

## **The Changing Roles of Personnel Managers: Old Ambiguities, New Uncertainties**

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**ABSTRACT** There have been notable attempts to capture the changing nature of personnel roles in response to major transformations in the workplace and the associated rise of 'HRM'. A decade ago Storey (1992) explored the emerging impact of workplace change on personnel practice in the UK and proposed a new fourfold typology of personnel roles: 'advisors', 'handmaidens', 'regulators' and 'changemakers'. Have these four roles changed now that HRM has increasingly become part of the rhetoric and reality of organizational performance? If Storey's work provides an empirical and analytical benchmark for examining issues of 'role change', then Ulrich's (1997) work in the USA offers a sweeping prescriptive endpoint for the transformation of personnel roles that has already been widely endorsed by UK practitioners. He argues that HR professionals must overcome the traditional marginality of the personnel function by embracing a new set of roles as champions of competitiveness in delivering value. Is this a realistic ambition? The new survey findings and interview evidence from HR managers in major UK companies presented here suggests that the role of the personnel professional has altered in a number of significant respects, and has become more multifaceted and complex, but the negative counter-images of the past still remain. To partly capture the process of role change, Storey's original fourfold typology of personnel roles is re-examined and contrasted with Ulrich's prescriptive vision for the reinvention on the HR function. It is concluded that Storey's typology has lost much of its empirical and analytical veracity, while Ulrich's model ends in prescriptive overreach by submerging issues of role conflict within a new rhetoric of professional identity. Neither model can adequately accommodate the emergent tensions between competing role demands, ever-increasing managerial expectations of performance and new challenges to professional expertise, all of which are likely to intensify in the future.

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## INTRODUCTION

Changes in the nature of managerial work over the past two decades have had a profound and often disconcerting impact on the roles of personnel managers and other functional specialists. New modes of organizational flexibility, the levelling power of information technology and relentless cost pressures have undermined occupational structures, middle management positions and functional roles, allowing managers to increasingly assume tasks once performed by the personnel function or to outsource them to external consultants. In addition, the emergence of 'HRM' as a panacea for integrating business strategy and people management has exposed personnel practitioners to a new set of role demands, professional challenges and managerial expectations that have underscored the gaps between HR rhetoric and reality. How have personnel professionals coped with these new pressures and what implications does this have for their role and future professional status?

Historically, a number of intrinsic factors that have influenced the way in which personnel professionals as an *occupational status group* have sought to cope with the exigencies of 'role change', defined as 'a change in the shared conceptions and execution of typical role performance and role boundaries' (Turner, 1990, p. 88). Some of these factors are generic to all professions in their attempts to maintain their autonomy or power through 'jurisdictional claims' over the provision of specialist expertise (Abbott, 1988, p. 59). However, personnel professionals as a relatively weak occupational group, face some very specific challenges that relate to the inherent role ambiguities that have characterized their functional position (Friedson, 1993). These include: (1) issues of 'powerlessness' or marginality in management decision-making processes, especially at a strategic level; (2) an inability to maintain or defend the boundaries of their specialist expertise from encroachment or control by managerial intervention; (3) lack of clarity or accountability in specifying the goals, business outcomes, or the contribution of the personnel function; and (4) tensions in sustaining an ethos of mutuality in the face of the opposing interests between management and employees (Legge, 1978; Tyson and Fell, 1986; Watson, 1977).

Partly as a consequence of these role ambiguities personnel managers have been past masters at reinventing or reinterpreting their role in their efforts to maintain their credibility and status within a changing world of work. This has often resulted in their 'willingness to adopt different roles and rhetorics to suit the contingencies of the times and to exploit possible bases of power' (Legge, 1995, p. 53). The constant search for occupational legitimacy has certainly underpinned the professional self-images of the personnel function in the past, as does the recent ascendancy of HRM as a reinvigorated agenda of 'professionalization'.

There is growing evidence, however, that other pressures towards role change or reinvention may be increasing in response to the centrifugal forces of increas-

ing organizational complexity and the competitive pressures of devolvement and outsourcing that have accompanied the rise of HRM. Over the past decade the personnel function has become increasingly fragmented or 'balkanized' as it has been devolved to divisional and business unit levels, where the associated pressures on cost, value and service delivery have forced discrete personnel functions to be sub-divided into specialist tasks, subsumed by line management or outsourced to other experts (Adams, 1991; Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1994; Tyson, 1995; Ulrich, 1997). Here the main threat is in fact a form of 'deprofessionalization', or the erosion of expert knowledge, credibility and role-based status. Paradoxically, the push towards professional specialization can itself undermine the group identity or solidarity essential to the pursuit of professional status (Turner, 1990, p. 95).

The threat to professional status and identity can also be driven by the centripetal forces of strategic control. For even when HR activities are centrally coordinated at a corporate headquarters level the influence of the HR contribution may increasingly derive more from a shifting array of expertise, 'rather than from a clearly defined role or function' (Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1994, p. 113). This issue is compounded of course by the marginality of the HR function and its inward-looking tendency to identify professional expertise mainly with concerns over who controls HR activities, rather than questions of effectiveness (Ulrich, 1997, p. 95).

Taken together, these pressures from without and within appear to be intensifying role ambiguity and conflict in an overall context where comfortable and secure managerial and functional roles have declined in many organizations. It is no surprise then, that HR professionals are now being encouraged to adopt non-linear or 'mosaic' models of 'career opportunism' in which 'one's position in the hierarchy becomes less relevant than what one knows' (Ulrich, 1997, p. 249). This represents a pragmatic reformulation of the classical tensions between expert knowledge and hierarchical power in a new organizational context where conventional models of managerial control have lost much of their legitimacy.

With such a disparate array of new factors at work and a long history of intrinsic role ambiguity, the task of capturing role change among personnel managers presents considerable difficulties (Truss et al., 2002). Of the various early attempts to explore the emerging impact of workplace change and HRM on the changing roles of personnel managers, one of the most useful approaches was outlined by Storey (Clark, 1993; Guest, 1987; Mackay and Torrington, 1986; Sisson, 1994; Storey, 1992; Torrington, 1989). Drawing on case-based research into 15 mainstream UK companies and public sector organizations conducted during 1986–88, he proposed a new typology that differentiated four personnel roles on the basis of two bi-polar dimensions: *intervention* versus *non-intervention* and *strategy* versus *tactics* (Figure 1). The four roles were: (1) 'Advisors'; (2) 'Handmaidens'; (3) 'Regulators'; and (4) 'Changemakers'. Advisors assumed a facilitating role, acting as internal consultants offering expertise and advice to line management, while

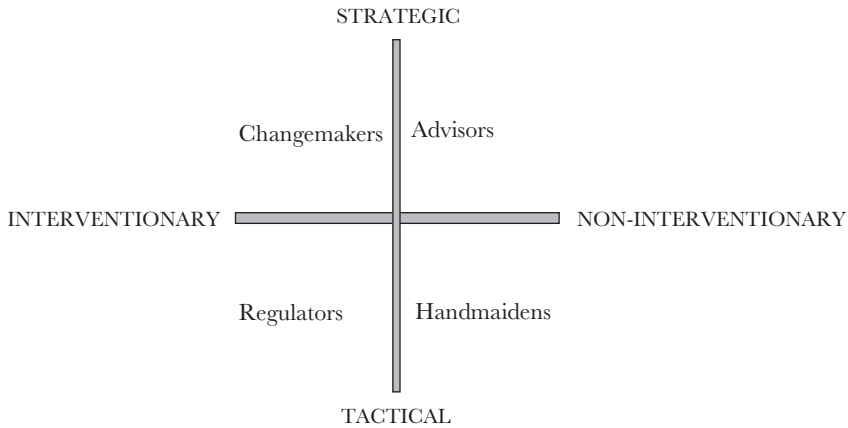


Figure 1. Storey: four roles of personnel managers

operating in an essentially non-interventionist manner (Storey, 1992, p. 171). Handmaidens provided specific services at the behest of line management, their ‘attendant’ role was essentially reactive and non-interventionist (Abigail et al., 1997). Regulators were interventionists involved in the traditional and essentially tactical role of formulating, promulgating and monitoring the observance of employment rules and industrial relations policy: ‘These were “managers of discontent”, seeking order through temporary, tactical truces with organized labour’ (Storey, 1992, p. 169). Changemakers were interventionists with a strategic agenda focused on both the hard realities of business performance and the softer HR interventions designed to enhance employee commitment and motivation. It was this new role that perhaps most clearly differentiated HRM from traditional personnel management (Guest, 1987, pp. 505–9; Storey, 1992, p. 180).

More than a decade later, can we expect to find significant changes in the nature of the four personnel roles proposed by Storey? Is the ‘Advisor’ role more closely associated with devolvement, business unit autonomy and the broader strategic agenda of HRM? Has the ‘Regulator’ role declined? How has the ‘Handmaiden’ role coped with the challenges of outsourcing? Has the ‘Changemaker’ role grown in significance as HRM has increasingly become part of the rhetoric and reality of business performance (Storey, 1992, p. 187)? Or, has HRM perhaps further undermined the credibility, professional status and legitimacy of a function that has in the past often been marginalized by senior management?

Many of the questions and issues concerning the future role of HR professionals have been addressed from a US perspective in Ulrich’s work, *Human Resource Champions* (1997). Although his work is primarily prescriptive and didactic, rather than empirical, it provides one of the most systematic frameworks for capturing the



Figure 2. Ulrich: four roles of HR professionals

emergence of new HR roles. It is an inspiring and sometimes disconcerting vision: HR professionals must become champions of competitiveness in 'delivering value' or face the diminution or outsourcing of their role (Ulrich, 1997, p. 17).

To become paragons of competitiveness, Ulrich defines four main roles for the HR professional along two axes: *strategy* versus *operations*, and *process* (HR tools and systems) versus *people* (Figure 2). The four roles are: (1) 'Strategic Partners' help to successfully execute business strategy and meet customer needs; (2) 'Administrative Experts' constantly improve organizational efficiency by reengineering the HR function and other work processes; (3) 'Employee Champions' maximize employee commitment, and competence; and (4) 'Change Agents' deliver organizational transformation and culture change. This model represents a sweeping attempt to overcome the negative counter-images of the personnel function and reinvent a new set of proactive roles for HR professionals (Ulrich, 1998, p. 124). Ulrich's mission is effectively a new agenda for professionalization. But how realistic is this prescriptive vision. How does it compare with Storey's analysis of personnel roles in the UK? Does it provide a new framework for resolving long-standing issues of role ambiguity and role conflict?

The new survey findings and interview evidence from personnel and HR managers in major UK companies presented here suggest that the role of the personnel professional has gone through a significant process of role change. While this has resulted in a more multifaceted and complex set of roles, the old ambiguities and negative counter-images of the past still remain (Legge, 1978; Hope-Hailey et al., 1997). The process of role change can therefore be partly conceptualized

as an uneven and incomplete shift from a traditional personnel 'role set' to an apparently new and more comprehensive HRM role identity (Merton, 1967). To partly capture this process of reconfiguration, Storey's original fourfold typology of personnel roles is empirically re-examined and contrasted with Ulrich's prescriptive vision for the reinvention on the HR function. This provides a useful analytical counterpoint for examining the complexities of role change.

The contrast is also useful in another sense. If Storey's four types provide an *empirical benchmark* for examining a before and after process of role change, then Ulrich's model appears to offer a *prescriptive vision* of the future. Certainly, Ulrich's model is already widely discussed in the UK and is often trumpeted as the practitioner paradigm towards which the profession should aspire. What we will discover, however, is that Storey's and Ulrich's models have intrinsic weaknesses. Storey's generic role-bound types do not capture the increasingly empirical complexity and multi-faceted nature of personnel and HR roles, although he anticipated the sources and impetus for role change. In contrast, while Ulrich's model recognizes the multiple and flexible nature of HR roles, its role types often overlap with Storey's to such a degree, that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish his radical agenda of role reinvention from the more mundane practices of accommodation. Nor does Ulrich deal adequately with the issues of role conflict that have partly been exacerbated by the ascendancy of HRM. In this sense, Ulrich's model may be a form of pragmatic post-rationalization of intensified role ambiguity and conflict in the face of new uncertainties, rather than a realistic prescription for the future that UK practitioners should embrace.

Nevertheless, there is clear evidence from the survey and the interviews of significant role change and increasing role complexity. This is highlighted by: (1) differentiating each of Storey's apparently self-contained personnel role types along a continuum from 'main role' to 'very minor role'; (2) examining the confusing overlaps and conflicts between old and new role types; (3) exploring perceptions of role change and its boundaries; and (4) discussing the intrinsic volatility and unpredictability of the role change process. From this analysis four tentative general inferences are drawn: (1) Personnel roles and the process of role change are much more complex than either existing empirical research or prescriptive models suggest. (2) Greater organizational complexity and flexibility may not only be challenging the conventional occupational self-identity of the personnel function, it may also be undermining, in the long-run, the foundations of the expertise, status and credibility necessary to sustain a new HR professional identity. (3) Old and newly intensified patterns of role ambiguity and conflict may have combined to become an intrinsic feature of personnel or HR roles in a context of constant organizational change. (4) Although personnel and HR professionals may have little control over the forces driving role change, they appear to demonstrate a remarkable ability at present to cope with the challenges of intensified role ambiguity and conflict.

## THE SURVEY

The survey was based on a postal questionnaire distributed in 1999 to personnel and HR managers in a sample of 350 companies randomly selected from a listing of 500 major UK companies ranked by 1998 turnover data. The listing also included data on industry sector and number of employees. Of the 98 companies that responded, 39 were also listed in the 1999 Financial Times Top 500 UK Companies ranked by market capitalization. A response rate of 28 per cent was a reasonable outcome to a postal survey, especially given the seniority of the respondents and the time required (40–45 minutes) to complete a very detailed questionnaire. The questionnaire was broken into 12 sections, consisting of 134 mainly structured questions using Likert scales.

The main characteristics of the sample were as follows:

- *Position*: Over half of the 98 respondents held senior personnel or HR management positions in their organizations; 15 were Board Members, 25 were Directors reporting to the Board and 41 were Senior Managers.
- *Age*: 48 of the respondents were in the age range 45–54, 32 were in the age range 35–44, and 12 were under 35.
- *Length of service*: Over half of the respondents had over ten years service with their organization, while a quarter had under three years service.
- *Sex*: There were 66 male and 32 female respondents.
- *Industry sectors*: Most industry sectors were represented, although financial institutions, including banks, insurance companies and financial services providers (21) appeared somewhat over-represented, partly because of the preponderance of these institutions among major UK companies and perhaps because of the greater diligence of the respondents in completing the questionnaire. Given the relatively small size of the total sample (98) it is difficult to draw general inferences about specific industry sectors.
- *Turnover*: 37 of the organizations had over £2bn turnover, 31 had from £800m to £2bn, and 29 had under £800m turnover.
- *Number of employees*: 36 of the organizations had over 10,000 employees, 25 had from 4000 to 10,000 employees and 35 had under 4000 employees.

## DEFINING THE FOUR ROLES

Survey respondents were asked to specify their personnel or HR role within their own organization based on four descriptive types:

- (1) An Advisor or internal consultant who actively offers senior management and line managers HR advice and expertise.
- (2) A Service Provider who is called in by line managers to provide specific HR assistance and support as required.

- (3) A Regulator, formulating, promulgating and monitoring the observance of personnel or HR policy and practice.
- (4) A Change Agent actively pushing forward processes of culture change and organizational transformation.

The four role types replicate the mapping exercise by Storey (Figure 1). However, Storey's broad and detailed descriptions of the roles types were summarized to fit into a survey format. In addition, the title 'Handmaiden' has been renamed 'Service Provider' to avoid any overly negative or pejorative meaning, and to reflect practitioner usage of the service provider concept (Armstrong, 1996). 'Change-maker' was also renamed 'Change Agent,' because this title is more widespread in discussions of HRM and change management (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992; Ulrich, 1997).

Respondents were allowed to specify their role in terms of the four types and to grade their responses along a continuum from 'main role' to 'very minor role'. This approach was designed to capture the multi-faceted and complex nature of personnel or HR roles. It also allowed the comparison of respondents' perceived roles with their actual management position (e.g. Board member).

## THE INTERVIEWS

Face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured agenda were conducted with 12 of the 34 respondents who volunteered to be interviewed. The interviews were designed to thoroughly question self-perceptions of role change, as well as the degree to which various roles could be combined. The interview agenda was also tailored to explore important issues raised by each respondent's specific answers to the questionnaire. The interviewees were selected based on the self-designation of their 'main role' as follows: Advisors (2), Regulators (2), Service Providers (1) and Change Agents (4). In addition, three 'no main role' respondents were interviewed (Table II). Given that most of the interviewees had multiple roles, all four roles were explored in the interviews, not just their self-designated main role. In terms of position, nine of the 12 interviewees were Board members or Directors reporting to the Board. Most of the interviews lasted from 1½ to 2 hours, and all the interviewees were assured that their individual identity and company name would remain confidential.

## ROLE TYPES: MAIN SURVEY FINDINGS

The most common role fulfilled by HR professionals was that of Advisor (Table I). Over a third of respondents (34) perceived this as their *main* role (Table II). The overall importance of the Advisor role is clearly underlined when the subtle gradation between the response categories of *main* role and *significant* role are com-



Table I. Ranking of importance of HR roles

<i>HR roles</i>	<i>Main/ Significant role</i>	<i>Moderately important role</i>	<i>Small/ minor role</i>	<i>Total respondents</i>
Advisor	80	13	5	98
Service Provider	48	25	25	98
Regulator	31	37	30	98
Change Agent	67	17	14	98

Table II. Combination of HR roles

<i>HR roles by main role*</i>	<i>Advisor</i>	<i>Service Provider</i>	<i>Regulator</i>	<i>Change Agent</i>	<i>No main role</i>
Advisor	34			<i>8</i>	
Service Provider		9	<i>1</i>		
Regulator		<i>1</i>	6	<i>1</i>	
Change Agent	<i>8</i>		<i>1</i>	21	
No main role					38

\*There were ten respondents with two main roles, indicated in italic.

Table III. HR roles and management position

<i>HR roles by main role*</i>	<i>Board Member</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Senior Manager</i>	<i>Middle Manager</i>	<i>Junior Manage</i>	<i>Total respondents by main role</i>
Advisor	6	9	16	3	0	34
Service Provider	0	2	5	2	0	9
Regulator	1	0	2	1	2	6
Change Agent	5	2	10	3	1	21
No main role	5	13	15	3	2	38

\*There were ten respondents with two main roles.

pressed (Table I). This reveals that the Advisor role was the *main* or *significant* role of 80 of the 98 respondents, with only five respondents viewing it as a small or minor aspect of their role. In general, the position of a respondent did not appear to significantly affect their perceived role as an Advisor, indicating that the Advisor role is an intrinsic feature of personnel and HR roles at most levels within the survey sample (Table III).

The next most important role was that of Change Agent, with 67 of respondents viewing this as their main or a significant part of their role. The roles of Service Provider and Regulator were the main or significant roles of, respectively, 48 and 31 of the respondents (Table I).

Although most respondents (60) said they had only one *main role*, there were some exceptions. For example, eight respondents saw their main roles as a combination of Advisor and Change Agent. In addition, respondents with one *main role* as an Advisor (34) had on average two other *significant roles*. By far the most common of these significant other roles was that of Change Agent (21), followed by Service Provider (12).

### MULTIPLE ROLES, CONFLICTING ROLES

One of the difficulties with Storey's original typology was that it appeared to treat each personnel role as a generic type (Storey, 1992, pp. 186–7). In contrast, Ulrich emphasized the multiple roles the HR professional must play, and he highlighted the paradoxes of combining different roles. However, Ulrich's synthetic model for role reinvention seriously underplays the issues of role ambiguity and role conflict. Much of the 'role ambiguity' associated with personnel roles arises from tensions between expected, perceived and enacted roles, and the processes of 'role conflict' that often emerge when a person performs more than one role. Although role ambiguity is a well-founded basis for understanding the peculiar occupational features of personnel roles, role conflict or competition between roles is equally important in understanding role change (Turner, 1990, p. 100).

To capture the multiple aspects of HR roles in the survey, Storey's original matrix of four roles was refined to allow respondents to indicate their various roles along a continuum from *main* to *very minor role*. This led to an interesting, if not wholly unexpected result. Of 98 respondents, 38 said they had no main role as Advisor, Service Provider, Regulator or Change Agent, a finding that did not appear to vary significantly with age, position or size of organization (Tables II and III). This suggests something of the multifaceted and complex nature of personnel and HR roles, and how difficult it is to fit roles within fixed boundaries or neat boxes. That so many respondents did not identify their *main role* may also suggest that some personnel and HR professionals may be experiencing some degree of role conflict. After all, role conflict is now very common among middle and senior managers in delayed organizations, and the personnel function subject to the equally disconcerting force of devolvement and outsourcing, is perhaps even more likely to experience this problem, especially when combining the divergent expectations of different roles (Ulrich, 1997, p. 249).

The issue of role conflict will form an important issue in discussing how role change affects Storey's four role types and Ulrich's prescriptive model. At least four areas of role conflict can be identified: (1) *Inter-role conflict* arises when the perfor-

mance or execution of one or more roles comes into conflict with that of others, causing discrepancies in performance, competing demands and potential role overload. (2) *Intra-role conflict* emerges from divergent expectations or incompatible performance criteria in performing a single role. (3) *Value-role conflict* emerges when the personal or professional values of a role incumbent are incompatible with the performance of a specific role or task. (4) *Old-new role conflict* arises when one or more new roles come into conflict with or encroach on existing roles. Although some examples of each of these forms of role conflict will be noted in examining both Storey's and Ulrich's role types, it should be emphasized that role conflict takes on a *variety of* other forms and often occurs in combinations or admixtures that cannot be easily distinguished (Jackson and Schuler, 1985; Peterson et al., 1995).

## ADVISORS

The Advisor role was clearly the main/significant role of most respondents. Storey noted in his original research that a 'considerable number' of the managers interviewed had shifted from a rule maker and custodian of personnel procedures and systems to a less assertive, non-interventionist, advisory role: 'The advisor role type is clearly compatible with the devolved, business-manager pattern adapted by many organizations for their line and general managers' (Storey, 1992, p. 171). This shift appears to have intensified over the past decade, in line with the increased devolution and growing autonomy of divisional and business unit management. Advisors enact their role as internal consultants offering expertise or advice in a persuasive way, but in a non-directive or overly prescriptive manner. The Advisor role therefore provides a way of accommodating devolution, while avoiding accusations of interference in line management decision-making. As one interviewee observed: 'I see a red line between advice and advocacy . . . managers have to own their decisions, after all they run the business'.

Yet, some of the survey findings indicate that the Advisor role is not confined to the strategic/non-interventionist quadrant of the role matrix (Figure 1). The Advisor role may also be compatible with the more proactive and interventionist role of the Change Agent. Eight respondents conceived their main role as both that of Advisor and Change Agent, and the Change Agent role was by far the most significant other role of Advisors (Table II). This considerable overlap between the Advisor and Change Agent roles along the strategic/interventionist dimensions of the role matrix clearly indicates that there is no pure type of Advisor. Advisors can be strategic *and* interventionist. Ulrich affirms a similar view when he argues that HR professionals must be '*both* strategic and operational', focusing on the long-term and the short-term (1997, p. 25). This duality is perhaps not surprising, although Ulrich does not probe the potential for 'inter-role conflict' that it may give rise to.

From the interviews, it became clear that the Advisor role is intrinsically weak if a purely internal consultancy response to the competitive pressures of devolution and business unit autonomy is taken too far; potentially leaving the personnel or HR manager stranded without real influence, administrative resources or power. As internal consultancy advice is tailored to the needs of the line it can become short-term and reactive, and this can undermine any potential strategic or business oriented role for the HR professional (Tamkin et al., 1997, pp. 14–16). This was certainly an issue in relation to corporate HR interventions: ‘Headquarter HR people just act as internal consultants. They don’t know the business and they don’t individualize responsibility’. The ascendancy of HRM was therefore perceived by some of the interviewees as transforming traditional personnel activities into a ‘central silo’ of consultancy and customer advise services that were not integrated into the fabric of the business. Moreover, the activities of internal consultancy and advice can be conceived as non-core activities that can be bought in or outsourced as required (Ulrich, 1997, pp. 89–104). One interviewee highlighted the potential for role reversal and deprofessionalization this may create: ‘An advisor without a power base is a consultant’.

Faced with these kinds of pressures the Advisor role has to balance the imperatives of devolving more and more responsibility to the line while retaining the ability, however limited, to intervene strategically. As one interviewee observed: ‘You should never oversell HR by making it too strategic . . . but some people simply undersell it by giving too much policy control away’. Ulrich’s concept of the HR professional as ‘Strategic Partner’ who proactively offers advice and ‘participates’ in strategic decision making, while not owning HR strategy, partly captures this dilemma. In practice, of course, once advice becomes a form of advocacy, more interventionist forms of involvement and strategic action may impinge on the Advisor role. In this sense the overlap between proactive Change Agent and Advisor roles may be the Janus-faced expression of genuine role ambiguity, and a realistic assessment of the limits of the Advisor role. Interestingly, Ulrich’s formulation of the Strategic Partner and Change Agent roles ends with a similar overlap, which is positively resolved by making the roles mutually reinforcing, rather than a potent source of role ambiguity and conflict (1997, pp. 37–48).

## SERVICE PROVIDERS

Although only 9 per cent of respondents viewed their Service Provider role as their *main role*, 40 per cent viewed it as a *significant* part of their role. In Storey’s research, ‘handmaidens’ enacted an imposed role that arose out of organizational upheavals, shifting business priorities, or programmes of culture change; all of which threatened the ‘traditional, and relatively stable, personnel and IR roles’ (Storey, 1992, p. 172). Handmaidens appeared as disempowered and hapless bystanders in the

face of new competitive imperatives. As new models of divisional and business unit devolution and autonomy took hold, the role of personnel practitioners was being redefined to serve the needs of business managers. In effect, the personnel function was in the throes of being remodelled to service internal customers and markets in much the same way that business units and functions were being driven to become more competitive and customer-oriented. During the 1990s, this process appears to have intensified through outsourcing and the subcontracting of more aspects of the HR function to external service providers (Adams, 1991; Tyson, 1995; Ulrich, 1997).

Ulrich offers the most convincing reading of this overall transformation when he extends and re-interprets the service provider role as a proactive 'Administrative Expert'. In the face of cost pressures and competing modes of service delivery, the administrative expert must constantly re-examine and reengineer HR processes to achieve ever-higher standards of service (Ulrich, 1997, p. 28). This is essentially an 'operational' role, although it is not just about 'cutting costs and simplifying work' (Ulrich, 1997, p. 89). Rather, the administrative task extends beyond the passive remit of the service provider to a proactive 'rethinking of HR value creation', including the wholesale outsourcing of key HR activities (Ulrich, 1997, p. 89).

Ulrich's hard-edged, if somewhat disconcerting, vision may go well beyond what Storey could have envisaged for the 'handmaiden' or service provider role in the UK. However, Ulrich's position would appear to be too optimistic in envisioning a reconciliation between 'cost cutting' and 'value creation'; surely a recipe for 'intra-role conflict'? Yet, what was initially surprising about the interview evidence was the degree to which the radical implications of the service provider role had been pragmatically accepted: 'It is not really a big step from operating as a cost centre with internal customers to becoming an outsourced activity. All managers really care about is getting the same level of service'. Or, even more pointedly: 'At the end of the day it is business necessity which determines how HR is delivered'. There was also a considerable customer-driven emphasis on monitoring and controlling the efficient delivery of HR activities: 'My credibility depends on running an extremely efficient and cost effective administrative machine . . . If I don't get that right, and consistently, then you can forget about any big HR ideas'.

Overall, the emphasis on the 'how to' aspects of service suggests a degree of realism regarding the requirements of the Service Provider role. This appears to contrast with the legacy of a 'handmaiden' role and its association with a demeaning perception or real diminution of the traditional personnel function. Ulrich, for example, makes a positive virtue of the HR professionals' traditional role as the 'caretakers' of administrative systems by emphasizing their potentially enhanced role in value creation: a shift in focus 'from what is done to what is delivered' (Ulrich, 1997, p. 96). One respondent in the survey captured the harsh implications of this fact with a pithy slogan scrawled in the comment section of the questionnaire: 'deliver or die'.

Despite the pragmatism and the apparent acceptance of new competitive realities, there were also some old tensions and new conflicts that characterized perceptions of the Service Provider role. The two issues that caused the most concern were 'devolvement' and 'outsourcing'. While most interviewees felt that devolvement was workable as long as personnel managers were allowed to 'challenge and chase', there was considerable concern regarding the related issue of central versus decentralized control of HR: 'Devolvement to the line is not really the problem. In my experience it is the corporate centre that constantly impedes my freedom of action and limits my resources'. With characteristic optimism, Ulrich has proposed that this perennial tension can be 'satisfactorily resolved' when the focus of HR administered expertise shifts from power and authority to issues of service delivery. This assumes, of course, the possibility of a 'rational', business-driven model of HR service delivery; a model that somehow overcomes an organizational world plagued by competing group interests over the allocation of resources. There was little evidence from the interviews that this ideal was real or attainable.

The second issue of most concern was 'outsourcing', not because it involved off-loading some routine aspect of HR administration, but because it might undermine the HR role itself. The objections here were varied: 'I can't really see a future where HR has been engineered out of the organization'. 'It's simply not cost effective to substitute internal personnel people with outside consultants . . . the arithmetic just doesn't add up'. Or, 'Without HR this organization would lose its culture'. Overall, most interviewees affirmed a strong belief in the value of internal personnel or HR expertise versus that of outside consultants. Yet, one sensed that the defence of internal versus external service provider roles was driven more by self-interest and professional pride than by harsh realism, especially on the issue of 'who' is best positioned to decide what is the most effective means to provide a specific service. Curiously, even Ulrich, who envisages a radical competitive future for the HR function, allows HR professionals the coveted role of 'facilitating selection' of the most appropriate modes of service delivery (Ulrich, 1997, p. 109).

## REGULATORS

In Storey's research the Regulator role was representative of the classic IR or 'contracts manager' type engaged in 'devising, negotiating and defending the procedural and substantive rules which govern employment relations' (Storey, 1992, p. 176). These procedural activities were 'decidedly interventionary' but rarely 'strategic' in character in that they were not directly related to high-level management decisions regarding business performance (Storey, 1992, p. 176). Regulators were essentially industrial relations fire fighters who could negotiate their way through the often-arcane language of union agreements. Storey also indicated that the emergent HRM approaches to people management were opposed to this tra-

ditional proceduralist model, and that it was 'under pressure from line and business managers who adopted a highly proactive and interventionary approach – even extending into the "personnel domain"' (Storey, 1992, p. 178). Moreover, the forces of devolution and business unit autonomy ultimately threatened the organizational base of the proceduralist model by precipitating the 'dismantling of company-level bargaining machinery' (Legge, 1993, p. 36; Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1994; Storey, 1992, pp. 195–6). Once the Regulators' power base as independent intermediaries or arbiters between management and unions was eroded, their role appeared to be set on a course of long-term decline. Unless, of course, it could be revived by a resurgence of union influence and power (Tyson, 1995; Hope-Hailey et al., 1997; Cully et al., 1999).

Ulrich's conception of the HR professional as 'Employee Champion' overlaps with, reinvents and in some respects provides a distinctively HR alternative to the Regulator role (1998, p. 125). It takes for granted one of the central assumptions of HRM: that greater employee involvement and commitment will improve business performance (Ulrich, 1997, p. 232). Employee Champions seek the means for employees to 'voice opinions and feel ownership for the business; they help maintain the psychological contract between employees and the firm; and they give employees new tools with which to meet ever higher expectations' (Ulrich, 1997, p. 30). Unlike the Regulator who is often caught in a precarious balancing act between management and labour, the Employee Champion appears to have closely identified with management as a business or Strategic Partner in delivering value (Ulrich, 1997, p. 45). In Ulrich's view, however, this can take the Employee Champion role to an 'extreme', alienating employees 'from both HR and management'. This outcome can only be avoided if HR professionals 'can both represent employee needs and implement management agendas' (Ulrich, 1997, p. 45). What Ulrich does not say, however, is that this dichotomy of intent not only makes the HR role inherently paradoxical; it also creates the classic conditions for 'value–role conflict'.

Is the Regulator role likely to have been eroded further since Storey completed his research? To what extent has Storey's original characterization of the Regulator role perhaps moved closer to Ulrich's prescriptive conception of the HR professional as Employee Champion? If the Regulator role has declined, does this mean the inevitable loss of some important ideals or values? Can the Employee Champion role really resolve the dilemmas of value–role conflict that can emerge from simultaneously serving the needs of employees and management?

Looking only at the survey evidence, the Regulator role does appear to be characterized by a pattern of decline; at least among senior headquarter staff in large organizations. Only six respondents out of 98 described the Regulator role as their *main role*, although 25 respondents identified it as a significant role. The interview evidence, however, provides a more complex and subtle picture. The fate of the Regulator elicited some of the most thoughtful, polemical and personal responses

from the interviewees, precisely because it appeared to form an archetype for the values of old style personnel practice and the antithesis of new style HRM.

Some interviewees had little doubt that the Regulator role had declined: 'To me the old IR era has gone forever . . . personnel people were undoubtedly more powerful than . . . We are now just another functional profession serving the needs of business . . . we have given up the role of fair arbiters'. Another interviewee underscored the negative images of the past: 'In the 1970s I was a personnel manager of a heavy engineering business with 3000 engineers, 3000 craftsmen and 14 trade union convenors. The scope for intrigue, bickering and misunderstanding was endless. I was never out of meetings . . . It was a bloody ridiculous way to run a business'. Against this background and a pattern of economic decline one HR Director felt strongly that HRM was essential in rebuilding both competitiveness and the personnel role: 'After two recessions HR offered personnel people the promise of a new role as business partners . . . we were more than ready to dump the past'.

There were, however, a number of interviewees who felt this was not the end of the Regulator role, and that it was being 'refuelled' or 'reborn' by a plethora of new social and employment legislation, as well as new ethical business policies: 'There are more and more areas of the business where HR has to act as policy policeman and ethical guardian . . . some potential customers will not do business with us until they have reviewed our ethical policies'. Another interviewee felt that this was part of a more fundamental strategic shift: 'Internal joint regulation is now giving way to external constitutional legislation . . . that shifts the focus from old IR skills to interpreting social and employment legislation'. However, this was not in itself going to revive the *internal* Regulator role. The reality was that the complexity and scale of new legislation made personnel people increasingly dependent on specialist advice and the expertise of employment lawyers: 'We haven't reached the stage they have in the States where you can't negotiate without the lawyers present, but we are getting there'.

This complex picture suggests the shifting nature and threats to the Regulator role. Yet one Personnel Director who defined his *main role* as a Regulator put forward a strong defence of the continued importance of this role for his own organization: 'a multinational car manufacturing operation with a large unionized workforce'. In this IR context the Regulator role included implementing new legislation, but also more traditional domains: 'pay, conditions and issues of relative worth are a regulatory minefield in this operation'. There was also considerable potential for the Regulator to re-emerge on old battlegrounds: 'The old divide is still just below the surface and one stupid management decision can open it all up'. Interestingly, this is precisely what occurred with the unexpected announcement of a major strategic restructuring, which forced the personnel function into an all too familiar IR fire fighting role: 'This one decision has destroyed the trust it took a decade to create . . . I have to anticipate union reaction, fend off con-



frontation, plug the gaps . . . It's a tactical role in damage limitation . . . and it is going to get very messy'. Although this role resembles Storey's image of the Regulator as tactical interventionist, it appeared more characterized by realism and fatalistic resignation in the face of strategic decisions over which personnel function had no influence: 'Yes, I knew about the decision to close the plant six days before it was announced . . . would any intervention I could make really make a difference? Not really . . . Now the whole business has been branded a failure, including personnel . . . Do I want to stay on and see the dismantling of what it took so long to build up? I am not sure I can face that'.

Yet, Despite this sense of defeat in the face of a seemingly unstoppable juggernaut of 'global competitiveness' there was an uncompromising affirmation of the role of personnel function as Employee Champion: 'If you give management a total free hand the workforce will get screwed . . . I see myself as a countervailing force against the short-termism of the business. In the long-term the people are the business'. This blunt and elegant formulation appears to invert or reverse Ulrich's warning to the HR professional never to identify too closely with management by doing precisely the opposite: identifying too closely with employees. The affirmation of 'values' takes precedence over the 'interests' of competitiveness. This suggests perhaps that the Regulator role may be a more humane setting for the substantive values of the Employee Champion, precisely because it is antithetical to the managerial aspirations of the Strategic Partner (Ulrich, 1997, p. 45).

## CHANGE AGENTS

Storey identified 'changemakers' as a type of personnel practitioner who sought to make 'a highly proactive, interventionary and strategic contribution' to HR policy and practice: 'Their orientation is away from bargaining, away from *ad hocery*, and away from "humble advice"' (Storey, 1992, p. 180). Storey's research highlighted this new emergent type and the aspirational tendency of many personnel managers and directors to embrace an HR 'change agent' role. Has this ambition now become a reality?

Certainly, for 68 per cent of respondents in this survey the change agent role was perceived as their main or a significant part of their role. In addition, 18 of the 21 Change Agents used the designation 'human resources' in their job title (Table II). How has this apparent conversion to HRM and change agency occurred (Grant and Oswick, 1998)?

Storey indicated that the 'changemaker' role was the 'natural location' of 'the human resource manager proper' (Storey, 1992, p. 180). As HRM has advanced into the mainstream of personnel policy and practice, it is perhaps no surprise that the change agent role has grown in significance. HRM as a mode of change management has also reinforced this process by projecting personnel and HR professionals into key roles as change agents (Hendry, 1993; Ulrich, 1997). Shipton and

McCauley (1993) have argued that personnel professionals are well positioned to embrace the new HR agenda of organizational development and become influential internal change consultants. Tyson has also argued that the relentless pace of organizational change has given HR managers enormous opportunities to assume high profile 'architect' roles that place them at the forefront of change management interventions (Tyson, 1995, pp. 136–7). Finally, Ulrich has provided the most powerful change-oriented model of the HR function that gives a prominent role to the Change Agent (1997, pp. 24–5; 1998, pp. 130–2).

This overall picture of the perceived importance of the HR professional as change agent was confirmed in the interviews: 'The HR agenda is wide-open for change agents . . . If we don't step up to the task someone else will'. This statement captures the opportunities for and potential threats to the change agent role. Storey underlined this issue when he suggested that although half of the personnel managers he interviewed had 'changemaker' aspirations, this key role was usually performed by line and general managers (1992, pp. 187–8). Tyson has also emphasized the emergence of the HR 'architect' as change agent, but he indicated that this role is often more effectively performed by outside consultants or interim managers who can lead large-scale change (Tyson, 1995, p. 136). Similarly, while Ulrich emphasizes the vital importance of the change agent role, he argues that HR professionals are 'not fully comfortable or competent in the role' and that personnel systems and processes are often 'antithetical to change' (Ulrich, 1997, p. 44).

Can these apparent contradictions in the role expectations of Change Agents be resolved? He argues that: 'HR professionals as change agents do not carry out change, but they must be able to get the change done' (1997, p. 161; 1998, p. 132). Ultimately, line managers are primarily responsible for HR changes and outcomes, yet HR professionals must be 'partners and pioneers' in guiding, facilitating or delivering change. This is an equivocal formulation, but it does capture some of the intrinsic difficulties and complexities of HR professionals performing a potentially proactive change agent role, while remaining outside the loop of strategic decision-making. One interviewee summed up this dilemma very bluntly: 'All this rubbish about strategy is simple self-delusion . . . personnel people are implementers'. And, in another equally forthright formulation: 'I have spent eight years in the Boardroom and personnel listens'. The negative implications of this dependency were also spelt out: 'If the business strategy is wrong, HR cannot make it right'.

Despite this realistic assessment of HR as a downstream strategy implementation activity initiated by and dependent on managerial interventions, most of the interviewees felt there was still considerable scope for them to perform a variety of change agent roles. Some saw their role as generalist business partner in the Boardroom, leading major change initiatives: 'In my view you can operate as a change leader if the organization is going forward with a clear vision. HR can in this context offer a foundation for building support for change'. Another interviewee underscored this high level role: 'During the change programme we were

treated as an equal partner, although we had to constantly justify our contribution'. The change agent role could also be performed by HR professionals operating as 'reactive pragmatists' positively facilitating change initiatives as they arose from the line, or the interventions of outside consultants. 'It does not matter where the change idea comes from, my role is to make it fit with HR policy and practice'. Alternatively, personnel specialists could be effective in designing or delivering incremental improvements on a task or project basis within specific HR areas: 'Revising our reward scheme has proved to be one of the most effective ways to motivate people here and promote change'.

These are only some of the ways in which change agent roles were conceived and characterized. Indeed, the complexity of the picture that emerged from the interviews suggests that there are a series of change agent sub-types, and these need to be analytically distinguished and clarified (Legge, 1993, p. 34; Storey, 1992, p. 181; Tyson, 1995, p. 136; Ulrich, 1997, pp. 184–7). Ulrich arrived at a somewhat similar conclusion in summing up his discussion of change agents, although he failed to adequately define or examine various change agent types (1997, pp. 184–7). The task of specifying the various roles that HR professionals perform as change agent is examined elsewhere (Caldwell, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

When Storey developed his fourfold typology of personnel roles he was trying to highlight some of the emerging structural changes in the workplace, as well as the impact of HRM on personnel roles in the UK (Storey, 1992, p. 168). Almost a decade later, the survey and interview evidence presented here indicates that the roles of personnel professionals may have changed in a number of significant respects. The Regulator role as the archetypal self-image of the personnel function appears to have declined, along with its perceptions of a more paternalist past. As one interviewee noted with a tone of nostalgia: 'We no longer occupy the high moral ground as honesty brokers between unions and management'. The Advisor role as a mode of internal consultancy has become more firmly entrenched as a way of accommodating devolvement, at least among senior head-quarter staff within large organizations. The Service Provider role appears to have been remodelled to deliver the administrative infrastructure of HR more effectively, while retaining a defensive awareness of the threats of outsourcing. The Change Agent role has grown in significance along with the ascendancy of HRM.

However, this pattern of role change appears to have added new layers of complexity and role conflict to the personnel function that Storey's original typology can no longer accommodate. Certainly, it is extremely difficult to conceive the roles within Storey's two-by-two matrix as forming discrete types. Advisor and Change Agent roles overlap to such a degree that they are almost indistinguishable when

mapped on to the survey or interview evidence. Indeed, each box within Storey's matrix forms a separate Pandora's box that, once opened, may reveal an unexpected multiplicity of roles, perhaps none more complex and confusing than that of the Change Agent: the progressive and proactive self-image of the HR professional (Ulrich, 1998, p. 130). Nor should it be forgotten, that most of the respondents (38) in the survey had no 'main role' as categorized within Storey's matrix (Table II). This, once again, underlines the old ambiguities and new complexities of the personnel role, in the face of new competitive pressures over which it may have little control. In the past role ambiguity was a flexible source of potential legitimacy, but it may now be an intrinsic feature of the personnel role in a context of constant organizational change.

If Storey's typology of personnel roles was partly designed to capture the empirical impact of HRM on personnel practice in the UK, Ulrich's fourfold model of HR roles is an insightful and sometimes persuasive exercise of reinvention from a US perspective. Indeed, like the importation of HRM, Ulrich's model is already becoming well established as a prescriptive paradigm among UK practitioners. This development should be viewed with considerable caution.

When Storey formulated his typology, he explicitly warned against any evolutionary teleology that might imply uniform 'progress' towards HRM or the 'changemaker' type, a danger implicit in all developmental typologies. In contrast, Ulrich's whole model is founded on translating the ascendant paradigm of HRM into a new set of roles for HR professionals as champions of competitiveness. To achieve this transformation the HR function must confront and overcome the myths and negative counter-images of the past by founding its professional identity on value creation: a shift from 'what is done to what is delivered' (Ulrich, 1997, pp. 17, 96). This simple formulation allows Ulrich to present the multiple and often conflicting roles of HR professionals as proactive 'business partners', who finally dispense with their reactive, inflexible and inward looking past (Ulrich, 1997, p. 37).

Yet how realistic is this prescriptive vision, and are Ulrich's new HR roles really a departure from the past? Certainly, the new roles Ulrich defines overlap with Storey's types, as well as reproducing the old tensions and pragmatic equivocations of the past. For example, the Strategic Partner appears as a more proactive Advisor focused on aligning HR strategy and business strategy. Nevertheless, Ulrich insists that line managers must have ultimate responsibility for HR processes and outcomes, and that it does not matter if they also assume the central role of HR champions (1997, p. 236; 1998, p. 126). Similarly, the Change Agent appears as a proactive advocate of transformation and culture change, yet the role is enacted through the more incremental and modest task of guiding 'those charged with making a change into choosing smart actions' (Ulrich, 1997, p. 166). Part of the problem with these reformulations is that they make a virtue out of necessity: the old ambiguities and paradoxes of the personnel role, its lack of power and

marginalization, are reconciled in a unifying vision for the HR function. Faced with new modes of organizational flexibility, growing cost pressures, increasing specialization, role conflict and the threats of outsourcing and external consultancy, HR professionals can somehow abandon the myths of the past and deliver value. Ultimately, Ulrich's optimism is guided by the belief that human resources are the 'dominant lever for creating value' and that managers, employees, consultants and HR professionals will all work together to achieve this overarching goal (Ulrich, 1997, p. 42). This 'unitarist' image of a collaborative partnership is also at the heart of Ulrich's synthesis of 'all four roles' that HR professionals can play as business partners. In contrast, Storey saw more rhetoric than reality in the emerging proactive self-images of personnel professionals, and he emphasized the historical legacy of pragmatism and opportunism associated with the personnel function in the UK (Storey, 1992, p. 188). This scepticism is still justified, and it is underlined by the propensities towards heightened role ambiguity and conflict that HRM can engender.

Yet, as HRM grows in significance, Storey's typology no longer fits a changing organizational context, while Ulrich's prescriptive vision may promise more than HR professionals can ever really deliver. Unfortunately, the personnel function is rarely in a position to abandon old myths or to reinvent itself in its own self-image (Legge, 1995; Sisson, 1994). The hard lesson of the past is that the changing roles of personnel managers are the mirror images of shifting managerial perceptions, judgements and actions, over which personnel practitioners may have only limited influence. Caught between a past they cannot fully relinquish and a future HR self-image that may ultimately be beyond their reach, personnel and HR professionals may be unable or unwilling to embark on the daunting journey of reinvention that might finally assure them of their professional status, power or value creating role. Instead, they may fall back on old role ambiguities in facing new uncertainties and develop an acceptable, if necessarily shifting *modus operandi*, between competing ideals, rationales, and conflicting roles, each with their own logic and justifications. This may not make them masters of their professional destiny, but it will allow them, once again, to prove that they are the undisputed champions at surviving the challenges of role change.

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