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basics in
90 minutes

Quicklook at **Human Resources**



About Quicklook at Human Resources

THIS is essential reading for those interested in the world of work.

Most of us get a job at some time in our lives. It affects the quality of life in many ways.

Quicklook at Human Resources gives an insight into this important subject from the perspective of the professionals who specialise in it. They have huge influence over recruitment and careers, but the vast scope of their work is not always understood by those affected.



How is recruitment approached? What procedures are followed and what does the employer have to consider? How are pay and conditions decided upon? Careers develop over time – how is this process managed? How should training and personal development be catered for? What motivates people? What happens when things go wrong? What is the modern role of Trade Unions in the field of employment?

Some companies operate all over the world. How is this dealt with? Few businesses remain static throughout a person's working life. What happens when a business expands, contracts or is taken over?

What steps should be taken to avoid discrimination and make management choices fair?

What about careers in HR? How do you enter the profession?

We see how to manage a difficult situation involving a business in need of major changes.

Quicklook at

*Human
Resources*

Janet Tapsell



Quicklook
books

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What is HR?



FOR as long as humans have congregated together with some form of common aim, a means of “managing” that group has also existed. The selection of members, deciding how to organise the group, allocating tasks and monitoring progress are all aspects of people management. This has, over years, emerged into the management speciality known as human resources (“HR”) management.

In the modern world there are many other types of management. These include strategic and financial planning, research, design and development, production and manufacturing, marketing, public relations, accountancy, legal matters and much else. Each organisation has its own requirements. Whatever the task, people need to be found to deal with it. This means that HR can be asked for advice across almost all parts of any organisation.

The term “Human Resources” originated in the USA and started to be regularly used in the UK and elsewhere in the 1980s. Prior to that, the function had various names, such as “Personnel” or “the Staff Department”. Whatever the label, the individuals were concerned with a range of specialised activities designed to achieve the effective management of people.

The functions of HR

Over time the trend has been for the scope of HR to increase as a specialist function. The role varies considerably from one organisation to another. In small ones, there may be no dedicated individual at all. Instead someone with other responsibilities carries out activities such as recruitment, perhaps with access to a legal or HR “hotline” provided by external specialists. In major organisations, however, the HR department can be very large, headed by a main board director, containing many specialists as well as generalists.

HR, being concerned with people, can act as a vital internal link, helping

managers to promote consistency and helping them to foster the chosen corporate culture.

Alongside this a degree of detachment also enables HR departments to advise line managers and employees, if need be rather frankly, often defusing tensions and acting in a mediating role.

Each HR department will seek to offer the service appropriate to its organisation and its aims. In addition to its role in securing the right number of correctly trained and motivated staff, it can stimulate, advise, warn, encourage and generally help. In today's heavily regulated environment, a key challenge is to do all this without becoming bogged down in procedures and bureaucracy. A good HR department will make processes and procedures a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

The development of HR



THE management of people is a very different matter from organising inanimate objects, such as machines on a production line. It is now seen as important to take account of social, cultural, educational and economic factors, since these all impact on the pool of people available and the way in which they behave. The interaction between people is important. Most groups or teams need balance. It is rarely a good idea for all members to have the same characteristics.

These considerations have applied from the dawn of civilisation. The building of Stonehenge or the Pyramids would have been impossible without a high degree of organisation. In addition to determining who did what and when, this would have involved training, in order to capture and pass on vital knowledge. Motivation of the workforce usually took a brutal form.

Effective training becomes a matter of life and death in times of war. The Roman Empire depended on its army and achieved dominant success as a result of training its members better than anyone else. Individual bravery on the part of its enemies was rarely effective in the face of disciplined legions, using techniques which were tried, tested and passed on. Such techniques included the operation of a standardised command structure. Everyone knew their role. Incentives included prospects of advancement for good performers, including the prize of Roman citizenship for those recruited in foreign lands.

In ancient times management arrangements were often rigid and based on laws, customs and social status in ways which would never be tolerated today. Slavery remained common in many societies until surprisingly recently. Forms of servitude falling just short of slavery required individuals to work in a particular way, usually on the land, for fixed rewards and with very little chance of change. The relationship of “Master and Servant” was

well established and formed the basis of much of the way in which employment contracts evolved.

The formal obligations of the old feudal system disappeared in Britain hundreds of years ago. Since then, in theory, people have been able to decide whether or not to take a particular job, except in emergencies when compulsory military service has been required. In practice the choice for many has been limited, if work has been available at all.

At the time of the industrialisation of Britain, which was a dominant feature of the 19th Century, employers, as owners of assets, held most of the power. Working conditions were usually harsh. Housing conditions in cheap dwellings built to accommodate workers drawn to rapidly growing industrial cities were often appalling.

The large new concentrations of people led to important developments. Workers started to become aware of their collective strength, leading to the emergence of trade unions. Not all employers were ruthless exploiters. Some set up model communities, in step with particular principles or religious convictions. (The Quakers provided prominent examples such as the workers' "villages" of Port Sunlight and Bourneville). Other reformers successfully pressed for laws to deal with some of the worst aspects of employment practices. These included restrictions on child employment and women working underground in coal mines. Towards the end of the 19th Century there was increasing emphasis on welfare work connected with employment. The welfare workers, usually women, were in many ways forerunners of the HR profession.

The huge demands of the First World War (1914-18) drew millions of men into the armed forces. The factories that kept them supplied became heavily dependent on female labour. This encouraged a rapid increase in the number of welfare workers, helping to manage the problems associated with hitherto unskilled female workers taking on "man's" work. The new, female, workforces were very productive. This was not viewed as a completely welcome development. There were concerns that such dramatic changes in work patterns would threaten the jobs of returning servicemen when the war ended. Trade unions voiced these concerns. Those responding on the employers' side found themselves dealing with industrial relations issues. They thereby developed one of the early specialist roles of HR. Industrial

relations was one of the dominant themes of 20th Century business life.

Management thinking struggled to keep pace with industrial development. In the earlier stages of the industrial revolution there was much thought given to how production could be maximised. “Scientific Management” was an attempt to take an analytical approach to this. The concept of a “production line” evolved. For it to work effectively, the right people had to be chosen for the various roles. F. W. Taylor, a leading proponent, indicated the mindset here when he wrote in 1911:

“Now one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type. The man who is mentally alert and intelligent is for this reason entirely unsuited to what would, for him, be the grinding monotony of work of this character. Therefore the workman who is best suited for handling pig iron is unable to understand the real science of doing this class of work”.

It is hard to imagine anyone expressing themselves like this today. However a sense of the demands of industrialisation and the need to allocate the new types of work correctly comes through clearly. Even though machinery increasingly deals with a lot of the most repetitive tasks, not all jobs are interesting. Motivating people to do them becomes a challenge, particularly when labour becomes short.

When the USA entered the First World War in 1917 its army faced the task of absorbing a huge number of recruits. In an effort to make best use of them an American psychologist, Robert Yerkes, put together an assessment team. This developed the “Army Alpha” test. It was designed to assess intelligence in a systematic way. It opened the way to a whole range of psychological techniques and theories, all intended to analyse an individual’s characteristics and capabilities. Many of these are now used in business, as HR departments try to find the right person for a job.

In the 1920s and 30s the “human relations” school of thought influenced the emerging HR specialists. Elton Mayo and others believed that the sterile concepts of scientific management were inadequate, failing to reflect the complex dynamics of human interaction. There was now much more interest in the relationships between general human behaviour, different types of

About the author

JANET Tapsell brings 30 years of experience to her current role as a consultant in Human Resources. Her early career was in a major international lubricants company where she spent time in a variety of roles including job evaluation, expatriate remuneration, employee relations and resourcing.

Promoted to Personal Director of a major subsidiary, she provided a complete HR service including senior recruitment, significant cultural change and re-organisation. Following a few years as an independent consultant Janet was asked to return to her former company as head of organisational development in which capacity she was responsible for talent management processes internationally for senior and emerging leaders. After this company was taken over by a multi-national oil major Janet was appointed HR Director of one of its global subsidiaries, providing HR advice to the CEO and his team across nearly 90 countries.

On leaving the group to work independently, Janet has advised a range of private and third sector organisations as well as NHS Trusts on a wide variety of HR issues.

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● Tackle a difficult situation as an HR manager.

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About the author

Janet Tapsell brings over 30 years' experience to her current work as a consultant in Human Resources. Working at a major lubricants company, she covered a number of roles, including job evaluation, remuneration, employee relations and resourcing/recruitment.



As Personnel Director of a large subsidiary operating internationally, Janet managed senior recruitment, significant procedural change and a big reduction in staff levels.

As a consultant, Janet has advised a range of organisations, including NHS trusts and a charity.

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