

The professionalization of human resources management: sociographic composition of a professional group in construction

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ABSTRACT:

Human resources management is a field which is strongly conditioned by an instrumental and regulatory logic. Both as a scientific discipline and as a professional practice it has been used on many occasions to legitimize dominant interests in employment relations. It is this legacy which lies at the root of the crisis of trust which HR management is currently undergoing as a profession — and to overcome this crisis we need a new paradigm capable of taking into account the contingencies related with human resources management.

Examination of the available literature reveals the ambiguities with which human resources management is fraught. In the Portuguese case, these ambiguities are particularly manifest as a result of the absence of critical reflection on the theoretical foundations of human resources management and on accepted professional practice, as well as the relative youth and structural incipience of a professional category undergoing a growth crisis.

KEY WORDS:

Human resources management, Professional group, Professional profile, Professional identities.

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes as its starting point an analysis of human resources management in the light of the theoretical premises of Occupational Sociology for further reflection on the structural modes of this field of knowledge, and on the dynamics at work in the composition of the professional group which embodies it. Thus, by starting with an analysis of professionalization as a *process*, this paper aims to examine the results of a research project on the professionalization of human resources management in Portugal. In viewing professionalization as a *process* we are making a theoretical choice which leads us away from the naturalist conceptions which see the professions as a natural emanation whose aim is the satisfaction of specific needs, and towards a perspective from which they are analyzed as the result of social and historical processes of division of labour (cf. Dubar & Tripier, 1998; MacDonald, 1999; Rodrigues, 1997).

Reviewing the literature on the theoretical foundations of human resources management, we will question the consistency of the corpus of knowledge which underpins it and its heuristic capacity to explain the complexity of labour relations. Again through reference to the literature we will also question the dynamics informing the composition of the professional group working in human resources, taking into account factors such as professional titles, gender, seniority in organizations, seniority in posts, and academic background.

Finally, we will examine the (unpublished) statistical data on the employees of the Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity in an attempt to identify the principal trends in the evolution of the human resources management professional group in Portugal in terms of the following dimensions: professional category, gender, breakdown by age groups, educational levels, dimensions and sector of activity of the companies in which the human resources management professionals work and, finally, regional distribution.

A DISCIPLINE ABOUT TO COME OF AGE?

Human resources management (HRM) has sought to assert itself as an instrumental and regulatory profession based on a body of applied knowledge, whose object is to help regulate human activities within organizations (Brabet, 1993; De Coster, 1998). For some observers, this body of knowledge is built on “two pillars, strategic management and organizational behaviour” (Cabral-Cardoso, 2000, p. 225), while for others it is the result of the contributions made by the so-called “employment sciences” (De Coster, 1998, p. 23), with particular relevance for economics, sociology and psychology. Yet both views seem unable to accommodate the multiplicity of theoretical and methodological contributions¹ that human resources management has drawn on in its attempts to respond to an ever more complex reality, as many authors in fact point out.

Gilbert (2000, p. 10), for example, maintains that “human resources management is firmly anchored in the human sciences, because it is from them that it draws much of its inspiration”; Guest and Zing (2004, p. 404), meanwhile, argue that the conceptualization necessary for human resources management should increasingly be anchored in a “broad-ranging knowledge of the social sciences”.

The history of human resources management is also marked by the acritical importation of legitimizing discourse and conducts of an autocratic nature², and this forces us to question its role in the management of the transformations which are underway in contemporary societies — all the more so since, as Brabet (1993, p. 13) asserts, “human resources management runs the risk, if it fails to constantly interrogate itself about itself, of becoming just one more instrument for the diffusion, legitimization, consolidation and perpetuation of private interests and prevailing discourses”.

Framing the debate within this critical perspective means accepting that human resources management is faced with a new challenge: that of “acting its age” as an autonomous scientific discipline which remains open to dialogue and interdisciplinary synergies. In other words it has to move on from a regulatory conception founded on a supposedly neutral instrumental apparatus and a homogeneous discourse based on a dualistic way of reasoning, towards a more analytical perspective which is capable of accommodating its contingent nature (Almeida, 2004).

The contingent nature of human resources management derives, among other factors, from the multiplicity of policies and practices which can be taken on board by HR professionals as organizational contingencies require (Cowling & Mailer, 1998; Mintzberg, 1995; Pichault & Nizet, 2000), the strategies of companies and organizations (Besseyre des Horts, 1987; Devanna *et al.*, 1984; Lundy & Cowling, 1996; Rodrigues, 1991; Torrington & Hall, 1995), types of organizational culture (Besseyre des Horts, 1987), professional identities (Dubar, 1997; Rodrigues, 1997; Sainsaulieu, 1995), relative states of competitive development (Porter, 1991; Rodrigues, 1991), lifecycles of companies and organizations (Fombrun, 1984; Miller, 1984; Tyson, 1995) and societal contexts (D’Iribarne, 1989; Gadrey *et al.*, 1999; Inohara, 1991; Maurice *et al.*, 1982).

The need to adopt a more analytical perspective gains in heuristic capacity when we consider the premises of the Critical Theory³ for the conceptualization of human resources management, subjecting it to what Watson (2004) designates a “critical social science analysis”, with a view to the adoption of a professional ethos which does not exclusively limit human resources management to its utilitarian foundations.

This critical — and hence, non-prescriptive — posture seems to gain in cogency in proportion to the growth of the critical mass among the academic community involved in investigation into human resources management, and the development of systematic theoretical reflection both within the discipline and in neighbouring disciplines. In the academic output in Portugal, this perspective is evident in works which seek to systematize theory, such as those by Cabral-Cardoso (2000), Neves (2000), Keating (2000) and Almeida (2004). With backgrounds in different academic fields (psychology and sociology) these authors are optimistic — albeit in different degrees and despite their recognition of the ambiguities which affect the profession — of the chances of human resources management becoming more credible and legitimate.

The debate on the maturity of human resources management as a discipline has elicited often contradictory claims characterized more by their levels of success in national contexts than by a global vision of the discipline. Thus while Gilbert (2000, p. 10), discussing the French case, argues that “human resources management has its autonomy, its vocabulary and its theoretical points of references”, or Keenoy (2007, p. 1), writing from the UK perspective, considers that human resources management is “currently the conventional academic perspective for analysis of the management of labour relations”, others, like Keating (2000, p. 113), and referring to the Portuguese context, argue that “considered globally, human resources management is not notable for a very consistent knowledge base”.

If the debate on the maturity of human resources management is open to different perspectives, there is much more consensus on the awareness that the discipline is currently undergoing a paradigm shift. Under certain conditions (Kochan, 2004), this paradigm shift may pave the way for a

new participatory order, based on the autonomy of the actors and the sharing of power within organizations as a way of rehabilitating the social legitimacy of the company and, concomitantly, that of human resources management and the professionals who work in this field.

As various authors have pointed out (Gold & Bratton, 2003; Kochan, 2004; Lansbury & Baird, 2004; Legge, 1978; Watson, 2004), human resources management professionals are going through a crisis of trust and legitimacy in the eyes of the different organizational actors⁴ and of society in general. This underlines the need to redefine their professional role and identity in the light of the debate on the contribution they make to the construction of a new equilibrium between the various interests at stake in labour relations.

A PROFESSIONAL GROUP IN THE THROES OF REFORMATION AND IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY AND LEGITIMACY

Although few empirical studies have been carried out on professionals working in human resources management, some research, particularly from northern Europe and the English-speaking world, has contributed to its characterization and the debate on its evolutionary trends.

Among these studies the author would like to single out the Cranet Report⁵, which in its aspirations to act as an observatory for human resources management applies a standard questionnaire designed to elicit views on points of convergence and divergence in the practice of human resources management, particularly in the European context. Recognizing the existence of a societal effect deriving from institutional factors which exert significant influence on the policies, practices and postures which organizations adopt (Brewster *et al.*, 2004), the project includes among its goals the characterization of the profile of those working in human resources management in terms of five factors: professional status, gender, seniority in the organization, seniority in positions, and academic background. The findings published provide us with a preliminary profile of these professionals, with significant divergences from one country to another.

Taking professional status as an indicator of the professionalism, social standing and reputation of those working in human resources management (Farndale, 2005), we find that professional status is higher in northern Europe than in the south (Brewster *et al.*, 2004); the exception is France, where in 90% of the cases observed the human resources manager sits on his/her company's board of directors⁶. A similar study conducted in Australia in the mid-1990s concluded that the human resources function was extremely poorly represented in the higher echelons of organizations (Dowling & Fisher, 1997).

In Portugal, participation of human resources managers on the boards of the companies for which they work is around 30% (Cunha *et al.*, 2004), a figure which reflects the under-valuation of human capital in the structuring of the national model for competitiveness — as pointed out by, e.g., Rodrigues (1991). We should note, nevertheless, that this figure is rising. In just 4 years (1995-1999), as Cabral-Cardoso (2004) observed, representation increased by 31%.

Another dimension of analysis which is relevant for the characterization of this professional group is the academic background and qualifications of its members. While findings with regard to levels of training point to a situation of relative homogeneity⁷, independently of nation-specific scenarios, with a clear predominance of university-level education, the same cannot be said of the academic backgrounds in which human resources professionals originate. Comparative studies conducted as part of the Cranet Report have revealed significant discrepancies from one country to another. These discrepancies can be illustrated as follows (Brewster *et al.*, 2004):

- i) Germany — predominance of academic background in business science and economics
- ii) Netherlands — predominance of academic background in arts and the humanities
- iii) Spain — predominance of academic background in law and behavioural sciences
- iv) Portugal — predominance of academic background in business science and behavioural science.

Although approaching the issue from a different perspective — the analysis of demand for human

resources professionals among organizations — the author's own research⁸ (Almeida, 2000) reveals an increasingly dynamic demand for professionals with university-level qualifications, a profile which accounts for 77% of demand. In 10% of cases, the educational qualifications required were no higher than secondary level, and for the remaining 13% no requirements were stated with regard to qualifications. These findings seem clearly to reflect a fast-moving trend which is bringing Portugal into line with the situation in other European Union countries, as mentioned above. They also reflect a growing awareness of the need for more professionalism in human resources management, as well as the greater availability of professionals with qualifications in higher education — a result of the democratization of access to higher education in Portugal in recent decades.

Findings on requirements with regard to areas of qualification present a situation which appears strongly conditioned by the redefinition of the demand profile, although in around 48% of the cases included in the author's research (Almeida, 2000) no specific area of qualification was stated. Nevertheless, representation from the traditional fields of recruitment — law (5%) and psychology (3.3%) — had fallen behind areas such as management (13.3%) and, in particular, human resources management (11.7%)⁹.

The idea that we may be facing an accelerated redefinition of the areas of qualification that afford priority access to the professional group results from the comparison with the data presented by Cabral-Cardoso (2004), who records that in 1999 human resources managers had educational backgrounds in business sciences (39.7%), social sciences (23.8%), law (14.3%), economics and accounting (13.5%) and engineering (7.2%).

Another dimension which deserves attention in the study of this professional group is its composition by gender¹⁰, in view of the potential implications of the growing female presence in this group. There exists the risk (Kochan, 2004) of salary stagnation among this professional group as a consequence of women being subject to discriminatory practices with regard to salaries on the employment market¹¹, as well as the possibility that new areas of intervention in human resources management, such as the reconciliation of family life with professional life,

come increasingly to the fore. Writing of the situation in Portugal, where the same phenomenon can be observed, Cabral-Cardoso (2004) also questioned the implications of the increasing female presence among human resources management professionals.

All available data does in fact point to a growing female presence in this professional group. In the case of the United States of America, for example, the representation of women in the professional group increased from 64% to 76% between 1987 and 2002; and even if we consider female representation in executive positions only, the same trend can be observed: 53% in 1987, 65% in 2002 (Kochan, 2004). In Australia too, and based on 1995 data, despite parity in the sexual composition of the professional group, the acceleration of female representation tends towards the exponential if we consider that the 20-29 age group accounts for 8.2% of male representation and 25.5% of female representation (Dowling & Fisher, 1997).

In Portugal, female representation in human resources management came to 38.5% in 1999, which in comparison with the 1995 figure of 26.8% clearly reveals a growing female representation. And with increasing numbers of women now entering higher education in the country, this trend will gather pace — something which already seems to have been confirmed, in fact, as women are now approaching parity in the 31-40 age group and constitute a clear majority (61.1%) in the under-30 age group (Cabral-Cardoso, 2004).

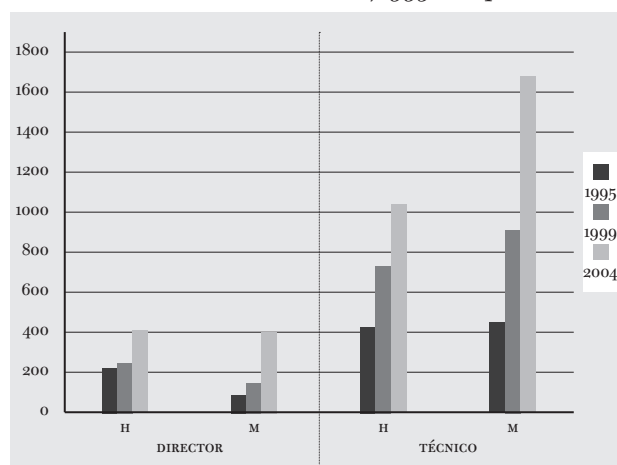
RECENT TRENDS IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE PROFESSIONAL GROUP IN PORTUGAL

In this section the author draws on a secondary statistical source — unpublished data on the employees of the Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity (MTSS) — in an attempt to trace a sociographic profile of human resources professionals in Portugal. Statistical data has been collected on the two categories which, according to the National Classification of Professions, constitute the professional group active in human resources management: human resources officers and human resources managers.

Chronologically, in view of the changing composition of the professional group, analysis focuses on three different moments¹²: 1995, 1999 and 2004.

Analysis of the quantitative evolution of the professional group reveals a rhythm of growth which is accelerated by external factors in both component categories, human resources officers and managers, although growth is faster among the former category, with 2.8 officers per manager in 1995 and 3.35 in 2004. This evolution represents a fall in managerial-level representation from 35.6% in 1995 to 29.7% in 2005.

Chart 1
NUMBER OF HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS
BY CATEGORY AND SEX, 1995-2004



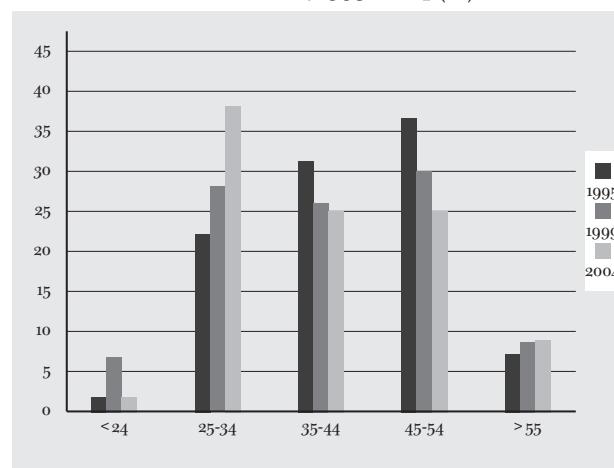
SOURCE: Employees of the MTSS

The data also reveals a growing female representation in the professional group, increasing from 44.8% in 1995 to 59% in 2004. However, this growing female representation is not a homogeneous trend. While parity has been achieved on the managerial level as a result of the exponential growth in the number of female executives in the last fifteen years, female representation in the junior category is even higher, at 62%.

Analysis of the composition of the professional group by age reveals a profession whose members are increasingly young, with new recruits swelling numbers in the 25-34 age group — which was clearly the dominant group in 2004. This rejuvenation, fuelled by the entry into the profession of young graduates, allows us to formulate the hypothesis that access to the professional group now occurs essentially via education, to the detriment of access via transfer from other occupational areas — which

would represent an implicit acknowledgement by employers of the specificities of human resources management.

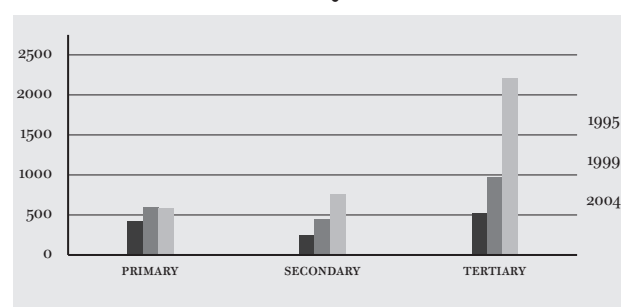
Chart 2
HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS
BY AGE GROUP, 1995-2004 (%)



SOURCE: Employees of the MTSS

The requirement of a higher education qualification as a condition for access to the professional group is clearly the most decisive feature in recent evolution in the profession of human resources management. While the literature reads it as an indicator of professionalism¹³, in Portugal this fact tends to reflect two concomitant trends: the growing technical complexity of human resources management as a profession as a result of changes in the country's paradigm of economic specialization and the consequent shift in its competitive base, and increasing numbers of graduates as a consequence of the democratization of higher education in Portugal.

Chart 3
HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS
BY EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS



SOURCE: Employees of the MTSS

The virtuous interaction of these two trends is not always to be found in the dynamics of the employment

market — demand for higher qualifications is growing, while supply of the education that provides the qualifications is expanding, particularly in areas specifically oriented towards this professional field. Note, too, that baccalaureates and degrees in human resources management only began to gain statistical importance from the 1990s onwards, which means the effects of this newly-qualified profession on the contingent of available labour are still at an embryonic phase, as is its social status. The cultivation of human capital in Portugal is still at an incipient stage when compared with the broader European context.

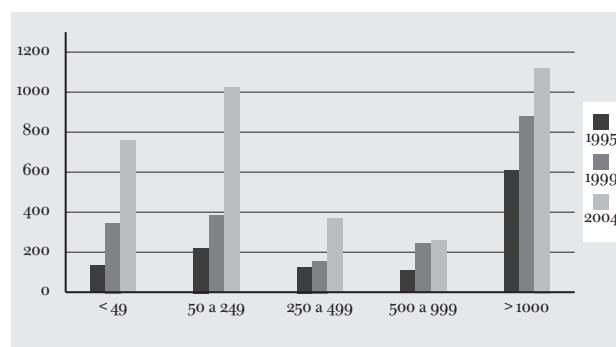
Analysis of the distribution of professionals by the size of the companies in which they work shows that growth in the numbers of professionals is not evenly distributed across different company dimensions. In fact, it is in very large companies (over 1000 employees) and small and medium companies (between 49 and 249 employees) that the biggest and most sustained increases in the numbers of human resources professionals are to be found. Demand for human resources professionals is the two intermediate categories of companies — with between 250 and 999 employees — is considerably lower.

These differences in the behaviour of companies according to their size reflect a heterogeneity of competitive strategies and dynamics. The behaviour of SMEs is particularly interesting in this respect. Their demand for human resources professionals was particularly high in the period under review, and this seems to suggest that SMEs are investing more and more in the cultivation of their human capital as a factor for competitiveness. Although the number of companies looking for human resources professionals is fairly low as a proportion of the total SMEs existing in Portugal, this trend does nevertheless point to significant growth potential for the employment opportunities open to the professional group, assuming demand among SMEs remains at the same rate.

The behaviour of companies with between 250 and 999 employees, with their lower demand for human resources professionals, is a reflection of the competitive strategies pursued by these companies — costs, not cultivation of human capital, are the essential consideration.

The distribution of human resources professionals across the various sectors of the economy shows

Chart 4
NUMBER OF HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS
BY ENTERPRISE SIZE CATEGORY



SOURCE: Employees of the MTSS

a general tendency towards growth in the period under review. One area which deserves attention for running counter to the trend is financial activities, in which the number of human resources professionals fell significantly in 2004. This fact is probably related to corporate downsizing in this sector, the creation of shared services within corporate groupings, the growing recourse to the outsourcing of certain business processes related to human resources management¹⁴ and, lastly, the possible reinforcement of responsibilities of immediate superiors in the management of their personnel.

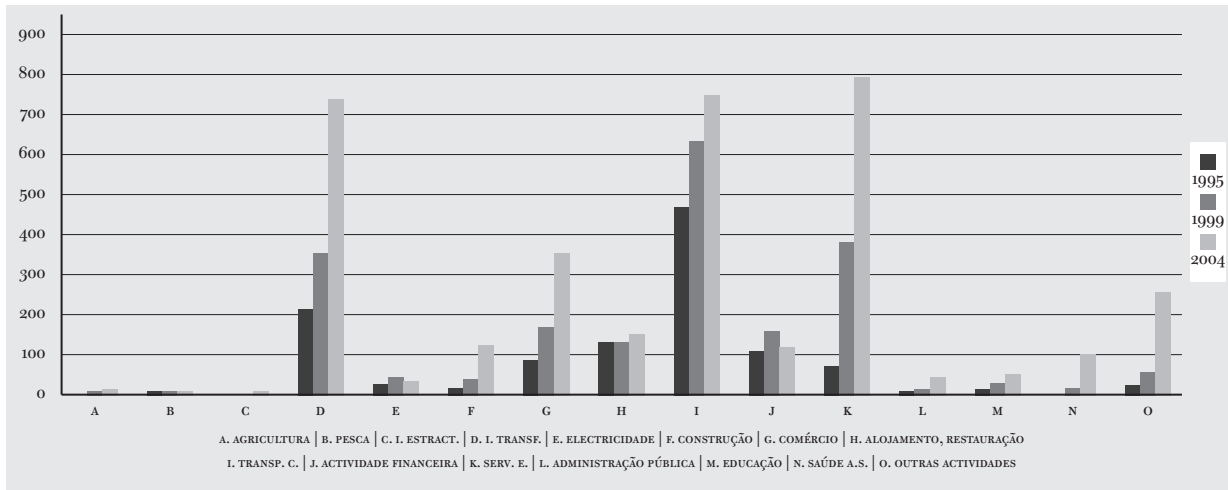
The other elements in the graph reveal a significant concentration of jobs in human resources management in three sectors of the economy: manufacturing/processing, transport and communications, and enterprise services. Trade/retail follows some way behind this leading group, although growth recorded in 2004 was extremely significant in comparison to the previous year of reference. Here, growth is probably related to the structural reorganization of this sector in Portugal, with traditional, “high street” commerce losing ground to supermarkets and hypermarkets operating as members of a small number of highly competitive business conglomerates.

Globally, the growth potential for jobs in human resources management is quite promising, whether we extrapolate the current trends in growth sectors or consider the economic importance of sectors where penetration of human resources management is still only incipient¹⁵.

Jobs in human resources management are strongly concentrated in the Greater Lisbon area, which accounts for 60% of HRM jobs — not surprisingly,

Chart 5

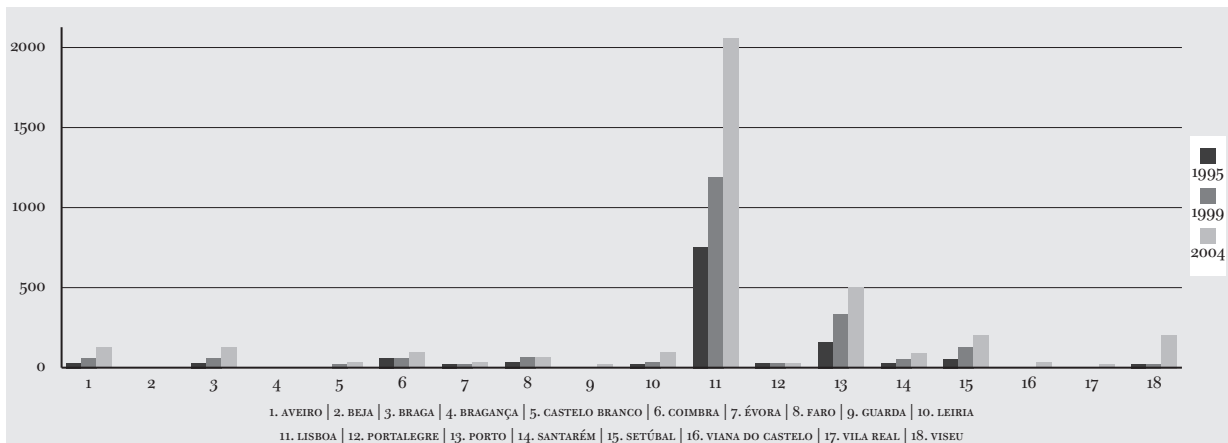
HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS BY ECONOMIC SECTOR, 1995-2004



SOURCE: Employees of the MTSS

Chart 6

HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS BY DISTRICT, 1995-2004



SOURCE: Employees of the MTSS

as it is here that most of the country's companies and public services are concentrated. It's also in this area that most of the training in human resources management is to be found¹⁶, particularly because of the significant presence of private high education, which accounts for over 50% of the supply of training (Moreira, 2006, p. 199).

The second-largest area of concentration is Greater Porto, which is nevertheless some way behind Lisbon. Then come the three most industrialized areas in the country after Lisbon and Porto: Setúbal, Braga and Aveiro.

Examination of chart 6 reveals a close correlation between the economic dynamism of the respective regions and the presence of human resources professionals in the companies operating there. Recruit-

ment of these professionals would seem therefore to be a consequence, rather than a cause, of corporate strategies which attach greater importance to the cultivation of human capital. While this dynamic is strictly economic, we should also take into account the effects of government policy on the regulation of the employment market,¹⁷ which can require the input of professionals with specific qualifications to ensure that regulatory mechanisms are correctly interpreted and applied by companies.

CONCLUSIONS

As a scientific discipline and as a profession, human resources management carries a significant amount

of “baggage”, in terms of its ongoing inability to resist infiltration by modish discourse spawned inter alia by the guru industry and its exploitation as a tool for the legitimization of the dominant interests which exist at any given time in any given society.

If human resources management is to shake off the burden of this legacy it requires a paradigm shift — one which allows it to adopt a critical perspective via which it can arm itself with the methods and the technical resources it needs to reinforce its credibility and autonomy, and the ethics of conduct it needs to support its social legitimacy.

By recasting the foundations on which its credibility and legitimacy rest, human resources management will be capable of asserting itself at the highest organizational levels — or in other words,

participating in the definition of organizational strategies and the criteria adopted for the evaluation of organizational success.

Analysis of recent trends in the professional evolution of human resources management in Portugal reveals significant qualitative as well as quantitative growth, with higher education qualifications becoming increasingly important. These changes have contributed not only to the public visibility of the profession but also to its social recognition.

Attention has to be drawn, however, to the potential effects of the growing female presence in the profession in terms of professional practice and the inequalities of distribution from one region of the country to another, and from one sector of the economy to another.

ENDNOTES

1. On this subject *see* issue 415/2000 of *Personnel*, which examines the contribution of the different disciplines to the development of Human Resources Management, summarized by Patrick Gilbert in an article entitled “Connaissance des sciences humaines et pratique de la GRH”.

2. This autocratic character is the product of the relationships of domination which have long characterized the world of employment; an opposing view is that of a participatory order in which diverse, but legitimate, interests meet.

3. A branch of knowledge developed by the Frankfurt School and which seeks to establish a distinction between two types of reason: an enlightening, empowering reason based on the ideas of the French Revolution, and an instrumental reason, based on technocratic principles.

4. Kochan (2004) adopts a perspective framed by the concept of the stakeholder, in which responsibility for human resources management contributes to a new equilibrium among the different organizational actors, both internal and external.

5. The project's website is at www.cranetreport.org.

6. France is the European Union country with the highest representation of human resources managers on the boards of their companies (Brewster *et al.*, 2004).

7. Despite this relative homogeneity, Portugal is among the countries with the highest (31%) proportion of human resources managers who have no higher education qualifications (Cabral-Cardoso, 2004).

8. This study sought to characterize demand for human resources professionals on the basis of an analysis of the job announcements published in a leading Portuguese newspaper.

9. Degree courses in human resources management did not become available in Portugal until the mid-1990s. Before then, only one private college in Lisbon had offered such a course.

10. The debate on the effects of the gender composition of professional groups has received extensive attention in a number of studies in the field of Occupational Psychology, with the study by Anne Wiltz (1995) deserving special mention.

11. On this subject, the contributions of Segmentation Theory in the labour market throw light on

the salary discrimination to which women are subject (Gazier, 1991).

12. 1995 marked a statistical watershed owing to the changes in the national professional classification, while 2004 is the most recent year for which data is available. 1999 was selected as an intermediate point providing a reference in terms of the analysis of trends.

13. Writing on the nursing profession, Canário (2005) stressed the importance of academic training and qualifications for nurses, as a means for them to build their social status, assert their professional autonomy and, consequently, strengthen their professional identity.

14. This hypothesis is in line with the exponential growth in the number of human resources professionals working in the enterprise services sector, and is lent additional weight by the study coordinated by Moreira (2006, p. 81), which concludes that “the market for specialist companies in the occupational field is undergoing significant growth”.

15. Considering that in terms both of number of companies and significance in the global employment structure, sectors such as manufacturing and processing, construction and public administration have high growth potential for jobs in human resources management.

16. The Lisboa e Vale do Tejo region accounts for over 45% of level 5 training availability at national level (Moreira, 2006, p. 207).

17. Although it may seem paradoxical to talk of public regulation in a context dominated by the rules of a free market, the flexibility of the rules governing the employment market is increasingly guaranteed by a new institutional configuration via which the State legitimizes the new labour relations management practices deployed by enterprises.

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