good text however, succeeds in deploying the wide range of heterogeneous elements that produce an outcome, so that "the materiality of a report on paper […] *extend[s]* the exploration of the social connections a little bit *further*" (Latour, 2005: 128, original emphasis).

The rest of this section reviews three design choices in this research –setting, data sources, and writing strategy– and grounds these choices on the three elements of practice-based methods described above.

4.1.1   Research setting

The setting for this research was 13 stores and the head-office HR department of a large multi-store fashion retailer. All fieldwork in the stores was completed before fieldwork at head office. This choice was significant for a number of reasons. First, it identified the stores as the main 'site of accomplishment' for the HRM activities under examination. This not only positioned the research closer to the actors who 'do' HRM –line managers–, rather than those who 'own' it –HR and top management–, it also made easier to detect the connections to other activities accomplished in the workplace.

Moreover, retail was chosen as an ideal setting for uncovering the dynamics of consistency and variability in HRM activity: as archetypical 'replicators' (Winter and Szulanski, 2001), retailers consist of a number of similar and comparable business units – the stores – with standard job roles, and the same applicable HR policies. Past research has identified an inbuilt tension between prescription and control of branch activities by Head Office, and the localised performance of such activities throughout geographically dispersed sites. For instance, Storey and his colleagues (1997) described some of the centralising changes to Tesco's operations in the 1990s and how this affected the role of line managers in the stores. Likewise, Grugulis and her colleagues (2010) described the many constraints Head Office departments imposed on the leadership activities of store-based managers. Thus, it was expected that a retail setting would be ideal for studying the relationship between intended HR practices and their actual implementation in the field.

4.1.2   Data collection

One striking feature of HRM research to-date has been its single focus on HRM practices[7] –that is, general accounts of HRM in organisations– and the absence of research on the actual individual separate organisational courses of action through which individual employment terms are shaped. The typical qualitative approach to studying, for instance, hiring and promotion activities has been to try to establish a univocal description of what activities should take place or are 'actually' taking place in an organisation *on average*. Fieldwork is typically geared towards collecting respondents' general summary accounts of such activities, and their evaluations of the same. Few researchers have actually attempted to understand the many specific individual courses of action that are subsumed –obscured under– such summary accounts of 'what goes on'. The result of this is that the very data collected by researchers emphasise repetitions as the basis for summarising multiple courses of activity, and marginalises differences which are less amenable to univocal summary descriptions. Thus, as described below, this research takes as its unit of analysis, not the 'practice', but the course of HRM action.

Most –though by no means all– practice[8]-based studies of organisations have relied on ethnographic observation as their main method for field data collection (Nicolini, 2011). Like many other studies however (e.g. Weick, 1993, Latour, 1996, Orlikowski, 2002), the research reported in this thesis has made extensive use of participant interviews, and this has been an important strength of the study. First, the use of interviews enabled the research to cover a larger number of HRM episodes (n=112) than would have been possible if observation had been used. Using a larger and more diverse set of cases was crucial in developing the theory resulting from the research. Second, the use of narratives from the interviews helped overcome some of the challenges inherent to the study of practices that span across different spaces and times (Czarniawska, 2007). Participant narratives included elements of courses of HRM action that were located far apart in space and time, and which

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[7] In the mainstream sense of practice as discrete entity that subsumes action.
[8] In the performative sense of 'organised sayings and doings' (Nicolini, 2011).

would have been virtually impossible to observe. Third, using participant narratives as the main source of data allowed for participants' own 'theories of action' to be taken into account (Latour, 2005). This is a direct consequence of ANT's insistence on recognising actors the same capacity for reflexivity, criticality, and objectivity as social scientists, thus worthy of a more central role than that of mere informants typically given to them in other research: "You have to grant [actors] back the ability to make up their own theories of what the social is made of." (Latour, 2005: 11)

Finally, the interviewing and data analysis techniques used in this research mitigated concerns about "retrospective sensemaking by image-conscious informants" (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007: 28). Czarniawska (2004) noted that in any interview situation three types of logic –of theory, of practice and of representation– are intertwined in interviewee responses. In this research, the combination of questioning techniques targeted at eliciting specific episodes of HRM activity, and analysis of interview data focused only on situated narratives ensured that theories were developed from data that privileged the logic of practice over the other two types of logic.

4.1.3 Writing-up strategy

Czarniawska (2004) has suggested that a good practice write-up starts with a rich situated description of practitioner activities that conveys the complexities, contradictions and differences that can be found in the world. She echoed a point also made by Weick, when he advocated richness, detail and thoroughness, against "formulations that strip out most of what matters" (Weick, 2007: 18). Chapter 6 of this thesis is an attempt to convey the practices of progression and performance management as a complex, contradictory, and variable set of activities. In contrast to the introductory summary in chapter 5, which delivers a simple, univocal account of HRM practices, chapter 6 is full of variation, surprise and multiplicity. This was partly achieved by following Czarniawska's (2007) recommendation to consecutively go over the data in different ways. In this case, narratives were first categorised by theme; second actors and artefacts of narratives were discussed; and finally several moments in the narratives were examined.

Another important element of a good report of practices as suggested by Czarniawska (2004) is to develop theory through the use of 'emplotment', that is, to use the structure in the text to help readers make sense of the phenomenon that is reported. Chapter 7 in this thesis develops a flat description of HRM that gains strength from the structure of the chapter, which is modelled on Latour's (2005) 'three moves', and Nicolini's (2009b, 2011) suggestion to zoom in on (HRM activity as distributed and emergent…), and zoom out of (… and patterned by central actors) practice.

Finally, for Latour a good ANT write-up is one in which "all the actors do something and don't just sit there." (2005: 128). This implies considering the agency of actors and artefacts as forming part of the courses of action, not as mere backdrops to them. Again, the analysis of narratives in chapters 6 and 7, and the flat view of HRM developed in chapter 8 strive to consider the full agency of every element that forms part of HRM assemblies.

4.2   Obtaining access

I started my search for access by identifying the 40 largest retailers in the UK by revenue through a search on the MINTEL database. I then used a commercially available directory of personnel managers (AP, 2009) to retrieve and compile contact details for the heads of HR in each of those companies. After discarding a few companies for a number of reasons, I mailed letters and research statements to 30 organisations in October 2009. I followed these letters with an email a week later, and a second letter in November. These efforts generated 12 declining replies and 2 shows of interest by early January. One of these two later withdrew their participation.

At the participant organisation access was initially agreed for a set of interviews – which eventually became wave 1 of the fieldwork (see below for a description of the different phases in the fieldwork). Because it was not clear how much access I would be granted beyond that initial phase, in February 2010, I attempted to expand access by targeting retail banking organisations. I focused on building societies, rather than commercial banks, because of the major upheaval the industry was in, following the part

nationalisation of RBS and Lloyds TSB in October 2008. I followed a similar procedure as with the general retail sector, sending letters to the 13 largest building societies in the UK. One building society showed strong initial interest, but after many emails, several phone calls, a few draft proposals, and two face-to-face meetings, they finally withdrew participation in May 2011. By that time, I had completed all phases of the fieldwork at the participating organisation, and was satisfied with the data collected.

This research has been carried out in only one organisation. Whereas theory developed using multiple cases is often seen as having a stronger foundation (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), there are reasons to argue such an approach may have limited the contribution of this research. First, considering multiple cases would have implied dealing with organisations where the HRM role of line managers and the applicable policies and practices would have been very different. In such case, the analysis of HRM activities may have been obscured by considerations of role and policies. By considering only one case, I have been able to focus attention on understanding HRM activities in themselves. Second, it is the broad sample of respondents (n=45), in different units and roles within the organisation, and particularly the diverse set of episodes of HRM activity considered (n=112), which provide sufficient scope for the theory that has been developed.

4.3　The company

The organisation studied was a large UK-based retailer of clothing, footwear, accessories and home products, with several hundred stores nationwide. The company held an overall market share of around 10% and was a leader in the mass midmarket segment. It was particularly strong in women's clothing and among more affluent shoppers in the 35-to-44 age group.

For several years, the company had achieved modest revenue growth. In the period between 2006 and 2011, the company's UK retail sales grew by just over 1% annually, while sales of all clothing specialists grew twice at fast by 2.27% annually. Moreover, the company was able to sustain its sales figure thanks to strong growth in direct sales to

consumers through the Internet. Store sales declined by 1.5% in the same period, despite a 9% increase in the number of outlets, and a 26% increase in sales area. With such limited opportunity for revenue growth, the company – which was publicly listed – strove for profitability. Its 2011 annual report stated that the main financial objective of the company was to achieve "sustainable long term growth in earnings per share". By that measure, the company's performance improved significantly between 2006 and 2011, with EPS growing in excess of 50% over the period, from 141p to 222p. A significant part of that growth however was achieved through share buybacks, as a way to "deliver EPS growth without adding operational risk" in an unfavourable economy (Annual Report and Accounts January 2011).

Indeed, the time of this research – 2010 – was dominated by the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and the ensuing recession in the British economy. Although UK clothing retailers' sales as a whole continued to grow through the recession, midmarket players with an older customer base suffered relatively more, as many of their customers limited their spending on clothing or traded down to value retailers (Mintel, 2010). In this difficult competitive situation, management put an emphasis on careful management of operating margin across the retail network. An important cost component of margin was store payroll. The company employed an average of 45,000 people in its retail stores in the year to January 2011, equivalent to 24,400 full time jobs. Store payroll amounted to about 22% of retail revenues. This proportion was kept constant in the year to January 2011 over the previous year, as the company offset a 1% annual pay increase with 'efficiency savings' in the stores (Annual Report and Accounts January 2011). Such 'efficiency savings' can be traced to two separate moves. First, there was a reduction in staffing levels, as selling space increased by more than 5% while full-time equivalent (FTE) employment remained constant. Second, average staff costs per FTE decreased by 1.48%, as use of part-time labour intensified.

4.4　Data collection

I collected data in two waves of semi-structured interviews, with a total of 44

managers in 13 stores in the Midlands region of England, and a further set of interviews with

5 members of the Retail HR organisation at Head Office (Table 4.1). In the stores, a total of

35 respondents (79.5%) were female, consistent with the proportion of female workforce in

the company, and the retail sector in general (Burt and Sparks, 2003).

Table 4.1　Interviews

	No. of sites	No. of respondents	Female
Wave 1	6	21	16 (76%)
Wave 2	7	23	19 (83%)
HR	1	5	3 (60%)
TOTAL	14	49	

Stores ranged in size from 45 employees and about £3 million in annual revenues, to

170 employees and more than £15 million in annual revenues. Table 4.2 indicates the

number of stores in the sample in each of seven grades used by the company to classify

stores according to their annual revenue, and Table 4.3 provides full details of the sample

size and characteristics of each of the stores visited. The scale of some of these larger stores

made them quite complex operations. In-store activities were grouped under three main

areas: commercial, operational and administrative (office). Commercial staff focused on

providing high quality customer service, maintaining the commerciality of the shop floor,

and protecting against theft. On the operational side, stockroom staff handled stock from

delivery to the shop floor, including major routines around processing of deliveries and

replenishment, often constrained by lack of physical space and tight schedules. Finally, the

administrative team carried out a wide range of important control activities relating to the

management of cash, tracking of stock and prevention of employee fraud, among other

responsibilities.

Table 4.2   Stores by size

Store grade	MAT band* (m£)	No. of stores in sample	No. of employees†
1S	>20	-	
1A	13-20	1	170
1	8-13	2	100-150
2	4-8	4	70-95
3	2.5-4	6	45-80
4	1.5-2.5	-	
5	<1.5	-	
		13	

* MAT=Moving Annual Turnover, a measure of revenue; bands as defined in company documentation.
† Actual number of full- and part-time employees in the stores in the sample.

Table 4.3   Research sample

Fieldwork wave	Store	Store grade	No. of store employees	No. of interviews in sample
1	Store 1	2	86	4
	Store 2	1	100	2
	Store 3	3	70	3
	Store 4	1	150	4
	Store 5	2	85	4
	Store 6	3	65	4
2	Store 7	3	170	4
	Store 8	1A	95	4
	Store 9	2	62	4
	Store 10	3	80	4
	Store 11	3	45	3
	Store 12	3	70	1
	Store 13	2	80	3
3	HR Dept	n.a.	n.a.	5
				49

In both waves of store interviews, an HR officer arranged for my visit to each of the stores on separate days. My point of contact at the stores was the store manager. After interviewing him or her, I asked to interview three further managers in the store. In 5 of the

13 stores I could not achieve this target number of interviews, even after a repeat visit (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4   Stores by number of interviews

	4 interviews	3 interviews	2 interviews	1 interviews	Total stores
Wave 1	4	1	1	-	6
Wave 2	4	2	-	1	7
	8	3	1	1	13

All interviews were held in private during work time in an enclosed room in the back area of the store. Before the start of each interview I read out a statement (Appendix 1) informing the respondent of my student status, my institutional affiliation, the purpose of my research, and the purpose of the interview. I also let respondents know the interview would need to be recorded. Further, I stressed that all responses would be kept confidential and that participation was voluntary, emphasising that I would not disclose non-participation. All prospective respondents agreed to participate.

4.4.1   Wave 1

Respondents in wave 1 held the following job titles: Store Manager (6), Assistant Store Manager (3), Commercial Manager (1), Sales Manager (7), Sales Supervisor (1), Office Manager (2), and Stockroom Supervisor (1). 16 of them (76%) were female, 5 (24%) were male. Median length of service was 6 years, ranging from 1 to 21. 12 respondents (57%) had been hired in their teens or early twenties into part time sales consultant positions; 5 respondents (24%) had been recruited externally directly into a managerial position.

Wave 1 interviews were exploratory. I did not have any prior knowledge of the company's HRM practices, policies or activities. My goal therefore was to inquire in general about the company's HRM practices and respondents' role in them: what practices they were involved in, what specific activities they carried out within those practices, and how HRM decisions were made. I designed two sets of interview questions (Appendix 2); one for store managers and another for the other respondents. Store manager questions were grouped under three headings: 'About your prior experience', 'About your current job' – including questions on store characteristics-, and 'About your role managing employees'. I

expected these interviews to last about 45 minutes. Other respondents received the following three sets of questions: 'About your job', 'About your manager', and 'About working for [the company]'. I designed these interviews to last around 20 minutes. Actual interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour for store managers (median 43 minutes), and between 15 and 45 minutes for other respondents (median 26 minutes). A total of close to 11 hours of audio material was produced (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5   Wave 1 interview times

	Number of interviews	Target time	Median time	Minimum time	Maximum time	Total time
Store managers	6	45:00	42:51	24:35	57:21	4:08:58
Other managers	15	20:00	26:29	15:15	46:22	6:44:50
						10:53:48

4.4.2   Wave 2

Respondents in wave 2 held the following job titles: Store Manager (7), Assistant Store Manager (5), Sales Manager (9), Operations Manager (1), and Sunday Store Manager (1). 19 of them (83%) were female, 4 (17%) were male. Median length of service was 9 years, ranging from 1 to 24.

Wave 2 interviews were designed to explore in detail the two areas of HRM activity which had emerged as most relevant for line managers after the preliminary analysis of wave 1 data: progression and performance management (see findings chapter for definitions). I decided that for the types of questions that I would be asking in wave 2, it made sense to ask all respondents the same set of questions, so I developed and used a single interview schedule (Appendix 3). Interviews were designed to last about 45 minutes. Actual interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour and 17 minutes (median 44 minutes). A total of 17 hours and 12 minutes of audio recordings were produced (Table 4.6). Questions were grouped under two main headings, 'Performance management' and 'Progression'. Within each of them, I designed questions that would elicit narrative accounts of recent significant HRM episodes. I targeted my questions towards obtaining accounts where the

respondent was involved in the episode as a line manager, as well as accounts where the

respondent was involved in the episode as the employee on whose employment terms a

decision was made. For instance, in performance management, I asked respondents whether

they had been 'performance-managed' before, and encouraged them to tell the story.

Likewise, in progression, I asked respondents to share their own career histories at the

company, and give details of how specific progression decisions had come about.

Table 4.6   Wave 2 interview times

	Number of interviews	Target time	Median time	Minimum time	Maximum time	Total time
All respondents	23	45:00	43:54	19:57	1:12:20	17:12:50

4.4.3   Retail HR

After completing all Wave 1 and Wave 2 store visits, I interviewed members of the

Retail HR organisation at head office. I deliberately scheduled these interviews last because

I wanted to privilege line managers' accounts of HRM activity. Indeed I completed my

fieldwork in the stores with virtually no input from the HR organisation and no prior

knowledge of the company's HR practices, policies or procedures. Respondents at head

office included the Head of Retail HR, two Regional HR Managers, and two HR Officers.

The goal in these interviews was to understand the role of the HR organisation and their

interactions with line managers, crosscheck some of my emergent findings, and clarify some

areas of HR policy and activity where line managers' data was fragmented or contradictory.

I developed and used a single interview schedule covering all HR activities, but with more

detail on progression and performance management (Appendix 4). The interviews were

designed to last about 1 hour. Actual interviews lasted between 51 minutes and 1 hour and

18 minutes, yielding a total of 5 hours and 38 minutes (table 4.7).

Table 4.7   Retail HR interview times

	Number of interviews	Target time	Median time	Minimum time	Maximum time	Total time
All respondents	5	1:00:00	1:09:22	51:42	1:18:42	5:38:39

4.4.4   Documentary data

Besides interview data, I requested and was granted access to all internal

documentation on the relevant HR policies. I analysed several major policy documents

including the Staff Handbook, Attendance at Work Guide, Disciplinary Guide for Managers,

Store Structure and Salary Pack, Long Term Non-Attendance Guide and a specimen of the

weekly Vacancy Bulletin, among other lesser documents. I also consulted company

publications such as the 2010 Half-Year Report, the Annual Report and Accounts (Jan

2011), and a number of other corporate presentations and documents.

4.5   Data analysis

The interviews produced a total of 33 hours and 45 minutes of recorded data. This

material was wholly transcribed verbatim and then coded using qualitative data-analysis

software (NVivo 8). Coding was performed in four stages (see table 4.8). Coding stages 1

and 2 were completed on wave 1 interview data before conducting wave 2 interviews. Once

wave 2 interviews were transcribed, they were coded to stages 1 and 2, and then, all

interviews were coded together to stages 3 and 4.

Table 4.8   Coding stages

Stage	Coding to…	Purpose
1	Interview schedule	Audit application of interview schedule
2	HRM activity	Describe consensus view of HRM practices
3	Narrative mode	Differentiate abstract accounts (ostensive aspects) of performance management and progression practices from situated narratives (performative aspects)
4	HRM narratives	Identify distinct narratives of performance management and progression episodes

4.5.1   Stage 1: coding to interview schedule

First, all interview transcripts were coded to their applicable interview schedule. Such

coding provided for an audit of how consistently the schedule had been followed across

interviews. Tables 4.9 and 4.10 show the number of respondents whose transcript had some

content coded to each of the main headings in their respective interview schedules. Figures

show reasonable consistency in the application of the interview schedules in both wave 1 and

wave 2 interviews.

Table 4.9 Coding to interview schedule, wave 1	Var. A Store Mgrs	Var. B Others
Number of respondents	6	15
Code	Sources	Sources
About your job		
Job description	6	15
Store description	6	n.a.
Who is your manager	n.a.	12
Goals	2	11
Challenges	5	14
About managing employees		
Main HR activities	6	n.a.
HR policies	6	n.a.
Example of process	5	n.a.
HR department	4	n.a.
About your manager		
Relationship with manager	n.a.	15
Good manager	n.a.	15
How much support	n.a.	11
Example of support	n.a.	11
Wish your manager did	n.a.	10
Working for the company		
Work history	6	15
Aspirations	n.a.	15
Change in employment	n.a.	13
Satisfaction with employment	n.a.	12
Rate employer	6	15
Final comment	6	15

Table 4.10 Coding to interview schedule, wave 2	
Number of respondents	23
Code	Sources
About current job	
Job description	19
Store description	6
Performance Management	
Role	19
Cases	18
Absence	22
Lateness	22
Traffic Light	22
Bound by rules	13
Self	18
Progression	
Role	23
Appointments	20
Development	17
History	23
Declined	19
Final comment	22

4.5.2 Stage 2: coding to HRM activities

In the second stage, I coded all data according to the main HR activities identified by

respondents, including staffing structure, management of man-hours, salary, bonus,

personnel selection, shifts, absence, time keeping, performance appraisal, training, employee

consultation, sales competitions and disciplining. Since I did not have prior knowledge of specific HRM activities carried out at the company, I first produced a long list of activities which I then developed in two ways. First, I further detailed coding within each of the initial categories. For instance, material that I had initially coded under 'time keeping', was further refined into 'evaluation of policy', 'implementation issues', 'new system', and 'old system'. Secondly, I connected activities together and eventually grouped some of them under umbrella HR activities. For example, respondent accounts of 'Absence' and 'Time keeping' were so closely related to performance management processes that I grouped them as special cases of the latter. Through this process two major HR activities emerged in which managers were most involved: progression and performance management. This initial conclusion after wave 1 interviews was key for designing the second wave of interviews.

4.5.3   Stage 3: coding to narrative mode

After I collected and transcribed wave 2 interview data and performed coding stages 1 and 2, I realised that respondent accounts of HRM practices could be split into three categories which I termed 'narrative modes' (Table 4.11). First, there were times when respondents described HRM activities as they *should* be performed. These were highly idealised accounts, similar to a standard operating procedure or a policy statement. There was little or no consideration to variation in activities, to the agency of the individuals involved or to context. I termed this type of account 'abstract prescriptive'. Second, respondents sometimes described HRM activities as they *generally* worked. They offered a sort of summary or average of many individual episodes. Agency, context and variation were often part of the description, but it did not expressly refer to any specific past instance. I termed this narrative mode 'abstract descriptive'. Finally, there were times when respondents described specific events situated in time and space, with identifiable actors. These narratives gave an account of an episode in which a certain employment outcome (e.g. a promotion or a disciplinary action) had been produced for a specific employee. I termed this narrative mode 'situated descriptive'. It was often the case that respondents' accounts

started at the abstract prescriptive but 'descended' through abstract descriptive to the situated

descriptive mode after further questioning, in a 'peeling the onion' fashion.

The third coding stage therefore involved coding all wave 1 and wave 2 interview data

which had been coded to 'Performance management' or 'Progression' to one of the three

different narrative modes. Table 4.11 summarises the proportion of data coded to each

mode. It illustrates the effectiveness of the emphasis on eliciting narratives of specific

episodes planned for wave 2 interviews, which succeeded in raising the proportion of

situated descriptive data from 23% in wave 1 to 48% in wave 2.

Table 4.11 Coding to narrative modes

Narrative mode	Definition	% of text coded to each[*]	
		Wave 1	Wave 2
Abstract prescriptive	Idealised account of how things should be done, close to a SOP, or a rendering of policy	6%	5%
Abstract descriptive	General story about how things are usually done, not a full account of specific performances, but often full of references to actual examples	71%	47%
Situated descriptive	Full account of a specific performance of a routine, situated in specific time, place and people.	23%	48%

[*] of transcript text coded to 'Performance Management' or 'Progression' in coding stage 2

4.5.4   Stage 4: coding to narratives

The fourth and final coding stage consisted in identifying usable narratives of

individual HRM episodes within situated descriptive data. The main criterion to determine

whether a narrative was usable was whether it gave sufficient detail to account for the

production of specific employment outcomes. In total, interview data yielded 112 usable

narratives. 50 of these narratives referred to episodes of progression, whereas 62 referred to

performance management episodes. The longest narrative was 2,208 words, whereas the

shortest was 135, median 453 (Table 4.12).

Table 4.12 Narratives

		Number of words		
	No. of narratives	Maximum	Minimum	Median
Progression	62	980	135	408
Performance Management	50	2,208	166	594
All	112	2,208	135	453

Usable narratives were provided by 34 of 44 respondents in the stores (Table 4.13), 10 respondents did not provide any usable narratives. Two respondents provided a maximum of 8 narratives each. In terms of distribution by stores, most narratives (96 or 86%) were sourced in wave 2 stores, consistent with the focus of wave 2 interview schedules (Table 4.14). A maximum of 21 narratives (19%) came from a single store.

Table 4.13 Respondents by number of narratives

No. of narratives	Performance Management	Progression	All
0	21	16	10
1	8	12	10
2	7	5	5
3	5	6	4
4	2	3	5
5	1	2	4
6			4
7			0
8			2

Table 4.14 Stores by number of narratives

	Store No.	Performance Management	Progression	All
	1	0	1	1
	2*	1	0	1
Wave 1	3*	2	0	2
	4	1	5	6
	5	2	0	2
	6	2	2	4
	7	4	15	19
	8	6	8	14
	9	8	9	17
Wave 2	10	11	10	21
	11*	6	8	14
	12*	2	2	4
	13*	5	2	7
				112

* Stores with three or fewer respondents

Narratives are representative of both genders and all job titles included in the sample of respondents, as shown by the very similar percentages in the narrative sample and the respondent sample (Table 4.15).

Table 4.15 Narratives by gender and job title of respondent

Gender	Progression	Performance Management	All	%	% of respondent sample
Female	46	44	90	80%	81%
Male	16	6	22	20%	21%
Job title					
Store Manager	21	20	41	37%	28%
Assistant Store Manager	9	11	20	18%	21%
Sales Manager	23	13	36	32%	37%
Sunday Manager	3	3	6	5%	2%
Operations Manager	3	3	6	5%	2%
Commercial Manager	1	0	1	1%	2%
Stockroom Supervisor	1	0	1	1%	2%
Office Manager	1	0	1	1%	5%
TOTAL	62	50	112	100%	100%

4.5.5 Analysing participant narratives

Once the 112 narratives were identified in the data through the coding stages described above, I analysed them in three steps. First, I coded the narratives to the actors and artefacts that featured in them. This involved identifying each instance where an actor (e.g. the line manager, the incumbent or an HR officer) or an artefact (either physical such as a paper form or a computer system, or symbolic such as a job grade or a misconduct category) featured in the narrative. This highlighted the very wide array of elements that were drawn by participants in accounting for HRM outcomes.

Second, in order to make the narratives more easy to grasp, I produced edited versions of the often messy narratives, mostly by ordering events chronologically and eliminating repetition. I also produced a short, two-sentence synopsis of each narrative. This facilitated the final third task of grouping narratives by themes as shown in the Findings chapters below.

4.6   Conclusion

This chapter has expounded the methods applied in this research. The first section has shown these methods to be consistent with other practice-based research. In particular, there were three design decisions which together strengthened the research. First, fieldwork was carried out in several stores of a retailer. This choice helped focus the research on HRM activities as performed by line managers and others in the different stores and trace the connexions between these sites and the centre. Second, data was collected mainly through participant interviews. This provided important advantages, including consideration of a larger number of HRM episodes, inclusion of elements located far apart in space and time, and privileging of actors' own theories of action. Finally, the strategy for writing up chapters of this thesis has followed recommendations to provide rich description and 'emplotment' (Czarniawska, 2004), and to deploy as many mediating actors as possible (Latour, 2005).

The rest of the chapter has given a full account of the steps followed to produce the research including obtaining access, carrying out the fieldwork, and data analysis. The detailed information provided is evidence of the thorough effort that has been done to keep good track of the research.

CHAPTER 5: HR FUNCTION AND HRM SYSTEM

5.1   Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to describe the HR function at the company and summarise the main policies and practices that comprised its HRM activities. The description has mostly been based on interviewee responses, crosschecked and complemented by an examination of documentary data. Overall, the company had a set of well developed HRM policies, which were widely known, respected and adhered to by respondents. There was a high degree of consistency between different respondents' accounts of HRM policies, procedures and activities.

The chapter is organised as follows. First is a description of the HR function at the company, which involved two organisations. The description is more detailed on the organisation called Retail HR because this was the one responsible for the activities that became the main focus of this research, as reflected in chapters 6 and 7. The second section discusses a set of HRM activities which I have labelled 'centralised HRM', including store structure, staffing levels, salary and bonuses. These activities were mostly carried out at Head Office, and the decisions fed down to the stores without consultation. The third section then discusses the set of HRM activities which I have labelled 'decentralised HRM', where much of the activity took place in the stores. Two broad areas of HRM activity were decentralised at the company: progression and performance management. The section provides a summary overview of these activities, and introduces many of the elements that will be further examined in chapters 6 and 7, where these two activities will be analysed in deeper detail using participant narratives.

5.2   The HR function

There were two specialised organisations in charge of areas which would ordinarily be considered to fall within the remit of the human resource management function. On the one

hand, Retail Training was responsible for all programmes having to do with tracking and developing skills in the workforce. They produced skill profiles for the different positions and management grades to guide managers in the training and developing their teams. Retail Training also produced materials such as manuals and DVDs that managers used in store to train employees, and ran courses which employees on a career track regularly attended. Finally, they designed and managed the annual performance appraisal system and the customer service 'traffic-light system', a tool for evaluating the customer service offered by individual commercial staff members. On the other hand, Retail HR was responsible for most other aspects of HRM, including staffing, appointments, recruiting, employment relations, salaries, employment contracts, disciplinary policy and legal and compliance issues. Whereas Retail Training was part of the Retail Division and reported directly to its Head, Retail HR was part of the HR organisation and reported to the Head of HR, who reported to the CEO of the company.

In general, managers in stores viewed the Retail HR department as a value-adding partner to the business. They were praised for their support to decision making in the store, especially in terms of the relevance and user-friendliness of HR policies, and the accessibility of HR advisors. Retail HR edited and distributed several policy documents for store managers and employees, including the Staff Handbook, and manager guides for managing attendance, long-term absence and disciplinary action. There was also an HR site in the company intranet, where these and other reference documents were accessible, and which provided automated online versions of most of the administrative paperwork associated with HRM activities.

The Retail HR department consisted of about 20 people, including a Head and five regional teams, each comprising a Regional HR Manager and a varying number of HR Officers and Assistants. All the teams were based at Head Office. The Head and the Regional Managers spent up to 80% of their time travelling to visit stores and area headquarters, whereas Officers and Assistants spent most of their time at Head Office

supporting the stores via telephone and email, with some occasional visits as well. One of

the HR Managers described his job in the following terms:

[my job is to provide] support for the field team, that's the region manager and area
managers, and store managers, [...] so for a large part it really is advice and support
for those managers, it's training and advice and development for those managers and
it is I suppose, to make sure that they are performing the HR aspects of the role that we
would expect, so I assess all of those things in different ways, maybe it will be that I go
and do store visits for example and assess how they are performing in those areas

(Respondent HRM1)

Store visits were indeed a central part of HR managers' roles. They routinely spent

three or four days a week 'in the field'. Each store visit was an opportunity to provide

advice, audit practices and generally learn about what was happening in the field:

for example, we had this recent spike in absence, so one of the things I would do was
making sure that stores with high absence percentages are managing their absence
correctly, so I would speak to the area manager and say 'are there any particular
stores that you want me to visit?', and then any concerns that you have, and the area
manager will come back and say, yeah, I'd like you to go to this store, and I'd like you
to go to this store, and that's how that comes about, but I look at a number of areas on
most visits, so it could be that I look at one specific area, it could be that I look at the
whole broad range, sometimes as in next week, I just plan to do some random visits
myself, because it also means I'm getting out and about, for me that's the better part
about my role to get out and meet the managers and discuss what the issues are in the
stores

(Respondent HRM1)

HR Managers were also periodically involved in the design of new policy or new HR

management systems. Typically, the head of the department would assign a project to one of

his reports, who would then involve participants from the field – area and store managers.

Examples of projects some of the respondents had been involved in in the past included an

overhaul of the sick pay scheme, the introduction of standard store staff structures, and the

design and implementation of the clock-in system. Often, major changes to policy were first

piloted in an area or region and then extended to the rest of the retail division.

HR Officers and Assistants, for their part, spent a majority of their time at Head Office

receiving phone calls throughout most of their workday from managers in the stores who

were in the midst of some HRM activity for which they needed advice:

primarily my role is office based here [at Head Office], I look after just over a hundred stores on the London region, by telephone contact, so they will contact me for advice on disciplinary issues, employment relations, recruitment, all of those, it's broad spectrum, it's everything really

(Respondent HRM3)

generally I think that we do have a very good relationship with the stores, we take a lot of calls, and if they didn't have respect for the department and for the advice and direction that you give them, they wouldn't make that phone call, and we do take hundreds of phone calls, sometimes in excess of six, seven hundred a day, so I really truly don't think they would make those calls if they didn't think they would get something positive out of it

(Respondent HRM4)

5.3   Centralised HR

Some areas of HRM activity were highly centralised, in the sense that decisions were taken at Head Office and fed down to individual stores, often without prior consultation. In particular, three important areas of HRM activity were centralised: store structure, staffing levels and salaries and bonuses. Both the store structure and salaries and bonuses were set annually in a policy document called the Store Structure and Salary Pack (SSSP), which consisted of 43 pages outlining the criteria for store and floor grading, the management structures for stores and floors of different grades, the salary steps and rates for managers and staff, and a set of policy statements for promotions, salary raises, bonuses, wardrobe, store upgrades and downgrades and job 'red-ringing'.

5.3.1   Store managerial structure

Stores were graded annually according to their revenue for the previous 12 months, a figure referred to internally as 'moving annual turnover' (MAT)[9]. There were 7 store grades, 5 being the smallest (<£1.4m), then 4, 3, 2, 1, 1A and 1S, which corresponded to the company's 7 largest stores with annual revenues in excess of £20m each. Both the store grading system and the actual grades assigned to stores were reassessed annually, with a mid-year partial review to accommodate exceptional circumstances (new stores, refits, etc.).

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[9] New and newly-refitted stores were given provisional store grades according to MAT estimates.

The structure and salary pack included an alphabetical list of all stores and their current grade. The store grade determined the senior management structure of the store, and their individual grades, including the store manager, assistant store manager, operations manager, commercial manager, and Sunday manager positions. Some adjustments were made for stores which opened longer hours (>70h). The grade of the store manager was the same as the store's, while commercial, operations and assistant store managers were set 2 grades lower. The operational structure of each store, including delivery manager, stockroom manager, replenishment manager and office manager, was also determined by its MAT plus a few operational variables, such as whether delivery was done out of hours, or whether there was an off-site warehouse.

The managerial structure of each of the sales floors was determined separately. Each of them was individually graded into 10 bands, according to their own annual revenues. The measure used was again based on MAT, but this was adjusted for the four product groups, so that men's wear had less cover, and children's and home more cover, than the women's wear floor for the same amount of MAT. Three separate target structures were defined according to weekly opening hours. Each of the target structures specified the number and grade of positions available to a department, depending on their MAT and their opening hours, with some flexibility in how coverage of Sunday trading was arranged. For instance, a women's wear floor with a MAT of £4 million and trading 70 hours per week was headed by a Grade 5 Sales Manager, who was supported by a Grade 7 Sales Manager and two Supervisors, one of them part-time (20hrs).

In strict terms, Supervisors – also called 'Senior Sales' – were not managers and were limited in some of the activities they could be involved in:

> *the only real difference is that I am not able to do disciplinaries or things like that, things that actually involve HR, but everything else I do virtually the same as if I was a manager*
>
> (MGR09)

In many ways, however, Supervisors functioned as the most junior level of store management and could run whole departments whose MAT did not warrant a grade 7

manager. Supervisor positions were included in the managerial structure in the Store

Structure and Salary Pack.

The standard structures defined in the Structure and Salary Pack were almost

universally applied. There were however some exceptions where a store might obtain

additional staff. Such exceptions needed to be grounded on operational issues, such as a

difficult sales floor layout or exceptional operating conditions, and had to be supported by

senior management in the Retail Division.

Both the commercial and the operational structures of the stores were subject to

adjustments due to changes in store procedures. For instance, in the past a significant

amount of the workload of office staff involved the control of shifts and actual working

times. However, the implementation of a new automated clocking system eliminated that

workload, which in turn led to cuts and downgrades of office roles in many stores.

Occasionally, stores and individual floors grew beyond, or performed below, their

MAT banding and were upgraded or downgraded accordingly. This was normally made

effective in February taking into account MAT in December[10]. Increases of one grade

usually led to the automatic promotion of the managers in the affected structure, whereas an

upgrade involving two or more grades meant the position was advertised and the incumbent

needed to reapply. Downgrades, on the other hand, triggered the so-called 'red ring policy'

which established procedures to adapt the store structure to the new requirements through a

number of different arrangements that often meant managers were transferred to positions in

other stores.

As an example of how fluid the store grading system could be, one of the stores

visited during this research was downgraded after a midyear MAT review in which it

became apparent that new store openings in the vicinity were affecting its business. The

structure was adapted and consultations carried out with affected employees. Some

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[10] Exceptionally, stores and floors could be re-graded at other times in the year, especially following events that significantly altered their business prospects, such as a refit or a store closing or opening in the vicinity.

managers moved to other stores, while others chose to stay and take a downgrade and a pay cut. Part-time staff members had their contract hours changed. By the end of the year, however, MAT had recovered to previous levels and the store was reinstated to its former grade. Changes were then reversed to again adapt the structure to the new MAT banding.

5.3.2   Staffing levels

Non-managerial staff accounted for up to 90% of store employees and consisted of Sales Consultants, and Stockroom and Office Assistants. A store's staff numbers were determined centrally using a system called the Staff Planner. The Staff Planner used a store's MAT forecast and historical sales information to work out a detailed prediction of footfall and sales revenue for each individual store and floor, at different times of the day, daily, each week of the year. Based on this prediction, the system worked out a basic cover plan to which staff employment contracts were adjusted. Store and floor downgrades and changes in store procedures often led to changes in the basic cover plan and employee contracts. In one of the stores visited, there had been consultations to cut the contract hours of all 85 staff members three times in as many consecutive years.

On top of minimum cover, stores had additional 'man-hour' (sic) budgets, which they managed to achieve productivity targets in terms of revenue per man-hour used:

> *we do run the store on a productivity, so depending on how much we take for the week it depends how many hours we can use for the week, we have to come along with the productivity target, so if we don't, we need to cut hours, so [staffing levels] can be tight sometimes*

<div align="right">(MGR06)</div>

The Staff Planner provided a default allocation of additional hours to the different floors and shifts, but managers at the store level had discretion to make changes and apply the hours where they thought most appropriate. Managers also had some discretion to decide who would work the extra hours. All departments had a mix of full- and part-time employees. Full-time staff were not allowed to work any overtime, but part-time employees usually worked more than their contracted hours, up to a full-time week. The Staff Planner kept a record of each part-time employee's availability beyond their contracted hours, and so

was able to work out a default allocation of the additional man-hours to the individual employees. Managers then had a brief window to alter these shifts manually before they were given out to the employees, generally about a week in advance.

The Head of Retail HR explained the simple rationale behind the company's MAT-based approach to determining a store's managerial structure and staffing levels:

> *turnover creates work, and work creates more heads to manage, and fundamentally the more heads you have to manage the more supervision you need, so there is a relation between turnover and management structure*

(HRM5)

5.3.3 Salary

A manager's salary depended on the grade of the position he or she held and the 'merit step' he or she was personally awarded. There were 9 managerial grades[11] and 6 merit steps[12], and each combination of grade and step corresponded to a specific annual salary figure. Additionally, salaries for Store Managers were about 7% higher than those of other managers of the same grade, and salaries for all managers in Outer- and Inner-London stores were about 15% and 21% higher, respectively, than salaries for managers in other regions.

Most new appointments received a starting salary at the 'New and Developing' step, with an automatic increase to 'Competent' six to twelve months later if performance was satisfactory. Higher merit steps could be awarded as merit increases in the annual salary review. However, the number of managers awarded merit increases in any given year was very small[13]. Moreover, there was a 'one up, one back' norm for promotions, meaning that when moving one grade up, a manager would be placed on a merit step lower than he or she previously had been. This meant that merit increases earned at a certain grade were lost in subsequent promotions, and therefore it was extremely rare for a manager to reach the highest steps through merit increases alone. Rather, the highest salary steps were most

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[11] Grades 5 to 1, 1A and 1S for Store Managers, and Grades 7 to 1 for other managers.
[12] 'New and Developing', 'Competent', 'Experienced', 'Excellent', 'Exceptional 1' and 'Exceptional 2'
[13] While normally between 5% and 10% of eligible managers obtained a merit increase in any given year, in the latest process less than 2% of managers had received one (HRM3, HRM4).

frequently used to match the external salary of a new hire or, more rarely, to lure an internal candidate into a hard-to-fill position.

Salary differentials varied across the different grades and steps. The median differential between grades at the same step was 12%, and the median differential between steps of the same grade was 5%. The upper steps of any grade, therefore, had a higher salary than the lower steps of the next grade up. A typical promotion under the 'one up, one back' principle carried a salary hike of about 7%.

For non-managerial staff, the standard hourly rate was set at the minimum wage[14]. A small proportion of employees[15] were paid at a slightly higher 'merit rate' (+3%), given they had more than 12 months service and "demonstrated high level of performance in all aspects of their role" (SSSP). 'Merit Sales' status could be awarded by the Store Manager without consultation or approval. The instances that came up in the interview data indicated that merit sales tended to be awarded in anticipation of a promotion to a Supervisor position.

5.3.4   Bonuses

Bonus was an important part of income for all store employees. There were two major bonus schemes, both directly linked to sales performance against target at the store-level. First, the 'Sales Bonus Scheme' was paid monthly to all employees in a store if sales were at least 95% of target, in which case the Store Manager would get 6% of his or her salary, all other managers 4.5% of their salary, and all non-managerial staff 3% of their salary. These percentages increased at higher levels of achievement, up to 100% of sales target, in which case the Store Manager would receive 16%, all other managers 12%, and all non-managerial staff 8%, of their respective salaries.

Second, the 'Super Sales Bonus Scheme' was paid at the end of each season (twice every year), if store sales were higher than target. The maximum Super Sales Bonus was

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[14] At the time of this research, £5.80 (Oct 2009) to £5.93 (Oct 2010). Stores located in Outer London paid a 5.7% premium and those located in Central London paid a 22.4% premium on these rates. The company paid the full adult rate to all employees over 18 years of age, rather than the legal minimum age of 21.
[15] E.g. store 3 had 2 'Merit Sales' out of about 60 sales consultants, or approximately 3% of the workforce (MGR09)

paid for sales 10% over targets and above, in which case the Store Manager received 14% of his or her salary, all other managers 10.5% of their salary, and all non-managerial staff 7% of their salary.

Adding both schemes together, Store Managers could receive up to 30%, other managers up to 22.5%, and staff up to 15%, of their salary as bonus. In general, there was an expectation that targets should be achievable and achieved, and most employees expected a monthly and seasonal payment as a valued component of their income:

> *every manager and every member of staff receives a bonus if we hit our target and they are very good and attractive bonuses, considering we've just come out of a recession, most of our staff through that recession have been receiving a bonus, the company even lowered the targets to help them achieve their bonus, so I think from that point of view, we might have a set salary, but it's very rare that you earn that set salary because your bonuses always pay a lot more money*
>
> (MGR09)

> *we get monthly bonus, so that's worked out for the four week bonus period, so if we make target over those four weeks we'll get the monthly bonus […] on top of that you'll also get your seasonal bonus, […] which is over the course of six months, if the store manages to reach [target] by depending on how much percent then we'll get a percent of our work that we've done, so they look after you, and there is an incentive to make you get the customers...*
>
> (MGR02)

Besides these two schemes based on store sales, managers were paid smaller seasonal amounts for achieving stock loss and productivity targets, and for complying with various corporate initiatives and procedures. For Sales Consultants, the company ran seasonal competitions on a diversity of commercial goals and rewarded employees in each store with gift vouchers and scratch cards.

5.4   Decentralised HR

Some elements of the company's HR system were decentralised, in the sense that specific decisions were made by line managers, within more or less defined corporate policy, and with more or less consultation with Head Office. My investigation showed that there were two major HR areas where decisions were largely made by line managers: progression –practices and procedures aimed at moving employees from one position to another within

the company-, and performance management –practices and procedures aimed at correcting undesired employee behaviour.

5.4.1   Progression

Throughout interviews in the stores, respondents spoke at length about *progression*, referring to the voluntary moves that many of them had experienced through their time of employment at the company. Many of these moves were upward into higher-grade higher-pay positions, but they could also be horizontal, or even downshifting, if the target position had other advantages for the employee, such as a more interesting product, a store with better career prospects, or a location closer to home. In this section, therefore, I explore progression at the company as the set of practices and procedures that enabled all voluntary employee moves whether to a higher-grade position or otherwise.

Progression was relevant to only a fraction of the Retail Division's workforce. As discussed earlier, up to 90% of employees in the stores were in entry-level jobs as sales consultants and stockroom assistants and many never moved to a different position. For some however having an expectation to improve their employment terms within the company was an important part of their work life:

> *you have two lots of people on the shop floor: you have the one person on there that this is their career, so they are very motivational and they would do anything for you, and then you've got the other side of the team where they're here just to get paid really*
> (MGR07)

Typically, a part-time employee's career path started by taking up all the extra hours he or she was offered, which managers often took as a signal of commitment to a job in retail. At this point, the employee could be offered a full-time contract, if available in the store. They could also be given 'merit sales' pay after completing 12 months in the company. From there on, the employee could aim for progression into supervisory and managerial positions.

It is important to recall that, as discussed earlier, management at the store level had virtually no influence on the number and nature of managerial positions in their structure, and only very limited opportunity to reward employees with merit salary increases. This

meant that, first, the best prospects for any employee to improve his or her employment terms were in moving into a different position within the structure; and second, that availability of progression opportunities depended on vacancies coming up, either because a new position had been created due to a review of the store's structure or –more often- because an existing incumbent had moved to another job or quit the company.

Progression was usually competitive: vacancies were advertised and applicants underwent a formal selection process to assess their suitability for the position. Every week, HR put together a vacancy bulletin with new job openings and distributed it to all the stores, where it was displayed on the staff-room notice board for three weeks. Virtually all supervisory and managerial positions were advertised. Before any new appointments, HR officers checked that the vacancy had been included in the bulletin. Occasionally, a manager would argue for a direct appointment without publication, but HR would only tolerate a direct appointment when it provided a placement for an employee whose position had been 'red-ringed'. In fact, managers generally sought to maximize the number of quality applications. Besides publication in the bulletin, they often sent job posters to nearby stores and personally encouraged anyone they considered a good candidate to apply.

As an example of what was contained in the vacancy bulletin, that for week 20 of 2011 (June), was a printout of fourteen A4 pages, stapled together. It had a cover page, with instructions for applying and HR contact telephone numbers, followed by two pages for each of five regions, one with a list of manager vacancies, the other with a list of supervisor vacancies. In total, there were 76 new openings nationwide on that week. Each vacancy was identified by its store name and number, title of the position and product, grade of the position, salary zone, range of products in store, and shift information. At the back of the bulletin, there were three whole-page posters for some of the jobs included in the previous pages.

All current full- or part-time employees interested in a position were entitled to apply. In the instructions, applicants were asked to "discuss any potential moves" with their current manager before applying. Respondents viewed these conversations as "developmental",

focusing on advice on whether the prospective applicant was "ready" to take up the position. These conversations were indeed part of the broader role line managers had in encouraging their team's progression through offering appropriate training opportunities and advice. Ultimately, no formal permission from the current manager was required for applying to an open position: there was evidence of at least one respondent who successfully applied for a position against the advice of his then manager. Applications were made to the HR department for managerial positions, and directly to the store for supervisory positions. At the end of the three week period, HR handed all applications received to the hiring manager at the store for him or her to handle the selection process.

The selection process typically involved an interview with the hiring manager. This usually consisted of a standard set of questions recommended by HR, which the manager often amended to suit the specifics of the process. Additionally, in some cases, the hiring manager devised activities for the candidates to perform, such as doing a floor walk, or planning a face change. Responsibility for the selection process and its outcome rested with the hiring manager. Others – the manager's own manager and peers, HR – were sometimes involved in support roles such as taking notes or providing a second opinion, at the request of the hiring manager. There was widespread agreement across respondents that hiring decisions were taken by the individual hiring manager, and there was evidence of hiring decisions made against the opinion of HR and of the hiring manager's manager. Only in the case of some showcase stores, would the Area Manager have the final say rather than the store manager. Even within a store, each manager usually took responsibility for selecting their team. One store manager explained:

> *I think it is important for [my managers] to be able to make their own [hiring] decisions, whether they be right or wrong, live with them and manage them.*
>
> (MGR 13)

Respondents attributed success in selection processes to applicants' "ability to do the job", and their "fit" with the current team. In practice, this meant that a candidate's chances improved significantly when they could show prior experience directly relevant to the role

and when they had acquired a certain level of visibility outside their own store. In particular, there were three ways in which employees could enhance their experience and visibility.

First, they could cover for absences in roles larger than their own and in stores different than their own. 'Covering' involved temporarily performing someone else's job. Usually, it implied leaving one's job[16], which may in turn need to be covered, creating 'chains' of temporary assignments. A cover could last anything from a few hours to several months; sometimes its duration was determined in advance and sometimes it was open-ended. Some covers were routine, planned events (e.g. vacation). When a planned absence was long (e.g. maternity leaves), covers involved a competitive selection process similar to a full appointment, including publication in the vacancy bulletin and an interview. Often, however, covers were unexpected, most notably in the case of illness. In such cases, if a suitable cover was not at hand, the absentee's manager would network with other managers in nearby stores, who would selectively offer the opportunity to their staff. Covers that lasted more than four weeks led to a temporary change in pay conditions; for shorter covers, there were no explicit rewards.

Second, employees could acquire experience by assuming functions delegated from their managers. This job enrichment or enlargement was a way to develop employees as well as to trial them for higher roles. Arrangements were made at the discretion of each manager, and had no implications for employee rewards. There were numerous references to this practice at all levels. For instance, an experienced store manager took up responsibilities from her area manager, carrying out store visits for her and leading fellow store managers in specific activities. Likewise, a sales supervisor whose manager had given notice of leaving in a few month's time was effectively acting as manager, even as a selection process was underway in which she was competing against other applicants for the position.

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[16] Sometimes covering someone meant doing two jobs at the same time, especially when the two jobs involved similar functions in the same organisational unit (as when covering for one's manager).

Finally, employees could improve their visibility by participating in area- or corporate-level project work, such as new store openings or the development of next season's collections. Appointments for these projects were made informally through the recommendation of managers.

All three activities above were widespread, with employees on progression track participating in one, two or all three. Except for long covers, none of the activities earned higher rewards or formal recognition; the only advantage for participants was precisely their increased chances of progression.

5.4.2   Performance management

Respondents used the expression 'performance management' to refer to a set of practices and procedures aimed at encouraging favoured employee behaviours, and discouraging unfavoured employee behaviours throughout the organisation. This included a continuum of activities ranging from on-the-job supervision and guidance, to informal verbal counselling, formal performance reviews, and disciplinary procedures leading to formal sanctions. Although the company had annual performance appraisals, they were not considered part of performance management because they were used as a form of praise and as a guide for employee development, rather than for discipline.

Achieving uniform high-standard employee behaviours across its retail network was a key goal for the company, whose competitive success depended on pushing sales through high levels of customer service in the stores, while containing the cost of running them. One of the respondents explained how performance management was linked to the practicalities of running a profitable store operation:

> *if I didn't pick up on managers or staff not performing in store it could be a loss of sales, if it's a security area it could be loss of stock, if it's a health and safety issue it could result in a big accident*
>
> MGR33

Indeed, managers considered performance management a key part of their role:

> *it's the way I achieve all my objectives, so it's very important*
>
> (MGR27)

it is one of the most important parts of my role.

(MGR29)

it's number one really

(MGR33)

On the most common, routine, day-to-day end of the performance-management spectrum, managers engaged in supervision on the shop floor. One of the main functions of all layers of management was to regularly review the work done by lower organizational levels. This was seen as crucial for ensuring conformity with company standards. For instance, store managers regularly started their work day with a morning floor walk in which feedback was given on all aspects of commerciality. Likewise, sales managers and supervisors spent time on the sales floor expressly watching their team work and "corrective-coaching" them:

> *we are told corrective coaching is the best way, so just quickly as soon as you see something, nip it in the bud, go along and say 'oh, try it like this, it may work better'.*
>
> (MGR12)

> *it's overseeing if the tasks are getting done, and time management, seeing if they are approaching customers, if they are doing their job, but with that, assisting them as well, helping them, pointing them in the right direction or if anyone needs development, spending time with them*
>
> (MGR19)

> *the best way to do that [(correct a performance issue)] initially is just to try and do it verbally, so 'look, you haven't got this quite right, you need to do it in that way going forward', and hope that that would nip the issue in the bud, that's usually what it is day to day*
>
> (MGR42)

Whenever a supervisor felt that an issue with an employee's behaviour on the job was not likely to be resolved through corrective coaching on the shop floor, he or she could decide to ask the employee to have an informal private conversation:

> *yesterday I had to pull her up here again and speak to her because I felt there was something wrong, she was really upset all day long*
>
> (MGR21)

Sometimes an informal conversation was held on the initiative of an employee who might feel the need to discuss an issue with his or her manager:

I knew that I wasn't performing right on the shop floor and I came and spoke to [my manager] and said 'you've had case to pick up on something that I hadn't performed', she had given me something to do I hadn't met the deadline and then I came and spoke to her [...], so we sat down and she spoke about other things that I hadn't done and we drew up a plan for the things I can do and I can't do

(MGR08)

The next level of performance management was the formal review. Typically, employees were put on review when informal performance management had not been effective. For the formal review, the manager filled in a 'record card' describing the specific behaviour that needed to change, along with a set of actions and a time when performance would be reviewed again[17]. In a 'counselling session', this document was discussed with the employee. After the time had elapsed, the manager evaluated the employee's behaviour and made a decision on whether the behaviour was corrected and the employee came off formal review, whether more time was given and a further review was set; or whether there had been no improvement and the employee was taken to 'disciplinary'.

'Disciplinary' was the final stage in performance management. The procedures were formally defined in the company's disciplinary policy as laid out in the Staff Handbook and the Retail Disciplinary Guide. Its main component was the 'warning process' which consisted of a first written warning, a final written warning, and dismissal. This structure is common in the UK, and is underpinned by labour law on unfair dismissal (Edwards, 2005). The warning process could be engaged at any of its steps. In grave cases of employee misconduct, such as theft or fraud, dismissal could be summary, with no prior warning. Other misconduct could lead to a final warning. However, in most normal circumstances, all the steps in the warning process were observed. First and final written warnings imposed a financial penalty on the employee for bonus was withheld for three and six months respectively.

The following excerpts illustrate the transitions between informal review, formal review and disciplinary:

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[17] Normally, a full review was set four weeks later, with a half-way partial review.

I spoke to him verbally about things to start with, and then I didn't think he'd improved so then we go to a formal counselling session, we get those documented, so I had three of those documented on certain issues that I wasn't happy with, personally written down on a duplicate format so he would sign it, I would sign it, we would agree some action points, go back in a week, see if those action points were being improved on, if they weren't, then we went to a disciplinary.

(MGR 06)

you have a quiet little word, 'why was you two chatting to each other? why was you not serving the customer?', asking if they need any help and then if you've witnessed it quite a few times, we've got a record card, so we bring them up have a little chat like we are, record-card them for it, probably got three chances that then you'll have a disciplinary, they're quite harsh, but it works

(MGR21)

it started off a bit informally, so 'what are you doing? how are you doing it?', and then it's got more formal, sit down, to the point where two weeks ago, 'I'm now documenting this as a documented conversation that if you do not improve I will formally performance manage you'

(MGR26)

Within the general performance-management framework, managers who encountered unwanted employee behaviour chose an approach based on corporate policy, their prior experience as managers and the advice of HR officers. Sometimes a single issue would go through the whole range of performance-management actions, from corrective-coaching to disciplinary. Often however, less important issues did not make it past a certain action, even if they were not corrected. In particular, it was ultimately up to the individual managers to make the decision to keep an issue 'informal' or take it to a 'formal' stage. Per contra, once an issue was made formal, the manager was less in control of the process as procedures dictated the sequence of steps, their timing and their possible outcomes:

I think when it gets to the point where you're doing formal performance management you have to follow the company guidelines, I think the degree to which you manage it before it gets to that point is a personal thing, isn't it? so I think there are probably some managers who would go down that route a lot quicker than I might like to

(MGR42)

I think because we know we've got a nice very clear cut performance management system, we actually take that initial step, it's absolutely fine, you just follow the process and HR are quite good because at every level through performance management you call the HR department, walk it through, 'is this fair? am I being consistent with how the company wants me to manage this sort of person?'

(MGR43)

The types of behaviours managers tried to correct through performance management were varied, but four reasons were most common. First, employees were often performance-managed because of absence. The company operated a system of trigger points by which, if an employee accumulated a certain number of absences[18], he or she would automatically be given first written warning, followed by final written warning and dismissal if further trigger points were reached. All instances of non-attendance were counted toward trigger points, independent of the cause:

> *It may become necessary to manage your non attendance formally if you have failed to maintain an acceptable level of attendance, regardless of whether your reason for non attendance is genuine.*
>
> (Attendance at Work Guide:15)

This policy had been strictly enforced over the past few years and was often perceived as harsh. More experienced respondents recalled a time when managers were able to judge whether an employee's absence was justified or not before taking performance management actions. Employee attitudes towards the current policy ranged from accepting it as a sign of 'professionalism' to openly resenting it, perhaps depending on how vulnerable the employee felt. The following quotations illustrate the divergence in views:

> *it is very strict within [the company] in the sense of it's very professional, maybe when I first started sickness wasn't taken as seriously as it is here, a lot of things are taken very seriously here, I wouldn't necessarily say it's negative, but some people say it's too serious, whereas at the end of the day it's a job, it's very professional, if you can't adhere to the way in which [the company] wants you to run then...*
>
> (MGR11)

> *I think that many years ago HR actually dealt with long term sickness with a little more sympathy than they actually do now, I understand that long term sickness has a knock on effect and it does affect the whole team, but I think sometimes there's one or two things that should be classed as mitigating circumstances where they're not [...] if [my illness] happened to me at this point in my career, because of the way things have changed within HR that wouldn't have been classed as mitigating circumstances whereas it was back then, so I do think sometimes that now they need to be a little bit more sympathetic with people, I think sometimes they forget that you are a person and you are a payroll number, and sometimes that... perhaps I shouldn't say too much [...] the environment at the store level is very supportive, but once things move on to HR*

---

[18] 3 occasions in any 12-week period, or 5 occasions in any 52-week period, or 3% of contracted time in any 52-week period

and Head Office, because they don't know you as a person... I just think that sometimes they don't take certain things into consideration I think that they should

(MGR16)

A second major reason for performance management was lateness. The company had in place a system of trigger points which operated in a similar way as for absence. Trigger points for lateness were set at about 25% of shifts worked in any 3-week period. When an employee hit a first trigger point, his or her manager was required to hold a formal performance review session and record-card the employee. Further trigger points led to first written warning, final written warning and dismissal.

During the time of this research, the company implemented a new clock-in system in which employees themselves clocked in and out at the tills at the start and end of their shift. By creating an electronic record of each employee's presence on the shop floor, the new system was ostensibly put in place to help ensure all staff were ready at their posts from the start of their shift. This was something that had practical importance for the running of the stores:

if they're in a nine thirty to eleven thirty shift, at nine thirty we're on what we call minimum floor cover, so it's just enough staff to open the store, to enable security to be covered, health and safety to be covered, and service to be covered, so that five minutes late, which doesn't seem like a lot, means for five minutes we either don't open the store and annoy customers [or] we open the store and we are prone to theft

(MGR43)

we had a real problem with [lateness], I'd open the shop doors at nine thirty to let customers in and I'd still have my staff pouring in the door, and to try and manage them was so difficult because they would come out with 'I was here on time', or 'I'm not starting until bang on nine thirty and you opened the doors at nine twenty-nine and fifty seconds', [...] they know how to get around it

(MGR25)

The new system freed managers from having to keep track of their team's start and end times. Previously, managers had to be aware of all their team members' whereabouts at the start of their shift and then had to manually record absences and late arrivals. Often, they would just sign off the shifts as they appeared on the rota. The new system produced reports which managers could use daily or weekly to review their team member's lateness records

and take performance-management actions. The overall effect was that many more employees were being formally managed for lateness.

Besides these performance-management implications, the information generated by the new clocking system was used by the payroll system to deduct pay for late starts. The system was set up to register time in 15-minute increments so that a late clock-in by more than 2 minutes was registered as a 15-minute delay. The savings generated in this way were so substantial for the company, that they had become a major driver for the system's implementation:

> *initially it was implemented to improve efficiency and to make sure that we had everybody in the right place at the right time and very quickly it became a cost saving exercise because although we knew we had a problem with lateness and people were often late for work and it wasn't managed, I don't think anybody saw how big that problem was, and it's huge, so it has saved masses of money*
> (HRM4)

A final further implication of the T&A system was that it gave Head Office visibility over shift arrangements in the stores. With the old system, it was possible for employees and their managers to make informal agreements on shifts outside the structure authorised for the store. With the new system however any mismatch between time planned and time worked would come up as a lateness or absence issue, with performance management implications:

> *a lot of people have come out of the woodwork saying 'I've got a contract from nine till one, but I actually can't ever get to work for nine o'clock [...] my manager has been letting me come in at quarter past nine'*
>
> (HRM3)

Having such centralised control of actual shifts was important to Head Office because informal arrangements were perceived to interfere with the efficient management of store staffing levels as prescribed by the company's store template:

> *now that the systems are a lot more transparent, I can see what people are working, [...] I can see what they're contracted and what they actually work, so [managers] won't get away with [informal shift arrangements], [if there is a need] that's now a more transparent conversation between [the manager] and the Organisation and Methods Department, saying [...] 'your systems may be saying this, but I'm the manager in the store, I'm saying it will run better like this', there is definitely the room for negotiation on a lot of things*
>
> (HRM1)

A third common reason for performance management was to correct poor customer service behaviours. The company had in place a "traffic-light system" by which all commercial employees[19] were rated each season as being white, green, amber or red in terms of specific customer service behaviours which were defined by the Retail Training department. The traffic-light system had been implemented only a few months ago, as part of a wider programme aimed at improving customer service and sales numbers, which also included elements like in-store sales competitions and instant reward scratch cards. Employees who were rated as red were put on performance review. If there was no subsequent improvement in their customer service behaviours, disciplinary action was initiated which could eventually lead to dismissal. After its first season running, the amber rating was eliminated because it was felt many managers used it as an 'easy' option. By forcing managers to mark the difference between those employees who were meeting the standard (green) and those who were not (red) top management ensured more corrective actions were taken. Traffic light ratings were discussed at store and area levels. Although no forced-ranking distribution was applied, overly favourable or unfavourable ratings needed to be defended and could eventually be revised.

Finally, a fourth reason for performance management was to sanction instances of misconduct, or breach of company rules. The company had an abundance of rules employees were expected to follow. In the Staff Handbook, employees were warned that "it is your responsibility to ensure you familiarise yourself with [company] policies and follow them", adding that "if you do not you may be subject to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal" (p 10). A similar warning was repeated a further 20 times throughout the handbook in reference to specific rules, such as "failure to notify the payroll department of an overpayment", "refusing a reasonable request to search your person", "abuse of the staff discount benefit", "breach of the smoking policy" and "improper interference with the

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[19] There was also a separate system for back-office employees.

fire fighting equipment". There was a further list of 21 offences classified as gross misconduct, and therefore deemed "serious enough to justify summary dismissal".

5.5 Rationales for (de-)centralisation

HR respondents were asked for the reasons that HRM activities seemed to be organised so differently in terms of centralisation and decentralisation of decision making. It is interesting to see the diversity of elements that came up in their responses. First, those HRM activities which had a direct impact on store payroll costs tended to be more centralised. Indeed, payroll cost was a direct function of the size of a store's management structure, the amount of man-hours that are allocated to it, and the salary rates and bonus paid:

> *it's about maintaining control of what is potentially an area of the business that could run away and become very very expensive if not careful*
>
> (HRM5)

In order to underscore the importance of controlling payroll cost, it is useful to recall what was said in chapter 2 about the importance of managing retail margins, and how achieving a constant proportion of payroll cost to revenues was highlighted in the company annual reports as a significant element of the overall performance of the company.

Second, centralisation of some HRM activities helped achieve consistency and fairness, which was in itself an important goal for members of the HR organisation, but also protected the company from litigation, and may help line managers in their roles:

> *the advantage where we do get involved, is really to provide that approach of fairness and consistency and ensure that not only the stores are complying for the legal requirements [...] but also that they reach consistent decisions [...], because sometimes stores will only deal with an issue once every couple of months, but we are dealing with those issues every day, because we are dealing with all of the stores, so we actually have much more consistent view of what we should be doing in certain situations, and what is fair and right to do*
>
> (HRM1)

> *we are very structured as a company and I believe a lot of our managers like that, sometimes I don't think that they think that they like it until they go and work somewhere else which isn't as structure and then they either come back or we hear "oh, it's great", because they know what they can and cannot do, [...] the*

disadvantage of that is that sometimes they can feel it's a little bit too structured, we tell them what to do

(HRM3)

the biggest and the most obvious [advantage of centralisation] is consistency, we employ a lot of people in retail and many of the stores are side by side with each other, so if we were to allow individual stores to make their own decisions, very quickly we would be in a situation where we are poles apart in terms of decision making [...] so consistency and being fair I think is the biggest reason, but also making sure [...] that people are managing in accordance with procedures and policies that we set up for them to work by, [...] if everybody was off doing their own thing, chaos would reign without doubt

(HRM4)

Third, some activities were decentralised because they depended on local information. For instance, appointment decisions include elements about the job that are best known by the recruiting manager and which may be difficult to transmit to Head Office:

[line managers]are the people that have to work with those people day in day out, sometimes I don't even meet some of my managers, so it wouldn't be right for me to recruit and appoint on their behalf

(HRM3)

[line managers] know their branch, they know the other people they have work in their branch, that they're in a position there to judge whether this person's bringing skills in that they need to complement others', [...] so they know just what the requirements are of their branch, we have to trust them to know that, and therefore we give them the power to make that appointment

(HRM5)

Finally, decentralising some HRM activities was a way of keeping the size – and consequent overhead – of the HR department small:

the reason for [decentralisation] is the resources for the HR department, we couldn't assist stores in their day to day recruitment, [...] we'll advise them if they're having problems recruiting, but [...] with five six hundred stores across the company, we don't have the resources to help them with the recruitment on a daily basis, [...] we've given them all the resources that they need to do the recruitment but we don't get involved often in that side of it

(HRM2)

it's a resource issue, because as a company if we were to get involved in all of the recruiting, then there would need to be a lot of us [HR managers], and from a cost point of view I don't think that would ever be achievable or possible

(HRM3)

5.6   Conclusion

HRM activities at the company were well structured and well known by managers in the stores so that the general accounts of how each area of activity was configured did not differ much from one respondent to another, or even from respondents in stores to respondents in the HR organisation at Head Office. The activities can be classified as centralised and decentralised. Centralised activities included store structure, staffing levels, salaries and bonuses. For these activities, decisions were made at Head Office and then communicated to the stores who had very limited opportunity to challenge or alter any of them. These four areas of HRM activity are the major drivers of payroll costs in the stores and that seems to be a major reason for their centralisation. Decentralised HRM activities, on the other hand, had a high level of involvement from the stores. Decisions on who would progress, to what position, etc. were mostly taken in the stores, and only exceptionally Head Office would intervene. Likewise, decisions on acceptable performance, formal or informal disciplining comprised many activities that were carried out in the stores, although in this case, Head Office had significantly more involvement.

This chapter has provided a general overview of decentralised activities, which are the focus of a much more detailed study in chapter 6 and 7. Whereas this chapter has aimed at summarising the common elements of progression and performance management, chapter 6 and 7 deploy the diversity of courses of action that led to progression and performance management outcomes.

CHAPTER 6: PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

6.1   General introduction to chapters 6 & 7

Chapters 6 and 7 present in a descriptive manner the 112 participant narratives identified in the interview data. The goal is to achieve a *rich description* that deploys the complexities, contradictions and differences in the world, avoiding summaries and "formulations that strip out most of what matters" (Weick, 2007: 18). This is consistent with Latour's recommendation to "feed off controversies" (2005: 21-5), that is, to avoid summarising variety into an average that describes 'what usually happens', but which at the same time hides the tensions and ambiguities that exist in HRM activity at the company.

The two chapters look at performance management and progression narratives respectively. In each, narratives are first categorised and reviewed according to their thematic content. Then follows an overview of the main actors and artefacts that are involved in the narratives. Finally, it is shown how actors and artefacts interact at specific 'moments' in the narratives to shape the production of HRM outcomes. This strategy of categorising and dissecting the narratives and their components in different ways follows Czarniawska's (2007) suggestions for reporting findings in a way that enables the reader to encompass its diversity.

6.2   Introduction

The set of 50 performance management narratives covered a wide range of situations. It is possible however to group the narratives under three headings according to the main reason for performance management. First, in twenty of the narratives the performance management situation arose because of time and attendance issues, that is because an employee had accumulated excessive absence or lateness. Second, nineteen of the narratives described situations where performance management had been due to job performance issues, where an employee's performance on the job was deemed below standard. Finally,

nine of the narratives referred to instances of misconduct where company rules had been breached. Although narratives within each of these groups were themselves quite diverse, they shared common elements which derived from the nature of the issues, but also from the different provisions made in company policy. Table 6.1 provides an index of the narratives grouped under each heading.

Table 6.1 Performance management narratives by theme

Theme	Number of narratives	Narrative numbers
Time and attendance		
Illness	9	12, 13, 14, 17, 28, 36, 39, 40, 47
Distress	5	03, 06, 26, 33, 34
Other Absence	3	08, 09, 16
Lateness	4	20, 21, 22, 23
Job performance		
Other issues	13	01, 02, 05, 25, 29, 32, 35, 37, 38, 43, 44, 45, 46
Customer Service	6	10, 11, 18, 42, 49, 50
Misconduct		
Lost store keys	4	04, 30, 41, 48
Unauthorised absence	2	07, 31
Attitude	2	24, 27
Physical incident	2	15, 19
TOTAL	50	

6.2.1 Time and Attendance

There were 21 narratives in the data which referred to instances of performance management following employee absence (nonattendance) or lateness[20]. Table 6.2 provides information on each of the narratives, including an identification of the respondent; his or her store; his or her point of view as manager, incumbent, etc.; a word count of the original transcript; the type of issue involved; and a short synopsis of the episode.

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[20] Instances of 'unauthorised absence' are excluded because they were treated as misconduct.

Table 6.2   Performance management narratives: Time and attendance

Narrative number	Respondent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Issue	Synopsis
12	MGR30	9	Third party	401	Illness	Part time employee involved in bus accident with little child. Two weeks off due to injuries, with doctor's note, she gets first written warning, against will of manager, appealed but not upheld.
13	MGR30	9	Incumbent	746	Illness	Part time store manager badly broke wrist. Close to losing her job (would still be employed in another position) because of length of absence.
14	MGR33	10	Third party	271	Illness	An employee with an ongoing condition was performance managed for absence, she appealed and got exceptional attendance terms (v. PM17)
17	MGR36	10	Higher management	792	Illness	An employee with an ongoing condition was performance managed for absence, she appealed and got exceptional attendance terms (v. PM14)
28	MGR38	11	Manager	398	Illness	Member of staff has absences due to medical problems, full discipline is given until final written warning, when special trigger-point arrangement of four non-attendance instead of three. Still employee quits four weeks later.
36	MGR43	13	Manager	338	Illness	Employee with depression was managed up to first written warning and left the company
39	MGR44	9	Manager	655	Illness	Employee has accident resulting in six weeks medical leave and hitting a trigger point. There is a second absence for the same reason and another trigger point, resulting in final written warning. She is waiting for it to expire to have surgery performed.
40	MGR44	9	Third party	166	Illness	Employee with 15 years in the company is involved in accident, was managed and had his pay stopped
47	MGR14	5	Manager	623	Illness	Employee involved in car accident and then managed because of absence, up to final written warning. Employee recovered. Manager tried to argue to get her pay back, but was refused.
03	MGR25	7	Manager	264	Distress	Model employee, husband has brain tumour, son broke arm, daughter lost job, was given first written warning for one and a half week absence which hit a trigger point. Absence is absence; there is nothing you can do.

Table 6.2 (Cont.) Performance management narratives: Time and attendance

Narrative number	Respon-dent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Issue	Synopsis
6	MGR26	8	Manager	786	Distress	Store room employee is absent because of attempted suicide. HR advised for final written warning, but Ops manager refused.
26	MGR37	11	Third party	666	Distress	Employee was on final written warning because of absence when her husband suddenly died. After taking two weeks paid absence for that, her absence continued and she was managed for that. She handed her resignation.
33	MGR42	13	Manager	229	Distress	Employee's husband had motorcycle accident, so she needed to care for him and ran into trigger points for absence. Was given first written warning and arranged care alternatively. Still employed.
34	MGR42	13	Manager	280	Distress	Lady who due to personal circumstances had absence and was disciplined. During disciplinary she broke down. HR was not sympathetic, but manager thought it was her duty to convey to HR what was going on in the room.
20	MGR35	10	Manager	461	Lateness	Girl in the Home department, came in late one day being ill. Manager followed procedure but recorded mitigating circumstance, in case it went further.
21	MGR35	10	Manager	180	Lateness	Someone was late alleging train was running late. They phoned the train company to confirm and added that to the file so there would be a mitigating circumstance.
22	MGR35	10	Manager	339	Lateness	Member of staff was late three times in a week, apart from consultation, manager offered a later shift, but incumbent turned down, saying it was not necessary. Manager noted down in file.
23	MGR36	10	Manager	565	Lateness	Hospital move affected traffic in the area unpredictably, so everybody was arriving late. store manager spoke to area manager to have everything overridden.
08	MGR28	8	Manager	482	Other absence	Employee taking time off to care for dependent. HR advised to draft a list of alternative care solutions to being absent from work.
09	MGR29	8	Higher mgt	673	Other absence	Supervisor has attendance problems. Over the course of five months, he is given notice by his direct manager, the dept manager, the commercial manager, and finally the store manager. He goes through all the stages up to dismissal.
16	MGR33	10	Manager	286	Other absence	Employee just transferred from another store, had hit trigger point in previous store, has now hit second trigger point and is going to disciplinary.

Time and attendance was a common way for referring to the management of absence and lateness at the company. Time and attendance narratives shared two elements of policy which were specific to them. First, they were affected by the 'T&A system', an automated time-keeping system which operated through the tills. Second, time and attendance narratives were affected by the company's attendance policy and its system of trigger points. Trigger points featured prominently in all time and attendance narratives. They were explicitly mentioned in 13 of 16 nonattendance narratives. In every case, reaching a nonattendance trigger point was a direct antecedent to being given the corresponding level of discipline as set in the policy:

> *... they'd already hit one trigger point, now they've hit a second one, so they're now going to a disciplinary...*
>
> (PM 12, MGR30)[21]

> *... she got hit two trigger points, got taken to a formal disciplinary twice...*
>
> (PM 28, MGR38)

> *... she'd hit a trigger point, so she had a letter [...] then she hit another trigger point, so she had a first written warning...*
>
> (PM 39, MGR44)

Many of the time and attendance narratives were noteworthy because of the circumstances surrounding the absence or lateness. In eight of the narratives, the employee had to deal with a serious medical condition, such as accidental injury (PM12, 13, 39, 40, 47), severe arthritis (PM17) or depression (PM36). In five further narratives, absence occurred in the context of distressful personal circumstances such as family illness (PM03 and 33), bereavement (PM26), and attempted suicide (PM06). Even in such extreme situations, and despite employees' and managers' wishes to avoid applying the formal rules in an unbending manner, the link between trigger point and disciplinary sanctions remained strong. For instance, in narrative PM12, an employee who had been involved in an accident invoked a doctor's note as a reason for not being disciplined and formally appealed the disciplinary, to no avail. Likewise, in narratives PM26 and 40, the managers argued against

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[21] All quotations have been identified with a narrative number and a code for the respondent (MGR for manager).

discipline, but they were swiftly overruled by their HR advisor. Indeed respondents

expressed the view that hitting a trigger point inescapably led to disciplining:

> *... they are the ones when you know there are massive extenuating circumstances and there is nothing you can do about it [...] absence is absence...*
>
> (PM03, MGR25)

> *... she had a fully justifiable reason as to why she was sick, [...] but policy was followed...*
>
> (PM28, MGR38)

There were however two exceptions where discipline was avoided after a

nonattendance trigger point. In narrative PM34, the manager felt she had to "fight that

corner" to persuade an HR officer that an employee did not deserve a disciplinary action.

The employee had "broken down" during the disciplinary hearing and the manager thought it

her duty to "to impress what we were experiencing in the room with the [employee] sat in

front of us to the person [from HR] over the phone". In even more dramatic circumstances,

the respondent in narrative PM06 reports an instance of an employee who attempted suicide

while on a first written warning for nonattendance. The resulting additional absence meant a

further trigger point was hit and that a final written warning was due. HR insisted that the

warning be given, but the manager refused. She explained:

> *... I don't think he needed any additional pressure or stress or anything like that, we've got to support our employees, we've got a duty to care for them, or else I wouldn't think that was fair, [...] the decision lay with me totally, on non-attendance we have occasions when you manage or don't manage, so I've just put that down, still logged it that he was off, but I've not logged it as an occasion where I'm prepared to take some formal action with it, because I didn't think that was right.*
>
> (PM06, MGR26)

This statement, which seems to contradict both formal policy and the expressed view

of most respondents, highlights the wide variance in the ways managers see their role.

Another example can be found in the contrast between narratives PM17 and 39. In both

narratives, employees had an injury which limited their ability to stand for long periods of

time and gave rise to repeated absence during acute episodes. After hitting non-attendance

trigger points, both employees were taken to disciplinary action. In narrative 39, the case

progressed through different levels of warning. The employee knew she needed to take time

off for treatment, but was postponing it to avoid further trigger points. The manager showed

frustration at the lack of flexibility in the application of policy as she felt powerless to

provide alternative arrangements favourable to the employee:

> *... you can't really do anything about it, and the young girl she is lovely and [...]she*
> *was in tears about [her disciplinary], [...] there should be a better level of*
> *understanding [...] and we [have to] accept that they can come to work and do lesser*
> *hours, or we have to look at their job role and maybe get them in the office, or get her*
> *a seat or something*

<div align="right">(PM 39, MGR44)</div>

In contrast with this episode, in narrative PM17 the employee appealed her

disciplinary and the store manager was ready to consider and push for a remarkable range of

solutions in support of the employee, including the seat that was missing in narrative PM39:

> *... so I spoke to HR [...] and they came back to us with a revised trigger point for her*
> *as an individual [...]she brought her physiotherapist with her, that was very very*
> *helpful, [...] we've done things like order a chair for her to use on the sales floor, [...]*
> *we've reviewed her hours [so that] she'll be having a break in her shift [...], we've also*
> *moved her upstairs from the busier department to the quieter department, [...] we'll*
> *assist where we can, but then it's got to be within reason, [...]so a lot of it is down to*
> *me, [...] and a lot of HR consultants will say that you're the store manager it's up to*
> *you to decide what's feasible for your store, and what you're prepared to go to*

<div align="right">(PM 17, MGR36)</div>

6.2.2 Job performance

There were nineteen narratives involving performance management where employees

were seen as not fulfilling their job requirements for a variety of reasons, among them

achieving substandard results (PM01, 29, 35, 37 and 44), offering poor customer service

(PM10, 11, 18, 42, 49 and 50), not following instructions correctly (PM05 and 45), showing

rude behaviour (PM02 and 06), resisting change (PM 43), or failing to implement changes in

company procedures effectively (PM38). Table 6.3 provides detailed information on each of

these narratives, including respondent, store, length in words, and a brief synopsis.

Table 6.3   Performance management narratives: Job performance

Narrative number	Respon-dent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Issue	Synopsis
01	MGR22	7	Manager	1098	Other issues	Delivery manager is not performing job tasks. ASM starts managing, but cannot follow up. New store mgr thinks there might be a training need and sends for training. Upon return issues persist. Issues ongoing.
02	MGR25	7	Manager	1563	Other issues	Home manager good in her trade, but inconsistent attendance and lateness, rude attitude. Previous manager had initiated formal review, but then dropped process. A turnaround was achieved through a combination of following disciplinary procedure, personal rapport, identification of training needs and new tasks that promoted involvement.
05	MGR26	8	Manager	1092	Other issues	Issues with stockroom supervisor highlights issues with deliveries manager. Ops manager is managing deliveries manager to get him to manage the stockroom supervisor.
25	MGR37	11	Manager	434	Other issues	Manager goes home leaving floor under minimum cover and without a supervisor.
29	MGR39	11	Manager	415	Other issues	Sales manager has planning and communication issues, is managed by higher grade sales manager while store manager is covering at another store.
32	MGR40	12	Manager	2208	Other issues	Sales manager insists he has two additional days of holiday than per company records. New store manager hesitates, but ASM suggests they look at till records to see if he was present on two specific days in August. Turns out he wasn't, HR informs this is gross misconduct. Since manager was on probationary because of new role, he must be failed and lose his job. Store manager wants to forced-transfer him. When confronted with evidence, he casually admits being wrong. he is disciplined for incompetence.
35	MGR43	13	Higher management	701	Other issues	Senior sales with longstanding performance issues which have not been formally managed. New store manager has initiated a formal review.
37	MGR43	13	Manager	283	Other issues	ASM had had issues with previous store manager. Area manager urged current store manager to manage the ASM, but the store manager chose a different approach.
38	MGR44	9	Manager	498	Other issues	Sales manager does not understand new clocking in system, but doesn't say so after training, resulting in a big mess with her department's payroll. She is taken to training again and record carded. Issues are solved.

Table 6.3 (Cont.) Performance management narratives: Job performance

Narrative number	Respondent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Issue	Synopsis
43	MGR06	2	Manager	478	Other issues	New store manager finds ASM does not want to change things, so he is performance managed and resigns after forced move and demotion.
44	MGR08	3	Manager	328	Other issues	An employee had performance issues. His manager thought it was her responsibility to talk with the person and change things so he would be better motivated.
45	MGR08	3	Incumbent	272	Other issues	Manager realises her performance is affected by her mother's death. She speaks to store manager before issue becomes bigger.
46	MGR13	4	Higher management	1295	Other issues	New store manager identifies conduct issues with an employee and persuades commercial manager to get involved and formally manage the employee.
10	MGR29	8	Higher mgt	717	Customer service	Young lady disciplined for quality of service, goes through all the stages until she resigns.
11	MGR30	9	Third party	1222	Customer service	Sales manager complains he was on lunch and senior sales was heavily pregnant. Sales manager leaves. Third party sees it as a hard lesson for everyone.
18	MGR35	10	Manager	930	Customer service	New sales manager was approached by employee who had been rated red and alleged had not received proper training. They engaged in negotiations on how the issue would be carried forward.
42	MGR32	9	Manager	449	Customer service	Regional manager visits store and finds service and security issues. He immediately calls Store Mgr, who then performance manages the sales manager and senior sales. Sales manager complains he was on lunch and senior sales was heavily pregnant. Sales manager leaves. (v. narrative 11)
49	MGR21	6	Manager	742	Customer service	Three disciplinaries, one of them is a man who feels uncomfortable in the ladieswear department. He was given warning before moved to another department.
50	MGR21	6	Manager	1346	Customer service	Three disciplinaries, one of them is a young woman with confidence problems who is very good at tasking but not customer service. Manager wishes not to discipline her, but she is. She is brought down.

The six narratives which focused on quality of customer service were special in that they were affected by the so-called 'traffic-light system', which meant regular assessments were carried out on a defined set of aspects of customer service. In the other 13 narratives however, evaluation of performance was less structured, in the sense that the nature of issues and the timing of actions were unspecified and largely left to the discretion of managers. In some cases, performance management was precipitated by a single incident which was taken to epitomise 'poor performance' (e.g. narratives 25, 29, 32); whereas in other cases behaviours that had been going on for a long time were put under new scrutiny, often due to changes in the store's management team. Indeed, seven of the job performance narratives involved managers moving to a new store or department and having to deal with situations that had been ongoing for some time before. In some of these cases the manager took a more lenient approach than previous management, in effect 'giving a second chance' to poorly performing employees:

> the delivery manager [...] wasn't reaching the things he should be doing in his role, [...] I started him on [...] a four week review [...] then [the new store manager] arrived and said to me she wasn't sure that it was a performance issue, she thought that it might be a training gap [...] so she sent him down to the store down the road [for training]
>
> (PM01, MGR22)

> when we were having all these problems with our customer service, it was discussed with [my area manager], that I take the assistant store manager to performance management because she was looking after customer service [...] I'd literally only been in the store probably a month, and the store manager before that, there were some issues with [her], and obviously the knock-on effect was how [the ASM] was working, and for that reason I said then I wouldn't do that, and that I thought a better way around it was to start afresh with [the ASM] get her motivated, and see how she worked under my direction, and actually the results have been better than performance managing
>
> (PM37, MGR43)

In other cases, the new manager took a course of action that was harsher on the employee. Typically this involved 'formalising' a process that had remained at an informal or verbal stage for some time (narratives PM02, 35, 46). The following passages illustrate some instances where an ongoing process was formalised:

I think [it was a success] because I really made the effort with her to sit down and formalise the review process [...] I put her on a review so we had to do a conversation every month

(PM02, MGR25)

the delivery manager is actually coming along but it has taken several conversations to the point where I've sat down and gone 'right well I'm now managing you because you're not managing', and that's had the bit of a kick that he needed...

(PM05, MGR26)

I spoke to [my assistant store manager], and I said 'look I think it's time that we sit her down and we make it more formal [...] we need to sit down and get something documented because it's just going on too long',

(PM35, MGR43)

the [formalised] process has definitely given [my commercial manager] a lot of confidence in dealing with performance issues, because when I did her appraisal, she talked to me about how she felt quite empowered by the fact that she could make a difference in getting somebody to achieve what he should be achieving

(PM46, MGR13)

Formalising performance management processes was all the more important because of the challenges managers faced in maintaining the continuity of disciplinary processes. In narrative PM01 for instance, the assistant store manager was "taken out of the business" on a project for the area manager, which disrupted the reviews due on the performance of the delivery manager. In narrative PM29, a similar disruption was avoided when the store manager, who was on cover at another store, delegated to another manager the conduct of the formal counselling session. In narratives PM05, 25 and 29, performance management processes had to be arranged around conflicting shifts and holidays of both manager and incumbent.

Despite such general emphasis on formalisation, one respondent provided two narratives where the value of an informal 'chat' was highlighted as a means of addressing job performance issues (PM44 and 45).

6.2.3   Misconduct

The final group of narratives referred to instances of performance management triggered by a breach of company rules. Table 6.4 provides detailed information on each of the narratives, including respondent, store, length in words and a brief synopsis. The company had an abundance of rules employees were expected to follow. In the Staff Handbook, employees were warned that "it is your responsibility to ensure you familiarise yourself with [company] policies and follow them", adding that "if you do not you may be subject to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal" (p 10). A similar warning was repeated a further 20 times throughout the handbook in reference to specific rules, such as "failure to notify the payroll department of an overpayment", "refusing a reasonable request to search your person", "abuse of the staff discount benefit", "breach of the smoking policy" and "improper interference with the fire fighting equipment". There was a further list of 21 offences classified as gross misconduct, and therefore deemed "serious enough to justify summary dismissal". Regarding our sample of nine misconduct narratives, four related to loss of company keys, and two each to unauthorised absence, offensive behaviour, and fighting on the premises.

The store-key narratives (PM04, 30, 41 and 48) provide an interesting set for comparison in that violation of the same rule led to different disciplinary outcomes. In all four cases, respondents described losing store keys as a serious breach of security rules, which typically carried the highest level of disciplinary action short of dismissal: a final written warning. This was indeed the outcome in narratives PM04 and 41. In the other two narratives however, there was only formal counselling, which was a full two steps down in the company's "warning process". A review of some elements present in each of the cases follows which may help explain the difference in outcomes.

Table 6.4   Performance management narratives: Misconduct

Narrative number	Respon-dent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Issue	Synopsis
04	MGR25	7	Incumbent	495	Lost keys	New store manager got a first written warning for not noticing that office manager left keys in safe overnight after cashing together. Was found out by another manager. Security procedure differed from previous store.
30	MGR39	11	Manager	788	Lost keys	Manager lost keys, HR advised for first written warning, manager went for formal counselling, with acquiescence of area manager.
41	MGR44	9	Incumbent	1468	Lost keys	Forgot keys in locker and got straight to a final written warning
48	MGR17	5	Manager	1143	Lost keys	Manager loses keys after they become unhooked. Store manager goes for formal counselling rather than the standard final written warning
07	MGR26	8	Manager	203	Unauthor-ised absence	Ops mgr had dismissed an employee for unauthorised absence, following the advice of HR. A few months later, similar case, but HR advice to give first written warning. Manager goes ahead with dismissal.
31	MGR40	12	Manager	690	Unauth. absence	Employee had multiple issues: absence, attitude, security. Disciplining procedure considers them separately, making follow up difficult.
24	MGR36	10	Higher management	776	Attitude	Problem employee, rude and violent, creates situation where HR advises not to do anything. Finally she puts in a grievance against the store manager. An investigation finds against it.
27	MGR37	11	Incumbent	1323	Attitude	stockroom employee has performance issues but is not managed because he has affair with store manager. He is promoted to manager. After store manager left, there are health and safety issues and swearing. He is managed and dismissed, but puts in a grievance against the manager (instigated by ex-store manager), which results in record card because of small incident.
15	MGR35	10	Manager	1659	Physical incident	Two employees were having "friendly banter", which resulted in shoving and hitting. Manager was only on duty at the time, HR was closed, collected statements, and investigation is ongoing (v. narrative 19)
19	MGR36	10	Higher mgt	1000	Physical incident	Two employees were having "friendly banter", which resulted in shoving and hitting. Manager was only on duty at the time, HR was closed, collected statements, and investigation is ongoing (v. narrative 15)

In Narrative PM04, the store manager was herself involved in the incident, which meant that the investigation and disciplinary procedures had to be done by high-ranking managers based outside the store. These managers were not aware of how things worked at this store, and were thus probably less able to appreciate mitigating circumstances or to gauge the overall level of discipline in the store, or of the employees involved, so that they may have been more likely to apply standard punishment. The fact that a member of the management team reported the incident and thus exposed his or her own store manager seems a direct consequence of the short time the latter had been in the position (two weeks).

Narrative PM41 was set in the largest store in the region, which had its own security officer. Having an officer expressly in charge of dealing with security offences may have made it more difficult to overturn a standard punishment. In addition, the incumbent may have put herself in a difficult position by taking several days to report the loss, although the security officer knew of the incident far sooner but waited for her to come forward.

Narratives PM30 and PM48 show how managers can work to bring about more lenient outcomes. In narrative PM30, the assistant store manager lost her keys. Her store manager thought that opting for a harsher outcome would be detrimental to their working relationship and that the store would suffer as a consequence. He successfully argued against HR that the incumbent's personal difficulties should be considered "mitigating circumstances". He also sought his area manager's support, protecting himself from subsequent trouble, "because obviously if I made the wrong decision I would then be managed for that". In narrative PM48, conversely, the manager argued for lack of fault on the part of the incumbent: it was a "freak thing" for which the employee could not be blamed. In both narratives there seemed to be genuine personal concern for the incumbent, and an interest for preserving a good working relationship.

The two narratives on unauthorised absence (PM07 and 31) refer to instances where the employee failed to report a reason for absence or where management had reason to think the reported reason was not genuine. Unauthorised absence was listed as an example of gross misconduct subject to summary dismissal. In narrative PM07 the respondent reported

on two separate cases of unauthorised absence involving different employees within a few months of each other. In the first case, the employee had been summarily dismissed, in accordance with HR's advice. In the second case, HR advised to give a first written warning, but the manager decided to go for dismissal to be consistent with the previous decision: doing otherwise would have been "questioning me as a manager" (MGR26). In narrative PM31, an employee had two consecutive instances of unauthorised absence for which she was given a first and then a final written warning, before she handed notice of resignation.

Two further narratives focus on situations where the employees had a general attitude of rudeness that affected their working relationships. In one instance (narrative 24) the respondent reported on an employee who was verbally aggressive and abusive in the work place. It was difficult for the manager to carry out decisive action to deal with such behaviour, and the issue dragged on for months. In narrative 27, a stockroom manager was dismissed for repeated health and safety breaches and for swearing in the workplace. The whole case was complicated by a history of permissiveness under previous management, and animosity among some of the actors involved.

Finally, narratives PM15 and 19 are two quite detailed and lengthy accounts of the same "physical incident" where two employees were involved in a brief tussle in the stockroom one late evening, told by the sales manager involved and her store manager. There was only one manager on duty in the store at the time, and the narratives highlight the ways in which her decisions had an impact in the performance management process that ensued. The incident was reported by another employee to the manager who then decided to log the incident in the accident book and take statements from the two employees involved and from witnesses. The following morning, the manager discussed it further with the store manager and with HR who advised that a formal investigation and disciplinary procedures should be undertaken. The sales manager explained her point of view in the following terms:

... some people may think it's a long winded scenario for something that happened that was over and done in five minutes, [...] but then I think [...] if this ever happens again and the outcome was worse [...] then I would feel responsible personally for the fact that I didn't act on it when it had happened initially…

(PM19, MGR35)

6.2.4 Concluding remarks

In this section, we have seen that performance management referred to a wide range of courses of action that were taken to address a similarly wide range of issues. In order to facilitate our analysis, they have been grouped according to the type of issue that was the main focus of the performance management action. This was broadly consistent with the way policy constructed the different types of issues: time and attendance, misconduct and job performance. We have seen however that even within these categories, the specific issues varied significantly, and moreover that even when the underlying issues could be characterised as similar, the actual performance management actions taken and their outcome could be quite different.

6.3 Actors and artefacts in performance management narratives

This section reviews the main actors and artefacts present in the narratives and the major aspects of their agency in performance management. For clarity of exposition, actors are grouped under four headings: line managers, incumbents, HR department, and other actors. Artefacts are grouped under policy documents, computer systems, other documents and the workplace.

6.3.1 Line managers

Line managers were the most prominent actors in performance management narratives. This partly reflected the fact that respondents were line managers themselves, and their accounts naturally tended to emphasise their own agency. It was also the case that direct line managers were intensely involved in performance management: "it's the way I achieve all my objectives" (MGR27); " it is one of the most important parts of my role" (MGR29); "it's number one really" (MG33).

Line managers' role in performance management was reinforced by the fact that company procedures required them to perform most of its formal elements. Thus, line managers conducted formal counselling sessions, investigations, disciplinary hearings, appeals and grievances. In such roles, managers had certain choices to make, albeit often within certain guidelines. For instance, the Retail Disciplinary Guide contained guidelines on questioning techniques, but the specific questions that were asked at a disciplinary hearing were drafted and decided by the manager. Moreover, policy also gave line managers responsibility for decision on disciplinary outcomes.

Besides their formal role in disciplinary policy, line managers had a wider impact on performance management processes, particularly in job performance and misconduct narratives – in time and attendance incidents, the system of trigger points limited line managers' discretion in this respect. In the course of their daily work routines, line managers assigned tasks to their team members, observed their actions and results, made decisions about the acceptability of those actions and results, and made choices of appropriate actions to redress any perceived issues. Several of these elements are present in the following excerpts:

> *the delivery manager [...] wasn't reaching the things he should be doing in his role, [like] having his rotas done before that week [...], filling out charts, filling out paper work, signing papers, filing paperwork, very basic things [...] I started him on [...] a four week review and [...] we went through the list of the things he was supposed to do and I ticked off the ones he'd done and we agreed he was going to do the ones that he hadn't*
>
> (PM1, MGR22)

> *I had an instance on Saturday where [a sales manager] didn't perform very well, [...] my two managers including [him], were both due to go and I suddenly realised his supervisor was on lunch, so I presumed that he would stay on the shop floor until the supervisor came back [...] to be told that he'd actually gone home [...]*
>
> (PM25, MGR37)

I've got one sales manager who is being performance managed at the moment, [...] things were planned [...] without the rest of the management team knowing, [...] so I've set him very clear goals and objectives in what he needs to achieve over the next six to eight weeks, and we will sit down every two weeks to review it, if we see no improvement, then obviously we'll take it to the next stage which will be disciplinary action

(PM29, MGR39)

we've just started performance-managing a senior sales on menswear, [...]she can't prioritise very well, so we do floor walks with her, there's five jobs that need doing, she might start one bit of every job, but not actually complete anything

(PM35, MGR43)

The role of line managers in performance management was embedded in a hierarchical cascading pattern, in terms of the role that a manager's manager played. Normally, it was the direct line manager who had the main role in performance management. However, higher level managers were also often involved in a number of ways. First, higher level managers often made sure managers were dealing with their teams' performance appropriately, sometimes interrupting the performance management process when they had doubts about its effectiveness (e.g. PM01). Second, a manager's line manager often prompted him or her to initiate performance management (PM35, 37, 46, 49 and 50), occasionally having to performance-manage the manager to get him or her to performance manage their team (PM05 and 11). Finally, when making nonstandard decisions on disciplinary outcomes, managers often enrolled the support of their own line manager, as a safeguard against being performance managed themselves for a bad outcome or for failing to apply company policy.

Line managers had normative and practical concerns around performance management, and these influenced their actions. For instance, one manager explained why performance management was important to her in the following terms:

if I didn't pick up on managers or staff not performing in store it could be a loss of sales, if it's a security area it could be loss of stock, if it's a health and safety issue it could result in a big accident

MGR33

But managers' concerns went far beyond such immediate instrumentalities. In one of the narratives of the 'physical incident' (PM19, MGR35), the respondent explained the

reasons for her decisions: she wanted to be thorough ("I just thought I've got to make sure that I'm initially doing all that I should be doing"); stabilise a version of events ("so while it was fresh, I thought, well if I can just get statements from them, get their version of events […] I just wanted to record the event that happened"); maintain her professional identity ("it's a big company that we work for and that sort of behaviour isn't tolerated"); show concern for the individuals ("I then approached that member of staff who seemed a bit shook up, […] and I just thought wow"); anticipate ensuing procedures ("so if [HR] were to ask me questions, at least, I sort of got the narrative […] and I just assumed […] that an investigation would be to follow"); and protect the company and herself against liabilities ("I put them both in the accident book as well, […]in case for instance the one with the bang in the head had gone home and has headaches"). All of these motives shaped her response to an unprecedented situation:

> *I've never had an incident like that before, […] I think a lot of it is initiative […] you just think on your feet, don't you? […] and I don't know whether other managers might do it different than I did, but that's how I dealt with the situation, and […] I'm quite happy with the outcome*
>
> (PM19, MGR35)

Another example of how managers' concerns shape their role in performance management can be found in some of the absence narratives. In narratives PM03 and 33, the managers were morally persuaded that disciplining was the right course of action. They were concerned about the actual interaction with the employee, but there were reasons to justify doing it: procedure had to be followed in narrative PM03, and the absence had impacted on other employees in narrative PM33. Because the managers were already committed to carrying out the disciplining, interactions with HR were sent to the background and not made relevant. In narratives PM06, 26 and 34, by contrast, the manager did not support the idea that the employee should be disciplined, and then interactions with HR came to the fore. In narratives PM06 and 34, the managers were able to overcome HR, but in narrative PM26, the manager was overpowered by what "the company" dictated. Some of the contrasts between these narratives are striking. For instance, between "there is nothing

you can do about it […] absence is absence" (PM03) and "on non-attendance we have occasions when you manage or don't manage" (PM06). Likewise, in narrative PM06 the manager proclaimed "we've got to support our employees, we've got a duty to care for them", whereas in narrative PM26, the level of support was left for HR to decide ("the company saw it that they'd supported her"). Finally, whereas the manager in narrative PM26 reported that "you speak to [HR] and you let them know your opinions", the manager in narrative PM34 thought it was her obligation "to fight that corner", and the manager in narrative PM06 ignored the advice outright.

6.3.2 Incumbents

There were several ways in which the actions of employees at the receiving end of performance management processes had an impact on those processes. First, most narratives included a description of incumbent employees displaying behaviour that was, for one reason or another, deemed deviant. Once performance management was under way, they could either alter that behaviour to conform to what was being asked of them, or persist in the behaviour and risk further action. Of course, this was not always a matter of willingness to conform, and there were cases where it seemed nothing the employee would have done would have been enough to prevent disciplinary action (e.g. PM43).

Second, incumbent employees affected performance management processes through their interactions with managers at the different informal and formal meetings that punctuated the process. In these meetings employees could challenge managers' description of the situation and offer explanations for their actions:

> *[my team] recently had […] the traffic light system, where they get observed and they get graded accordingly, […] I did have one member of staff who's come to me to say that he didn't agree with his grading […]he did say he wasn't happy because there were some training issues and he felt that he hadn't been given the training that he was meant to have, which would have elevated him into a green*
>
> (PM18, MGR35)

Employees also displayed emotions that influenced the way managers handled the process. For instance, in narrative 48, the manager justified a more lenient outcome on the emotional reaction of the employee:

... knowing how the reaction was of that member of staff when she initially had lost her keys, just the pure shock on her face, [...] you knew she was very concerned about it, so it wasn't a case of she wasn't bothered, she was bothered, so doing the formal process was enough for me to say she knows how serious it is and she's learned [from it]

(PM48, MGR17)

In narrative 32 on the other hand, the emotional reaction of the employee contributed to a harsher outcome when the manager interpreted it as a sign of poor attitude:

his reaction was really disappointing, I think if he had reacted like 'oh gosh, I'm so sorry!', a bit more genuine, and a bit more 'gosh!', then I would have been a lot more... but the fact that he wasn't bothered, that indicated a poor attitude for a manager

(PM32, MGR40)

A third way in which employees could have an impact on performance management processes was through the use of formal procedural safeguards such as appeals and grievances. There were three narratives in which employees formally appealed the outcome of a disciplinary procedure. Although in none of these the decision was overturned, in narrative PM17 after the employee appealed alternative arrangements were made to accommodate her medical condition. There were also three narratives where employees put in grievances against their managers (PM24, 27 and 32). In all three cases, they were desperate moves in the face of dismissal.

A final way in which employees often attempted to resist dismissal was by handing in notice of resignation. This was the case in 9 performance management narratives (PM10, 11, 24, 26, 28, 31, 32, 36 and 43). In effect, employees still lost their jobs, but the company could not report that there had been a dismissal to future prospective employers.

6.3.3   HR department

HR's involvement in performance management took place most often through telephone calls made by managers to a team of HR officers based in Head Office. Some of these calls were made because there was a requirement to contact HR at a certain stage in a formal procedure, most notably during adjournments in disciplinary processes. Others were

made spontaneously by managers who sought advice or clarification as to what action was appropriate at different stages of performance management.

HR's input was described as advice by all respondents; its precise nature however was contested. In some instances, managers took HR's advice as an opinion, which they could act on, or not; whereas in other instances, managers took HR's advice as instructions to be followed.

Most often HR's advice included an indication of appropriate outcomes of the performance management process (e.g. a level of warning), or on how to proceed with a process (e.g. take someone to disciplinary). Their role was often linked to the need to ensure consistency of outcomes – equal treatment of similar situations, regardless of persons involved – and process integrity – that procedural steps are followed to minimise legal risk to the company. In practice, more often than not HR pushed for harsher levels of warning and a somewhat inflexible application of the letter of policy:

> *They said 'manage it still because he's not going to get dismissed in this occasion, and if he appeals we'll deal with it then'*
>
> (PM06, MGR26)

> *from HR they read back paragraph page whatever to her in a letter*
>
> (PM12, MGR30)

> *the initial reaction from the HR officer wasn't that we were going to give any leniency to that*
>
> (PM34, MGR42)

One recurring theme was HR's insistence that managers issue a warning after an employee hit a nonattendance trigger point. A similar phrase came up repeatedly in several such accounts: "we're managing the fact that she is not at work, not the reason that she is not at work" (PM39, MGR44).

Occasionally, HR offered solutions which were not in policy. For instance, in narrative PM08 the manager was advised to create a list of child carers in order to address an issue with excessive time taken off for dependents (MGR28). Likewise, in narratives PM17 and 28 nonattendance trigger-points were altered to accommodate an employee's difficulties

(PM17 and 28); and in narrative PM49 HR advised to transfer an employee to another department.

6.3.4   Other actors

Other actors in the store also featured in performance management narratives. Most commonly they took a formal role as witnesses or note takers in formal procedures as required by policy. Occasionally however, they played more consequential roles. For instance, in narratives PM04, 15 and 19, a member of staff not involved in the incident reported it to management, which enabled it to be performance-managed subsequently. In five other narratives a former store manager's actions had a bearing on a current performance management process. For instance, in narrative PM02, a store manager had to start a disciplining process from the beginning "because the previous manager had not followed the steps correctly". Likewise, in PM32, a store manager thought she would have to grant an employee additional days off because she knew the previous manager "would put people through as holiday when they weren't on holiday but to use up their holiday". Finally, in PM24, an employee's conduct was more difficult to manage because the previous store manager had never attempted to address the issues.

Some actors external to the company also featured in performance management narratives. Customers gave good and bad feedback on departments and individuals (narratives PM10, 15, 46 and 49). Health specialists (doctors and physical therapists) gave advice in narratives PM17 and 28. Finally, husbands, wives, partners, sons and daughters had an indirect role through their impact on an employee's performance at work (PM03, 06, 09, 12, 13, 33 and 45)

6.3.5   Policy documents

A number of policy documents were highly relevant in performance management narratives. The most important were the *Staff Handbook*, the *Attendance At Work Guide*, the *Retail Disciplinary Guide* and the *Long Term Non Attendance Guide*. Additionally, there

was the *Managing T&A[22] compliance* team-talk script. At the time of the research, the

lateness trigger-point system had been under review for several months, due to the

implementation of the new T&A (clocking) system. In such situations where policy was still

being adjusted, information was disseminated to store employees and managers through

team-talk scripts, rather than fully developed policy documents. Team-talk scripts were used

by managers during meetings with employees, and then posted on notice boards for

everyone's reference. Table 6.5 shows key data for all these documents, including their

physical description and a summary of their main policy contents.

Table 6.5:   Policy documents

Document	Physical description	Policy content
Staff Handbook: Company Guide for Retail Staff	Small pocket-size 84-page booklet (15.5 cm x 9 cm)	Standard terms of employment and an overview of company policies employees were required to comply with
Attendance at Work: A Guide for all Staff	24-page booklet (14 cm x 14 cm)	Attendance policy, including sections on reporting nonattendance, sick pay, nonattendance trigger points, and an overview on company leaves
Long Term Non Attendance: Company Guide for Retail Managers	20-page A4 pamphlet	Instructions for dealing with cases of nonattendance for periods of over 3 weeks, including guidelines for home visits, review meetings and return-to-work meetings, with accompanying forms
Retail Disciplinary Guide: Company Guide for Retail Managers	33-page A4 document	Formal aspects of the disciplinary process, including process flowcharts, step-by-step instructions on how to carry out investigation and disciplinary interviews, guidelines for effective questioning, a description of the roles of the HR and Security departments, and a questions and answers section
Managing T&A compliance Team-Talk script	3 A4 pages	Detailed the workings of the lateness trigger-point system and the related disciplinary policy

Policy documents were expressly mentioned in some of the narratives but, more

importantly, they defined elements of policy which had widespread presence in performance

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[22] Time and Attendance

management narratives. One such element was the *Warning Process* which defined a

standard set of graduated penalties that could be imposed on employees for any serious

performance issue. The warning process consisted of three levels of warning – formal

counselling, first written warning, final written warning – the fourth step being dismissal.

First and final written warnings carried an economic penalty in that bonus was withheld for

three and six months respectively.

**Figure 6.1: The disciplinary process, from Retail Disciplinary Guide (Company Guide
for Retail Managers)**

THE DISCIPLINARY PROCESS
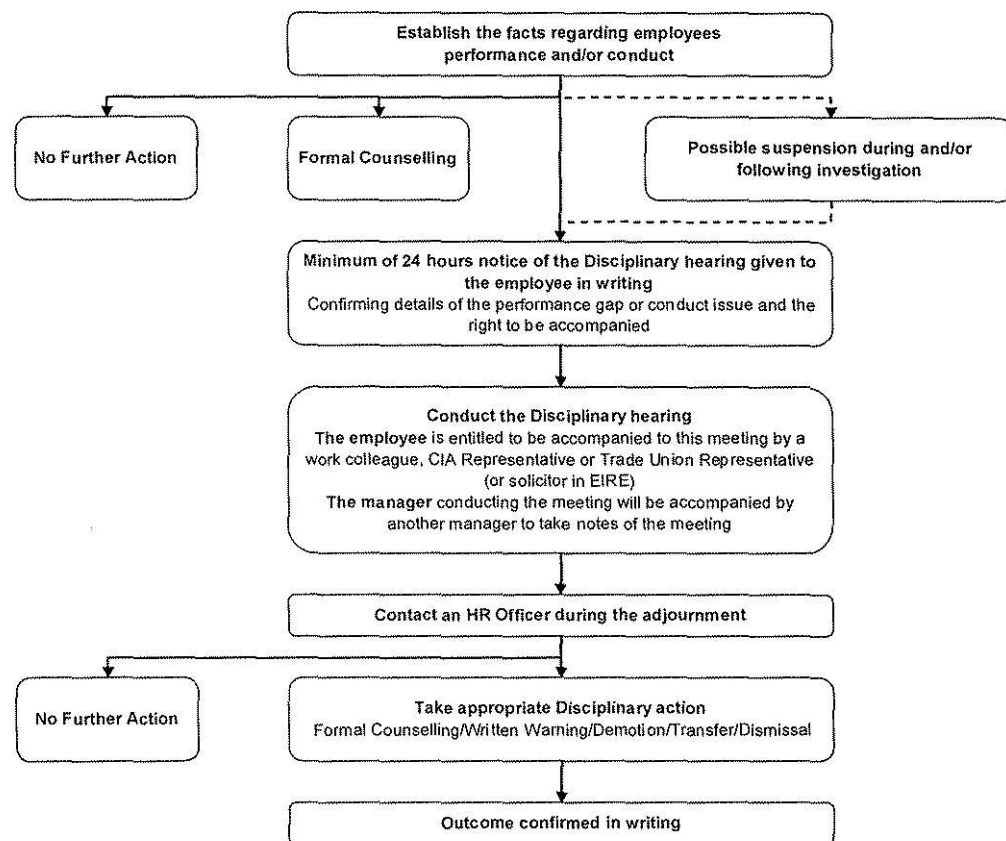
A second important element defined in policy documents was the set of procedural

flowcharts and meeting scripts intended to guide managers' actions. For example, the

flowchart in Figure 6.1 represents the company's disciplinary process, as it appears in the

Retail Disciplinary Guide. Many of the elements in this flow chart appeared often in

performance management narratives, for instance labels such as 'formal counselling' and

'disciplinary hearing', or actions such as contacting an HR officer after the adjournment.

Likewise actions and specific phrases contained in scripts were also present in performance management narratives. For instance, in the following excerpt, the script for disciplinary hearings reinforced the role of managers as decision makers:

> *we're always told it quite clear, when you've come back from adjournment your first line is 'I've spoken to HR, I've made the decision to...' and then you decide what the outcome is, it's all your decision*
>
> (PM07,MGR26)

Third, the attendance and lateness trigger point systems were defined in the *Attendance at Work Guide* and the *Managing T&A Compliance* team-talk script. Lateness trigger points were set in terms of number of occasions (about 25% of shifts worked in any 3-week period), whereas nonattendance trigger points were defined both in terms of number of occasions (3 in any 12-week period or 5 in any 52-week period), and in terms of percentage of contract time not worked (3% in any 52-week period). A direct correspondence was established between hitting trigger points and the company's warning process:

> *A process that mirrors the disciplinary stages will manage cases of short-term frequent non attendance i.e.*
> *- Initial discussion, supported by a letter confirming you have reached a trigger point*
> *- First written warning*
> *- Final written warning*
> *- Dismissal*
>
> (Attendance at Work Guide: 15)

Importantly, warnings and eventual dismissal were prescribed regardless of the cause for absence or lateness and whether or not it was justified:

> *Even if the reason for non attendance is genuine, your ability to attend work on a regular basis will be managed*
>
> (Attendance at Work Guide: 13)

> *It may become necessary to manage your non attendance formally if you have failed to maintain an acceptable level of attendance, regardless of whether your reason for non attendance is genuine.*
>
> (Attendance at Work Guide: 15)

6.3.6   Computer systems

A number of computer systems featured in performance management narratives of which the T&A system was the most relevant. Two other systems, the electronic journal and

the back-office system featured in one of the narratives (PM32).   Table 6.6 provides a

succinct description of each of these systems.

Table 6.6:   Computer systems

System	Description
T&A system	Automated time-keeping system which operated through the tills
Electronic journal	Record of all sales transactions in the store generated from the tills data
Back-office system	A collection of applications that ran on PCs in the office which supported a number of HR processes and record keeping

The T&A system, also called 'the clocking-in-and-out', was an automated time-

keeping system which was implemented during the months when this research took place.

Rotas specifying individual employee shifts were loaded onto the system automatically

through the Staff Planner application and subsequently adjusted manually by managers

through the tills. At the start and end of each shift, employees clocked in or out at a till by

swiping their company ID card and keying a personal code. The system recorded time only

in 15-minute increments, so that clocking in three or more minutes after the start of the shift

was automatically recorded as a 15-minute late arrival. Late clock-outs, on the other hand,

were only recognised as time worked if a manager previously modified the employee's shift.

Discrepancies between clocking-in-and-out times and rota shifts were fed to payroll who

discounted any time not worked from the employee's salary. Additionally, reports were run

at least weekly by managers which highlighted late clock-ins in the period and kept track of

individuals' lateness trigger points.

The electronic journal was the record of all sales transactions in the store. It was

generated from the tills data and identified the individual employee who had input the

transaction. The back-office system was a generic term for a number of PC-based

applications used by the office staff which, among other purposes, provided support for

several HR processes. In narrative PM32, the manager resorted to both these systems for

information that helped her determine whether an employee had taken a holiday several

months before, and thereby make sense of the employee's current actions.

6.3.7   Other documents

Diverse types of documents were present in performance management narratives: a list of goals, a doctor's note, a notice, a letter, a note, a personal file, a record card. Documents left traces of activity which enabled procedures to extend through time and across locations and sets of actors. For instance, 'recording a conversation' was a necessary step before other actions could be taken. If done well, different managers could be involved in successive steps. Documenting actions was also a way of showing performance management had been carried out and that the manager was doing his/her job.

Documents showed agency in different ways. Some documents had performative properties. For instance, a 'first written warning' was a physical letter which carried with it a disciplinary sanction. Likewise, employees resigned by 'handing notice'. Some documents, on the other hand, prompted actions (e.g. warning letters had to be delivered, "here is a letter saying…") or changed the course of events (e.g. drafting a list of possible child carers stopped a case of absenteeism, even if the actual list was never really used to find childcare).

6.3.8   Workplace

Performance management narratives were set in different areas of the store: the sales floor, the office, and the stockroom. Each of these spaces afforded different possibilities for action. Moreover, actions and their consequences were qualified by the fact that they happened in specific areas of the store. For instance, swearing in the stockroom had different implications from swearing on the sales floor, and having a talk with your manager in the office was different from having it in the staffroom.

The sales floor was the area that featured most prominently in the narratives, reflecting the fact that most respondents had a commercial role, but also that the sales floor was at the heart of store activity. The sales floor was the place where revenue was generated and customers were present. As such it was a place where faultless performances were expected and required. Monitoring was both continuous and random. The open layout of the floor

meant actions were easily visible. Moreover, it was a public space where any customer could turn out to be a mystery shopper, or a head-office manager auditing the store.

The stockroom by contrast was a male-dominated crammed space where relatively dangerous and somewhat wild activities took place. Shouting, rudeness, swearing and even violence were not unheard of.

The office was the most private place in the store where access was controlled at all times. It was where cash was kept in the safe and store systems were controlled: the electronic journal was scrutinised for fraud and live CCTV footage was shown on screens. The office was also the place where disciplinary hearings, or any other type of private and confidential conversation, took place.

6.3.9   Concluding remarks

There is a wide variety of actors and artefacts involved in narratives of performance management episodes. Outcomes were shaped not only by the actions of line managers, but also by those of the incumbent employees, members of the HR department and other actors in and out of the store. Moreover, a long list of artefacts were also involved in the production of performance management outcomes including documents, computer system and the spatial configuration of the stores.

6.4   Moments of performance management

The previous section introduces the different actors and artefacts that feature in performance management narratives. This section describes how these actors and artefacts interacted in different ways at each of four 'moments' common to most of the performance management narratives. The aim is to show how it is through these interactions of heterogeneous elements that the courses of action that produce performance management outcomes are shaped.

6.4.1   Noticing actions and behaviours

Performance management always started by someone noticing an action or a behaviour. How this was done varied in the different narratives. Direct observation was a

key way in which managers monitored employee behaviours. In the context of the stores, much of the work done by employees was directly observable, be it serving customers on the shop floor or handling stock in the stockroom. The sales floor in particular was a place where behaviours were thoroughly scrutinised. The following is an example of the kind of surveillance employees on the sales floor were subjected to:

> *… and I'll say 'well no, actually I've been watching you for the last few weeks, you're still not approaching customers, you are still standing around talking to other members of staff, you're standing at the front with your head down and not smiling at the customers when they come in…'*
>
> (PM50, MGR21)

Being present in the different areas of the store and noticing behaviours was a crucial part of managers' job role. Instances of employee behaviour witnessed by managers were construed as 'observations' which could then be documented to become part of performance management processes. Many such observations were done simply in the context of daily ongoing routine, that is, managers remarked certain behaviours or stumbled upon incidents in the workplace:

> *… an employee had been observed several times and they weren't offering service, […] a customer one day asked for an item and instead of going and look for the item the member of staff's reply was, oh yeah, that's all we've got, now obviously we didn't offer the ordering facility, there's things we could have done…*
>
> (PM10, MGR29)

> *…I walked into the stockroom and he was managing his team, he called it by the expression 'come on you f'ers, get on with it'…*
>
> (PM27, MGR 37)

Alternatively, observations could be structured within a performance management procedure. For instance, putting someone under formal review required follow-up meetings at regular intervals:

> *what you do, you put him on a four week review and you review it half way*
>
> (PM01, MGR22)

> *I put her on a review, so we had to do a conversation every month*
>
> (PM02, MGR25)

Likewise, the 'traffic-light system' prescribed that observations of certain aspects of customer service be made at certain times of year.

... this was a traffic-light assessment so we have to assess them on their approach to customers [...] so are they approaching every single customer? are they asking if everybody needs any help or are they ignoring the customer? and then are they link-selling when they do ask the customer, offering 'oh there's a nice pair of shoes that goes with them'?...

(PM49, MGR 21)

Being a public space, employee behaviour on the sales floor was visible not only to direct managers, but also to a number of other actors. First, store managers often observed employees on the sales floor and pointed issues out to floor managers. Similarly, area and Head Office managers made store visits with the intent of directly observing employee behaviour:

... I had a visit from my regional manager which wasn't very good on a particular department [...] they come into the store, and they wander about like a mystery shopper, so they don't make themselves known because they want to grasp what service is like, and they came upstairs and saw the service on the menswear department and immediately came to get myself to go through what was that let us down and what was witnessed on that floor...

(PM15, MGR32)

Second, peers also brought behaviours to the attention of managers. In narrative PM19, for instance, a misconduct incident was first reported to a manager by a colleague of those involved; in narrative PM38, employee complaints about mistakes in their payslips led to a sales manager being performance managed; and in narrative PM04, a manager reported her own store manager to security officials for an incident involving store keys. The store manager concerned in the latter incident commented:

... I think it does have an impact on my awareness of, if I make a mistake, who I can say 'I've made this mistake, what do I do now?', I probably wouldn't open my mouth if I thought I've made a mistake again. I mean it wasn't me who reported [the incident], it was found by another manager and they did completely the right thing and reported it, but again they reported it, there might have been other managers that wouldn't, that would have said 'oh my God! I found this, but obviously no money has been taken, checked the CCTV, no-one came in, I haven't reported it', that person would have probably been wrong, but that does happen and it's frustrating it entirely depends on who you work with.

(PM04, MGR25)

Finally, customers could also provide information on employee behaviours, through compliments and complaints. In narrative PM15, for instance, favourable customer comments were taken as evidence that previous issues had been corrected.

Besides direct observation, managers used a number of artefacts to help monitor different areas of employee behaviour. In narrative PM32, for instance, the manager made use of the back-office system, the holiday diary, and the electronic journal, in order to establish whether an employee had been on holiday on a certain date. Another important example was the T&A system which helped monitor absence and lateness:

> *... she got here at about ten past, but with our clocking in and out you've only got to be two minutes late and it will deduct you fifteen minutes, so you could clock in at 11.03 but it records you clocking in at 11.15...*
>
> (PM20, MGR35)

6.4.2 Evaluating behaviours

A second moment in performance management narratives was evaluating employee behaviours. Again, evaluations of employee behaviour emerged through the agency of various actors and artefacts including managers, higher management, HR, corporate policies and computer systems.

There were three important ways in which performances were evaluated. First, observed behaviours were labelled as instances of some recognisable type. For instance, "using the pallet truck as a skate board" was "health and safety" (PM27, MGR37); not showing up for work was "still nonattendance" even if you can produce a doctor's note (PM28, MGR38); and being "not very good at following direction, […] you can leave him a plan saying do A, B, C and D, and he'll do A, swap to D and then make up his own agenda" was labelled as "a performance gap" (PM05, MGR26).

Labels facilitated communication and helped determine appropriate courses of action:

> *HR said 'yes dismiss, it's unauthorised absence'*
>
> (PM07, MGR26).

> *from their perspective it was a breach of security, therefore first written warning should be issued*
>
> (PM30, MGR39)

Both of the above labels – 'unauthorised absence' and 'breach of security' – were found in company policy artefacts (Staff Handbook), as many others that were widely used in performance management narratives such as 'nonattendance', 'poor customer service', 'performance issue', 'training gap', 'gross misconduct', 'health and safety', etc. However, labelling was not always straightforward, and was open to contest. For instance, in narrative PM32 (MGR40) different labels were given to an incident by different actors at different points in time. First, the manager was unsure about the incident and how to categorise it, so she asked an HR officer for advice:

> I've got a bit of an issue, I don't really know how to deal with it [and] I explained the situation

Then, the HR officer concluded it was an instance of gross misconduct and prescribed a sanction:

> [the HR officer] said, well the thing is actually that's gross misconduct [...] you need to fail his probationary because that's gross misconduct

After the disciplinary interview, the manager decided the incident indicated poor performance, incompetence and poor attitude:

> he couldn't manage his own holiday which is really poor performance [...] which to me indicates incompetence, [...] that indicated a poor attitude for a manager

Finally, the incumbent challenged the manager's judgment by arguing it was a mistake.

> he was like 'I made a mistake, I made a mistake'

The open nature of labelling was further highlighted in narratives PM15 and 19, which referred to the same incident where a fight had broken out between two employees. At the time of the research, disciplinary interviews were still being carried out, so the respondents used tentative labels, such as "physical activity", "a bit of a kerfuffle", "physical conduct" and "a bit of a fracas".

Even in cases of 'non-attendance' and 'lateness', which tended to be clear cut issues ("absence is absence", PM03), there is sometimes overlap, which may or may not be exploited by the actors involved. In the following instance, an occasion of lateness could almost be counted as absence, so the manager made a note, in case such ambiguity can be exploited "further down the line":

> *... I had a girl on the Home department two weeks ago, came in late, [...] and she wasn't well, yet she still came into work, [...] she was then late two days later, and I said to her, look you've got to have a consultation [...] so you stick to [procedures] by the letter, but [...] I will also make notes, so that if it was to go further down the line [...] HR might say to me 'okay, then in that occasion if you've got record that [...] the girl was sick the day before, and she'd come in and she still wasn't well but was coming because she knew you were short of staff...'*
>
> (PM20, MGR35)

A second way in which managers evaluated employee performances was by assessing their severity. For instance, in narrative PM30, the fact that keys were misplaced for "just five minutes" contributed to considering the offence less severe; whereas in narrative PM41the fact that keys were not reported lost for four days contributed to a harsher response.

Finally, a third way in which managers evaluated performances was by attributing fault. This was a fairly common contention in time and attendance incidents, where policy and HR's reiterated position was to not to consider the cause for absence or lateness. Even so, in narrative PM21 the employee alleged his train was running late. The manager phoned the rail company to verify this and made a note, in the hope this would be taken into account if more serious action was to be taken in the future for additional lateness. Another rare exception to the trigger point system was made in narrative PM34, where the manager succeeded in 'fighting that corner' and persuading HR that an employee's absence was due to extreme circumstances beyond her control. This was a case where the employees' display of emotions influenced attributions of fault:

> *they had broken down during the disciplinary, very upset, and I felt like it was my obligation to fight that corner*
>
> (PM34, MGR42)

Narrative PM48 was yet another such example:

... I think this is completely a genuine mistake, this is completely a freak thing that has happened, it's not something that's deliberate or intentional, [...] because the reaction from the member of staff that I saw, what they'd been doing at that time, the chance of it happening again is probably one in a million, so as much as there's a procedure in place [...] I thought it was only fair to say to HR 'look I take on board your point, however, this member of staff won't do it again, it wasn't a deliberate act of their own fault, it was purely a case of being very unlucky'...

(PM48, MGR17)

6.4.3 Engaging the disciplinary process

A third moment in performance management was the engagement of the formal procedures that constituted the company's disciplinary process as represented in figure 6.1 above. This was sometimes referred to in narratives as 'formalising' performance management.

The importance for managers of formalising a performance management process was that it provided managers with a path for scaling up the threat of dismissal, and therefore it made it more likely that performance management would lead to 'an outcome': either a change of behaviour or the removal of the employee. In the following two excerpts, the respondents were store managers who, shortly after being appointed to a new store, persuaded one of their managers to start performance-managing an employee with longstanding performance issues. They explain how engaging the disciplinary process was a fairly easy step because in the first levels of warning the stakes were not too high, but also that the possibility of scaling up the threat of dismissal had an important impact on their activity as managers.

I think because we know we've got a nice very clear-cut performance management system, we actually take that initial step, it's absolutely fine, you just follow the process and HR are quite good because at every level through performance management you call the HR department walk it through, 'is this fair?', 'am I being consistent with how the company wants me to manage this sort of person?' [...] I think it'll be good for [the sales manager] as well to get an outcome, obviously you always hope for the best outcome, but it might not be

(PM35, MGR43)

I don't think that she had had a lot of experience previously in performance reviewing somebody, with the foresight in that if this person doesn't improve he will be dismissed.

I think the process has definitely given her a lot of confidence in dealing with performance issues, because when I did her appraisal, she talked to me about how she felt quite empowered by the fact that she could make a difference in getting somebody to achieve what he should be achieving

(PM46, MGR13)

Engagement of the disciplinary process came about in different ways in performance management narratives. For time and attendance narratives, the T&A system and the trigger-point system together established a direct link between the act of clocking in and out and the warning process:

she was then late two days later, and I said to her 'look, you've got to have a consultation'

(PM20, MGR35)

Both systems combined made absence conspicuous, and the management of it inescapable: trigger points were hit *therefore* discipline was applied. Discipline was applied not so much as a consequence of absence, but as a consequence of trigger points being hit. The link was further strengthened by HR's commitment to encouraging and policing its application:

all [HR] say is we're managing the root cause that she's not at work, managing the fact that she is not at work, not the reason that she is not at work, and that's where it is company procedure

(PM39, MGR44)

Similarly, but in a looser way, the 'traffic-light system' established a link between certain customer service behaviours and the warning process:

I've done three [disciplinaries] this week, that was for poor customer service, so we've monitored the people, they are in a red, amber or green, you have to be green to be good, if you're on an amber you keep being reviewed and then you get disciplined, we've done three disciplinaries this week

(PM49, MGR21)

For most other job performance narratives and for misconduct, however, no artefacts provided such links, and the engagement of the disciplinary process usually relied on a decision being made by one or several actors. In many of the narratives, it was the decision of the direct manager:

I spoke to him verbally about things to start with and then I didn't think he'd improved so then we go to a formal counselling session

(PM43, MGR06)

Sometimes, however, the manager engaged the process on the suggestion of his or her manager:

so I spoke to [my assistant store manager] and [she] has agreed yeah, she'll start performance managing her

(PM35, MGR43)

I had a discussion with the commercial manager about him really and what I was seeing, […] and through coaching and guiding, she came to the conclusion that he should go on review

(PM46, MGR13)

In narrative PM37, a similar suggestion was made by an area manager for a store manager to discipline her assistant manager. However in this case, the store manager resisted and the disciplinary process was not engaged:

… and it was discussed with [my area manager] that I take [the assistant store manager] to performance management […] and I'd literally only been in the store probably a month, […] and for that reason I said then I wouldn't do that, and that I thought a better way around it was to start afresh with [her], get her motivated, and see how she worked under my direction…

(PM37, MGR43)

Finally, HR often pushed for the disciplinary process to be engaged. In the following excerpt, the direct manager, the store manager, HR and the traffic light system for customer service, all interacted to produce a decision to engage the system.

[my store manager] was on holiday last week and she said 'you must get [the disciplinaries] done […] while I'm away' and I said 'I've got one of the girls […] who is improving massively in other areas, […] but she's just not good at customer service and I feel like if I discipline her it's going to bring her right down', […] and [the store manager] said she wasn't sure so she said 'ring HR and see what they say', but they still insisted that it was all about customer service and I was still to go ahead with the disciplinary, so [the store manager] agreed with me that maybe that person shouldn't be disciplined, but we then had to consult HR and they said we've got to do it

(PM50, MGR21)

There were two points at which the disciplinary process could be engaged: formal counselling or a disciplinary hearing. In the case of formal counselling, the act of engaging the disciplinary process was performed through a "conversation" with the employee.

Employees were 'pulled into the office' and 'sat down' to mark a break with the normal flow of activity on the shop floor:

> *...so what we did with that was we had him in the office, we had a conversation to say 'right you know this can't continue...'*
>
> (PM09, MGR29)

> *... I took the individuals in one by one, sat them down, had a conversation with them and asked them what went wrong...*
>
> (PM15, MGR32)

> *...so at the back of that, we then had a conversation with him, sat him down and said 'this in unacceptable, this is what needs to happen'...*
>
> (PM29, MGR39)

Then, the nature of the meeting was declared, and the disciplinary process invoked explicitly:

> *... I've sat down and gone 'right well I'm now managing you' [...] it started off a bit informally, [...] and then it's got more formal, sit down, to the point where two weeks ago, 'I'm now documenting this as a documented conversation that if you do not improve I will formally performance manage you'*
>
> (PM05, MGR6)

> *... and I said 'right we are going to have to record that we've had the conversation, I'll review it weekly and if there's no improvement, we'll have to take it further and we'll go the disciplinary route'*
>
> (PM38, MGR44)

Finally, the event was recorded in writing and included in the employee's personnel record.

> *...so I then pulled him into the office, and noted down on a record card the conversation...*
>
> (PM32, MGR40)

> *...and I said 'look, I think it's time that we sit her down and we make it more formal, [...] we need to sit down and get something documented because it's just going on too long...'*
>
> (PM35, MGR43)

In the cases where disciplinary action started with a disciplinary hearing, the employee was "invited to a disciplinary" with a written notice 24 hours in advance. The format, content and participants in the meeting needed to conform to strict requirements set in the policy:

now he's hit a second trigger letter, so I've invited him in to a disciplinary [...] with another pre-format that we do [...] and it's formal, he can have a witness [...] we have to do it formal, we have to give him 24 hours notice as well

(PM16, MGR33)

what actually happens, it then goes to what we call a formal disciplinary meeting, where the individual is given 24 hours' notice.. well it's generally more than that, but a minimum of 24 hours, they're also entitled… and they're informed of this at the time of being given the letter, they're entitled to have a companion who works within the company with them

(PM19, MGR36)

Once the disciplinary process had been engaged, following a set sequence of steps was a central concern. At one level, the very purpose of performance management activities – to produce changes in employee behaviour – often required that a number of iterations be made between monitoring employee performances, taking corrective actions, monitoring again for changes in behaviour, further corrective actions, and so forth. This led to commonplace sequences such as the following:

we record carded him first, we documented it to say 'right you know you've got to change this pattern we've identified', they didn't change, so record card him first, we then gave him several opportunities to rectify things, it didn't work, it took us about five six months to come to the ultimate and them just being dismissed

(PM09, MGR29)

so I've set him very clear goals and objectives in what he needs to achieve over the next six to eight weeks, and we will sit down every two weeks to review it, if we see no improvement, then obviously we'll take it to the next stage which will be disciplinary action

(PM29, MGR39)

… so we reviewed it, two weeks, reviewed it again, huge improvements, reviewed it again and it's fine…

(PM38, MGR44)

At another level, disciplinary processes were subject to legal requirements. Disciplinary actions could be challenged at employment tribunals, whose rulings were often based on whether company procedures had been followed. Thus HR's interventions in disciplinary processes were often aimed at ensuring procedures were abided to:

and [HR] did say that you will need now to [...] record a formal investigation with a note taker and tell them if they wanted somebody to sit in with them

(PM19, MGR35)

I rang HR and because the previous manager had not followed the steps correctly, HR didn't feel like I could go to the next level, go to disciplinary, I had to start the process again

(PM02, MGR25)

A complication was that there were sometimes practical difficulties in maintaining the sequence of actions. First, shifts and holidays made it difficult for managers and employees to be present at the same time for the meetings necessary to carry procedures forward. This often interfered with the timing of actions due:

[the delivery manager] does seem to be turning around, unfortunately they're going to about cross over because [he] has been on holiday, [the supervisor] is on holiday

(PM05, MGR26)

it's my day off tomorrow, and then he's out running the other [subsidiary] store for the next two weeks, so I won't actually be seeing him until I go down for a visit down there, […] so yes I will be sitting down, I will be speaking to him when I see him and it will be a recorded conversation

(PM25, MGR37)

Furthermore, the disciplinary sessions themselves were a drain on the scarce resources of the stores, putting further strain on ongoing business:

now the disciplinaries are happening and we've got no staff, so the floor levels are affected, so even that's had knock on effect, these incidents have an effect on everybody else, because everybody else is having to work that little bit harder

(PM32, MGR35)

Finally, temporary assignments could be a source of disruption to ongoing disciplinary processes:

he was due that two week review, but I wasn't in the business and nobody did it on my behalf, so it was left, when I did come back, I had to do it then, which was a bit late

(MGR22)

Things were further complicated when several procedures with the same employee conflicted with one another.

… I went through the disciplinary process, the first time she went through first written warning [for] absence, I was then in the process of taking her to disciplinary for conduct but she was then absent again which triggered her disciplinary for her absence to go to a second written warning, so I didn't do the second disciplinary, I continued with the first one, which took her to the second written warning…

(MGR40)

6.4.4   Shaping decisions

The fourth and final moment in performance management narratives was the shaping of decisions.   An important way in which disciplinary decisions were shaped was through interactions between managers and the HR department.   Managers were formally required to contact HR before a disciplinary hearing and during adjournments, to obtain "objective and expert help", so that "procedures are followed and conducted in a fair and appropriate way" and there is "consistency across the company" (Retail Disciplinary Guide).   At the same time, managers were reminded that "the final decision is yours".   Against the backdrop of this formal definition of the role of managers and HR, there were frequent negotiations between the two sides which could play out in different ways.   The relationship was perceived very differently by different managers.   For some managers, HR were advisors, but they were free to make their own decisions on disciplinary outcomes.   Other managers described a decision process where HR dictated outcomes which managers were expected to accept.   The following are quotes from three different managers that are representative of such diversity of views on their relationship with HR:

> *… I then contacted HR and said 'these are the issues I found, what's your advice?' but ultimately the question is always back to me in terms of what do I want to do about it, HR always guide but they will never say 'this is what you should do'…*
>
> (PM48, MGR17)

> *…[HR] did say that to me 'what do you want from this?' and I said 'well I wouldn't mind just counselling this person, talking to them again' and they said 'well I'm afraid not on this occasion, I think they've had enough chances and there has to be a first written warning'*
>
> (PM50, MGR21)

> *… and then you phone HR, you go through the questions you've asked, and then they make a decision, yes with you, or that's what they say, you make a decision together, but at the time for that one it was very much 'oh no, she's going to have first written warning'…*
>
> (PM47, MGR14)

Some managers gave accounts of instances when they went directly against HR's advice.   They risked being disciplined if there was a bad outcome, such as an appeal which is upheld, so they often covered their back by seeking the support of their own line manager.

... I did go against HR's advice, it was probably about three weeks ago, it's a guy I've got in store, he is very close to a final written warning, he only needed another occasion, [...] he was off because he attempted suicide, [...] when he came back in another manager had phoned HR for some advice and they said 'manage it still because he's not going to get dismissed in this occasion, and if he appeals we'll deal with it then' which I was not prepared to do, I was not prepared to manage him, I don't think he needed any additional pressure or stress or anything like that, we've got to support our employees, we've got a duty to care for them, or else I wouldn't think that was fair, so that is a time where I have not done what I've been asked to do because I just don't think it's the right decision

(PM06, MGR26)

Incumbents were not always passive recipients of disciplinary decisions, but were able to contribute to shaping the decisions in a number of different ways. First, incumbents' actions during the disciplinary could have an impact on the decision. In the following two excerpts, the manager attributed their decision to the incumbent's reaction during the disciplinary procedure, in narrative PM32 the reaction made the decision more severe, whereas in narrative PM48 it prompted a more lenient response:

... so I then pulled him into the office, and noted down on a record card the conversation, basically I said to him [...]'are you 100% sure you didn't have that holiday?' and he said 'yeah, I didn't have that holiday', I said 'well the thing is I've looked on the electronic journal and you didn't activate a till that day, which indicates to me that you were not in the business', and he just went 'well I couldn't have been there, could I?' [...] so we failed his probationary with a forced move to [another store], [...]because if I had presented him with that information and he'd been like 'oh I'm so sorry that I've asked you to do this', then I would have thought 'yes it was a genuine mistake', but his reaction at that point was very poor, and that just straight away, I just thought 'that's a bad attitude for a manager to have in general', nothing to do with the issue that had happened, but the reaction was very bad.

(PM32, MGR40)

... in this case a member of staff lost their keys, [...] the standard procedure is if you lose your keys it's final written warning, [...] I said to the member of staff [...] 'we've got to follow a formal process, [...] don't always think worst case scenario [...] it's my decision and what I feel is appropriate action to take I will make that call', because she was petrified, she thought she was going to lose her job, which she would, because that's how serious it is, [...] but that's when obviously I felt, knowing how the reaction was of that member of staff when she initially had lost her keys, just the pure shock on her face, she'd made a mistake... not that she'd made a mistake, it was purely a freak thing, but the reaction of that member of staff, you knew she was very concerned about... so it wasn't a case of she wasn't bothered, she was bothered, so doing the formal process was enough for me to say she knows how serious it is and she's learned by just obviously, by them being unfortunately removed by an item of clothing.

(PM48, MGR17)

Incumbents could also resist outcomes by appealing, filing a personal grievance or quitting the company before the conditions for a dismissal were effective, as explained in a previous section.

6.4.5 Concluding remarks

The analysis above highlights the many paths any performance management episode could take through any one of the four moments considered. Moreover, it provides evidence to suggest that it is rare for any one artefact or actor to set the course of action, but that this is only achieved through the interactions among them, which are difficult to predict at the outset.

6.5 Conclusion

From the review of participant narratives above, two features stand out. On the one hand, there is remarkable variation across narratives in terms of the issues that are dealt with, the paths decisions take and the individual outcomes that are finally produced. Moreover, situations which seemed similar at the outset were dealt with in quite different ways, leading to disparate outcomes. For instance, there were four narratives involving the loss of store keys, a seemingly straightforward and verifiable incident which constituted a 'serious breach of security procedures' and carried a final written warning according to both written policy and general practice as acknowledge by participants. Of these four narratives, two indeed led to final written warnings, but the other two only led to formal counselling, two levels of warning below that established in policy. Likewise, narratives PM14 and PM39 referred to episodes where employees had a medical condition that impaired their ability to stand for long periods of time. Whereas in one of the cases, adaptations were made in the workplace, including more flexible absence trigger points, in the other, the employee was struggling to avoid disciplinary action for absence and waiting for occasions to lapse in order to take time off to have remedial knee surgery.

On the other hand, there were striking similarities among groups of narratives. For example, in all four narratives about lost store keys, the incident was described as 'a serious

breach of security'; in most attendance narratives hitting a trigger point was followed by disciplinary action; finally, in most narratives of disciplinary hearings the manager adjourned the meeting before an outcome was reached and telephoned the HR department.

We have also seen how at different stages in performance management narratives, different actors and artefacts interact to produce outcomes. Such interactions are an additional source of diversity in performance management narratives.

CHAPTER 7: PROGRESSION

7.1   Introduction

The 62 progression narratives referred to a wide variety of episodes. 25 narratives described episodes leading to permanent appointments, while 10 narratives involved a temporary appointment to cover situations such as illness or maternity leave. A further 10 narratives referred to instances where applicants had been unsuccessful in their bid for a vacancy. Finally, 17 of the narratives did not refer to any specific appointment, but involved activities carried out to ensure an employee's preparedness for future progression, because of a concern for either his or her career, or for management succession within the store. Table 7.1 below lists all the narratives considered.

Table 7.1   Progression narratives by theme

Theme	Number of narratives	Narrative numbers
Permanent appointments	25	02, 04, 05, 07, 08, 11, 13, 16, 18, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 36, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 51, 53, 54, 55
Temporary appointments	10	01, 10, 15, 20, 21, 22, 28, 38, 49, 52
Unsuccessful applications	10	03, 06, 12, 14, 17, 19, 29, 33, 35, 47
Career and succession	17	09, 23, 24, 34, 37, 44, 45, 46, 48, 50, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62
TOTAL	62	

7.1.1   Permanent appointments

There were 25 narratives in the data which referred to permanent appointments. Table 7.2 indicates the respondent and store involved for each narrative, the perspective of the respondent, and gives a synopsis of the process and outcome. A majority (14 narratives) referred to sales manager appointments, but there were also appointments for supervisor (PR26, 39, 40), store manager (PR11, 27, 42), assistant store manager (PR02, 31), operations manager (PR16), part-time sales manager (PR30) and office manager (PR51) positions. Narratives included both episodes that involved a change of store (14 narratives) and episodes where the employee moved to another position within his or her current store.

Table 7.2   Progression narratives: Permanent appointments

Narrative number	Respondent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Synopsis
PR02	MGR22	7	Incumbent	309	Operations Mgr's position is red-ringed. She is force moved as an Operations Mgr in another store in the area. She does not like the idea at first, but finally sets in.
PR04	MGR22	7	Recruiting Mgr	581	A sales manager position. Advertised on bulletin, three applicants interviewed, successful candidate had good experience.
PR05	MGR23	7	Incumbent	632	A supervisor applied and got a sales manager position at another store, after several unsuccessful attempts and thanks to his manager's development efforts.
PR07	MGR24	7	Incumbent	493	A sales manager position came up in the bulletin, but no one applied. A more junior sales manager within the store spoke to Store Manager informally and was offered the position without a formal process.
PR08	MGR40	12	Recruiting Mgr	456	A sales manager successfully applied to a position at another store. Coming from a larger store, he was very commercial. After six months, he returned to a higher position in his previous store. A supervisor who was not successful originally has now applied again to the same position.
PR11	MGR25	7	Incumbent	370	Store manager moved to another store, position was advertised but no applicants because it was small store. Ladieswear manager did not apply because she was three grades below. Area Mgr approached her to suggest she took the position.
PR13	MGR25	7	Recruiting Mgr	383	A supervisor who had been acting as a sales manager was given the position permanently when it became available, because HR thought it was unfair to not give it to her, since she had been covering it, and no-one had wanted the temporary position in the first place
PR16	MGR26	8	Incumbent	357	Operations Mgr from a top store moved out to lesser role because of difficulty with Store Mgr. After a few months, applied and got larger role
PR18	MGR27	8	Incumbent	243	An ASM was red ringed and encouraged to apply to a ladieswear manager position at a large store
PR25	MGR31	9	Incumbent	731	Childrenswear mgr moves from large department to smaller store to be able to get training for ASM role without changing product. An exception was made not to reduce her salary.
PR26	MGR32	9	Recruiting Mgr	758	A sales consultant was recruited into a Supervisor position at another store. Another candidate from the same process was also brought in to another position that subsequently
PR27	MGR32	9	Incumbent	412	A sales mgr applied and was successful for an ASM position at another store. Six months later the store mgr left shortly before Christmas and she was asked by the area manager to

Table 7.2 (Cont.) Progression narratives: Permanent appointments

Narrative number	Respondent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Synopsis
PR30	MGR33	10	Recruiting Mgr	535	A part time manager position was advertised and the only applicant selected. Most people want FT positions.
PR31	MGR33	10	Incumbent	560	Grade 5 ASM applied for Grade 4 ASM maternity cover, was not given it, but was given Gd4 ASM position of successful candidate. At end of maternity got permanent ASM 4 position in a new store. She had to cover elsewhere until the store opened.
PR32	MGR34	10	Incumbent	509	Supervisor applied to sales manager position at a new store. Recruiting store manager had been for two months covering at his previous store.
PR36	MGR36	10	Recruiting Mgr	290	Office supervisor is promoted to MW manager. She applied and was a good fit for the department.
PR39	MGR38	11	Recruiting Mgr	673	LW+CW manager needed to recruit a supervisor. Published in bulletin. Got two applications from people in the store. Conducted interviews with a mix of standard and tailored questions and practicals. Successful candidate showed ability to cope with pressure in her answers to questions.
PR40	MGR38	11	Incumbent	354	PT sales consultant applied and got FT Supervisor position.
PR41	MGR39	11	Recruiting Mgr	538	A LW+CW supervisor applied for a MW+H sales manager position in the same store. He was interviewed in competition against two other supervisors from other stores. He was the successful candidate.
PR42	MGR39	11	Incumbent	360	ASM in a small store applied and got position as Store manager in another small store.
PR43	MGR12	4	Incumbent	955	MW junior manager has applied for a LW manager at a smaller store as the senior in the dept
PR51	MGR11	4	Incumbent	442	PT office assistant applied for Office mgr at another store. Got help from current manager to prepare the interview and was successful
PR53	MGR12	4	Incumbent	200	LW Supervisor wanted to apply for MW manager position in same store. His manager did not think he was ready, but he still applied and got the position
PR54	MGR19	6	Incumbent	354	A supervisor applied for a manager position in the same store, which was advertised in the bulletin. The interview had a mix of questions and practical exercises
PR55	MGR20	6	Incumbent	302	M+H manager was downgraded with the store to supervisor. He then applied to a manager position in LW

The narratives were mostly consistent with the general practice for competitive internal selection processes described in chapter 5. Thus, in virtually all cases, the vacancy was published in the weekly companywide bulletin, candidates made a formal application, and a decision was made by line managers following an interview with each applicant. There were, however, four narratives in which the appointment was not competitive. In narratives PR13 and PR27 a permanent appointment was made of someone who was already doing the position on a temporary basis. In narratives PR02 and PR18, managers had been given notice that their position was 'red-ringed' (identified to be eliminated) and were therefore in need of relocation. In both cases, the respondent was urged to take an available position in another store, even though they were not initially interested in the move.

Apart from these four exceptions, all other narratives of permanent appointments first involved publishing the vacancy in the weekly bulletin. The recruiting manager created the vacancy in the intranet system and this was compiled by HR and made available to all the stores once a week, also through the intranet. Prospective candidates could see the bulletin directly on the intranet, but more commonly, they saw it on the notice board in the staff room where it was regularly pinned by office staff. All vacancies had a deadline of three weeks for anyone to make an application through the HR department. Candidates were required to speak to their line managers before applying. At the end of the period a list of candidates was sent by HR to the recruiting manager who arranged the selection process.

The selection process typically consisted of an interview carried out by the recruiting manager with a note taker. These interviews were structured, with the same set of questions and practical exercises put to all interviewees. Decisions were made by the recruiting manager, who informed the successful candidate and HR of the outcome, and provided feedback to all other applicants. Finally a date for the transfer was agreed, usually within four weeks of the decision being confirmed.

7.1.2   Temporary appointments

The interview data included 10 narratives where a temporary appointment had been

made. These were internal temporary appointments, which could be a step towards

progression. Table 7.3 shows detailed data on these narratives, including respondent, store,

and a brief synopsis. Temporary appointment narratives referred to different levels of

management positions, including store manager (PR 01, 22, 28), commercial manager

(PR15, 21), assistant store manager (PR10), operations manager (PR38), sales manager

(PR20), delivery manager (PR52) and part-time store manager (PR49).

In all but one case [23], the temporary appointment was made to cover an absence due to

maternity (PR10, PR15, PR20, PR21, PR28), illness (PR49, PR52), or an assignment to a

role at head office (PR22). In narrative PR01 however, the temporary position was offered

to cover as a means to persuade an employee to take up a hard-to-fill position. She was

asked "to see whether I liked doing it", in the understanding that she could return to her

previous post if she did not, which eventually was the case.

Most temporary appointments were for a period of between 6 and 18 months; the

shortest was 4 weeks (PR38). The employee was not forced to stay in the position for the

duration of the temporary appointment. For instance, the person in PR28 applied

successfully to another position 9 months into a 12 month maternity cover, and someone else

was brought in to cover for the remainder of the period.

In all but 2 narratives, the line manager directly approached the person to suggest they

take the position temporarily. In one of the narratives (PR21) the position was advertised in

the bulletin, and in another (PR15) the employee put herself forward, since she knew

informally that the temporary position was to be made available.

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[23] Excluding narrative PR38 where the initial reason for the chain of temporary assignments
was not mentioned.

Table 7.3   Progression narratives: Temporary appointments

Narrative number	Respon-dent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Synopsis
PR01	MGR22	7	Incumbent	789	Operations Mgr was approached to take Store Mgr role in a small store. A temporary trial assignment was arranged. She did not succeed in Store Mgr position and went back to old.
PR10	MGR25	7	Incumbent	582	Store Mgr applied to cover a maternity for a year at another store. Her position was advertised but there were no applicants because it was a small store. ASM and Ladieswear Mgr were asked to go up one level, temporarily at first, then for the whole of the cover.
PR15	MGR26	8	Incumbent	602	Operations Mgr spoke to Store Mgr to cover for Commercial Mgr's maternity. During the cover, she built relationship with area manager. At the end of the cover moved back to previous position
PR20	MGR28	8	Incumbent	427	Menswear manager was offered to cover for an 18-month maternity in childrenswear, she took it and went back to her old position in MW
PR21	MGR29	8	Recruiting Mgr	881	A position was advertised to cover a maternity leave for a commercial manager and about 10 applications were received. 4 of those were interviewed. The successful candidate had experience and personal qualities.
PR22	MGR29	8	Incumbent	851	Store Mgr was covering at a larger store for one year as part of a chain of 9 temporary moves because an area manager had a temporary appointment at Head Office. He was approached by the area manager
PR28	MGR32	9	Incumbent	380	A store manager was called by the area manager to offer a maternity cover at a store that was being refitted. She accepted because of the new experience with the refit. A few months before the maternity is over she has applied to a Store Mgr position at a new store, so a new person is being brought for covering the rest of the period
PR38	MGR38	11	Incumbent	515	LW+CW manager stepped up as acting Ops Mgr, while store manager covers another store. Was approached by Store Manager and there are others involved in the chain
PR49	MGR30	9	Incumbent	279	Because of swine flu epidemic, a store manager looked for support from staff and managers in other stores. A part time manager went to cover an additional 2 days a week. Since then, she is called for covering absences.
PR52	MGR12	4	Incumbent	361	A junior M+H manager has successfully applied for a position as MW manager at another store. In the meantime, the deliveries Mgr is off ill. He goes to cover for him, while he is covered by the supervisor in the MW department

Three of the temporary assignment narratives made reference to 'cover chains' (PR10, PR22, PR38) in which one temporary assignment involved several people moving to cover the previous person's position. In PR22, for instance, the respondent revealed that "there's about four people in front of me and about five people below me", involving at least two area manager positions and two store manager positions across different stores and areas. Similarly, in PR10 and PR38, several in-store managers were temporarily 'stepped-up' to a higher role while the respective store managers covered at another store.

7.1.3   Unsuccessful applications

As part of the interview schedule, wave 2 respondents were asked to provide a narrative of an instance where they applied to a vacancy but were declined. This yielded 10 narratives of progression episodes from the point of view of applicants who did not succeed. Table 7.4 contains detailed information on these narratives, including the respondents and their store, and a brief synopsis.

The narratives included a diversity of positions that were applied for, including store manager (PR03, 47), commercial manager (PR17), assistant store manager (PR35), sales manager (PR36, 12, 19, 29), and supervisor (PR14, 33) positions. Only one of the narratives referred to a temporary assignment (PR03), all others involved potential permanent assignments. Three of the narratives were within the same store (PR03, 06, 14), while the rest involved a potential move to a different store.

In all 10 narratives, the candidates went through an interview process. Most were also given specific feedback of why they had not been successful, and were aware of who had been appointed in their stead. Several had also received specific advice on how to be successful in that position in the future. Reasons given for not being appointed included other stronger candidates (PR06, 17, 29, 35), poor interview (PR12, 33), "too big a jump" (PR03), insufficient experience (PR14), and not getting along with the manager and favouritism (PR19, 47).

Table 7.4   Progression narratives: Unsuccessful applications

Narrative number	Respondent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Synopsis
PR03	MGR22	7	Incumbent	980	Operations Mgr applied to cover Store Mgr's 12-month maternity leave, went to interviews with Area Mgr, but got declined because it was a two-step jump. Area Mgr approached Store Mgr from a smaller store, and offered her position to the Operations Mgr, but she did not want that position because of a previous bad experience at a small store.
PR06	MGR23	7	Incumbent	392	Supervisor applied for Sales Mgr position in same store but was declined in favour of an external applicant. Store manager offered development and support.
PR12	MGR25	7	Incumbent	413	Ladieswear Mgr applied to same role at a larger store but got declined due to the interview. She was not aware of standard questions.
PR14	MGR25	7	Recruiting Mgr	389	Newly appointed Store Mgr found there was a Supervisor position that had been vacant for a year, published in bulletin with no applicants. She spoke with HR to go external. However, the external recruiting website does not allow for Supervisor positions, so they advertised for a full time consultant, and selected CVs with higher experience. When the position was advertised externally, two candidates from the same store applied, but both were declined, one because of inconsistent attendance. Finally an external candidate was selected.
PR17	MGR26	8	Incumbent	306	Operations Mgr applied to two positions as Commercial Mgr and Store Mgr, and was declined for both. This was presented as evidence that operations staff are discriminated against.
PR19	MGR27	8	Incumbent	210	LW manager applied for a position but was declined. The position was given to the person who was temporarily doing the job
PR29	MGR32	9	Incumbent	142	sales Manager applied for same role at larger store, went to interview where practical and theoretical questions were asked, was declined because there was a more experienced candidate
PR33	MGR34	10	Incumbent	373	Sales consultant applied for a supervisor position but got declined because he did not know the answer to specific questions he was asked in the interview
PR35	MGR35	10	Incumbent	503	A grade 8 sales manager is recommended by senior store managers she had worked with in the past to apply to a grade 5 ASM position, HR was surprised but said ok because of the recommendation. The position was given to another candidate that had previous ASM experience. she was told she came second
PR47	MGR44	9	Incumbent	836	ASM has applied to a number of positions in the area, and got declined with little feedback from area manager. She has decided not to pursue any more opportunities in that manager's area

7.1.4   Career and succession

A final group of 17 narratives did not refer to specific appointments but gave accounts of episodes where specific individuals had been developed to be able to move on to a higher position. Table 7.5 indicates the respondent, store and brief synopsis for each narrative. In most cases, the narrative focused on the actions taken to develop an individual's career. In a few of the narratives, there was also a preoccupation in ensuring there was someone ready to take a specific position when it became available in the future (PR24, 34, 48).

This group of narratives is illustrative of the varied ways in which progression was supported beside the specific appointment episodes. There is for instance mention of on-the-job training and coaching (PR09, 24, 37, 60), annual appraisals and talent management reviews (PR50, 57), in-store rotations (PR46, 58), and use of temporary covers for development purposes (PR56).

7.1.5   Concluding remarks

This section has presented an overview of the 62 progression narratives, grouped according to features of the episode. It shows there is a wide range of activities that contribute to shaping employees' progression outcomes.

Table 7.5   Progression narratives: Career and succession

Narrative number	Respondent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Synopsis
PR09	MGR24	7	Current Mgr	429	A specialist sales consultant applied and got the supervisor position in the department, but could have gone for the manager position. Because she was young she had difficulty managing others so her new manager made sure she developed those skills.
PR23	MGR30	9	Incumbent	312	Former manager came back in the company as a Sunday floor Mgr an quickly progressed to Sunday store manager
PR24	MGR30	9	Current Manager	301	Sunday Mgr planned for a senior staff to train a junior before he had to leave the company for personal reasons
PR34	MGR34	10	Incumbent	350	Grade 7 Childrenswear was helping her grade 5 LW+CW manager because she was new to the company. When she left, CW manager applied and got the position because she knew the role so well
PR37	MGR37	11	Recruiting Mgr	572	Part time sales consultant applied to different full time positions in different stores. At one store, the recruiting manager had a telephone conversation and was impressed, so she invited him for an interview and offered a 30 hour contract. Upon arriving he was put on a development path to become a supervisor within a few months
PR44	MGR40	12	Incumbent	682	Store manager was asked by area manager to sit for someone else at a product surgery. She did so well that she was expressly asked to go to the next one
PR45	MGR42	13	Recruiting Mgr	448	PT sales consultant has progressed quickly to FT and to manager position. Store Mgr had role in identifying potential and suggesting her for position
PR46	MGR43	13	Current Manager	275	After failing to win an ASM job at another store, a sales manager is swapped to a quieter floor so she can have time off the floor to spend with the ASM
PR48	MGR03	1	Incumbent	285	Stockroom Mgr has announced he will go later in the year. Stockroom supervisor is acting as Manager, and being tried. The position will be advertised and there will be competing applicants, since it is a Mon-Fri job

Table 7.5 (Cont.) Progression narratives: Career and succession

Narrative number	Respon- dent	Store	Point of view	Word count	Synopsis
PR50	MGR10	4	Incumbent	531	Commercial Manager finds ways of enriching her job with corporate projects, rather than going for store mgr position
PR56	MGR39	11	Current Manager	404	Store manager describes how arrangements are made for temporary covers, so they become development opportunities
PR57	MGR38	11	Current Manager	301	FT sales consultant was graded a merit sales to encourage her to develop into a supervisor
PR58	MGR36	10	Current Manager	135	Explains career plan for MW manager
PR59	MGR22	7	Current Manager	397	A floor manager is ready to progress, but the opportunity has not been there
PR60	MGR23	7	Current Manager	572	Sales manager trains his staff in order for him to be able to come off the sales floor to be trained himself
PR61	MGR36	10	Current Manager	153	Store manager planned development of new sales manager in sight of her next progression
PR62	MGR36	10	Current Manager	179	Store manager realised the need to let ASM 'fly the nest'
PR50	MGR10	4	Incumbent	531	Commercial Manager finds ways of enriching her job with corporate projects, rather than going for store mgr position

7.2 Actors and artefacts

This section introduces the main actors and artefacts present in progression narratives, and the major ways in which their agency is effected. The following groups of actors are considered: recruiting line managers, current line managers, applicants/candidates, the HR department, and other actors. The headings under which artefacts are grouped include policy documents, company intranet and other documents.

7.2.1 Recruiting line managers

In many progression narratives line managers had central roles as recruiting managers who were seeking an appropriate person to fill a vacancy in their team. Many progression narratives started with a line manager who anticipated a vacant position in his or her team and entered the details of the vacancy on the intranet to go on the weekly bulletin. When publication in the bulletin did not produce suitable applicants, recruiting managers approached employees they thought might be good candidates and interested in the position.

Once a set of candidates had been sourced, line managers planned and performed the selection interviews. They were responsible for setting up the logistics of the interviews, but also for designing the interview questions and practical exercises they would use.

Finally, line managers carried the process through by making an appointment decision. In all narratives, the decision to appoint was attributed to the recruiting line manager, relying on the candidate's performance in the interview, and information about their previous role. If the candidate was not known to the manager previously, they often contacted their current manager before appointing:

> *we also phoned her store manager at [another store] and got some feedback from the store manager that actually works with her all the time and that feedback was very good, so that helped us make a decision as well*
>
> (PR26, MGR32)

Line managers often made the effort to give feedback to all candidates. The following excerpts are examples from the points of view of the candidate and the manager:

I told the person who was successful first, in case they changed their mind, then I told everybody else afterwards and feedback to them why they weren't successful on this occasion.

(PR21, MGR29)

I personally make sure that my feedback is documented and given out to the candidates so that they know, and if they're in my store we sit down and we put together a personal development plan

(PR46, MGR43)

I came second, which wasn't brilliant, I didn't get the job, however [...] the store manager was really impressed with my interviewing, [...] there were elements of being an assistant store manager that I'm not going to learn until I am at that role, and the manager did say because she was going to be out of the store a lot, she wouldn't have that much time to do the training, so that's what encouraged her to go with the other candidate

(PR35, MGR35)

Only one of the respondents mentioned an occasion in which no feedback was given after an unsuccessful interview process:

I applied for the store manager's position [...] and my area manager interviewed me, [...] I didn't get the position, and I never got feedback on it

(PR47, MGR44)

For temporary assignments, the process was often less formal and more dependent on the initiative of the recruiting line manager. In 8 of the 10 narratives on temporary assignments, the employee was directly approached by the manager and given the position without a formal selection process:

because it's only temporary, the position was just offered to me, like 'would you like to do this position?' and I said yes, because it was valuable experience for me, good knowledge and a little bit of a pay rise for eighteen months

(PR20, MGR28)

I was approached by my store manager [...] I was approached as to if I'd like to do it, what the job role would consist of, and was then finally asked 'do you think you can do it? would you like to do it?' and I said yes

(PR38, MGR38)

In the following example, the store manager herself made urgent calls to others stores in order to secure sufficient staff during an emergency:

there's another store [...], they had a swine flu epidemic about eighteen months ago and half the staff was just down with swine flu, the store manager phoned here, and they said, 'have you got any staff that you can send along to support?'

(PR49, MGR30)

7.2.2   Current line managers

Line managers also played important roles in progression narratives as current managers of employees who sought progression. Current line managers intervened in individual progression episodes, in several ways. First, employees were formally required to discuss with their line manager their suitability for a position before applying. The vacancy bulletin had the following indication on the front cover of every weekly issue:

Please discuss any potential moves with your Line Manager before applying. If at any time you wish to discuss your career, please speak to your Store/Area Manager.

(Vacancy Bulletin)

All instances of such discussions reported in the interviews were open and constructive. Following are three examples from the perspective of both managers and employees. In one of them (PR53), the manager recommended that the employee did not apply to a position, but he still went ahead and eventually got the job.

she helped me prepare for the interview, again it was one of those where I asked whether she felt... whenever you apply to a new position, especially if its higher, you have to speak to your manager and see whether they feel that you are ready to take on that new and extra responsibility, so I asked her and she said there are obviously weaknesses that I really needed to build on, but yeah, there's no reason why you can't do the job and then she just prepped me for it

(PR51, MGR11)

he is now a supervisor, and he's now already wanting to be a manager, but I'm now holding back, he's not ready for that, so it's also making him realise, because he is only eighteen, that actually there's still a lot you need to learn before you go on to that management position

(PR37, MGR37)

my senior manager of the department, I said I wanted to apply for it [...] and she said she didn't think I'd been ready for it yet, she said 'give it a few more months and then I think you'll be ready for the position', and I just went for it anyway and I still got the job, [...] she was glad that I got it, she just felt that I wasn't really ready

(PR53, MGR12)

Second, line managers helped inexperienced candidates prepare for interviews. In one of the examples above (PR51), a junior manager reported that her manager had helped her

prepare for the interview. In the example below, another respondent described how she was unsuccessful at an interview, partly because her manager had not helped her prepare for it.

> *at the time I wasn't aware that the company structured questions, they had a number of questions they always asked, [...] so I went in not knowing what I was going to be asked, and I found out that I could have rehearsed all of these options, which the other candidates did and I didn't [...] if I had had a senior manager above me at the time who wanted me to move on, she could have supported me better*
>
> (PR12, MGR25)

Third, line managers were often asked for, and gave, references about applicants to recruiting managers. This was known by the candidates and was often acknowledged as an important input for a successful application:

> *I also think there was my previous store manager might have spoken to this store manager and said 'look, this is what he is good at, this is what he can do for you', that might have helped quite a bit*
>
> (PR05, MGR23)

> *I know that they rang my superior at the time and said 'what's she like? would you give her this job?', and she would have said yes definitely,*
>
> (PR12, MGR25)

Finally, current line managers often suggested that employees apply to a vacancy they saw advertised in the bulletin or heard about from other managers at meetings. Sometimes this was as a consequence of discussions among managers regarding hard to fill positions. Following are a few examples of line managers suggesting their team members to apply to an available position:

> *my store manager spoke to me and said 'this is coming up would you be interested', of course I would because it's what I want to get back into*
>
> (PR16, MGR26)

> *when this position was advertised, my store manager said to me 'look, it might be a good idea for you to go into a smaller store, it's a lower grade manager but it's a smaller store for you to get that development to move into an assistant store manager position', so she suggested it to me and then I thought about it and was 'ok I could do that', and then just followed the process*
>
> (PR25, MGR31)

> *I was approached by my area manager, I was operations manager [...] and my store manager said to my area manager I would be good for the job and they both decided it would be a good idea for me to go and have a go*
>
> (PR01,MGR22)

Besides intervening in processes for specific appointments, current managers were generally involved in the development of their team members. Both the vacancy bulletin (see quote above) and the staff handbook ("Your manager can provide you with the criteria for promotion", Staff Handbook: 57) pointed to such role, which included planning career steps, carrying out career reviews, setting career target and selecting training actions to be carried out:

> *I kept [my line manager] informed throughout the process because he knew I wanted to progress, he knew I was ready to progress and he helped me a lot to develop me to be ready to progress*
>
> (PR05, MGR23)

> *the lady who was the other manager on my floor [...] has progressed probably quicker than anyone I've ever known [...] it wasn't ever the case where we said within a year we want you to be a manager, there was never any particular vision of how quickly she was going to get on, she's got lots of initiative [...] she was just as invested in developing as I was in developing her*
>
> (PR45, MGR42)

> *[My store manager] sat me down, he'd gone through my strengths and weaknesses of my interview and talked about how I could improve them, and then I'd get tasks to do in my current job role, so the next time I was interviewed it wouldn't be so much of a problem because I could go 'look, I've done this, here's the evidence for it', and he was always open-door policy, because after applying for a few jobs and not getting anywhere I was quite low and he was more than happy for me to go 'look, I've applied for jobs, I haven't gone anywhere what do I do next?'*
>
> (PR06, MGR23)

7.2.3 Applicants/candidates

Employees took an active role in their own progression. First, they made selective decisions to apply to specific vacancies. Indeed a majority of progression narratives, particularly for permanent assignments, involved employees taking the initiative to apply to a vacancy. In the following four excerpts, employees showed interest in a position in different ways, including the formal conduit through HR, asking informally, and contacting the store directly.

> *[I] saw it in the vacancy bulletin, applied to HR, had an interview with the area manager and then got the job*
>
> (PR42, MGR39)

I knew the job was going, so I asked if there was a possibility

(PR07, MGR24)

I wanted to progress, so I wrote out a letter of application, came here handed it to the manager, I had worked with the manager before, [when] they were covering at my store for a week, [...] we had a good chat, I was offered an interview

(PR05, MGR23)

I called the other store, [...] said I'm interested in this position, I told them what I am doing now and [that] I'm interested in applying, [...] I asked them what [the position] involves, what department is it, what hours is it

(PR43, MGR12)

Second, employees were able to influence their progression by proactively acquiring new knowledge and skills. They did this by undergoing formal training, applying or volunteering for temporary covers, taking up delegated tasks from their managers, and engaging in business development projects such as new store openings or refits. Following are examples that illustrate each of these different areas where employees' actions shaped their own progression.

as the ASM [assistant store manager], I oversee all the supervisors' training and their training is dependent on them, there's five specific training sessions that they do, but it's up to them how long it takes, [...] he had all of them done and back to me within four weeks, which is really good going, he had obviously done a lot of work at home

(PR37, MGR37)

because it's only temporary, the position was just offered to me, like 'would you like to do this position?', and I said yes, because it was valuable experience for me, good knowledge and a little bit of a pay rise for eighteen months, [...]it was a higher profile floor, it takes more money than the menswear department that I was on, so it's a faster paced floor, it's a totally different product, [...] so it was giving me an insight into another area of [the company] which was childrenswear, helped me cope with managing more staff, [...] if I were to apply for a permanent grade 5 position it gives me the opportunity to say well I've already done that role, you could already see that I'm experienced and capable of doing that role, so that gives you a bit of an advantage over somebody that perhaps has never done the grade 5 position before but is applying for the same position as the one you are

(PR20, MGR28)

the manager above me was new into the company, and [...] she was unaware of how to do certain tasks, [...] I had gone up step by step, I knew roughly how to do her position as well, so I was helping her in one respect but actually doing the job in another, so therefore when it come about that [she] left, I was doing that job anyway, [...] it has to be given out and applied for by everybody but I had my interview and because I had proven myself that I could do the position, that I was actually offered it

(PR34, MGR34)

172

because the store was having a refit for three months, which is quite a big thing for the company, I wanted to come here to actually experience doing a refit because it's something I've never done in my career [...] to have a three month's refit is very good to have on your profile, because it will help you be able to go out and help other stores that have got refits [...] and it will also help you when a new store opens, because you could actually have a bit more of a lead if you're applying for a position [...] I knew the store manager was going on maternity cover, and my area manager called and asked if I would be willing to cover the store while she was off, so I just said yes

(PR28, MGR32)

7.2.4   HR department

Every week each of the regional HR teams verified the vacancies that were submitted through the intranet by the stores in their region and authorised their publication in the bulletin. If they were unsure about any of the submitted vacancies, they contacted the recruiting officer to discuss any issues. Managers were then responsible for carrying out the selection process, using the tools that HR made available to them, such as the 'interview pack'. At the end of the process, the recruiting manager communicated to HR their decision, and it was the HR team that input the new appointment onto the system for it to take effect in the payroll. Again, if there were any issues they would discuss with the manager. This type of involvement meant that line managers took ownership and responsibility for sourcing and selecting their own team, but at the same time HR made sure that certain steps were almost always followed, including publication in the bulletin and interviewing of all candidates. An HR respondent described their role in the following terms:

if [managers] need assistance, we will assist with that, if they can't get the right calibre of staff, we'll go to agencies, we'll advertise it, we'll advise them if they're having problems recruiting, but ultimately they know what hours they've got in the store, they know where those shifts need to go, and they need to get those people in the stores, so I think reasonably with five, six hundred stores across the company, we don't have the resources to help them with the recruitment on a daily basis, I mean we advertise them, they'll come to us if they need anything advertising, we control the vacancy bulletin that goes in store, we created the website for them to make their recruitment process easier, we created the recruitment material, the interview pack, so we've given them all the resources that they need to do the recruitment but we don't get involved often in that side of it

(HRM2)

7.2.5   Other actors

There were other actors that featured in progression narratives. First, the actions of other employees who chose either to apply or not to apply to a position conditioned the outcome for those who did apply. In any of the unsuccessful application narratives, the outcome may have been different if the candidates against whom the unsuccessful candidate was compared had not applied. Conversely, in the following passages, the fact that a stronger candidate did *not* apply opened the door for an unexpected progression move.

> *[My senior] is the Home specialist, when I went on to Kids and Home [manager], she was already established on that floor, […]she could have gone for [my] job and she would have had more experience than me, but she didn't want to do it*
>
> (PR09, MGR24)

> *the store manager had left and the assistant manager, the lady above me, decided she definitely did not want to do it again, and it went up in the vacancy bulletin, […] no-one applied and I must admit I didn't apply, […] then my area manager rang me and said 'I really think you should think about it'*
>
> (PR11, MGR25)

A particular case in which progression moves depended on others' actions was cover chains. As the following respondent explained, the progression opportunity a cover chain offered was shaped by other members in the chain.

> *I'm only temporary because we have one or two managers who've stepped up temporarily to cover area manager's jobs, that made a position in this store, which I've stepped into […] the end date is meant to be January next year, so hopefully if the person who started off all these moves likes his job at Head Office, he will stay there, and then this position here may become permanent, […] there's a whole chain in front of me, there's about four people in front of me and about five people below me as well, all because of one person moving, but this is where [the company] is really good, […] as soon as one person moves up the ladder, it gives scope for everybody else to progress as well, […], and again in January if one of those four people above me decide they don't want the position or they are not suitable, then I'm stuck, I have to go back to my old position, so who knows let's see what happens, I don't want to go back to my old store, I want to stay here […] but there's nothing I can do about it*
>
> (PR22, MGR29)

Former managers could also play a role in progression by advising and mentoring their former team members. In the following narrative, a manager applied to a position after it was recommended to her by two former managers. Moreover, HR accepted her

application to the highly graded position on the basis that it had been recommended by one

of the former managers, who held an important position in the area.

> *I did recently go for a position as assistant store manager at a standalone home store, which was recommended to me by a couple of store managers, who I've worked for previously, [...]the fact that the one of the managers who had recommended me is a store manager at [our area's flagship store], she was my store manager for four or five years, so I thought she's obviously seen something in me to recommend me to go for this job because even when I rang HR and said I was applying, they said to me 'do you realise what position you're applying for?', and I said 'yes, I know, but it's been recommended to me' and they said 'ok, that's fine then'*
>
> (PR35, MGR35)

Higher management could also affect an individual's progression through their

decisions on the structure of a store, either because they were downgraded or upgraded:

> *I got moved to this store actually, [the company] was doing a restructuring, and they were re-grading some stores, [...] they downgraded the store and got rid of the ops manager position, which was me*
>
> (PR02, MGR22)

> *fingers crossed, things might change here, [...] the store potentially might get bigger, not sure at the moment, it's all in the hands of someone else*
>
> (PR50, MGR10)

Finally, actors external to the organisation also featured in some progression

narratives, particularly employees' family members who could affect the decisions they took.

Following are three examples:

> *she said I need someone on a Sunday to run the womenswear floor, [...] I said yeah, it sounds like I could do that, and came home and discussed it with [my husband] and [he] said yeah, [...] and then I did that for six weeks*
>
> (PR23, MGR30)

> *I will [seek to progress] but I have quite a young family, so travelling distance wise, I'm not willing to travel too far, because my priority is my family, I love [the company], it is great, it's been very good to me, but I'm not willing to travel any further to go anywhere, I've got two little children and my wife, far more important, so yes I will progress, but only for this store here*
>
> (PR22, MGR29)

> *unfortunately it's got in the way a little bit really* [respondent taps her abdomen, she is visibly pregnant]*, because I came to the company in November, I didn't have any plans, it wasn't planned, but it is fantastic, we are very very happy, but I basically would have been looking to move on in the next six months, once I found my feet [...], but I definitely look and do see myself progressing through the company,*
>
> (PR44, MGR40)

7.2.6 Policy documents

Two policy documents were particularly relevant to progression narratives for the many elements they defined: the structure and salary pack and the vacancy bulletin (see table 7.6). The staff handbook, on the other hand, only addressed progression in one paragraph on 'promotion policy' at the bottom of a page, and a further two paragraphs on 'training and development'. Both passages in the staff handbook referred to line managers as the source of further information. Table 7.6 provides a physical description of each of the policy documents and a summary of their content.

Table 7.6: Policy documents in progression

Document	Physical description	Policy content
Structure and salary pack	43-page A4 document	Store grading scheme and grading criteria Salary increase guidelines and criteria Store management structures Salary and hourly rates Bonus schemes Working wardrobe policy Upgrade/downgrade and red-ring policy Store grade listings
Vacancy bulletin (weekly issue)	14-page A4 document	Cover page with instructions for applying and HR contact numbers 10 pages of "current vacancies", by region 3 pages with posters
Staff handbook	Small pocket-size 84-page booklet (15.5 cm x 9 cm)	Promotion policy (1 paragraph) Training and development (2 paragraphs)

Introduced in chapter 5 as part of centralised HRM activities, the Structure and Salary Pack (SSP) was a 43-page document which detailed the management structure of each store, salary bands for each grade, details of variable pay schemes, and policy statements for salary setting, working wardrobe, upgrades and downgrades, red ringing and merit increases. The SSP played an important role in progression because it set the structure of the stores and thus the available positions and their grade. Managers relied on the SSP to know what their target structure was and to determine what positions they could recruit for.

The vacancy bulletin was a 14-page A4 document issued weekly. It was put together by HR from the vacancies submitted by the stores through the intranet, and made available through the intranet every Thursday. In each store, a member of the office staff printed each week's issue and pinned it to the notice board in the staff room. Since prospective candidates had three weeks to apply, there were typically three current issues of the bulletin displayed in each store.

that goes on to what we call the computer system and it's printed out in every store across the country and they have to phone this store and apply, at the end of the four[24] weeks we get a list of everyone who's phoned and applied, and we invite them to come for an interview.

(PR39, MGR38)

they have a vacancy bulletin which comes through every Thursday listing all the vacancies in every store throughout the country, and that comes off every week and it sits in the staff room for three weeks, you have three running weeks' worth of vacancies

(PR05, MGR23)

Figure 7.1 shows the bulletin's cover page, which displayed the week of issue, and gave succinct instructions for applying, including the need to discuss with the line manager before applying, and to contact the HR department. It also included instructions for expressing interest to apply to other areas of the company outside retail stores. 10 pages of vacancy tables followed, one for managerial and one for supervisor positions in each of the 5 regions. Figure 7.2 is an example of one of these pages. Each table identified the position by listing the store name and number, title (e.g. sales manager), product (e.g. ladieswear), grade, salary rate (central London, outer London, standard), products present in the store, and other info –typically including shift information, store location and term dates for temporary appointments. Finally, the vacancy bulletin included a few full-page posters highlighting some of the positions listed in the tables. An example is shown in Figure 7.3.

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[24] Candidates had three weeks to apply after publication in the bulletin, but managers needed to submit the vacancy a week before it appeared in the bulletin, hence the four weeks this respondent refers to.

Figure 7.1: Vacancy bulletin; cover page

Figure 7.2: Vacancy bulletin; sample current vacancies page

Figure 7.3: Vacancy bulletin; sample poster

7.2.7 Company intranet

Much of the recruiting process was supported through the company intranet. For instance, managers created the vacancy on the intranet, and the vacancy bulletin was distributed to the stores through it. There was also an interview pack on the system with sample questions and other guidelines for recruiting managers:

> *we'd print interview questions off the system, because they are all done for us, and you print off a job profile, the rate of pay and everything like that, so you get all of that together before you do the interview*
>
> (PR04, MGR22)

> *I interviewed him [...] I used a standard list of questions that we have on our internet service that I can pull those up to have a look at [...] we also did a practical, we get them to go and have a walk around the floor and see what they pick up on and see if there is anything they miss, that's quite useful*
>
> (PR30 MGR33)

7.2.8   Other documents

Progression narratives made occasional reference to some documents such as posters that managers faxed to other stores to advertise their vacancies, lists of candidates that HR put together and sent to the stores, and letters of application that candidates submitted to HR or directly to the recruiting manager.

7.2.9   Concluding remarks

In this section, we have seen the role of many actors and artefacts in progression narratives. Although formally appointments were the responsibility of recruiting line managers, a host of other actors and artefacts contributed to individual progression outcomes, including applicants, current line managers, other actors, documents, forms and computer systems.

7.3   Moments of progression

This section discusses four 'moments' in progression narratives. The aim is to show how actors and artefacts came together to shape progression episodes. The four moments considered are dimensioning positions, sourcing candidates, interviewing, and developing staff.

7.3.1   Dimensioning positions

Progression narratives that referred to appointments focused on having someone perform a set of tasks that were defined as a 'position' within the structure of a store. Each year HR confirmed the authorised structure of each store, and store managers were responsible for managing the workforce to that number.

> *The structure tables give a guideline of the structure you should have based on your store and department MATs. The HR department will confirm your store's individual structure at the start of the Spring Summer season. You must not recruit outside of these structures unless authorised by your Human Resources and Regional Manager.*
>
> (Structure and Salary Pack: 13)

Deviations from what was published in the structure and salary pack were rare. A store's structure was formally defined in the structure and salary pack as a role and a grade,

for instance, *Grade 5 Sales Manager* or *Grade 3 Operations Manager*, and these two dimensions were important elements of progression narratives.

The main element of the role dimension was the difference between commercial and operational roles. Although there was formally no limitation to moving between one and the other, in practice this remained rare. Some employees who had an operations background actively sought to gain experience on the commercial side in order to improve their progression chances:

> *last year I stayed here but I swapped my job role I [...] did commercial for a year [...] whilst the commercial manager was on maternity, just so I could prove that I could do both sides of the business still, [...] so when I want to progress from here I'm not classed as an operations person, [...] I do feel that operational staff do get labelled a bit more and the job role seen not as important because it's back of house and not having to do with customers and sales, which isn't the case at all, [...] I don't think you can do one job role without having the knowledge of the other side of the business,*
>
> (PR15, MGR26)

Grades were a second important component in progression narratives. In most cases, employees sought moves to higher grade positions and this usually had salary consequences:

> *when we take somebody internally if they get a promotion, they would go up a grade and back a step, so if they were on competent as one grade and they got a promotion they go to probationary, if that didn't give them a very big increase, the area manager might say I want them to have a bit more money, so we put them in the next banding, it happens quite a lot,*
>
> (HRM3)

Normally, the unwritten expectation was that employees would progress by one grade at a time and this was a criterion managers used for encouraging or discouraging applications and for justifying appointment decisions (e.g. "I was told that it was too big of a jump for me" PR03, MGR22). Occasionally however, managers might encourage two- and three-grade jumps:

> *it went up in the vacancy bulletin, the company vacancy bulletin, no-one applied and I must admit I didn't apply, I didn't even know it was an option, [...] as far as we were always taught, you could only jump one grade at a time, so it was a three grade jump, so I didn't think I was allowed to [...] I actually applied for an assistant manager role somewhere else and then my area manager rang me and said I really think you should think about it*
>
> (PR11, MGR25)

Beyond grade and role, however, there were a number of additional dimensions that were relevant to gauging and describing a position in progression narratives. For instance, within commercial positions, product was important because there was specific knowledge of product characteristics, customer base and selling techniques that influenced role effectiveness. This showed in managers' decisions as well as employee progression choices:

> *things I had expected her to be knowledgeable of in terms of the product on menswear and home which was what I was recruiting for, she couldn't give me that many examples*
>
> (PR41, MGR39)

> *I work on kidswear and I don't want to work on any other floor, that's my personal preference*
>
> (PR25, MGR31)

> *there's a position that came up, a permanent position at a home standalone store, which is very different from mainline, […] so to get that in my profile as well will be a big achievement for me, so I applied for that position*
>
> (PR28, MGR32)

> *I did recently go for a position as assistant store manager at a standalone home store, which was recommended to me by a couple of store managers, who I've worked for previously, […] I thought I don't know, I don't really know home, because I've worked on ladies and kids, but then also products are products, it doesn't really matter*
>
> (PR35, MGR35)

A second relevant dimension was pace, which referred to the volume of footfall a floor received. Typically, womenswear and childrenswear floors had a faster pace than menswear and home floors, but this varied from store to store. A faster pace implied a number of challenges due to the business of the floor, such as servicing more than one customer at a time, needing to replenish more often and dealing with a higher risk of theft. Having previous experience at a higher pace floor influenced manager and employee progression decisions:

> *the menswear manager that was on that floor […] he's had a sidestep to grade 7 onto the womenswear, it's a development area because he's done menswear, […] and it ran really smoothly but for him to develop further […] he needed to manage a bigger team and a faster pace, […] so he's now got a great deal to have to focus on and work towards, but he does need to be able to achieve that and have that under his belt before he can then move on*
>
> (PR58, MGR36)

the position was just offered to me, 'would you like to do this position?', and I said yes, because it was valuable experience for me, good knowledge and a little bit of a pay rise for eighteen months, [...] it was a higher profile floor, it takes more money than the department that I was on, so it's a faster paced floor, it's a totally different product [...] so it was giving me an insight into another area of [the company], helped me cope with managing more staff [...] and working at a faster pace as well

(PR20, MGR28)

A third dimension that was relevant was the size of the store. Being part of a small store meant that roles were broader in the sense that one person had to deal with more elements of a process, whereas in larger stores the same set of tasks may be broken up among several roles. Some employees found roles in small store environments preferable because they allowed for more learning, whereas others avoided such roles precisely because of the breadth of issues that needed to be dealt with:

it was better for me to come to a smaller store, to shadow someone like the assistant store manager to get that training, whereas in a bigger store like [my previous one] there is no assistant store manager because it's split, so it's a totally different game there, so it was better to come into a smaller store

(PR25, MGR31)

I applied to this job and got declined for it [...]all I was told was that it was too big a jump for me, so in those words, I need to go to a grade 4 position [...] he offered me the store down the road, [...] it's a small store, so you're not as able to... well ideally I want a store I could train people and manage people, you can't do it in that store, you can manage people but it's not in the same way, so, no, I don't want to come across as bitter [but] I'm happy to just stay in the position I'm in

(PR03, MGR22)

Store size also influenced management appointment decisions:

I saw [the store manager position] in the vacancy bulletin, applied to HR, had an interview with the area manager and then got the job [...]I think [the other applicant and I] were both to a very similar standard, I think I interviewed well, and that was the feedback that I got from the interview, and I think potentially I was more right for that store, because I'd come from a smaller store background, [...] whereas the other applicant [...] had come from a much larger store, going into that environment is very different

(PR42, MGR39)

7.3.2   Sourcing candidates

Another important moment in progression narratives was the sourcing of candidates to fill a position. Although not part of written policy, managers were well aware that all

manager and supervisor permanent positions were to be published in the weekly vacancy

bulletin. Moreover, virtually all such positions were indeed inserted in the bulletin. This

was achieved through a mix of policing on the part of the HR organisation (see below "you

can never appoint until you do"), and a perception of real value in publishing on the bulletin.

In the following excerpts, an obvious candidate seemed at hand, and was eventually

appointed, and yet the position was still advertised in the bulletin:

> *I had two applicants, and she just walked it, she was an excellent candidate for the*
> *position, which I thought she probably would be, but you never know who might be*
> *applying from either another store or from outside, so you do always enter all*
> *positions into the company bulletin for management roles including supervisors,*
> *they're in there for three weeks, there's a deadline for that, you can interview within*
> *that period because then you can recruit as soon as that deadline is over with, but you*
> *never know if somebody could have been on holiday who'd be a perfectly suitable*
> *candidate, might apply right at the very last minute, […] and then you need to*
> *organise their interview, you can never appoint until you do*
>
> <div align="right">(PR36, MGR36)</div>

> *when it come about that the grade five [manager] left, I was sort of doing that job*
> *anyway, I mean, within the company it has to be given out and applied for by*
> *everybody but I had my interview and because I had proven myself that I could do the*
> *position, that I was actually offered it […]they've still seen other people, they don't let*
> *any... I mean, if someone wants to go for the position we always see... I mean, there*
> *might have been someone who was absolutely fantastic, who was better than me that*
> *have done the job for years*
>
> <div align="right">(PR34, MGR34)</div>

Exceptions to the publication requirement needed to be discussed with HR:

> *originally it was going to be advertised, but then it was pulled because somebody had*
> *been acting in that role for six months, HR agreed that it was a bit unfair that she*
> *wasn't just given that role because she had been acting in it so long and no-one had*
> *originally wanted it temporarily, so she did not need to interview for it, that provided*
> *she was doing a good job, that she could just be made permanent*
>
> <div align="right">(PR13, MGR25)</div>

Although the bulletin was by far the most common medium for prospective candidates

to learn about vacancies, there were some alternatives. In the following passage the

managers produced a poster and faxed it to nearby stores in the hope of reaching more

potential candidates quicker:

> *I just try and put a fax like a little poster, because in the vacancy bulletin it has to go in*
> *a week before and then it's advertised in there for two weeks, so as soon as the vacancy*

is available, put it on line to go in the bulletin, but then I'll send a poster around to all the stores, they can put it in their staff rooms, so you've got people phoning up before they've actually seen it in the bulletin [...] she saw the poster and she called myself and then applied

(PR26 , MGR32)

In PR43, the candidate found out through word of mouth and called the store directly to ask for further information about the vacancy:

you can have a look in the bulletin and that's generally it, [...] for the one I applied for the other day, [...] that one I didn't see on the bulletin, that was just I heard about it, [...] I'd call the other store, say 'yeah you know, I'm interested in this position', I'd tell them what I'm doing now [...] I'll ask what the position is what it involves, like that's what I did when I... I asked them what sort of... what it involves, what department is it, what hours is it [...] and, if I'm interested in applying then I'd call head office, let them know that I want to apply for it [...] so I applied for that one

(PR43, MGR12)

When a vacancy proved to be hard to fill managers sought alternative solutions to encourage applications, such as directly approaching candidates, considering candidates who would normally not be successful, or advertising externally. Following are examples of some of these alternative approaches.

originally it was the store manager who thought 'you know what? that person who works full time on your floor would be great in that role', but it took some consideration because it's quite fast track and it was... had a conversation with me, do I think that she would cope, and I was... 'think she could', have a conversation with her, she was shocked that she was considered for it, but really keen again, and it went on a trial basis initially, saying 'look, you're going to move to a floor which is quieter, where you'll have more time and you'll have all the support that you need, see how you get on', and she just flourished

(PR45, MGR42)

[a supervisor position] had been vacant for about a year, when I took over [as store manager], nobody had filled it, so I [...] rang HR 'no-one's been interested, can I advertise externally?', [...] now it's online recruitment, but there isn't a senior option on there, so you can't deliberately advertise for a supervisor, but I advertised for a full timer and used the CVs and the responses that came in to see who might have the level of experience for the role

(PR14, MGR25)

Approached candidates were often within the recruiting manager's current store, but may also be known to the manager through a past temporary assignment, or be introduced by HR as a red-ringed individual. In narrative PR11, a sales manager was approached and

encouraged to apply to a store manager position which she had thought was too high for her.

Similarly, in narrative PR18, a manager whose position had been red-ringed was offered a

hard-to-fill sales manager position.

> *I was approached, […] it went up in the company vacancy bulletin, no-one applied*
> *and I must admit I didn't apply, I didn't even know it was an option, I actually applied*
> *for an assistant manager role somewhere else and then my area manager rang me and*
> *said 'I really think you should think about it' […] because I had covered as an*
> *assistant manager and I'd covered on other stores in the area I think he got to know*
> *me*
>
> (PR11, MGR25)

> *I recently came here last year because of the restructuring, I was red-rung in my other*
> *store as ASM, so I came here as a grade 5 in ladieswear […] I was headhunted a little*
> *bit, […] I think they were struggling to fill it because it's quite a secluded store, it's not*
> *on a retail park, it's not near any other retailers, so I don't think they had any*
> *candidates that had applied that were suitable for the position*
>
> (PR18, MGR27)

For temporary appointments, there was no explicit requirement that the position be

advertised in the bulletin, although that was certainly a possibility for temporary positions to

cover planned absences, such as maternity leaves. For unforeseen absences, however,

managers tended to rely on directly approaching candidates. The following passage is

indicative of the difficulties that the urgent nature of some situations brought to the process,

and how temporary appointments tended to be repeated over time.

> *there's another store […], they had a swine flu epidemic about eighteen months ago*
> *and half the staff was just down with swine flu, [the store manager] phoned here, and*
> *they said, 'have you got any staff that you can send along to support?', but also 'have*
> *you got any managers?', so I […] supported for two or three days a week for the store*
> *manager there, and now whenever she's got any of her managers off, she phones me to*
> *see if I can go across to support her […] apart from Saturday because I have no child*
> *care to cover […] so she's had holiday in the last couple of weeks […], and she*
> *actually got in touch with me and she said can you come across and she'd do anything*
> *for me, basically I could choose what I wanted, but I think that's because I go into that*
> *store, and […] fit in really really well*
>
> (PR49, MGR30)

7.3.3   Interviewing

A third important moment in progression narratives was the interview. Managers in

the stores were widely responsible for deciding how selection would be carried out and to

decide which candidate should be appointed. Almost invariably, the selection process

consisted of an interview whose content was decided by the recruiting manager. They often referred to the 'interview pack' that was available on the intranet for standard questions and practical exercises for each appropriate grade and role:

> *we'd ring them up and ask them in for an interview, and then we'd print interview questions off the system, because they are all done for us, and you print off a job profile, the rate of pay and everything like that, so you get all of that together before you do the interview. Then you do one interview and basically I make a decision based on that interview*
>
> (PR04, MGR22)

Additionally, recruiting managers sometimes developed their own questions and exercises in order to test for some particular skill. In narrative PR39, the two candidates came from the same store where the position was available, which allowed the line manager to target the questions in a way that was more relevant and suitable for those candidates:

> *we told them that they'll be invited for an interview, they turned up for their interview, and it was conducted by me and I had a note taker, and we did it slightly different, because obviously we knew the candidates a lot more, we had a set list of questions that we have to ask from HR, then we also created our own store specific questions, so we had questions that we knew it would be a challenge for those two to answer, so things they might not necessarily have got involved in before, so we were interested in how they would do that, so we came up with about four or five questions that we tailored to this store, and then the practical scenarios we did, actual tasks like going on to the shopfloor and monitoring the staff's service, so it is a very similar interview, we just had to create our own questions to give us a better insight into it*
>
> (PR39, MGR38)

Narratives of progression episodes often highlighted performance at interviews as a central part of decision making. Following are some examples from recruiting managers and from candidates:

> *the deciding factor in the end, is that womenswear and childrenswear is a very busy floor and it came across in the interviews that one of the candidates could deal with pressure significantly better than the other candidate, so in the end we decided that that person would be more suited to a busy department [...] I obviously did know that candidate before, so I know she did well under pressure, but there was a lot of answers she gave, examples of what she's done outside of work that showed actually yeah you've got really good pressure.. like she's organised different events and shows, and things, and it showed that I think she really could deal with pressure, things that I didn't actually know about her, so it was useful to get that across, and I thought that 's what tipped it over the edge if you like. [...] I spoke to my note taker, because they pick up on things I didn't, but at the end of the day, yeah it's my decision*
>
> (PR39, MGR38)

the guy from this store [...] was the best candidate, [he] had been in the supervisor role for nearly two years, the guy from Leamington had been in the supervisor role for two months, and still very fresh and very new and didn't' know, or couldn't give me that many examples of how he'd developed his people management skills, or how he would step up to cover the store for example when he was responsible for running the store, which sales managers do tend to do, the lady from Birmingham also very new to her role, very fresh was more competent in terms of answering questions about managing people but very commercially unaware, so things I had expected her to be knowledgeable of in terms of the product on menswear and home which was what I was recruiting for, she couldn't give me that many examples, and as part of the practical exercise I got them to walk the floors and pick up on what [...] they felt that could be improved, that was quite a weak part of the interview for her, whereas the manager that I interviewed from here, was very strong in all three of those areas

(PR41, MGR39)

I know there was one other applicant who was also from my store, [...] I think I had a lot of experience because I had been given so much responsibility at my previous store and I was able to demonstrate that in my interview and show that I understood all these sales reports, and I could highlight weaknesses in this store by looking at their sales reports, and just talking about how I was going to improve them, I think generally it was a good interview, I was well practiced at it because I had had a few previous to that, I also think there was my previous store manager might have spoken to this store manager and said look this is what he is good at, this is what he can do for you, that might have helped quite a bit.

(PR05, MGR23)

you are asked a bit about yourself and what do you know about the job, what I expect to do, what I expect to learn, one's weaknesses, developments [...] and then there's some practical stuff as well, management tasks, [...] for instance for a face change, so when new products come in you launch say from summer to winter, how do you go about changing everything, there's a lot of factors to consider, like getting extra staff involved, coming in earlier or staying later to make sure the task is done and then after updating all the staff with the new products and new knowledge, so we have to plan that, and then from that they make notes and then go away and make a decision

(PR54, MGR19)

Besides the interviews, some additional elements of judgement are present in the above excerpts, including evidence of previous experience and input from previous managers.

you do tend to ring up [their previous manager] just to make sure beforehand, just to get an idea, sometimes I like to do it after to make sure I've got my own opinion, because sometimes if they've got a strong opinion it's difficult to make your own, so it's best to do your interview and then ask them what they think

(PR04, MGR22)

7.3.4   Developing staff

A final fourth moment in progression narratives was staff development. Regularly, managers reviewed and discussed their team members' progression potential during the appraisal exercise:

> *when we do appraisals at the end of every year with staff as well, we do what we call talent management, if we think they've got the potential to progress we'll suggest what they should be doing, so for example, you should be a supervisor six months down the line, you've got the capabilities to do it*
>
> (PR57, MGR38)

In practice, managers had a vested interest in developing their team members because of three concerns: first, well-trained team members made their manager's job easier; second, well-trained team members made succession smoother within the team; and finally, well-trained team members allowed their manager to devote more time to his or her own progression. Following are examples of managers explaining why developing their team members was important for themselves:

> *the way I see it is if I don't train my team, and I don't develop my team then it's going to be a lot more work for me, so if I can get my team trained it will make my job easier,*
>
> (MGR31)

> *it's good for me because the more I develop my employees, effectively the more they can do for you, and so I think I like to encourage my staff, I want them to be able to do more, because at the end of the day if my supervisor was to leave, I want someone there who can step straight into that role to support me, so the more developed you've got your staff, the easier it is*
>
> (PR57, MGR38)

> *I don't think I can develop unless my staff develop, the more time I spend off the shop floor, the more I can learn, so if I can build a team that's strong enough to be out there on their own and do the job to the standards that I want, I can be off the floor and I can be doing new things and I can be learning new things*
>
> (PR60, MGR23)

Development was achieved through several means, including company courses, on the job training and developmental rotations and temporary covers, which were often planned with detail and involved some degree of do-it-yourself improvisation by the managers. The following quotes provide a few examples.

there's the standard training manual that we get, and we have to go through health and safety and legal procedures that we have to do with them. I always believe in being dropped in at the deep end and learning the hard way, and something I always try to work towards with new staff is customer service first, getting that sorted, getting that built into their minds, there have been times where I've been worried about my staff's level of customer service and I've disabled their pins for the till so they have no reason to be behind the till, so they have to be out on the shop floor and they have to be serving, and just using any training resource at my hands, the DVDs that Next offer, the team talk sheets that we can print off our system, and just going through stuff with them

(PR60, MGR23)

I've got B. at the moment on menswear, she was on the lower floor as a sales manager, she went for the assistant store manager [at another store], and didn't get it, various feedback and a lot of it has been she needs to be able to spend time with myself and [the ASM], obviously we haven't got the man-hours in the store just to put her off the floor, so I've had to sit down and think of ways in which we can spend more time with her, so she does get to see these what I call store management jobs and things, so very quickly we were just able to swap S. and B. around, so S. went downstairs, B. came up, that's the quietest floor, so now we can start, without being detrimental to the store, we can start pulling her off, she can start spending time with [the ASM] and training with [the ASM] to give her that skill, it is difficult and it needs to be thought about, that's the only way we're going to get these managers ready to slot into positions, rather than go in under the position and develop within it, yes they still would develop within the position but at the moment they're falling short of the skills they require to even do the basic job

(PR46, MGR43)

the main way in which we develop [managers is] covering different roles of the next step up, they can cover those roles when there's a chance to, so for example when I've been out of the store, my assistant manager has had to step up into my role, and my ladieswear sales manager has stepped up into the assistant manager role [...] which is new to him [...] the way I do it is [...] I have a conversation with them and set them both up with clear expectations, what I want them to achieve during those two weeks, what they're going to be responsible for, it also comes from them as well, [...] when I was looking at the plan for those two weeks, my ladieswear sales manager came to me and said 'I want to do this while you're away, I think this is the way [...] that I'd like to get involved', I then considered that and felt 'that's a great idea, let's do it', and we then talked about the sort of things that he'd be responsible, a lot of which were new to him, so we went through a brief training, [as a company] we don't like to take a lot of time to train, we'd rather put people into positions and get them to do it and learn on the job, and if they make mistakes, that's fine, we then can learn from those mistakes
(PR56, MGR39)

7.3.5 Concluding remarks

The analysis above on four moments in progression narratives gives an indication of the diversity of paths progression episodes took at any of them. Moreover, this depended not

on any single actor or artefact, but on the interactions of a wide range of them that were brought to bear on the specific episode.

7.4   Conclusion

Like the performance management narratives presented in chapter 6, progression narratives showed both remarkable variation and striking repetitions. On the one hand, variation across narratives was salient in aspects such as the career progression rates of different employees or of the same employee at different times in their careers, and the success, or lack thereof, of an employee's application to similar job openings. The specific career paths of individual employees were very different, some stayed in the same store for long periods in their career, while others moved stores with almost every promotion. There was no standard path from entry positions, such as part time sales consultant, to a management position. Progression paths were constructed through the interactions of actors and artefacts, one step at a time. Moreover, the outcome at each step was not always reached in the same way. Sometimes a permanent appointment was obtained after an application and selection process. Sometimes, it came after a temporary appointment, or was directly offered to an employee. On the other hand, there were many similarities across many progression narratives. For instance, many featured the vacancy bulletin, formal applications from a number of candidates, and interviews.

Finally, we have shown that activities at each of four different moments in progression involved a diversity of actors and artefacts whose interactions were themselves a source of diversity in progression narratives

7.5   General conclusion to chapters 6 & 7

Chapters 6 and 7 have presented data on 50 performance management narratives and 62 progression narratives collected from 34 distinct respondents in 13 stores. The account has been deliberately descriptive. By avoiding summarising into an 'average', it has made evident at the same time the extensive repetition and the broad diversity of elements that

constitute individual performance management and progression episodes and outcomes. It has also shown how through the interactions of actors and artefacts the courses of action that produce employment actions are shaped. The next chapter pulls together these insights to develop a flat description of HRM.

CHAPTER 8: THE PRODUCTION OF INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

8.1 Introduction

The previous three chapters have provided a thorough description of HRM activities at the company. First, in chapter 5, we looked at respondents' general accounts of HRM practices at the company and found a high degree of agreement across respondents, both in the stores and at head office. Overall descriptions of how key HRM practices were carried out at the company pointed to different arrangements for the involvement of store-level managers in decision making, so that we were able to categorise HRM activities as more or less (de-)centralised.

In chapters 6 and 7 we turned our attention to specific courses of action within two areas of relatively decentralised HRM activities –performance management and progression– through the study of participant narratives of actual decision making episodes. As soon as we shifted our focus summary accounts of practices onto courses of action, it became patent that participants' coherent and unequivocal summary descriptions of practices disguised a richness of variation in the individual courses of action. We saw how subsumed under the umbrellas of 'progression' and 'performance management' practices were quite varied action sequences, and how each course of action involved a wide variety of actors and artefacts. Moreover, it was rare for any one element –actor or artefact– to determine the course of action. Rather, it was through the difficult-to-predict interactions of actors and artefacts that courses of action were advanced.

The present chapter takes a further look at these participant narratives in order to achieve a deeper understanding of how individual employment outcomes were produced.

The analysis is built in two stages. First, I *zoom in*[25] on HRM activities through a detailed analysis of six participant narratives, which I have selected among the 112 considered in this research. My choice of these particular narratives has depended on their adequacy to illustrate a number of points about doing HRM. I have also tried to keep a balance between progression and performance management narratives and between ordinary, mundane episodes and more exceptional or convoluted ones. Although the argument here is illustrated with a small number of narratives, it was derived from, and applies to, the broader set of 112 narratives considered in this research which have been thoroughly described in chapters 6 and 7.

In the second stage of analysis, I *zoom out* of HRM activities to look for patterns across courses of action, and investigate the nature and origin of these patterns. Data obtained in interviews to members of the HR organisation is particularly relevant in this analysis.

8.2   Zooming in on HRM activities

This section examines the courses of action that produce individual employment outcomes, an activity I will call *doing HRM*. Through the analysis of selected participant narratives I describe two particular features of doing HRM. First, the production of an individual employment outcome involves a surprising range of actors and artefacts which are all consequential to the outcome. Second, at the outset of a course of action it is not certain which actors or artefacts will become involved in it. Thus, the employment outcome is never fully predictable from the conditions at the outset. These analyses lead to a characterisation of doing HRM as a *distributed* and *emergent* activity.

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[25] This analytical and argumentative structure is inspired by Nicolini's (2009b) strategy of zooming in on and zooming out of practice. Contrary to his proposition however, which entailed a change of theoretical lenses when switching from one movement to the other, my analysis is consistently informed by Latour's (2005) actor-network theory at both stages.

8.2.1 Multiple actors

First, consider the narrative in vignette 8.1 which reports an episode of progression. The narrative includes several elements that were part of the company's formal written policy, such as recruiting only for available vacancies, advertising all supervisor and manager vacancies in the bulletin, and interviews as the main selection tool. A few additional elements were not part of written policy, but were common enough to feature regularly in progression narratives at the company, for instance sending posters around to nearby stores, and contacting the applicant's current store manager for references. It can be argued, therefore, that this narrative is an account of a fairly typical and routine progression episode at the company.

Vignette 8.1

I've got a woman downstairs called Jane, she is a supervisor on womenswear. She was a full time sales consultant from the Coventry store. She had an interview here and she was successful and she's been with us now for six weeks.

As soon as the vacancy was available, I put it online to go in the bulletin. But I also sent a poster around to all the stores to put in their staff rooms, so you've got people phoning up before they've actually seen it in the bulletin.

Jane saw the poster and she called myself and then applied through HR. Then I gave her a call back to arrange an interview. I had three people that interviewed for the job: Jane, one from this store, and one from a store in Birmingham. The sales manager and myself interviewed Jane together and then we both discussed what we thought. She came across in the interview as very verbal, very bubbly, very loud, and I think when you are looking at your floor you have to think of how your manager is and how your supervisor is. You want them to be a bit opposite, so the two of them mix together. Jane had experience at running the floor and managing people; she had experience working with the womenswear stock and how to merchandise it and present it; so that helped her get the job. And she has won quite a few awards as well, so that was a really good positive point. We also phoned her store manager at Coventry, and that feedback was very good, so that helped us make a decision as well. So we took on Jane to cover the ladieswear position.

(Edited from transcript of narrative PR26, respondent MGR32)

A salient feature of this narrative, however, is the many actors that were directly involved in Jane's hire: the store manager (respondent), who put the vacancy online, sent a poster around and called to arrange the interviews; Jane herself, who called in, applied and performed well in the interview; HR, who received and forwarded the applications; the sales manager, who participated in the interview; and Jane's previous store manager who gave positive references. The involvement of these actors was far from circumstantial: if say HR had mishandled Jane's application, or her current manager had given damaging feedback, the outcome may have been different. In fact, a longer list of relevant actors might include the unspecified person in Jane's current store who printed the poster and put it in the staff room; the two unsuccessful applicants, against whom Jane compared favourably; the incumbent supervisor, whose skills were complementary to Jane's; even other possibly stronger applicants who might have applied but did not. Had any of these acted differently, Jane might not have been hired into this position.

Indeed, all participant narratives of HRM episodes in this study involved multiple actors whose actions combined to form the specific outcome. As in vignette 8.1, most narratives featured line managers, HR and the incumbent employees as central actors. Often, however, relevant actors included other management, peers, and even external persons such as customers, health professionals and family members. The performance management narrative in vignette 8.2, for instance, featured an employee, a line manager and HR, but also a train that arrived late, and a rail company representative that provided confirmation of this, a name and a telephone number.

Vignette 8.2

We've had somebody that literally came in and said that the train was late and we did actually phone and checked and the train was late. It made no difference then, but in the consultation, when he had come late twice, we could actually just record "yes, he had come in late twice, he did have to have a consultation, because that is the company policy, however the first occasion was due to the fact that the train was late, it was confirmed, we got a name, telephone number". So that if he started then going down that route of verbal written, we could then liaise with HR and say "right, this is as it says in black and white this is where this employee is at now."

(Edited from transcript of narrative PM21, respondent MGR35)

8.2.2   The role of artefacts

Let us now turn to the narrative in vignette 8.3, which also gives an account of a performance management episode. We find again here a number of actors that were directly involved in producing an HR outcome: a sales manager (respondent) who was in charge of the store one evening; a member of staff who raised the alarm; two employees who were involved in a fight; an employee who sat in all the meetings; witnesses who gave statements; the store manager; and HR. In this example, the actions of the sales manager seem particularly decisive in the course of events, but the actions of the others could still have produced a different outcome. Yet let us focus on what the manager actually did on the evening of the incident: she involved the offending employees and a few witnesses in producing a set of written records of what had happened. These records ensured that the next morning the issue could be followed up with the store manager and HR. The manufacture of these written records was far from trivial: had the signed statements from the employees and witnesses not been produced on the night of the event and become available the following morning, it is likely that any action would have been delayed and contradictory accounts of the events may have emerged. The performance management episode and its outcome would have most likely been different.

Vignette 8.3

I did do an investigation last week with two members of staff. I was running the store that evening. It was in the stockroom the incident. They were just chatting generally about music, as they do as they're working, and then only five minutes after, a member of staff on ladieswear approached me and said 'there's been an incident'. I asked where they were. One of them had come up and was in the staff room. He had been slapped in the face and he was a little bit shook up. He got a cut on the side of the face.

I'd never had an incident like that before, so I just thought I've got to make sure that I'm initially doing all that I should be doing, and I thought if I leave it, the one member of staff wasn't in for another two days, so while it was fresh, while they are both in here now, if I can just get statements from them, get their version of events. I wasn't sure what the severity of it was with regards to what I needed to do, so I thought I've got to record it, I've got to have statements, because if this ever happens again and the outcome was worse than a slap in the face or a bang to the head, then I would feel responsible personally for the fact that I didn't act on it when it had happened initially. And then if HR were to ask me questions, at least, if I got the story.

I said, 'I need somebody to come and sit in with me as a witness', and I spoke to the one of them, asked the other one to have a drink in the staffroom. So we liaised with the one and then we liaised with the other. I did tell them it was completely informal I just wanted to record the event that happened. When they had both given names of witnesses, we then asked the witnesses to give statements and sign them. And I just said to them, 'Look, I need to get in touch with HR, they're not available at the moment, if you want to go home for the evening, and I'll liaise with you in the morning'. Then I put them both in the accident book as well, in case for instance the one with the bang in the head had gone home and has headaches.

I checked with the store manager the following morning; I said, 'was there anything else that I should have done?'. And she said, 'no, just call HR this morning at nine'. When I did liaise with HR, they did say that I had done everything that needed doing; but they did say that I needed now to carry out a formal investigation, with a note taker, and tell them if they wanted somebody to sit in with them. Those interviews have taken place and one member of staff is coming for the disciplinary today and then the other member of staff will have their disciplinary. Worst case scenario will be they get the sack, because it's physical conduct. I don't know whether other managers might do it different than I did, but that's how I dealt with the situation, and I don't feel that I should have treated it any less severely than I did, I'm quite happy with the outcome, other than the fact now the disciplinaries are happening and we've got no staff, so the floor levels are affected.

(Edited from transcript of narrative PM15, respondent MGR35)

This analysis introduces another crucial feature of the narratives in this study: the profusion of artefacts and their important consequences for HRM activities and their outcomes. Looking back at vignette 8.1, we can now consider the central role the poster played in that narrative. It is indeed because of the poster that Jane considered applying. If the recruiting manager had not taken the trouble to write and distribute the poster, or if no-one at Jane's store had printed it and pinned it to the notice board, Jane may have missed the vacancy in the bulletin. Moreover, it is not only that these actors chose to do something *with* the poster, the poster *itself* had to accomplish the non-trivial deed of first transporting the vacancy information from the manager's desk in one store, to the notice board in several other stores – through several transformations and different media – in a reliable, quick and economical way, and second getting Jane's attention. Intervening technologies might include desktop publishing, electronic mail, laser-jet printing, and paper among others. Again, without these technologies, and what they enabled the poster to achieve, this and possibly other progression episodes and their outcomes would have been different. Likewise, in the narrative in vignette 8.2 it was the written record of the telephone call to confirm the train's late arrival, along with a name and telephone number, that had an effect on the performance management episode.

As with actors, the list of artefacts relevant for a specific episode can be long. In the progression narrative shown in vignette 8.4, a tentative list of relevant artefacts may include company policy (as printed policy documents), the vacancy bulletin, the computer system, a list of applicants, an interview, interview questions and scenarios, and interviewee responses. It is again clear in this narrative that the flow of activity and its outcome were shaped by these material elements as well as the human actors involved.

Vignette 8.4

I've just recently recruited my womenswear and childrenswear supervisor. Company policy is that any position at supervisor or higher is advertised in what we call a vacancy bulletin, and that we phone HR, they advertise that position in the bulletin, and it goes in there for four weeks. That goes on to what we call the computer system and it's printed out in every store across the country and they have to phone this store and apply. At the end of the four weeks we get a list of everyone who's phoned and applied, and we invite them to come for an interview.

So in this case we had two candidates, both were from this store. We told them that they'll be invited for an interview. They turned up for their interview. It was conducted by me and I had a note taker, and we did it slightly different, because obviously we knew the candidates a lot more. We had a set list of questions that we have to ask from HR; then we also created our own store specific questions. So we had questions that we knew it would be a challenge for those two to answer; we were interested in how they would do that. So we came up with about four or five questions that we tailored to this store. And then the practical scenarios we did, actual tasks like going on the shop floor and monitoring the staff's service.

I spoke to my note taker, because they pick up on things I didn't, but at the end of the day, it was my decision. The deciding factor in the end, was that womenswear and childrenswear is a very busy floor and it came across in the interviews that one of the candidates could deal with pressure significantly better than the other candidate. I obviously did know that candidate before, but there was a lot of answers she gave, examples of what she's done outside of work that showed she really could deal with pressure, things that I didn't actually know about her, like she's organised different events and shows, and things. So it was useful to get that across, and I thought that 's what tipped it over the edge if you like.

(Edited from transcript of narrative PR39, respondent MGR38)

8.2.3   Uncertain outcomes

A further interesting aspect of the narrative in vignette 8.4 is that, for a time period, two possible and mutually exclusive outcomes coexisted in the activity: after the two applications were received, any one of the two candidates could have been hired into the position. Moreover, the prevalence of outcome 'hire person A' over outcome 'hire person

B' can be viewed as the result of the interactions among the managers, the candidates, a set of interview questions and 'practicals' and candidates' answers.

The performance management narrative in vignette 8.5 provides a more vivid example of coexisting outcomes. Throughout this narrative, we find a succession of courses of action leading to competing outcomes (see table 8.1). Nothing at the outset determined which of them would be successful at the end. This depended on the elements –actors and artefacts– that were successively enrolled in the course of action, and on how enduring their enrolment proved to be in the presence of a competing element. For instance, had the information in the electronic journal not been enrolled in the activity 'six days off' would have probably prevailed, as the respondent herself acknowledged ("I was thinking 'I have to take his word'").

Table 8.1   Competing outcomes in narrative PM32 (vignette 8.5)

Competing outcomes The ladieswear manager…	Passages in the narrative
… has six days off	I'm sure I've got six days I didn't have any time off in August I have to take his word
… has four days off	he hadn't activated a till, so he did have the holiday I couldn't have been there, could I? I made a mistake
… fails his probationary for gross misconduct and is fired	that's actually gross misconduct […] you need to fail his probationary I've got to sack him for this
… fails his probationary for gross misconduct and is 'forced-moved'	is there no way that we can find him another position? I was worried that it was just a genuine mistake it would be a forced move to Coventry
… fails his probationary for poor performance and is 'forced-moved'	he wasn't right for the job role we failed his probationary with a forced move to Coventry
… resigns and wins a grievance for unfair treatment	He then handed his notice of resignation, but he put in a grievance
… resigns	I had documented everything nothing came of it

Vignette 8.5

My ladieswear manager came in the office on a Monday and he asked me, 'oh I've only got four days holiday down here, I'm sure I've got six days'. I said 'let's have a look at the system'. He looked at the screen and said 'I didn't have any time off in August, I would know if I had two days off together at the end of August'. I said 'I'll have a check on the holiday diary'.

The store manager that was here before me would put people through as holiday when they weren't on holiday just to make her weekly man-hour target. I had known this because my assistant store manager (ASM) had said so. So it was very confusing for me because I was thinking 'I have to take his word, because I've got no way of proving that the previous store manager hasn't come to the end of the week and just put him through as holiday. So later on that day I said to him 'I've had a look in the diary and every page had been crossed out and scribbled and you couldn't really tell head and tail of it, have a think about it tonight, go home ask your family'.

He came back in on Tuesday, 'no, I definitely didn't have any time off'. Later, my ASM said to me, 'if I go back on the electronic journal we'll see if he activated a till; there is no way that he could have been in the store for those two days without activating a till at least once'. So she went onto the system and saw that he hadn't activated a till, so he did have the holiday.

Later that same day, I had a meeting for another reason with my area manager and Sue, from HR, and I explained the situation. Sue said 'that's actually gross misconduct, because he is trying to get a further two days paid leave from the company'. Now, the ladieswear manager was still in his probationary from when he started that role, so Sue insisted 'you need to fail his probationary'. If he failed his probationary, he didn't have a job, so I was in a bit of shock, I was thinking, 'I've got to sack him for this'. I then turned to Sue, and said 'is there no way that we can find him another position?'. So I arranged with Sue that I would fail his probationary on the grounds of gross misconduct, and it would be a forced move to Coventry, because I didn't want him to lose his job because I was worried that it was just a genuine mistake, that he genuinely didn't know that he'd had the holiday.

(…)

(from previous page)

I came back into store on Wednesday and spoke to somebody else in HR, and she said 'I think that what Sue said was a bit harsh; get him in and give him the opportunity to come clean, present him with the evidence that you have found, and see his reaction'. So I then pulled him into the office, and noted down on a record card the conversation, I said to him 'I've looked on the electronic journal and you didn't activate a till that day, which indicates to me that you were not in the business', and he just went 'well I couldn't have been there, could I?'. And I was like 'right, so you have let me go off and investigate and look into all of this, and now you're saying that you couldn't have been here?'. He was like 'I made a mistake, I made a mistake', and I said 'but you were prepared for me to continue with that'.

Then, having spoken to HR, we came to the conclusion that I was still going to fail his probationary because he couldn't manage his own holiday, which is really poor performance in terms of, I need him to manage the shop and I need him to manage a team of seventeen people and their holiday. Well, if he can't manage his own and he has this throw away attitude, then he wasn't right for the job role.

I felt that if I didn't manage him and failed his probationary I wouldn't be managing him right, and in the best interest of the store, he wasn't competent enough to do the job and therefore I felt that it would reflect badly on myself as a manager through the eyes of my area manager. His reaction was really disappointing, because if I had presented him with that information and he'd been like 'oh I'm so sorry that I've asked you to do this', then I would have thought 'yes it was a genuine mistake'. But his reaction at that point was very poor, and that just straight away, I just thought 'that's a bad attitude for a manager to have in general'. Nothing to do with the issue that had happened but the reaction was very bad.

So we failed his probationary with a forced move to Coventry. He then handed his notice of resignation, but he put in a grievance letter against me. But I had handled it correctly, HR knew that, because I had documented everything, I'd gone through the correct lines, so he did a grievance and nothing came of it.

(Edited from transcript of narrative PM32, respondent MGR40)

Such unpredictability of outcomes meant there was always room for uncertainty or even surprises. In vignette 8.5, the ladieswear manager or, for that matter, the store manager, could never have imagined at the beginning that he might fail his probationary and be dismissed or forced-moved. Likewise, in vignette 8.1 Jane was not certain of the outcome of her application, just as the sales manager in vignette 8.3 was uncertain about the outcome when she first took statements.

Participants were aware of such uncertainty. For instance, in the following passage, a manager who had lost her keys was petrified with fear of being severely disciplined, although eventually she was only record-carded:

> I said to the member of staff, [...] don't always think worst case scenario [...] in a way to reassure her [...] because she was petrified, she thought she was going to lose her job, which she would, because that's how serious it is, because obviously if you lose your store keys that's a security thing.
>
> (Narrative PM48; respondent MGR17)

Moreover, participants were able to retrospectively imagine different outcomes, had actors acted differently. The following excerpt again refers to an episode of lost store keys:

> it wasn't me who reported it, it was found by another manager and they did completely the right thing and reported it, but again they reported it, there might have been other managers that wouldn't, that would have said 'oh my god, I found this, but obviously no money has been taken, checked the CCTV, no-one came in, I haven't reported it', that person would have probably been wrong, but that does happen and it's sort of frustrating it entirely depends on who you work with
>
> (Narrative PM04; respondent MGR25)

The progression narrative in vignette 8.6 provides another example of the uncertainty, even the serendipity, that is sometimes behind HRM outcomes. The narrative explains how the respondent was appointed to her current position as a consequence of her application to another position she did not get, which prompted her appointment to a temporary position and her being well placed for the current job. Thus, an explanation of her current position takes us back many months to uncover the assembly of several store managers, fellow applicants, graded jobs, job applications, interviews, managers having children, and maternity-leave policy and legislation.

Vignette 8.6

I was a grade 5 assistant store manager for about a year and a bit when I applied for a grade 4 ASM and I didn't get it. My feedback was that the other person was a grade higher than me and had been doing the job already, because she'd been covering it for six months of maternity, but this person then wanted to extend the maternity, so she got the job for longer.

But then I got the job that that person was doing previously as a grade 4 assistant store manager at another store, but that wasn't a permanent position. So I had to find a new position or had to go back to my old position, which I really didn't want to do. So I knew that this store was opening, and I applied for this position here. I knew who the store manager was so I applied directly to her, I went to an interview and there were another two applicants for the job. I was recommended by the store manager I was working with at the time, so that had I would say significant input. I'm just passionate about the company, I'm enthusiastic and I always want to do more and do better, so that is probably what would come across to other people. So I got this as a permanent grade 4 position, like the temporary that I was on before. I had a few weeks where I'd finished that job, but this store hadn't opened, so I did go and support a couple other stores in between.

(Edited from transcript of narrative PR31, respondent MGR33)

8.2.4   HRM activity as distributed and emergent

The participant narratives discussed above illustrate how individual employment outcomes were produced. In particular, they show how *doing HRM* involved a wide range of actors and artefacts. Here, I further the argument by contending that it would simply not be possible to understand the production of individual employment outcomes without considering *all* the heterogeneous elements –human actors and material artefacts– that became associated in doing HRM. It is the whole assembly of human and material elements involved that both explains and defines an individual employment outcome. First, none of the elements associated in the production of an outcome can be said to be either decisive or superfluous. For instance, in the narrative in vignette 8.5, we can say the information in the electronic journal participated in producing the outcome, but there is nothing in it that determined the outcome: the information could have been ignored by the store manager, or challenged by the ladieswear manager with new evidence. Second, an HRM outcome is defined by the elements associated in its production: take away one element, and the

outcome would be a different one. It is not the same to resign because you found a better job elsewhere, than to resign following an episode like the narrative in vignette 8.5; and it is not the same to be promoted through a competitive process, than by direct appointment. The end result may look similar, but the overall effect of each assemblage of elements can be quite different.

The implication is that the production of individual employment outcomes at the company could not be understood only taking into account the agency of HR or line managers. Each element in a narrative, whether human or material could associate other elements, existing or new, into the course of action: the manager in vignette 8.4 drafted a job description, but the job description prompted the HR officer to paste the information into the vacancy bulletin and the vacancy bulletin prompted the two candidates to send in an application. Likewise, the electronic journal *made* the store manager in vignette 8.5 speak to Sue from HR, and it *made* Sue say "that's actually gross misconduct". Understood in this way, HRM *was performed by* all the human and material elements in the narrative. In this sense, doing HRM was a *distributed* activity.

Moreover, the set of human and material elements that would make up an outcome was not predetermined in the conditions of the initial situation, but was created in the flow of activity through the associations performed by actors and artefacts. Each new association was only tentative; it endured by establishing further associations with more actors and materials. For instance, in vignette 8.1 Jane and a further two employees associated themselves to the course of action by sending in an application. Initially, all three endured by enrolling HR –the applications were forwarded–, and the recruiting manager –interviews were scheduled–, and a host of mediating materials. Eventually, however, only the course of action Jane was part of endured, through the number and resilience of its constituent associations with other actors and artefacts.

Each association made the course of action a bit more irreversible and brought it closer to being fixed, that is, to becoming an 'outcome'. Thus, at the time of interview, we are told that Jane is working in that job role, so the assembly of elements that enabled her

being there seems to have endured and become so irreversible we can consider the episode closed, a done deal. However, if say tomorrow Jane found herself in a situation like the one described in vignette 8.5, the whole assembly may suddenly become undone and the perhaps the newly vacant position offered to one of the runners-up.

My point here is that individual employment outcomes were not derived from the intentions, skills or dispositions of individual actors or any other 'objective' characteristics of the initial situation. Rather, they depended on the associations the different human and material elements were successful in establishing, and on their endurance. The makeup of the heterogeneous assemblage that would ultimately become fixed was not determined by initial conditions and, in this sense, HRM activities and outcomes can be described as *emergent*.

8.3   Zooming out of HRM activities

In the discussion above, I have characterised HRM courses of action at the company as distributed and emergent: seen up-close, each course of action was unique and unpredictable, beyond the control of any individual actor. The question immediately arises how this view can be reconciled with the finding in chapter 5 that HRM activities at the company were not random or chaotic, but were perceived by respondents as fairly consistent and well established. In this section we *zoom out* of HRM activities to examine patterns of repetition between them, their nature and origin.

We saw in the conclusion to chapters 6 and 7 that HRM activities exhibited frequent repetition of some elements. For example, recalling the findings from chapter 7, many progression narratives involved the vacancy bulletin, formal applications from a number of competing candidates, and interviews. Likewise, in chapter 6 we saw that in most attendance narratives hitting a trigger point was followed by disciplinary action; in all four narratives about lost store keys, the incident was described as 'a breach of security'; finally, in most accounts of disciplinary hearings managers adjourned the meeting and telephoned the HR department to discuss possible outcomes. HRM activity at the company therefore exhibited plenty of repetition, it was *patterned*.

Let us explore the nature of patterns in HRM activity at the company by looking again at the narratives in the previous section. First, consider again the narrative in vignette 8.4 where a sales manager claimed to have two more leave days than was reflected in the computer system. At the outset, this was not a recognisable instance of performance management, and it could have stayed that way. For instance, if the holiday diary had been in perfect order, or the assistant store manager had not mentioned that the previous store manager's holiday records were unreliable, the store manager may have been able to come to a quick conclusion that the sales manager was only entitled to four days leave, and the whole episode would have been purely anecdotal. However, the episode changed when the disciplinary policy of the company became associated into the course of action when the HR officer said 'that's actually gross misconduct'. The point I want to make is that what turned the episode in vignette 8.4 into an instance of performance management was the presence in the course of action of certain types of elements that made it *resemble* one, such as the label 'gross misconduct', a record card, a dismissal letter and a grievance letter. In the same way, the episodes in vignettes 8.1, 8.4 and 8.6 were recognisable as instances of progression because they included elements such as the vacancy bulletin, graded jobs, job applications, and interviews. If all these elements were absent, it would be difficult to recognise those episodes as instances of progression, and maybe participants would be talking about instances of cronyism instead. In the case of performance management narratives, the absence of elements such as attendance trigger points, the staff handbook, the disciplinary process and record cards would again make the episodes difficult to recognise as instances of performance management, and maybe participants would be calling them instances of arbitrary and unfair treatment –and employment tribunals would probably agree.

Thus, rather than repetition in actions or actors, recognisable patterns across HRM courses of action were based on the repeated presence of materials. Among these, two types of material stood out as particularly relevant: text and talk. Text, sometimes accompanied by diagrams and numbers, constituted the material basis for a great many items of policy that made HRM courses of action: job grades, warning levels, interview questions, trigger points,

vacancies, etc. were all elements defined in text on paper (and increasingly electronic) documents. These texts that appeared repeatedly in HRM courses of action were composed by the HR department and circulated to the sites where doing HRM took place. In addition to text, the HR department also created and circulated a lot of talk, in the form of direct instructions (HR's advice) and memorable aphorisms.

However, a close look at the data presented in chapters 6 and 7 clearly indicates that texts and talk not only flowed from Head Office to the stores, but also from the stores to Head Office. Sales data, customer service evaluations, disciplinary forms, clock-in and out times, and vacancy descriptions, among many others, are texts that originated in the stores and found their way to Head Office. Likewise, in disciplinary proceedings, managers were instructed to call HR during the adjournment and describe the meeting verbally.

The means through which texts and talk were sourced from the field and brought to Head Office and those through which text and talk were disseminated from Head Office to the field overlapped to a great extent. They all entailed someone or something physically travelling from the stores to head office or vice versa, passing on statements –instructions, narratives, aphorisms…– and data, through voice or through inscriptions. Thus, section 8.3.1 below discusses the means by which the HR department both got to know the field and deployed standards into the field. Then, section 8.3.2 examines how the HR department transformed knowledge of the field into the materials that created patterns in HRM actions.

8.3.1 The circulation of texts and talk

There were three major ways in which texts and talk moved from the field to head office and vice versa. First, telephone conversations provided information on on-going courses of HRM action and the delivery of specific instructions. Second, store visits provided rich information on many aspects of HRM activities and their impact on store business operations. Third, information systems, whether computer- or paper-based, carried inscriptions from one site to another, either supported on ink and paper, or on electric impulses and data bytes.

Phone calls. Phone calls provided an important link between the HR department and the stores. A team of HR officers was dedicated to receiving phone calls at head office. Managers in the stores appreciated the fact that HR was only 'a phone call away'. Vignette 8.7 gives an indication of the many subtle ways in which phone calls contributed to two-way communications between HR and the stores.

Vignette 8.7

Disciplining is probably the biggest part of my job. The managers will phone, 'I'm in a disciplinary adjournment, I need some help'. So I ensure that they are following the policy, and by that I mean I'll ask them a number of key questions: 'have you given notice in writing?', I will tick, 'have you used the correct level of witnesses?', I will fill a form in to make sure they've done all of that.

Then I'll say 'tell me what the issue is' and we go through the details of the case. My question when we've done all of that is 'what do you want to do?'. Sometimes I get the response 'well, that's up to you, you're the HR department'. My immediate response is 'no, you're the line manager, […] I'm here to make sure you're fair, I'm not here to make the decision for you'.

I will always try and get from them what they think first, so I can gauge whether they're way off the mark or whether they're quite close and we just need to work together. If I think they're way off the mark, I will try and pull them towards my recommended outcome, because I think about consistency as a company, I think about the policies that we have, and fairness, and other cases that I know have been similar and have resulted in a certain level of warning.

There's only been a handful of times where I've strongly disagreed with what they want to do, and I've had to say 'I'm going to escalate this to my manager because I'm really uncomfortable with what you're doing'.

<div align="right">(Edited from transcript of interview with respondent HRM3)</div>

In this account, the HR officer first collected data on policy adherence. Importantly, she was using a form to guide her questions and record the answers. She then elicited a narrative of 'the issue' and the manager's proposed outcome. In the course of the conversation she might reiterate the aphorism "it is your decision", which indeed came up

again and again in participants' performance-management narratives. Finally, she shared her advice, which was based on her knowledge of company policy and other cases.

The excerpts in vignette 8.8 are examples of how the instructions and aphorisms that were transmitted from HR to the stores through phone calls could then be associated into a course of action to produce an employment outcome. In the first three cases, HR's advice and aphorisms did become part of the action. In the fourth episode however, the manager at the store did not take up HR's statement. In the final episode, there was a rich exchange over the phone in which the manager in the store was "able to impress" what was happening to the HR officer.

Vignette 8.8

I had a member of staff who had some problems, *it was still non-attendance*. We contacted HR and asked for some advice, and they actually said we still follow policy and we still issue her with a final written warning, which was the case. However we adjusted the trigger point system for that member of staff. That was HR's advice to us and we explained to her about that.

(Edited from transcript of PM28, MGR38)

We've got a young girl on ladieswear who was off sick for six weeks. I did speak to HR and I just said 'do we still count that as a separate occasion?'. And they went '*it's another occasion*'; all HR say is '*we're managing the fact that she is not at work, not the reason that she is not at work*'.

(Edited from transcript of PM39, MGR44)

One member of staff received a warning for being off and it's '*we're not managing what they've been off with, we are managing the occasion*'. And then you phone HR, you go through the questions you've asked, and then they make a decision, yes with you, or that's what they say, you make a decision together, but at the time for that one it was very much 'oh no, *she's going to have first written warning*'. And whilst yes you are doing your job, it's then hard to sit down and say 'unfortunately you are now going to have a written warning for your absence'.

(Edited from transcript of PM47, MGR14)

(…)

(from previous page)

I did go against HR's advice. A guy I've got in store only needed another occasion for a final written warning. He was actually off because he attempted suicide. HR said "*manage it still*" which I was not prepared to do, because I didn't think that was right.

(Edited from transcript of PM6, MGR26)

I've done a disciplinary before for absence where we had a lady who had some difficult personal circumstances. And when we delivered her circumstances to the HR officer they didn't have much sympathy for her situation. And I felt like it was my obligation to fight that corner. HR eventually came to an agreement about it and gave this person an opportunity to try and improve. I felt like we were able to impress what we were experiencing in the room, with the person sat in front of us, to the person over the phone.

(Edited from transcript of PM34, MGR42)

Store visits and meetings. Store visits were a second important means for two-way movement of materials between HR and the stores. HR managers spent up to four days a week visiting stores within their assigned region. Vignette 8.9 illustrates the nature of such visits: there is often an audit component to them, but they are also an opportunity for "discussion" on a broad range of issues that either side may find relevant. Store visits were used widely by other Head Office departments to influence different areas of store activity. Some instances that were present in participant narratives include regional managers, area managers and mystery shoppers, who regularly assessed quality of customer service in the stores. Such visits often had links to performance-management activities.

Vignette 8.9

I can go and do a store visit, and for me it is very much about a discussion. Yes, I'm grading the visit, I'm rating their performance at that particular moment in time. But I'm also saying to them 'how can I help you to overcome these issues? Is there anything you need me to do? Is it just that you've been lazy and haven't been doing it? Or is it that actually there is a problem with achieving this?' So it's always a two-way conversation.

(…)

(from previous page)

For example, we had this recent spike in absence, so one of the things I would do was making sure that stores with high absence percentages are managing their absence correctly. But I look at a number of areas on most visits. So it could be that I look at one specific area, it could be that I look at the whole broad range. Sometimes, as in next week, I just plan to do some random visits myself, because it also means I'm getting out and about. For me, that's the better part about my role, to get out and meet the managers and discuss what the issues are in the stores.

(Edited from transcript of interview with respondent HRM1)

Another way in which the HR department reached to the stores was through the participation of HR managers and officers in regional and area store manager meetings. Again, the same setting was an opportunity to both collect information from the field and to spread standards:

I attend regional and area meetings which is where we pass down information from our department in terms of what we want to implement…

…that's always very evident through our area meetings, where you can see that what one manager perceives to be a serious issue, somebody sitting next to them might think actually they're not really that serious in the scheme of things…

…we've been through a big consultation recently and I think that has taken away the focus from time and attendance, and we know because we've been talking about it recently through our area meetings and regional meetings, our managers have lost focus on how they're dealing with it…

(HRM4)

Information systems. Chapters 6 and 7 above introduced a number of information systems that gathered data on activity in the stores and made them available to staff at head office, including such computer based systems as the T&A system and the electronic journal. The discussion here refers to a broader set of systems whereby elements of the local situation were transformed into text and numbers. Such definition would include not only the T&A system and the electronic journal, but also the vacancy bulletin, the traffic-light system, the company intranet, and a host of policy documents and paper forms that circulated between the stores and head office.

Some of these systems supported information flows in one direction. For instance, the staff handbook was used to deliver a number of statements –instructions and aphorisms– from HR to the stores. Most systems however supported two-way communications. For instance, the T&A system collected clock-in data and made it available to actors in head office, but it also delivered attendance and lateness reports that were used by managers in the stores. Likewise, paper forms often had a dual role as inscription devices where data was recorded to be sent elsewhere, and as a guide or checklist for local action.

A crucial aspect of information systems was the way in which the text and numbers were generated. The new T&A system provides a good illustration of the impact a new inscription device can have on HRM activities and outcomes:

> *on the old system, all you would see is that [someone] worked four hours on a day, you wouldn't see [...] when those four hours were, [...] now I have pure visibility of what every single member of staff's hours are every single day, that's why it was brought in*
> (HRM1)

To achieve such 'pure visibility' the T&A system had two clever features. First, the system ran on the tills, rather than on a computer in the back areas of the store, so that employees needed to be physically present on the shop floor ready to start their shift. Second, in order to clock in, employees needed to swipe their company ID card and key in their PIN, just as they had to do to activate a till to perform a sales transaction. Since the use of ID cards and PINs was intensely policed to prevent employee fraud, it was highly unlikely that employees would clock in for others.

The above example illustrates the importance of artefacts' *doing HRM*. Likewise, small and apparently insignificant material properties of some of the inscriptions potentially made an important difference. For instance, the format of the Staff Handbook as a small pocket-size booklet increased the probability that the book would be taken home and kept there at hand for reference on issues like how to report absence.

8.3.2   Transforming text and talk of the field into HR text and talk

The previous section traced text and talk as they travelled from the field to head office and vice versa. This section looks at what went on at head office in order to transform text and talk about the field into the materials that were then circulated back to the field.

The information (text and talk) that was gathered through phone calls, store visits, meetings and information systems was transformed at head office in several ways. First, some inscriptions were simply compiled or put together. For instance, the vacancy bulletin was just a gathering of all vacancies submitted by the stores. Likewise, HR kept files and archives of activities in the stores, such as disciplinaries and grievances. Second, some inscriptions were tallied and counted. For instance, employees' lateness and absence occasions were counted to determine whether a trigger point had been hit. Third, some inscriptions were of a nature that allowed for arithmetic and other calculations. For instance, monthly and seasonal bonus payouts were calculated based on store revenues for the period. Finally, non-codified talk could still be shared among department members to make up a body of collective expertise. One of the respondents explained:

> *I'm probably one of the most experienced in this department at the level that I am […] but some of the newer members of the team […] don't have that level of experience […] what we say to the newer members of the team is 'if you get this, come and talk to me about that', and some of the more junior members of the staff will come to me and say 'what do you think about this?', and I'd say 'what do you think?', and then we'll talk around it until I come round to where I think we need to be*

(HRM3)

The importance of creating standards by transforming information collected from the field lay in that they embodied knowledge which was practically relevant for the actions of managers in the stores. One of the HR respondents described how this provided the HR department with an advantage:

> *sometimes stores will only deal with an issue once every couple of months, but we are dealing with those issues every day, because we are dealing with all of the stores, so we actually have much more consistent view of […] what we should be doing in certain situations, and what is fair and right to do, so I believe it's that kind of sounding board, however you want to put it, that gives us an advantage to do it*

(HRM1)

The need to develop standards that incorporate information from the field was so important at the company that HR policies were often developed by joint project teams involving people based at Head Office and in the stores. Vignette 8.10 shows an example of how the knowledge embedded in the structure and salary pack was created through such a mixed team. It was the fact that the SSP incorporated this knowledge of the field that made it relevant across many stores.

Vignette 8.10

The structure and salary pack is based on the turnover of the store on the whole, because turnover creates work and work creates more heads to manage and fundamentally the more heads you have to manage the more supervision you need, so there is a relation between turnover and management structure

The last time it was done, it was a project that involved people from HR, people from various levels of the sales team, managers from different store types, as a committee to determine how much work there was in different aspects of the store, how many people were needed to do that, what level of supervision and how many supervisors or managers we needed to adequately control that. And all of that was put together and then divided up into turnover bandings in order to achieve a model as to how many people were required to supervise those roles and those areas of the store. It was more of a collaborative project based on various people's actual experiences of what's required to be done. And then turned it into a series of tables.

(Edited from transcript of interview with respondent HRM5)

8.5   Conclusion

This chapter has characterised the production of individual employment terms at the company as a distributed, emergent and patterned activity. First it showed that doing HRM was distributed, in the sense that ~~they were~~ *performed by* all the human and material elements that became associated in a course of action. Second, doing HRM was an emergent activity, in the sense that the associations that were made and their endurance was not determined by any conditions of the initial situation, but was achieved *performatively* in the situated local courses of action. Individual employment outcomes were produced by actors

and artefacts as they associated themselves into courses of action that could become fixed. Finally, HRM activity was patterned in the repeated presence of certain materials. Most of these materials were created and put into circulation by the HR organisation. To the extent that they embodied knowledge of the local situation, these materials became inserted in local courses of HRM activity.

CHAPTER 9: A FLAT DESCRIPTION OF HRM

9.1   Introduction

The dominant top-down view of HRM (Nishii and Wright, 2008) that was discussed in chapter 2, is based on the assumption that organisational HRM activities are [imperfect] enactments of HRM plans (systems, practices, architectures, etc.). This view has created a number of problems for the strategic HRM literature. First, the literature has taken the 'HR practice' –and their aggregates: systems, architectures, etc.– as its main focus of interest, neglecting the actual activities that are performed daily in organisations as mere enactments thereof. As a classic example of the research-practice gap (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011), practitioners have been offered plenty of advice on how to get their abstract designs of HRM right, but very little has been said about how that relates to their daily activities.

Second, the top-down view sustains an antagonistic relationship between HR practitioners and line managers based on a simplistic view of the agency of the latter as mere enactors of prescribed activity and their characterisation as *good* or (more often) *bad* followers of instructions. As Suchman (2007) aptly anticipated, within the planning view of action 'other' actors –in this case line managers– are seen as part of the conditions that hinder or advance the focal actors' –HR/top management– planned progress towards their goals, rather than as integral to the action itself. The result is a tendency to disdain line managers as cognitively biased, low skilled, and self-serving –flaws that do not seem to apply to HR practitioners at all!

Finally, by defining variability in courses of HRM action as deviation from the original univocal design and expecting desired effects of HRM to come only from prescribed regularities, the top-down view leads to causal models of the performance effects of HRM that are hard to reconcile with the fluid nature of observed HRM activity. Thus, research has tended to either ignore variation in HRM activities altogether, or show bewilderment at the difficulties of accounting for it.

This chapter develops an alternative understanding of HRM as *situated action* (Suchman, 2007). First, section 9.2 builds on the insights of chapter 8 to develop a 'flat' (Latour, 2005) description of HRM activities. Then, section 9.3 discusses the role of intended, actual and perceived HRM practices, as *representations of* HRM action. Finally, section 9.4 provides new theory on the link between HRM actions and organisational performance. Section 9.5 summarises the conclusions reached in the chapter.

9.2 Courses of HRM action

A distinctive feature of the approach this research has taken is the focus on HRM courses of action, understood as the episodes of situated action through which individual employment terms are set, rather than summary accounts of 'average' action, which is what the literature has commonly called 'HRM practices'. This shift in focus is underpinned by an ethnomethodological view of action (Suchman, 2007), which challenges the common assumption that purposeful action ~~has a direct causal link~~ is causally *often* to plans and intentions. Instead, ethnomethodologists see situated action as a local accomplishment, where *all* elements in the situation –human and material– interact to produce a course of action. In this view the link between plans and situated action is seen as vague and contingent upon all other elements in the situation.

Taking this particular point of view, Chapter 8 characterised courses of HRM action at the company as distributed, emergent and patterned. The present section builds on this insight to develop a description of HRM consistent with Latour's exhortation for social scientists to "keep the social flat" (2005: 165-72). A flat description is one which explains order without recourse to differences of 'level': all action is situated action and patterns are not the effect of higher-level entities, but of *other* situated action.

To achieve a flat description of HRM this section follows Latour's (2005) own plan and perform three 'moves'[26]. The first move is to *redistribute the local* (Latour, 2005: 191-218), that is, to describe how courses of HRM action are formed through assemblies of many different elements. The second move is to *localise the global* (Latour, 2005: 173-90), that is, to describe the nature of ~~commonalities~~ REPETITION across courses of HRM action and identify the space-time locations where they originate. The third and final move is to *trace the connexions* (Latour, 2005: 219-46), that is, to identify the material vehicles on which the agency of structuring 'global' actors travels from the sites where they are located, to the sites where courses of HRM action become assembled.

9.2.1 Redistributing the local: the production of individual employment outcomes

This section develops the idea that courses of HRM action are not enactments of an abstraction. Rather, they are always local achievements, assembled by actors and artefacts collocated in space and time.

Actors have purposes, intentions, goals and habits; let us call these 'programmes of action'. Actors and their programmes of action, however, do not on their own constitute action. Action can only come about when actors and materials are brought together in real space-time locations. For instance, in order to write a performance evaluation a manager's intention is not sufficient, she will need to sit at her desk, pen in hand, with an evaluation form in front of her. Let us call these real space-time locations a 'site', and *all* elements – material and human– that are collocated in a site a 'situation'. A priori, none of the elements in a situation can be said to be either decisive or superfluous for the production of action: "none is necessarily crucial, but *if we take them together then they generate the effect*" (Law, 1994: 143, original emphasis). Thus, we will not mark any differences between human and material, local and structural, endogenous and exogenous, textual and contextual elements; and all we will say is that HRM action is always *situated action* (Suchman, 2007): the product of a particular ensemble of heterogeneous elements collocated in space-time.

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[26] I have altered the order of the first and second moves in Latour (2005) for the sake of clarity in the ensuing discussion.

Now, the precise ways in which actors and artefacts come together in situated HRM action are infinitely varied. Examples might include a line manager filling out a performance evaluation form, an employee swiping their ID card to clock in, an HR officer writing an email or speaking advice over the telephone. However, we learned from the discussion in chapter 8 that material artefacts also achieve things: a sheet of paper might transport information on a vacancy from the desk of a store manager to the staff room, an email on a computer screen might prompt a manager to call a staff meeting, a warning letter might make an employee resign. Thus, from an analytical standpoint, we can consider material artefacts to also have their own programmes of action. As with human actors', these programmes of action do not in themselves constitute action. However, they shape the ways in which the artefact can come together with other situational elements in the production of action.

We thus come to a view of HRM action as the coupling or association of elements – human and material– that advances the production of an individual's employment terms. This coupling of heterogeneous elements is what ANT scholars have termed a *translation*: in ANT parlance, actants (actors or artefacts) translate each other and become associated in action (Callon, 1986, Latour, 1991). In terms of HRM, when a manager fills in an evaluation form, we can say that the manager and the form have become associated in that particular 'manager-fills-form' action. This language avoids assigning prevalence to the human actor in the production of the action and acknowledges that the filling of the form is as much shaped by the manager as by the form itself –and surely other human and material elements of the situation, which *we* have not remarked on this occasion.

Seeing action as a coming together of heterogeneous elements in specific space-time locations also helps highlight the way in which action is made to last through its *inscription* on more or less durable materials. In our 'manager-fills-form' example, the action and the associations it creates become embodied in a new artefact, the filled form, an inscription. This is important because inscriptions become the material support on which an action can endure beyond the spatial and temporal confines of the site of its production, and thus the

means through which it can have subsequent effects in the world. It is only if and when the filled performance-appraisal form is associated into a further situated action –for instance it later becomes part of an evaluation interview, or it reaches Head Office where it is used in variable pay calculations–, that the original 'manager-fills-form' action has any effects beyond its site of production. Thus we see how single HRM actions can become links in a chain of actions, threaded together by inscriptions. We call any such string of HRM actions a *course of HRM action*.

Now, looking back at the sequence of actions from the certainty of an outcome, it is tempting to ascribe a rational or deterministic quality to any course of HRM action: if an employee is promoted, he must have been the best possible candidate *from the outset*; a search is carried out in order to uncover the fact that was there all along. Likewise, an evaluation exercise may seem to be carried out in order to best approximate the real objective performance of an individual, which is an external element independent of and pre-existing the action of evaluating. Ethnomethodologists however will argue such examples to be cases of reconstructed rationality (Suchman, 2007): it is only looking back from a desirable state of affairs that actors may rationalise that state of affairs as "the goal toward which our previous actions, in retrospect, were directed 'all along' or 'after all'" (Suchman, 2007: 72, paraphrasing Garfinkel, 1967: 98). We must therefore stress that at the outset of any course of HRM action many different outcomes are possible: the suitability of a particular outcome is not in the conditions of the initial situation, but can only be settled *in the course of HRM action*.

Thus, it is only in retrospect that courses of HRM action may seem to progress unequivocally and resolvedly towards an outcome. In actuality, as they unfold, courses of HRM action are rife with uncertainty: each action is only tentative and its endurance, like the movement of Latour's (1986) 'token', is reliant upon subsequent situated actions involving different sets of actors and artefacts, in other times and places.

To summarise the argument so far, we have seen how HRM courses of action, and the individual employment terms they produce, are not performed by or under the control of

rational purposeful actors, but are the result of local configurations of heterogeneous –human and material– elements.

9.2.2   Localising the global: patterns in HRM activities

The previous section emphasised the inescapably local nature of HRM action: every HRM action is the product of its situation, understood as the assembly of human and material elements collocated in a specific space and time. It follows that, since a situation can never occur twice, HRM actions –and by extension courses of HRM action– are never wholly repeated.

In the present section this view is complemented by the observation that, although HRM actions themselves are never wholly repeated, some of their constituent material elements are profusely replicated across courses of HRM action. This is an important insight because it is in the local presence of material elements that HRM action and courses of HRM action are patterned and ordered. For instance, if we were to observe every instance of performance appraisal in an organisation, we would find that the participation in the action of copies of the same form is one of the major similarities across all the different local actions. Indeed, as we saw in the analysis of HRM narratives in chapter 8, it was the repeated presence of replicable materials such as documents and spoken statements that made courses of events recognisable as certain types of action: repetitions in performances [*situated actions*] were *of* replicable materials.

Two things are of note therefore about patterns in courses of HRM action. First, they do not imply repetition of the same sets of associations across all, or even most, courses of action: there is no core set of elements that defines a type of HRM action, but a shifting set of associations that is partially repeated in many instances. This is the type of pattern that Wittgenstein called a *family resemblance*: "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (1953: 66). There is no single fibre running through the whole set of situated actions, but "an overlapping of many fibres" (1953: 67).

Second, the origin of the repetitions in situated HRM actions across an organisation can always be traced to specific sites and the situated actions that take place there. In particular, the HR organisation creates and circulates many of the material artefacts that constitute patterns in situated HRM action. These artefacts relay the situated actions that take place at Head Office, to the many sites where situated HRM action takes place.

This is a crucial insight because it provides an explanation for patterns in situated HRM action, not in any cross-level relationship between a 'structural' entity (HRM architecture, policy or practice) and action, but in other situated action, connected to the multiple sites of repetition by replicable mobile materials. Thus, local situated action may incorporate agencies from other spaces and other times –never other levels– when they assemble artefacts that have travelled and relayed the action from a distant site. It is when these moving artefacts show up repeatedly in different times and places that repetition becomes a feature of HRM activity: HRM activity has been ordered.

9.2.3 Tracing the connexions: the circulation of standards

I have argued above that patterns in courses of HRM action are not the product of higher-level entities, but of other situated action. To complete the flat description of HRM, we need now to perform Latour's (2005) third 'move' and focus attention on the ways artefacts are replicated and then circulated to the multiple sites of situated HRM action.

Latour (2005) identified three types of circulating materials that sustain coordination across sites: *standards*, *quasi-standards* and *collecting statements*. Standards are fully-traceable precise measurement conventions, such as those that make up the International System of Units (i.e. the kilogram, the metre, etc.). First, standards help coordination by establishing commensurability across space and time. Standard measurement units are certainly a part of HRM activity. Organisations typically measure work time, salaries, sales levels, etc. using standard measures such as hours and minutes, workdays, and currency units (sterling, euro, dollars…). Although it might be easy to take these standards for granted, it is easy to realise their importance by imagining what HRM would look like in an environment

where these were inexistent –perhaps in some informal industries in less developed economies HRM operates in the absence of these standard measures.

Second, quasi-standards are measurement conventions and classification systems that operate in a similar fashion to standards, but with different degrees of exactitude and materialisation, such as can be established in accounting codes, diagnosis manuals, or social class studies. Consistent with Latour's observation that "most coordination among agents is achieved through the dissemination of quasi-standards" (Latour, 2005: 229), quasi-standards form the bulk of the artefacts that is made to circulate to achieve coordination in HRM actions. Such quasi-standards include performance evaluation criteria, job descriptions, salary scales, disciplinary meeting scripts, descriptions of corporate misconduct, and training plans. These quasi-standards are typically embodied in inscriptions whose presence in the multiple sites of HRM action *creates* repetition across courses of HRM action. Because they are not as strongly traceable as standards, however, they are only a source of imperfect commensurability across situations.

Finally, 'collecting statements' are memorable (hence replicable) expressions that when uttered reproduce certain relationships among elements. For instance, in chapter 6 we saw how the HR organisation would use a number of expressions to shape how instances of absence would be dealt with, such as "absence is absence" and "we are managing the fact that she is not at work, not the reason she is not at work". Likewise, in her fieldwork at Hewlett-Packard, Truss found that it was typical to hear comments making reference to 'The HP way', such as "you will never progress as a manager in this company unless you practice management consistent with The HP Way", or "The HP Way . . . is the ethos" (2001: 1134). Such expressions that are often repeated in organisations help achieve another layer of standardisation in courses of HRM action.

To summarise the argument so far, patterns in courses of HRM action are achieved through the circulation of standards, quasi-standards and collecting statements from centrally located sites to the multiple sites of situated HRM action. Moreover, the origin of most of

these standards can be traced to the HR organisation that devises and actively disperses these materials *in order to* create repetition in situated HRM action.

The question remains however, how it is that standards actually achieve repetition. Assuming that the mere existence of standards creates repetition in situated HRM action would be a case of technological determinism, defined as the assumption that the effects of a technology on the social are "determining and inevitable" (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). So repetition cannot be the effect of the mere existence of standards, these need to be effectively enrolled in individual courses of situated action. As Suchman noted, "the problem for administrators to make their interests endogenous to the settings that they are charged to administer" (Suchman, 2007: 204).

The answer to how this is achieved is to be found in the ways in which the HR organisation produces the standards[27] it circulates. I want to suggest that the rate at which standards are effectively enrolled in situated action depends on their suitability to the specific situations. And this suitability is achieved via the knowledge that the HR organisation is able to gather about the set of situations it is trying to standardise. This insight directs our attention to another set of material flows that are constituent of HRM activity: the flow of situational knowledge inscriptions from the field to the HR department.

Figure 9.1 illustrates the proposed position of the HR department in the flow of materials from the field, their transformation into standards, and the dissemination back to the field. By virtue of these flows of materials, or 'cycles of accumulation'(Latour, 1987), the HR department constitutes itself into what has variously been termed a 'centre of calculation' (Latour, 1987), a 'centre of coordination' (Suchman, 1997) or an 'oligopticon' (Latour, 2005), that achieves 'agency at a distance' (Law, 1986). It is through these activities that repetition, or consistency, is achieved in situated HRM actions.

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[27] For easy reading, I will use the term standards to refer to all three types of circulating materials: standards, quasi-standards and collecting statements

Figure 9.1: The HR department as a 'centre of calculation' or 'oligopticon' (Latour, 2005)
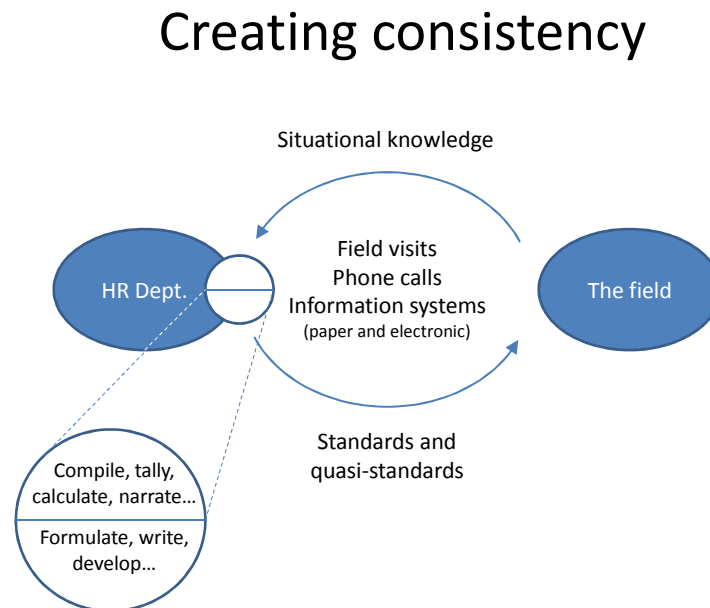
9.2.4 Summary

This completes our flat description of HRM activity, which explains patterns in situated HRM actions without recourse to higher level constructs, but as the effect of other situated actions and the connexions established by the movements of material artefacts.

First, HRM action is always situated action: ~~the production of~~ individual employment terms is the product of unique assemblies of actors and artefacts collocated in a site. Second, patterns in situated HRM actions are based on the repeated presence of certain material artefacts. Finally, these artefacts are devised by the HR department through the constant flows of materials from the field to Head Office and vice-versa. These flows are thus the basis of consistency or coordination in dispersed HRM actions.

9.3 HRM practices

A flat view of HRM activities alters the way in which HRM practices –as the term has been used in the SHRM literature– can be understood. As introduced in chapter 2, the top-down view sees HRM practices as discrete entities that originate as top/HR management's abstract intentions and designs, are then enacted by line managers, and finally perceived by

employees. Moreover, at any of these stages, HRM practices can be objectively measured and compared to identify mismatches and 'variability'.

The present section reconciles the 'flat' description developed in the previous section with the top-down view of HRM and its concept of HRM practices. The key insight is to recognise that HRM practices at any of the stages just described are summary descriptions or *representations* (Suchman, 2007, Law, 1994) of sets of diverse courses of HRM action. Whether prospective –intended HRM practices–, or retrospective –actual and perceived HRM practices–, these representations of HRM activity are important components of organisations, as part of actors' deliberating *about* HRM activities. Their relation to situated HRM action however is in no way direct, strong or causal, but vague, weak and contingent.

In what follows, I review the characteristics of the three types of HRM practices that are identified in Nishii and Wright's (2008) model: intended, actual and perceived HRM practices. The last subsection discusses the role of representations of HRM action in the practice of reasoning *about* HRM.

9.3.1   Prospective representations of HRM action: intended HRM practices

Operating within the 'planning view' of action (Suchman, 2007), the top-down view of HRM considers management intentions and plans to be the necessary and direct antecedents of HRM action. A direct causal relationship between plans and actions is assumed, providing the logical support to a view of 'HRM practices' moving sequentially from intended, to actual, to perceived, as transformations of essentially the same thing, as implied by Nishii and Wright's (2008) model.

The first distinction that must be made, therefore, is that plans are not of the same kind as situated action. From an ethnomethodological perspective, plans are *projective representations* of action (Suchman, 2007), that is descriptions of imagined action produced in anticipation of action itself. An intended HRM practice is thus a material artefact: text or talk *about* situated HRM action.

Moreover, plans rely for their efficiency as representations on being as univocal as possible: only one or very few variants of the action can be incorporated in the plan for it to

possibly function as one. This is achieved by two means: intended HRM practices omit a great deal of what is to be performed in situated HRM action, and that which is specified is formulated in terms of an average or typical HRM action. Thus, an intended HRM practice is in effect a partial average description of a set of imagined courses of HRM action.

The next question we need to address refers to the nature of the relationship between plans of HRM action –intended HRM practices– and HRM action itself. In the top-down view of HRM, intended HRM practices are assumed to prescribe or determine action, at least to a certain point, in a fairly direct and strong causal manner. Earlier in this chapter however we learned that, from an ethnomethodological perspective, action is always situated: the product of a particular configuration of human and material elements in a site. Thus, the way in which a particular artefact, such as intended HRM practices, may impinge on situated action needs to be sought in its participation in the situational configuration, together with the rest of human and material elements. Thus, far from determining situated HRM action in any strong sense, the participation and import of intended HRM practices in situated action remain unspecified before the fact, as they are contingent upon the varying unique local situations where action is generated.

To summarise the argument in this section, 'intended HR' is the set of materials that prospectively represent imagined courses of HRM activity. Far from causal, the connexion between these artefacts and actual courses of HRM activity is not direct, but through their enrolment, among a host of other actors and materials, in individual local courses of situated HRM action.

9.3.2 Retrospective representations of HRM action: actual and perceived HRM practices

This section argues that actual and perceived HRM practices are retrospective summaries of diverse sets of situated HRM actions, which are composed by specific actors – researchers, HR practitioners, employees– for a specific purpose.

Actual HRM practices have been defined as "those HR activities that take place within the organization, regardless of whether or not they are in response to any articulated HR

strategy" (Truss and Gratton, 1994: 681). This definition however, does not refer to the individual HRM courses of action, with their infinitely varied situations, but to summary accounts of what seems to be 'going on' in an organisation. 'Actual HRM practices' thus strive for univocality by leaving out much of what was done during HRM action, and averaging out what is included in the account. Thus, like intended HRM practices these summary accounts of 'actual HRM practices' are *representations* of diverse sets of courses of situated HRM action, albeit retrospective ones.

Defined as employee perceptions of the HRM practices they are subject to (Purcell and Kinnie, 2007), perceived HRM practices are also summaries of diverse courses of action, composed in this case by employees. Like other representations of HRM actions, in the abstract they have no effects in the world. As formulated in speech acts they are artefacts that can be assembled into further courses of action. They can for instance be taken up by the employee or a co-worker to become part of their flow activity for the day. They can also be collected by researchers to produce further representations of HRM activities.

9.3.3   Deliberating and reasoning about HRM

Representations of HRM actions are important to organisational actors as the stuff of their deliberations and reasoning *about* HRM. Actors construct representations of HRM actions, projective or retrospective, as a means to "catch hold of situated action and reason about it" (Suchman, 2007: 60). Such reasoning constitutes a type of situated action itself, in which representations made by different actors are fine-tuned, refined and updated; and yet they will remain ambiguous, provisional and contested.

This reasoning about HRM action is an important activity of organisations, but is not coterminous with situated HRM action itself. Indeed, representations are "constituent [of practical action] as an artefact of our *reasoning about* action, not as the generative *mechanism of* action" (Suchman, 2007: 60). There are certainly connexions between the two types of activity, but the relationship between representations and action is not direct, causal or generative, as the top-down view of HRM posits.

The whole discussion about intended, actual, perceived HR refers to the practice of reflecting about HRM activity, the practice of creating and spreading representations of HRM activity, but says nothing about how courses of HRM activity themselves have effects.

9.4   HRM and organisational performance

A flat view of HRM also helps reformulate the possible means by which the effects of HRM may be generated. The top-down view of HRM has emphasised the importance of perceptions of HRM practices as the principal mediator between HRM activity and performance effects. Nishii and Wright for instance contended that "the effect of actual HR practices does not reside in those practices, but rather in the perceptions that employees have of those practices" (2008: 227). For them, employees' perceptions of HRM are antecedents of their attitudes towards the organisation and these attitudes are themselves antecedents of performance behaviours.

From an ethnomethodological point of view, however, any theorising on the performance effects of HRM needs to be based on HRM's connexion to situated action. In other words, HRM can only have effects on organisational performance through its links to the situated actions that constitute that performance.

With that in mind, the first question we will address is whether employees' perceptions of HRM practices are relevant to organisational performance. We argued above that perceived HRM practices are in fact representations of diverse HRM courses of action, composed by employees for a specific purpose. We saw also that such representations are material artefacts that can be enrolled by actors in subsequent courses of situated action. This provides a possible path for 'perceived HR practices' to produce effects: accounts of HRM activity are composed and inscribed or uttered by actors; this account can at a later time be remembered or cited during a course of action, which then becomes shaped by it. So there is support also in the flat model of SHRM for the notion that employee perceptions of organisational HRM practices may have an impact on later courses actions that constitute organisational performance. The extent of that impact however will vary across situations,

so that the overall impact of a certain 'shared' perception on organisational outcomes remains an empirical question.

Note however that any effects of HRM that are mediated by perceptions of HRM practices are produced by the practice of deliberating and reasoning about HRM, rather than by the courses of situated HRM action themselves. Thus, our second question will be whether direct effects of HRM actions are possible, without the mediation of their representations. Such effects of HRM actions would relate to the ways in which HRM courses of action extend or feed into other courses of organisational action, including those that are the basis for financial performance, such as revenue generation and cost driving activities. For instance, a particular course of action that leads to an appointment results in a certain individual showing up for work at a certain site and engaging in certain situated actions, for instance a sale, which may lead to the recognition of revenue. Likewise, a performance appraisal exercise produces an inscription (the appraisal) which can be recalled by the appraised employee during a subsequent course of action. Finally, a training course may provide a number of materials (forms, instructions, memorable statements, etc.) which can be brought to bear in later action.

The extent and importance of these direct effects of HRM actions are an empirical question. We must not forget however that any evaluation of the effects of HRM –as indeed all SHRM research– is part of the practice of reflecting *about* HRM. Such practice is much better equipped to consider representations of HRM action as an antecedent to organisational effects, than it is to delve into the complexity of considering the vagaries of individual courses of action, which are just so much harder to describe and discuss because they are not easily amenable to representation.

9.5   Conclusion

This chapter has expounded a flat description of HRM activities based on a view of HRM as situated action. First, we have seen how HRM activities are not enactments of an abstraction, but a coming together of heterogeneous elements in specific space-time

locations. HRM action is thus always a local achievement shaped by the human and material elements that become associated in it. Moreover, material inscriptions help thread local actions into courses of action which, if they endure, constitute HRM outcomes.

Second, patterns in HRM action originate in the actions of the HR organisation and the artefacts it deploys. Through iterative cycles of standardisation, the HR department creates and sustains order in HRM activity.

Third, organisational actors produce prospective and retrospective representations of HRM action in order to *reason about* it. What has been termed intended, actual and perceived HRM practices in SHRM research are examples of such representations. The relationship between the practice of reasoning about HRM actions, and situated HRM action is not direct, strong or causal, but indirect, weak and contingent.

Finally, this chapter posits that HRM actions may directly impinge on organisational performance as they extend or feed into other courses of action which constitute organisational performance.

Overall, the chapter has thus provided a coherent theoretical framework for understanding HRM activity outside of the practice-implementation paradigm.

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the thesis. The first section offers a summary of the content of previous chapters. The second section explicates the empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions of the thesis. The third section explores its implications for HRM research and practice, while the fourth and final section acknowledges the limitations of this research and suggests future areas of inquiry.

10.1   Summary of the thesis

The goal of this research has been to develop an understanding of HRM activity that can take better account of variability in HRM practices. Chapter 2 argued that the dominant top-down model of HRM is based on the practice implementation paradigm which sees collective action as deriving from rules set by management and imperfectly followed by organisational members. Such a model necessarily sees variability as an impediment to effective HRM, and proposed the development of an alternative view of HRM activity as the goal of this research. Chapter 3 explored so-called practice perspectives of organisations, which explain collective action outside the rule-following paradigm. In particular, the practice perspective on organisational routines, which has shown how patterns of collective action can endogenously change over time, provides a useful first approximation. I showed however that this perspective, like other views based on the theory of structuration, has limitations for accounting for variability and consistency in collective action across space. I suggested that a model based on actor-network theory's 'flat' description of collective action could overcome such limitations.

Fieldwork was carried out through visits to stores of a large UK-based fashion retailer. Data from interviews with store-based managers produced 112 narratives of specific HRM episodes, in the areas of 'progression' and 'performance management'. The analysis of these narratives allowed for the characterisation of HRM activities at the company as distributed, emergent and patterned. This insight provided the foundation for the development of a flat

model of HRM which describes the production of individualised employment outcomes in organisations. Employment outcomes are produced through the assembling of heterogeneous elements –human actors and nonhuman artefacts– into courses of action. Course of action that endure by enrolling more actants become less reversible, more fixed and more real. Each of these provisionally fixed courses of action, defined by their whole assembly of actants, are what we may consider an outcome. This view of HRM therefore considers 'doing HRM' as an emerging activity performed by a wide range of actors and artefacts. Further HRM is a patterned activity in the sense that certain elements are profusely repeated over time and across space. A flat model of HRM identifies the source of such repetition, not in the following of rules by line managers, or in the overhanging presence of any kind of structure, but in the situated actions of the HR department, and the circulation of replicated materials to the sites of situated HRM action. Such circulation of materials involved cycles of knowledge retrieval from the field, processing at Head Office, and dissemination back to the field in the form of standards and quasi-standards.

The thesis has thus achieved its goal to develop a theory of HRM that provides an alternative to the prevalent top-down view. More specifically, it has answered the research questions outlined in section 2.6.

Research question 1: How are individual employment outcomes produced?

This thesis has theorised that individual employment outcomes are produced through courses of situated action that involve heterogeneous elements (see section 9.2.1). HRM courses of action, and the individual employment terms they produce, are not performed by or under the control of rational purposeful actors, but are the result of local configurations of heterogeneous –human and material– elements.

Research question 2: What are the sources of variability and consistency in HRM activities?

This thesis has identified variability as the consequence of differences in the situations where action is produced, and consistency as the product of the actions of the HR department and the circulation of material artefacts. Every HRM action is the product of its situation;

since a situation can never occur twice, HRM actions –and by extension courses of HRM

action– are never wholly repeated. On the other hand, some of constituent material elements

of HRM action are profusely replicated and this is the basis for pattern and order in HRM

activity. Moreover, such order is created by the HR organisation through the circulation of

material artefacts.

Research question 3: How do intended, actual and perceived HRM practices relate to

the production of individual employment outcomes?

This thesis has characterised intended, actual and perceived HRM practices as

prospective and retrospective representations of situated HRM action. Furthermore, it has

identified these representations as constituents of the practice of *reasoning about* HRM, and

has acknowledged the importance of this practice to HRM itself. Thus, the new theory of

HRM does not invalidate previous views of HRM, but re-specifies them as part of a separate,

albeit related, practice to HRM activity.

10.2 Contribution

The contribution of this thesis is threefold. First, from an empirical standpoint, this

thesis presents a rich case description of HRM activities in a large UK fashion retailer.

Second, at a theoretical level, this thesis has proposed and elaborated a flat model of HRM,

consistent with actor-network theory, which goes a long way to address the lack of

understanding of HRM 'implementation' in the literature. Moreover, this model provides an

extension to practice views of organisational routines, which can account for stability and

change, as well as variability and consistency. Third, in methodological terms, this thesis

provides a novel method for operationalising an analysis of the logics of practice and

representation in interview data.

10.2.1 Empirical contribution

The thesis has provided a rich description of HRM activities in a large UK fashion

retailer. The value of this description resides in the detail provided on the performance of

individual HRM episodes. Whereas case study research designs are relatively common in

HRM research, particularly in the UK, this study is distinctive in that it has focused on the courses of action that produce individual employment outcomes. Other case studies have typically started with an a priori definition of the HRM practices in use, and have collected information on summaries of average processes or general perceptions of how the practice was enacted in the organisation. Because the aim of this thesis was not to arrive at a conclusion on how a practice was enacted, but to understand the activities that produced employment outcomes, I was able to capture the richness of HRM activities as displayed in the broad array of specific episodes that were studied. For instance, Grugulis et al.(2010) describe how store managers in two retail chains had some discretion in staffing their stores, but do not provide any description of how specific hiring outcomes had been achieved. Likewise, in their case study of Selfridges Purcell and Hutchinson tell us that line managers "interview applicants, advise on the job evaluation and make the final decision to select" (2007: 15) but provide no detail of what these 'tasks' actually entail. By subsuming diverse courses of HRM action under such terse descriptions, these studies may give the false impression that variability in HRM is negligible as either rare or without consequence. This thesis by contrast, has exposed the diversity of courses of HRM action and its importance for the practicality of HRM activities.

10.2.2 Theoretical contribution

The main contribution of this thesis however is a 'flat' view of HRM, which provides a novel understanding of HRM activities beyond the practice-implementation paradigm that has dominated the SHRM literature so far. This new view provides a number of advantages over previous ones. First, the model has been developed from a study of situated action and thus benefits from the advantages of practical rationality theories (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011), including a "significant bridging" of the theory-practice gap. Over the last decade, SHRM scholars have repeatedly called for research on HRM implementation (Paauwe and Boselie, 2005, Purcell and Kinnie, 2007, Guest, 2011), in the hope that this will provide a clearer link between its findings and prescriptions, and the experience of HRM practitioners. The evident slow progress on that front can be attributed to the failure of the literature to

abandon the scientific rationality premises that underpin the top-down view of HRM. By taking situated HRM action as the point of departure, this research provides a view of HRM that is directly resonant with practitioners' day-to-day activities.

Second, a flat view of HRM overcomes the limitations the literature has faced in dealing with variability in HRM practices by challenging the very premises on which SHRM scholars such as Nishii and Wright (2008) and Bowen and Ostroff (2004) base their own analysis of variability. First, a flat view of HRM recognises that courses of HRM action are characterised by repetition and variability *at the same time*: more variability does not imply less consistency, nor vice-versa. This is a significant departure from Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) approach which emphasised the importance of minimising variability as a way of enhancing consistency in HRM activities. Moreover, variability is not necessarily detrimental to the efficacy of HRM activities, but is indeed what makes HRM activities at all possible, given the infinite variety of the situations in which they are embedded. This again is at odds with Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) and Nishii and Wright's (2008) view of HRM where variation is seen as undesired slippage. Finally, and more fundamentally, seeing HRM actions as enactments of intended HRM practices sustains the false idea that consistency is the original state of HRM actions, and variation is introduced by feckless actors. In fact, rampant variation is the natural state of affairs when courses of action are distributed across many locations. Consistency on the other hand is effortfully accomplished through the standardising actions of certain actors and their associated artefacts, who must operate continuously in order to sustain the repetitions. Thus, it is patterns, repetition and order in HRM activities that need to be explained and studied, rather than the inevitable unsurprising differences across courses of situated HRM action. This contrasts with Nishii and Wright's (2008) efforts to list all possible sources of variation in HRM (see table 2.1 above), and Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) suggestion that consistency in HRM depends on features of intended HRM practices.

Thirdly and finally, a flat view of HRM helps avoid antagonism between HR practitioners and line managers. The top-down view of HRM assumes that only those

elements of HRM activity that are part of top management design are relevant to producing desired outcomes. This understanding establishes a divide in HRM activities between those aspects that conform to top management intentions, contribute to consistency of HRM practices, and produce desired effects; and those that are not part of top management design, are a source of variability in HRM practices, and are at best irrelevant, at worst detrimental to the efficacy of HRM practices. This divide is at the heart of the idea that variability is undesirably introduced by line-managers with poor skills or spurious goals, and efforts to squelch their agency. The flat view of HRM by contrast sees line managers' involvement in situated HRM action as central to the efficacy of HRM.

Besides contributing to the study of HRM, the flat description of HRM is also significant to the theory of organisational routines. In particular, it respecifies the dominant practice-based model of organisational routines (Feldman and Pentland, 2003), providing a parsimonious explanation of stability and change in routines over time, as well as variability and consistency across space. The flat description thus fulfils Feldman and Pentland's (2005, 2008) transition from a structurational model to an ANT view of organisational routines. In this view, there is no abstract phenomenon called a routine; the only underlying phenomenon is activity, understood as courses of collective action. Further, courses of collective action are assemblages of actants that translate each other. Assemblages that endure by incorporating more actants become less reversible, more fixed, and more real. Material artefacts and disciplined bodies can circulate from site to site and can therefore assemble themselves into more than one course of action. This is the basis for repetition and patterns in collective action over time and across sites. Participants and observers rely on such patterned repetition to compose summaries as shorthand for sets of courses of action. Descriptions of organisational routines are examples of such summaries, which as material artefacts themselves –in written or spoken form– can circulate and become part of further courses of action.

10.2.3   Methodological contribution

This thesis also makes a methodological contribution in its use of interview data as its main data source rather than ethnographic observation, and in the use of participant narratives. Although some authors, such as Nicolini (2009a) and Czarniawska (2004), have championed the use of interview methods in practice-based research, studies where interviews are the main source of data remain rare. The study presented here should contribute to enabling the spread of interview methods of data collection in practice-based studies, and bring at least two benefits to the field. First, because of the economy of interview methods compared to ethnographic observation, larger scale studies become more feasible. They also provide a means for overcoming the difficulties of studying practices across different times and spaces (Czarniawska, 2007). Second, the study of participant narratives goes a long way towards taking account of participant's own theories of action (Latour, 2005) and achieving Callon's methodological principle of 'free association', that is, not to "bring in any actor that they [the respondents] themselves did not explicitly invoke [nor] impose any fixed definition on the entities which intervened." (1986: 222). Further, through the use of 'narrative mode' coding, this study has developed a novel operationalisation of Czarniawska's (2004) three response logics –theory, practice and representation–, in a way that makes possible the analysis of participants' situated narratives as the basis for exploring practice.

10.3   Implications

10.3.1   For HRM research

The flat description of HRM activities put forward in this thesis provides an alternative to the dominant top-down model, and this has profound implications for SHRM research going forward.

First, a flat description of HRM raises questions about the validity of research aimed at producing advice on the adoption of practices or on the optimal features of HRM systems, based on quantitative analysis of survey data. Such research relies on the assumption that

HRM practices and HRM systems can be described by a finite set of parameters, which can in turn be objectively measured in different organisations. Moreover, such research assumes that optimal configurations can be identified through statistical analysis, so that other organisations may replicate the practices and their effects by reproducing the parameters. Contrary to these assumptions, a flat description of HRM suggests employment outcomes are produced through idiosyncratic assemblies of actors and aretefacts, which cannot be reduced to a finite number of parameters that can be measured and replicated elsewhere. This critique fully subscribes to Sandberg and Tsoukas's (2011) effort to 'debunk scientific rationality', which by ignoring the "irreducibly *situational nature* of reality" (2011: 341, emphasis in original) fails to produce knowledge that is relevant to practitioners.

Second, a flat description of HRM challenges the validity of more recent studies which have taken employee perceptions and attributions of HRM practices as their independent variable (e.g. Nishii et al., 2008, Ehrnrooth and Björkman, 2012), on the grounds that "the effect of actual HR practices does not reside in those practices, but rather in the perceptions that employees have of those practices" (Nishii and Wright, 2008: 227). Such studies consider employees as external to HRM practices, which are applied *to them* by others. Employee perceptions are formed *after* such application of practice, through a range of individual and group cognitive processes, and performance outcomes arise as employees *then* reciprocate with attitudes and discretionary behaviours towards their employer. A flat description, by contrast, posits that employees co-construct the assemblies that produce employment outcomes and that effects of HRM are created in those assemblies. Thus, there is no sequence practice-perception-reaction, but courses of action which ramify and stabilise into different types of outcomes. In this view, perceptions are a consequence of outcomes, rather than their antecedent.

A third line of research on which the findings of this thesis impinges is that pertaining to the 'strength' of HRM systems (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004), which has posited that HRM systems which are high in distinctiveness, consistency and consensus send strong unequivocal signals to employees about the type of behaviours that are rewarded by the

organisation, making such behaviours more widespread. The implication is that systems of HRM practices should be designed to maximise consistency and minimise variability. A flat description of HRM supports the idea that consistency is important for achieving certain outcomes, but also suggests that variability makes HRM viable as situated action: HRM would not be possible without everything that is *not* repeated, standardised and ordered. At any rate, consistency is understood in very different ways in either perspective. In Bowen and Ostroff (2004) consistency is about uniformity of interpretation of the messages implicit in HRM practices, as an antecedent of uniform employee behaviour. In a flat view of HRM, consistency is about the repeated enrolment of certain artefacts in courses of HRM action, and the implications this has for those same courses of action. Whereas for Bowen and Ostroff (2004) consistency is ensured by certain features of the HRM practices, in a flat description of HRM consistency is an ongoing achievement.

Last but not least, a flat description of HRM postulates a shift in attention and interest from explaining variability in HRM to explaining order in HRM activities. This is important in view of the critique contained in section 2.5 above and our reservations about the unlikely success of the research programme suggested by Nishii and Wright (2008)

As an alternative to these approaches, a flat understanding of HRM suggests that rich descriptions of live HRM activities, based on case study research that focuses on studying the courses of action that constitute HRM outcomes, may provide the best area of progress for the field. Such studies should provide enough detail for practitioners to identify elements they might seek to translate into their own activities.

10.3.2 For HR practitioners

A flat understanding of HRM puts HR practitioners at the centre of the activity that creates order in HRM activity. This implies a considerable shift from the type of scholarly advice that has been provided to practitioners in the past, which has chiefly dealt with the selection and design of HRM practices. The problem with such advice, besides the fact that it relies on the assumption that the effects of a practice are inherent in its design, is that little guidance is given to practitioners about how to go from design to actual HRM activity. The

few authors that have provided some advice in this area have emphasised the importance of 'aligning' practices to each other and to organisational strategy (Wright and McMahan, 1992) and keeping actors 'on the same wavelength' (Rousseau and Greller, 1994). More recently these two elements have been recast into the concept of a 'strong' HRM system (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Unfortunately, these prescriptions remain far from practitioners' practical activities and concerns, and thus are of limited relevance and use to them.

By contrast, a flat view of HRM refers directly to the type of situated action in which HR practitioners might be involved on a daily basis. It highlights their role as creators and sustainers of consistency in the varied courses of HRM action dispersed throughout the organisation. In this view, consistency in HRM is not a problem of design, but an achievement that must be sustained through ongoing engagement with the organisation. Thus, rather than devising full abstract plans of HRM systems, HR practitioners should try to learn as much as possible about the courses of situated action through which employment terms are determined in their organisations, and identify the elements within those courses of action where they think standardisation will have a greater impact on the organisational activities that drive performance. Then, HR practitioners can engage in cycles of standardisation that include the retrieval of situational knowledge from the field, the conversion of this knowledge into material standards, and the circulation of the latter to the field. It is through the constant iteration of this cycle that order and consistency can be achieved across the many situated actions that constitute an organisation's HRM activities.

Three elements stand out in this view of the role of HR practitioners that distance it from previous prescriptions for the role. First is the importance that HR practitioners obtain situational knowledge about how individual employment terms are produced, and about how this is relevant to the courses of action that drive organisational performance. This will be the basis for their success in creating consistency and making an impact on relevant organisational outcomes. Second is the centrality of material artefacts in ordering HRM activity: forms, policy documents, aphorisms are, computer systems are the stuff of order and consistency. Finally,

Thus, a flat view of HRM calls for the HR department to 'get physical', that is, engage closely with the organisation they are serving –travel, visit, see and hear, talk, collect data, and learn what is important for the business–, and become experts in the creation and deployment of material artefacts –documents, forms and information systems. This is clearly a departure from the previous emphasis on abstract plans and designs and the prescription of a more 'strategic' role for the HR organisation (Ulrich, 1997).

10.4 Limitations and further research

This research has three important limitations which will need to be addressed through further research. First, it is based on research in a single organisation, which may raise concerns about the extent to which its findings are applicable to other organisations. Second, it is based mainly on interview data and particularly on participant narratives of HRM episodes. Third, it has focused on two specific areas of HRM activity –progression and performance management– which may be different in nature from other areas of activity which are commonly part of HRM activities in organisations. In what follows I elaborate on the significance of these limitations to the findings of the research.

10.4.1 Single case study

This research relies on fieldwork at a single organisation, a large fashion retailer in the UK. Within a statistical or analytical generalisation framework (Tsoukas, 2009), further research that replicates these results would be needed before any validity can be assumed. However, this thesis has provided enough 'thickness' in its description of HRM activities that it can claim to provide what Tsoukas (2009) described as 'heuristic generalisation': it provides better understanding of a particular case, but the resulting theory remains incomplete and open to further specification –rather than validation– in other cases. This argument therefore calls for further case study research on the detailed HRM activities in other organisations, in order to further refine our view of how HRM outcomes are assembled –doing HRM– and standardised –patterning HRM. Such research will offer refinement of

the flat description of HRM, through new detailed descriptions of activities in other organisations.

10.4.2 Use of interview data

The main source of data for this research has been interview data, supplemented by documentary data. This enabled access to a larger number of individual instances of HRM activity, and a broader view of each of those instances stretching beyond the confines of specific space-time sites, than would have been possible through direct observation, and this has been crucial for the development of theory in this thesis. Furthermore, although direct observation has often been considered a more objective source of data than secondary accounts of activity, using participant narratives had the important advantage of privileging participants' views of what is relevant in explaining the reality they participate in, over researchers' preconceptions of what may be counted as valid or invalid elements of such explanations.

In any case, further research may consider combining both interview data and direct observation to achieve a different balance between breadth and depth of data.

10.4.3 Areas of HRM activity

This research has focused on two HRM activities – progression and performance management – which were identified in the early stages of fieldwork as being decentralised at the company. The distinction between centralised and decentralised HRM activities, however, was only due to practical considerations for planning a second wave of fieldwork that was focused and contained. The choice to study decentralised activities was justified because much of those activities was located in the stores. I had chosen the stores as the prime site of my fieldwork because that was where 'HRM implementation' was supposed to be carried out by line managers and this was an under-researched area in the SHRM literature. Still, the differentiation is of degree rather than nature: for instance, even if decisions on number of managers per sales floor were taken at Head Office, they still needed to be followed up by activities in the stores, including hiring, red-ringing and employee consultations.

Further research may thus disregard this differentiation, and explore both centralised and decentralised HRM activities through the lens of the 'flat' model proposed here. Some important new research questions may thus be addressed, such as, how is centralisation of HRM activities achieved, and how are outcomes decided centrally made relevant to local interactions. In the case of the company I studied, for instance, the Structure and Salary Pack (SSP) was a key instrument for centralising decision on store structure, salary and bonus. What other means helped effectuate agency at a distance? What cycles of accumulation helped ensure that elements dictated in the SSP were relevant for activities in the store?

10.4.4 Suggested area for further research

Besides the suggestions for further research that derive from the limitations above, the 'flat' view of HRM would benefit from further specification of how HR departments achieve and maintain their position as oligoptica. Such research may entail an ethnographic study of the day to day activities HR departments, with data collection including shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) of HRM managers, direct observations of HRM call centres, in-depth analysis of HRM information systems on of HR departments, observation of processes of information sharing and artefact creation within HRM.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Consent statement

About my research

I am a doctoral student at the University of Warwick.

My research deals with how firms manage their employees. In particular it looks at how line managers participate in Human Resource Management processes.

About today

I would like to interview you on your role in HR as a store manager. I am interested in your personal views to my questions. There are absolutely no right or wrong answers. You shouldn't think about what other might expect you to say, but on your own account of how things work.

The interview should last for about 45 minutes, but can be shorter or longer.

About how responses will be treated

Your responses are strictly confidential. Only I will have access to your individual responses. I am also responsible for the safety of all the data that I keep. I will need to record the interview so as not to lose your actual responses. The files with the recordings will be kept safe and only I will have access to them.

From your responses and those of other interviewees, I will draw conclusions around my research interest. These conclusions will be disseminated via publications or presentations to academic audiences. A presentation will probably also be made to management at⌷. Nothing in these materials will allow others to identify the source of any specific information used.

About your consent

I have asked management at⌷ to set up this appointment for me because your response is of great value to my research. However, your participation is voluntary. Before we proceed I will ask for your consent and I would not report your declination to participate if this were your choice.

Before we get to that, do you have any questions or concerns about my research or your participation in it?

At this point, then, I must ask you whether you are willing to go ahead with the interview.

Appendix 2: Wave 1 interview schedules

Store managers

Interview schedule - Store managers

About your job
- How long have you held your current job?
- About your store:
  - Location
  - Size: employees / sq metres / sales
  - Product offering
  - Customer profile
  - Thinking about your current workforce as it stands today, how appropriate would you say it is to the business needs of the store, in terms of…
    - Size
    - Skills
    - Commitment/ engagement/ morale
  - How "difficult" is this store, compared to others you have worked in or know about?
  - How has the performance of this store changed (if at all) since you picked it up?
- Do you have formal goals? What are they?
  - Is anyone measuring these? How?
- What are the main tasks involved in your job?
- What is the hardest about your job?
  - What do you do in order to meet the challenge?

About your role managing employees
Involvement in Human Resource activities:
- What are the main HR activities you are involved with?
- Alternatively, in which of these activities are you regularly involved…
  - Recruiting
  - Induction, training
  - Performance appraisal
  - Disciplining and dismissals
  - Promotion
  - Salary and bonus
  - Attendance and punctuality
  - Job and task assignments, workload
  - Breaks, time off and holidays
  - Overtime
  - Other?
- How important are these activities to your job as a store manager?
  - Are some activities more important than others? Which? Why?
- Let's focus on the two or three that are most important:
  - What tasks do you usually perform in each of these?

Example of HR process:
- Can you recall an important HR process or decision in which you have participated recently?
  - What was the issue?
  - Who was involved in the decision?
  - What were your goals while involved in this decision?
  - How did your goals differ from those of others involved in the decision?
  - What criteria did you use for the decision?
  - How did these criteria differ from those of others involved in the decision?
  - What means/devices did you use to influence the decision?
  - How was the decision arrived at?
  - What was the outcome?
  - Were you comfortable with the amount of input you personally had in the decision?

- o Were you satisfied with the specific decision as was finally implemented?

HR policies:
- Do you find company HR policies useful in managing your employees?
    - o Are some policies more useful than others?
    - o Which?
    - o Why?

HR department:
- Do you have access to an HR specialist?
    - o Where is he/she located?
    - o How often do you have contact with him/her?
    - o Would you describe his/her role as an adviser, instructor, regulator, administrative support?
- Have you had formal training to deal with Human Resource issues?
    - o What did it consist of?
    - o How valuable has it been?
- Overall, what do you make of HR?

About working for [the company]

- Can you sum up your history at [the company]?
    - o Year of hiring
    - o Promoted through the ranks / hired into a managerial position
- Overall, how good do you think [the company] is at managing its employees, on a scale from 0 to 5? 0=Not good at all; 5=Extremely good

Other managers

Interview schedule - Other managers

About your job
- What is your current job title?
- What are the main tasks involved in your job?
- Who supervises your work?
    - Do you see this person as "your boss"? Why?
- Do you have formal goals?
    - What are they?
    - Who is measuring these?
    - How are they measured?
- What is the hardest about your job?
    - What do you do in order to meet the challenge?

About your manager
- What is your relationship like with your store manager?
    - Do you regularly meet him/her in a formal setting?
    - When was it last? For what purpose?
- For you, what makes the difference between a good and a not-so-good store manager?
    - Can you give examples of what a good store manager would do as opposed to a not-so-good store manager?
    - Why are these things important?
- How would you rate the amount of support you get from your current store manager, compared to other store managers?
  More than most/ About average/ Less than most.
    - Can you give examples of how your store manager shows his/her (lack of) support?
- Is there anything within your store manager's reach, you wish he/she did for you?
    - What are the chances he/she might grant this in the future?
    - What prevents him/her from doing it now?
- On a scale from 0 to 5, how would you rate your overall relationship with your store manager?
  0=Not good at all; 5=Extremely good

About working for [the company]
- How long have you worked for [the company]?
- Have you held any other jobs at [the company] before this one?
- What jobs do you expect to hold at [the company] in the future?
- Looking back at when you started work here, can you recall why you chose to work for the company back then?
    - Do those reasons still hold today? How have they changed?
    - What might motivate you to seek employment at another company?
- In the last year or so, can you think of ways in which your employment at [the company] has become <u>better</u>? Explain
    - Whose decisions or actions do you think contributed to this change?
    - Why do you think they took those decisions or actions?
- Can you now think of ways in which your employment at [the company] has become <u>worse</u>, again in the past year or so? Explain
    - Whose decisions or actions do you think contributed to this change?

    - Why do you think they took those decisions or actions?
- In particular, how much influence do you think your store manager had in the changes you just mentioned?
  A lot/ some/ little/ none
- Overall, how satisfied are you with the current terms of your employment here?
  Very satisfied / somewhat satisfied / somewhat dissatisfied / very dissatisfied
    - Why?
    - Does this affect you at work? How?
- On a scale from 0 to 5, how good is [the company] at managing its employees?
  0=Not good at all; 5=Extremely good

Appendix 3: Wave 2 interview schedule

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Your current role: title, department, manage someone?

Performance management

2. As a manager, do you see yourself as playing a **role in managing your current employees' performance**? What is that role? What is your purpose? How? Can you give an example?
3. As a manager, have you faced performance issues? Can you recall a recent instance?
   - ISSUE:
     - What was the issue?
     - How important was it and why?
     - Had you faced similar problems in the past?
   - ACTION:
     - What actions did you take?
     - What was your initial purpose?
     - Was HR involved? How?
   - OUTCOME:
     - What was the outcome?
     - Was the issue solved?
     - Did this instance of performance-management impact on the team?
4. Have you performance-managed an employee for **absence**?
   - ISSUE: what was the issue? And the likely cause?
   - ACTION: what action did you take? What was your initial purpose? Was HR involved? How?
   - OUTCOME: What was the outcome? Was the issue solved?
5. Have you performance-managed an employee for **lateness**?
   - ISSUE: what was the issue? And the likely cause?
   - ACTION: what action did you take? What was your initial purpose? Was HR involved? How?
   - OUTCOME: What was the outcome? Was the issue solved?
6. Have you used the **traffic light system** for customer service?
   - Describe the situation when you used it.
   - Would it have been different if the traffic light system wasn't in place?
7. To what extent are you bound by company rules when performance managing your employees?
   - Has this changed in the recent past?
   - Have you ever gone against the advice of HRM in a disciplinary?
8. Have you ever **been performance-managed yourself** throughout your career? How did that come about?
   - ISSUE: what was the issue?
   - ACTION: what actions were taken?
   - OUTCOME. What was the outcome? Was it fair? Did it have any impact on your employment at ☐

Progression

9. Do you see yourself as playing a **role in your current employees' progression**? What is that role? Why and how? Can you give an <u>example</u>?

10. As a manager, have you been involved in **making appointments to your staff**? Can you recall the last time? How did you go about it?
    - SOURCING:
        - o How and where did you source candidates? Why?
        - o How many candidates did you source?
    - SELECTION:
        - o What was important for you to find in the right candidate?
        - o How did you select among the available candidates?
    - OUTCOME:
        - o Who was finally appointed?
        - o How was the decision arrived at?
        - o How is that person doing now?

11. Tell me about **your own history at** [____] when you joined and what progression you have had since. (Note year of hire, position of hire, current position, time in current position)

12. Looking back at the successive moves, can you think of one you would single out as the **most important** to you? (big challenge, worked hard for it, came at a special moment, you learned something from it, you met someone important in your career)
    Focusing on that move (or your last),
    - why was it important to you?
    - how did it come about?
    - APPLICATION:
        - o Did you formally apply to the position?
        - o How did you learn about the opportunity?
        - o Did you speak to your then manager before applying? In what terms?
        - o Did you know the hiring manager before?
        - o Did you have any prior experience in that specific role?
    - SELECTION:
        - o What was the selection process like?
        - o Do you know who else was competing?
    - OUTCOME:
        - o How was the decision communicated to you?
        - o Why do you think you were offered the position?
        - o How did your experience in that selection process and your appointment shape your employment at [____]

13. Have you ever applied to a position but been **declined**? When was the last time?
    - APPLICATION:
        - o How did you learn about the opportunity?
        - o Did you speak to your then manager before applying? In what terms?
        - o Did you know the hiring manager before?
        - o Did you have any prior experience in that specific role?
    - SELECTION:
        - o What was the selection process like?
        - o Do you know who else was competing?

    - OUTCOME:
        - o How was the decision communicated to you?
        - o Why do you think you were not offered the position? Was it a fair outcome?
        - o How did your experience in that selection process and its outcome shape your employment at [____]

Appendix 4: HR interview schedule

Interview schedule – HR Managers

CURRENT JOB	What is your current job title? Can you summarise the main aspects of your job? How long have you been in this job?
CONTACT	Do you have contact with people in the retail business? • With whom? • How is that contact done: face to face, phone, email? • How often? • What for?
HR ACTIVITIES	Looking at the HR activities listed on this card [SHOW CARD]… Are you familiar with how decisions are made regarding each of these matters? • Recruiting and hiring • Induction, training and development • Performance appraisals • Store structure: departments, positions, job grades… • Promotions and appointments • Disciplining • Temporary assignments: absence covers, secondments… • Time and attendance: lateness, absence, sick leave… • Staffing issues: working hours, shifts, breaks, time off and holidays … • Salary and bonus • Customer service (ministry of selling) • Grievances
POLICY	For which of these does Next have a formal written policy? • So, there would NOT be a written policy for… Who gets involved in drafting HR policy? • Have you personally been involved in any of these? • Can you explain a recent example?

DECISION MAKING	In terms of **applying** the policies to make the actual decisions that are necessary from time to time... I would like to identify which activities would fall under each of the following three categories: 1. HR activities where individual decisions are made by managers at Head Office, with little or no involvement by the stores affected 2. HR activities where individual decisions are made jointly by managers at Head Office and managers in the stores 3. HR activities where individual decisions are made freely by managers in the stores with little or no involvement by H/O • Are there any HR activities carried out in a way other than the three mentioned above? • What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of the arrangements? • Why is each of the activities arranged the way it is?
ROLE OF HR	How would the HR department be involved in each type of activity? • (Decision-maker, adviser, instructor, regulator, administrative support) Are you personally involved in decision processes regarding any of these matters? • Which, how and when? • Can you explain a recent example?
ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS	I would like now to ask about the role of line managers in HR decision processes. How would you describe line managers' attitudes towards HR activities in general? • Can you think of examples that illustrate those attitudes? Are there differences between managers in the way they are involved in HR processes? • Describe or give examples Would you say there are also differences between line managers in the extent to which they are able to influence HR decisions about their employees? • If so, why do those differences exist? Are you aware of areas of HR where line managers might often contravene policy? • Can you give an example? • Why do you think they do that? • What happens if they are found out? For CENTRALISED decisions: Would individual Store managers be able to influence centralised decisions as they affect their staff? If so, how? Overall, how much discretion do you think managers have in making decisions in favour of those who deserve recognition?

T&A	I would now like to ask about some specific areas of HR management. About the new Time and Attendance system: • What effect was sought by its implementation? • What actual effect have you observed? Examples
TRAFFIC LIGHT	Ministry of selling (traffic light system): • What effect was sought by its implementation? • What actual effect have you observed? Examples
DISCIPLINA RIES	In disciplinary procedures: • How likely are individual managers to follow HR's advice? • When would managers not follow HR's advice. Is achieving "consistency" in disciplinary procedures an important goal? WHY? Is achieving "flexibility" in disciplinary procedures an important goal? WHY? How are the two related?
PROGRESSI ON	What would you say is most important to get ahead in ⬚ retail organisation? What mechanisms are in place to help employees develop their skills to get to the next level? If someone came new to the company at a supervisory or junior management level, and you thought that person had extraordinary career potential, what practical advice would you give him or her so that such potential is fully realised, for the benefit of the company?
HOW GOOD	Overall, how good do you think ⬚ is at managing its people, on a scale from 0 to 5? 0=Not good at all; 5=Extremely good; • Why? • Could it be improved? How?
ANYTHING ELSE	Is there anything I haven't asked that you think is relevant for my understanding of how HR management works at ⬚
COMMENT	Any final comment you would like to make?

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