Human Resource Management: a professional field of "good people"[1]

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Abstract

The increasing adherence of human resources professionals to the discourse and the values of managerial ideology contribute to their recognition in the business world. Since they assume themselves as partners in the fight for economic competitiveness and in the defence of financial results of the business, human resources professionals replaced the ideology of the welfare by the ideology of the management. Therefore, their role, particularly in the context of the societies of advanced capitalism, has been marked by the increasing sophistication of their means of symbolic action. Being so they are in charge of implementing practices of self-discipline of the workers in a society where the cult of performance has became the hegemonic social value.

Confronted with the existence of interests that are in conflict and crossed by the mark of the heterogeneity, human resources professionals tend to use the implementation of practices based on self-discipline of the workers. These practices make sense through the mobilization of discursive resources that act as mechanisms of consented disciplining (Fournier, 1999) supporting the interests of dominant economic and cultural forces. To ensure the ideological conformity of the workers to the new forms of flexible work, human resources professionals are required to mobilize a number of competencies of a political nature that the good sense and emotional neutrality seem to be the most important ones.

Based on the issues outlined, this communication aims to report the preliminary results of a PhD research project in progress using five semi-direct interviews to the human

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[1] Paper presented at the 9th ESA Conference, Lisbon, 2009

resources directors of large Portuguese companies. Using the content analysis we discuss the role of political competencies in the course of their everyday professional practices.

The results confirm the centrality of social and political skills. Good sense is the central discursive element, because of the nature of the relational and symbolic role that human resources professionals are called to play. The emotional neutrality is another element that legitimises the everyday action which is guided by an abstract interest of the common good that the human resources professionals act as guardian.

Introduction

Discussion about the function of human resources and the professionals that shape it have come to merit growing attention from the academic community as business has become central in the process of social regulation in light of the State's inability to assume responsibility for this regulation. It is against this background that a discourse analysis of human resource professionals on the skills they need to carry out their function takes on particular relevance.

Using as our point of departure the importance of these organisational agents in institutionalising social regulatory mechanisms, as expressed in companies' Human Resource Management policies, we have carried out five semi-structured interviews with Human Resource Managers of large companies operating in Portugal with the aim of describing their role and the key skills which give them their standing and social recognition within their companies.

With these stated objectives in mind, we have organised our text in the first section to give a critical analysis of the theoretical presuppositions in which the role and competencies of professionals can be fitted in the context of social regulatory mechanisms which run through advanced capitalist societies; and in the second section, the views of human resource professionals on their own skills.

Literature Review

Central to constructing and developing capitalist societies, labour relations have emerged from fundamental ideological confrontation and from the social struggle during the last two centuries. The historic struggle for the establishment of a set of basic rights governing work and the work place constituted one of the most important advances in modern society, assuming the central role of regulating a structurally unequal relationship between capital and labour in their political constitutional system.

However, this process did not occur universally or in a lineal fashion. Associated with the proletarianisation in industrial societies and with political democratisation, it developed principally in the so-called west societies. Furthermore, it suffered advances and setbacks according to the political-ideological balance being established in each Nation-State. It means, therefore, that we are faced with a territory defined by instability in which interests clash and tensions are continually expressed in material and symbolic struggle, generating further tension.

It is the structural nature of these tensions or conflicts which makes the role of the State (which together with the market constitutes rationality and social regulation in exceptional cases), assume crucial importance as a balance capable of guaranteeing interests, not only respect for human dignity, but also of a society in constant search for social justice. However, in advanced capitalist societies, we have witnessed a growing shift in power with respect to both aspects of social regulation in which the power of the market has achieved dominance at the expense of State regulatory power (Estanque, 2005).

With the macro social framework outlined above, in which labour relations in contemporary society are established, it is now important to describe the conditions which, at a micro level, build up labour relations within the company, not only with regard to conflicting interests, but also with respect to social regulation. Having acquired a growing social legitimacy, which in recent decades has assumed magical status (Bernoux, no date), capitalist business is characterised as having either an economic or a social function. At the same time, it is a place of creation and social distribution of wealth, of confrontation and consensus, of production and reproduction of social norms.

The management of social dynamics affecting business has assumed different forms in time and space (Segrestin, 1966). From these forms have emerged two dominant concepts:

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one marked by paternalistic and the other by managerial ideology. If the first, albeit typical nowadays of small family-run businesses, is based on the moral superiority of the owner who creates a 'social authority' which must be respected, guaranteeing in turn the 'protection' of its workers; the second, dominant in contemporary society and at its most extreme in large multi-national companies, has at its base the principles of the scientific organisation of labour,[2] which assert the superiority of techno–economic rationality in business management.

It is within the framework of this managerial ideology, which has supported the development of a capitalistic model of flexible accumulation, that a model of social regulation has developed, reflecting the growing tension between collective and individual management of labour relations. This, among others, is translated by a confrontation between the primacy of work as a "right" and work as a "responsibility", as suggested by White (2001: 7). Legitimised by public bodies, either by commission or by omission, the construction of this new model of social regulation has put human resource management policies at the centre of the debate as well as the role performed by agents who shape them – the human resource professionals.

If economic rationality is the central element underpinning managerial ideology, acquiring meaning through the "cult of performance" (Ehrenberg 1991), then human capital takes on strategic importance, with the promise of achieving personal aspirations being placed at the epicentre of a world of unlimited material and symbolic opportunities. This world of promise, which finds fertile ground for its dissemination in meritocratic ideology, makes individual will and effort subordinate to its fulfilment, thereby obscuring shared social inequalities as well as the existence of varying structures of social opportunity.

This form of dominant thinking about social relations, in general, and labour relations, in particular, emerges at the same time against the backdrop of a society of risk (Beck, 2001) where social struggle occurs both at the level of distribution of wealth and the distribution of risk associated with modernisation. By following the negative policy of dismissal and elimination, thereby resisting the positive policy of appropriation, which is at the centre of wealth distribution, the social distribution of risk is presented as a new and unavoidable

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[1] In spite of its origin in Taylor, management ideology has ably sought to present itself as a counterpoint to reify the importance of the human factor (Le Goff, 1977).

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phenomenon, which is the object of a rhetorical construction[3] imposed by dominant social groups.

It is against this social complex that human resource management is positioned, be it as an academic discipline or as a professional practice. Because its action is not socially neutral, human resource management requires constant epistemological and ethical self-reflection to avoid being solely an instrument of diffusing and legitimising interests and dominant arguments (Brabet, 1993; Watson, 2004; Cabral-Cardoso, 2004; Almeida, 2004). Though a minority concern, it is gaining influence among the academic and professional community, making it one of the most relevant aspects in the debate on the professionalization of human resource management.

Heir to a negative historical legacy, human resource management finds itself confronted with a crisis of confidence and legitimacy, which results, among other factors, in its being associated with an image, and often to a practice, which, according to Doyle, makes professionals *perfect agents of top management* (cit in Kochan, 1997) or as Baritz puts it, *servants of power* (cit in Brief, 2000). Overcoming this suppression of human resource management and its professionals requires a double break with the past: externally, by demonstrating its credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of professionals with whom it interacts and with the public in general, and internally, by reinventing itself, with respect to the community, recognised in the project of liberating the professional collective.

Carrying out this break, beyond the epistemological and ethical reflection cited earlier, requires a development of a body of knowledge and skills which would enable professionals to perform a new role in business and society. It is precisely this body of knowledge and skills, being central for social agreement, which is far from being achieved. If, for some, it is important for human resource management to support business competiveness, aligning its practices to business objectives; for others, it is necessary to have a more inclusive ability to understand socio-economic phenomena affecting business life and the political contexts in which they operate (Hendry & Pettigrew, 1990).

While appearing to be simple, these two ways of thinking about human resource management imply an adherence to different ideological concepts about the way in which social regulation operates within business and, consequently the deployment of specific

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[2] For Beck, the existence and social risk distribution is fundamentally mediated by the argument given the invisible and intangible character of these risks for people exposed to them.

knowledge and skills. If, in the first case, what is important is business knowledge and adoption of a set of supporting techniques, then in the second, a more analytical approach is required, which is capable of discussing the aims of the business as well as the role of different internal and external agents operating in it. These two concepts are described in the literature, through the pioneering typology proposed by Legge (1978) who puts human resource managers into two categories: conformist innovators and deviant innovators.

If conformist innovators are characterised by developing their work from dominant norms and values in an organisation operating according to economic/financial objectives of "shock managers", deviant innovators question the system of norms and values in use, adapting them to their own actions, not only on economic values, but also on social values. These two ideas find their equivalent in the traditional American school which classifies human resource management as *hard* and *soft*, since, according to Storey (1992), *hard* management puts the emphasis on the quantitative, calculations and strategic dimensions of the business and personnel control; whereas *soft* management focuses on the importance of involvement, communication, motivation and leadership within the perspective of developmental humanism.

Results analysis

Drawing up a profile of professional human resource skills is a recent exercise in Portugal, with the production of a reference document by the Portuguese Institute for Quality in Training (IQF) on the development of qualifications and diagnosis of training needs in Portugal. This document, titled *People management; trends, qualifications and training* (Moreira, 2006) seeks to reconcile two strands of thinking, which are sometimes contradictory. These take into account, on the one hand, the immediate needs of business, and on the other, a prospective exercise on evolutionary trends in the profession, which the authors have divided into two groups: business specialising in consultation services and non-specialised business.

The study departs from presuppositions of unmistakeable relevance to its conclusions. These presuppositions highlight a decline in traditional human resource management activities, which the authors call "tactical intervention", and the emergence of new areas of strategic intervention disseminated by line managements. This approach which has as its

point of departure the principle that there is a "process of expansion and enrichment of the traditional functions of Human Resource Management" (Moreira, 2006: 229) is the object of some controversy in specialised literature when we consider the structure of human resource function in business. The reasons for this controversy are many because it favours the process of externalisation and automatisation of functions, as recognised by its own authors, and because achieving a place at strategic level in a business, always means an evolution of the strategy (Farndale, 2005).

The two professional profiles established by the authors – manager and technician – reflect inherent ambiguities of this professional area, namely the respect for a body of supporting technical-scientific knowledge. In a prospective exercise, it concluded that the profile of a manager "is accessible from higher training in social and human sciences and in business and economic sciences", while the profile of a technician "is accessible from higher training preferably in the domain" (Moreira, 2006: 245 – 251). The authors do not take into account the process by which the professional group assume greater importance, as shown in the analyses of the temporary series, carried out on our statistical data on the Personnel framework (Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Almeida, 2008) and the employment analysis by companies (Almeida, 2000; Torres, 2008). The increasing weight of training in human resource management as a prerequisite for the profession is not only because of pressure exerted by the specialisation of training, but also by the necessity for business to reduce socialisation time and costs in the managerial function. This emerges as a clear trend in the studies cited.

The responses of our interviewees are similarly influenced by these ambiguities. The identification of training areas of access follow inclusive criteria, but always in the area of social and human sciences:

"... fundamentally, it is about training in the area of social sciences" (Psychologist);

"...HRM has a set of inherent skills, but this does not imply an uniform profile, that is, I am a lawyer, but I do not expect to be at the head of HRM, that is, I would have to be psychologist, a person specifically trained in HRM (…) to be someone trained in social sciences" (Lawyer).

Despite the uptake of a wide academic base, there is a clear trend to exclude access to human resource professions to those have not a degree in social and human sciences:

"Obviously an engineer would not be recruited, because engineers clearly do not have these specific characteristics" (Lawyer) or as other interviewee discreetly puts it "….somebody who likes only numbers or only computers, or feels good and happy doing accounts, which is all legitimate, cannot be managers, or leaders or human resource managers" (Psychologist).

Another is in agreement with the trend to match the profession with the training. Likewise human resource management seems to be charting its own course:

"I find graduates in Human Resource Management with new degrees in Human Resource Management. Moreover, in the field in Social and Human sciences, there are various careers such as sociology, psychology…" (Psychologist).

"…basic training has to be on human resources. That has to be the basic training" (HRM).

The logic for limiting professional access to Human Resource Management, expressed in this last statement is reinforced when the interviewee adds, "do not put a financier, or a manager where he could only see numbers," (HRM). This second level of criteria raises a debate within the legitimate professional field, largely because of the academic recognition of human resource management which, since the middle of the 1990s, has seen a massive increase in both graduate and postgraduate training.

If higher level training today is a prerequisite for access to the profession, with a continuing trend to exclude other disciplines, when we analyse the skills required for the profession, we observe an undervaluing of skills associated with the technical aspects of human resource activity, and an overvaluing of social skills. Despite this being a trend observed in an earlier study (Almeida, 2000), it is not surprising that, analysing the opinions expressed by our interviewees, we were confronted with a strong consensus on a clearly identified set of skills in this area, compared to an absence of any reference to any other strictly technical skill. So, at the first level of analysis, we found an appreciation for the ability to like and understand people:

"In my opinion, what is most important in the human resource profession or in the personal characteristics of human resource professionals is to love people! It is necessary to love people" (Psychologist).

"...it is necessary to be sensitive, to perceive others, to be an individual with great psychological awareness, who effectively understands people because we are here to communicate, to manage people (HRM);

Liking people has emerged as a requirement for these professionals to feel good in the jobs they are doing, which contrasts with the image of "agents of Power". The ability to communicate, negotiate, influence and make decisions emerges as a condition guaranteeing effectiveness in this role. This effectiveness seems to be particularly greater in having "flexibility" and in the ability to "sell dreams":

"A professional in this area must have above all great ability to analyse problems, an ability to make timely decisions, and be flexible" (Lawyer);

"The ability to negotiate, communicate, influence and sell dreams is fundamental. It is a lot there. (…) It is a positive energy which the professional gives to the company and to the teams" (Sociologist).

It is in this role of "sallers of dreams" that we find one of the most relevant political dimensions in human resource management, in that these "dreams" are nothing more than constructs and persuasive discursive practices aimed at ensuring social regulation within the business. By legitimising the social order in force, these "sallers of dreams" find their social standing through adherence to a system of values and discursive resources of the "trustees of power", who flourish in the principles of the ideology of meritocracy and in the "cult of performance" which support the management order.

Deploying apparently neutral discursive resources to design the action and human resource skills of professionals is clearly expressed in the way two of the interviewees synthesise the key professional competency:

"Managing human resources is more or less like (…) trying to catch a bird. I use this example a lot. If you pull or squeeze the bird too much, it will die, but if you let go it will escape. It is in this balance, that good management resides; in my opinion it is the management of common sense; the management of good sense" (HRM);

"one of the best characteristics of human resource managers is to be a person with common sense, because many conflict situations are potentially avoidable if at the head there is person with good sense" (Lawyer).

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The importance of good sense as an attribute for "a good professional" emerges in this context not only as a resource for problem solving (Legge, 1978), but also as an element for affirmation and social distinction within the company, through appropriate control of common sense by human resource professionals.

Conclusion

In performing a key role in preventing and resolving conflicts within the company, human resource professionals have to be like the fire brigade which, filled with altruistic convictions in their actions, contribute to keeping social order and consequently, reinforce a regulation model based on the legitimacy of the managerial ideology dominating the daily operations in business. This can produce increasing social inequality, characterised in contemporary society.

In seeking legitimacy for this wide field of social sciences, the knowledge of which has served arbitrarily to legitimise exploitation and social inequality by developing a set of material and symbolic instruments to supervise and control workers, human resource professionals emerge as a heterogeneous group whose social legitimacy in contrast to other professional groups appears to be based less on a scientific basis than in the political action they perform within business. By identifying common sense as a central factor for professional development, human resource managers agree to play the game of power, while at the same time expressing, as Watson (1978) puts it, "deep suspicion of the academic and theoretical".

By adopting this pragmatic position, conceived as an effectively neutral policy, and in the absence of professional regulation mechanisms and a moral system of sanctions, human resource managers see themselves lacking in tools which would allow them ethical and epistemological reflection on the aims and the means to support their professional daily practices.

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