Rhetoric, facts and self-fulfilling prophecies: exploring practitioners’ perceptions of progress in implementing HRM

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ABSTRACT
Although the virtues of ‘HRM’ are widely espoused by its proponents, evidence of its widespread uptake by UK companies has invariably been disappointing. Why? A survey using questionnaires completed by 98 personnel and HR practitioners in a sample of 350 major UK companies was used to explore perceptions of ‘progress’ in implementing HRM, and this was followed-up by interviews of 24 survey respondents. While the survey and interview evidence clearly indicate that progress towards HRM is a profoundly contradictory and unfinished process, it also raises serious questions about the ability of the HR function and role to facilitate, oversee or lead processes of implementation.

INTRODUCTION
After more than a decade of persistent efforts to persuade UK companies of the vital importance of ‘HRM’, there is stubborn evidence of a significant gap between prescription and practice (CIPD, 2003; Guest et al., 2000; Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Sisson, 1995). The ongoing series of CIPD sponsored research studies have underscored the broad scale of the implementation problems of 18 ‘high-commitment’ practices in 237 UK companies. Only one per cent used more than three quarters of the practices, 25 per cent used more than half and 20 per cent used fewer than a quarter (Guest, 2000). These findings and others have become a source of increasing concern to both HR practitioners and academics, especially in the face of the apparently ‘overwhelmingly’ factual evidence that ‘progressive’ HR practices are associated with improvements in organisational effectiveness or business performance (Conway et al., 2000; Guest et al., 2000; MacDuffie, 1995; Patterson et al., 1997). Understandably, this has created ‘something of a paradox’ for researchers and advocates of HRM: ‘If good people management is self-evidently beneficial to organizations, why do not more of them adopt it?’ (Guest and King, 2001: 11).

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Until recently there have been few attempts to explore the reasons for HR implementation failures. Many of the early controversies in the emergent disciplinary field of ‘people management’ focused on the rhetorical or theoretic identity of ‘HRM’ versus old-style personnel management and industrial relations, and this was compounded by debates over the ‘professionalisation’ of the personnel function (Armstrong, 2000; Beer et al., 1984; Guest, 1987; Hoque and Noon, 2001; Ulrich, 1997). In this respect, recent empirically focused research on the links between HRM and performance has filled an important evidential vacuum, while seeking to overcome some old schisms (Huselid, 1995). However, one of the consequences of the new emphasis on empirical verification is a tendency to assume that once cumulative evidence of the links between HR practices and performance has been established, directly or indirectly, it can be or should be translated into practice; either by ‘institutional isomorphism’ or professional advocacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1988). Unfortunately, the continued existence of a series of implementation gaps suggests that the links between evidence and practice are enormously complex, and that part of the ‘paradox’ of HR uptake may lie in how implementation issues are conceptualised or examined. Moreover, the increasing focus on HRM-performance linkages may mark a shift away from the more intractable issues of how specific HR practices can be implemented in a variety of organisational settings. This would partly explain why the obstacles to HR implementation have rarely been examined, especially from the front-line viewpoint of personnel and HR practitioners seeking to grapple with the challenges of implementation.

Using new survey and interview evidence from major UK companies, this article examines HR and personnel practitioners’ perceptions of ‘progress’ in implementing HRM. What role do they play in this process? Are they aware or convinced of the links between HRM and organisational effectiveness or performance (Becker and Huselid, 1999; Delaney and Huselid, 1996; Patterson et al., 1997)? What implications do their views and judgements have for understanding the relationship between HR rhetoric and reality? Are the main obstacles to HRM implementation intrinsic to the HR function and role, or are they linked to broader institutional and organisational contingencies?

Overall, the survey findings and interview evidence clearly indicate a very significant gap between prescription and practice, covering twelve key HR policy goals. On average 67 per cent of the respondents believed that their organisation had not made major or substantial progress in implementing the six most important policy features of HRM (Table 1). The explanations for these gaps are complex, but the broad implications of the interview evidence suggests that, with some notable exceptions, many HR or personnel professionals have only partly accommodated to the ‘progressive’ agenda of HRM, while others remain reluctant or unable to break out of their traditional inward looking occupational paradigm. This may have serious consequences for the future of HRM, especially if one assumes that the HR function or personnel specialists are expected to become ‘strategic partners’, ‘players’ or ‘change agents’ who facilitate, oversee or lead the implementation of HRM (Ulrich, 1997).

PERCEPTION MAPPING

Mapping practitioner perceptions of ‘progress’ towards HRM is a notoriously difficult task (Delaney and Huselid, 1996). The major dangers are that HR specialists may
inflate or overrate the effectiveness of the HR function, perhaps not deliberately, but as a form of pragmatic self-belief in the value of their role or the mission of HRM (Wright et al., 2001). Despite these obvious dangers, there are three major advantages of perception mapping. Firstly, it allows a broad consideration of the complexity and limitations of personnel and HR roles in implementing HR policy (Caldwell, 2001). One can therefore avoid the flawed and self-serving assumptions that old-style personnel management was synonymous with paternalism and collectivism, while new-style HR roles are identical with individualism and the imperatives of managerialism. Rather than this either/or dichotomy, HR roles must be disentangled by much more complex typologies of ‘management styles’, interests and contextual variables (Purcell, 1987; Storey, 1992; Truss et al., 2002). Secondly, perception mapping is often crucial in understanding the contingencies and limitations of ‘HRM’, as a form of practice. Rather than assume a ‘universal’ or empirical model of HR ‘best practice’, the emphasis shifts to examining the diversity of practices within a variety of organisational contexts. With this focus, issues of implementation can come to the fore. Thirdly, perception mapping is valuable because it provides a means to explore the self-belief of practitioners in the efficacy of HRM as a managerial ‘worldview’ (Weber, 1947: 280). This is an important interpretative or ‘sensemaking’ task (Weick, 2001). It can provide important ethnographic insights into ‘HRM’ as a belief system and how practitioners as possible ‘believers’, ‘atheists’, or ‘agnostics’, perceive its various meanings and limitations (Grant and Oswick, 1998; Turnball, 2001). Moreover, by searching only for the ‘empirical’ verification of a specific set of HR practices, one may forget to realise that HRM is a project of ‘becoming’ (Ulrich, 1997). In this respect, the universal ambitions of HRM often fundamentally derive from the inability of its most forceful ‘evangelists’ and academic advocates to separate what it is (i.e. the facts) from what it would like to become (i.e. prophecy). For ultimately, some advocates of HRM have embarked on a quest for the Holy Grail of competitive success: the achievement of a truly integrative philosophy of people management (Ulrich, 1997; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000).

THE SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS

The survey was based on a postal questionnaire distributed to personnel and HR managers in a sample of 350 companies randomly selected from a listing of 500 major UK companies ranked by turnover data. From the sample, 98 completed questionnaires were received, constituting a 28 per cent response rate. The size of the sample and the random selection of the respondents indicate that the cohort of organisations is likely to be broadly representative of large UK companies. For example, 37 of the organisations had over £2bn turnover, 31 had from £800m to £2bn, and 29 had under £800m turnover. Further details of the survey sample are provided elsewhere (Caldwell, 2001; 2003).

In the survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to say how important 12 key policy propositions about HRM were and how much ‘progress’ they had made in implementing these policies within their organisation. The 12 policy propositions were distilled from a broad review of various definitions of ‘HRM’ and constituted a broadly normative-descriptive policy model against which practitioners’ perceptions of ‘progress’ could be assessed (Beer et al., 1984; Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995; Ulrich, 1997). For example, Storey (1995: 6) has proposed 12 key definitional
elements of ‘HRM’, organised under four headings: beliefs and assumptions, strategic aspects, line management roles and key levers. Similarly, the 12 propositions proposed here encompassed the broad church of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ versions of HRM, covering bold generic and proactive statements of philosophy or principle to more specific policy goals (Table 1). This was considered a more useful approach to highlighting practitioner perceptions or beliefs in the distinctiveness and promise of ‘HRM’, than a focus on a limited set of ‘progressive’ HR practices (e.g. regular appraisals, induction training), some of which may be indistinguishable from conventional personnel management (Conway et al., 2000). Table 1 lists the 12 propositions.

Naturally, any attempt to define HRM involves a characterisation of its distinctiveness relative to personnel management. This is rarely an absolute contrast. Rather, it is more often a case of ‘six of one and half a dozen of another’, in that facts, stereotypes and prescriptions overlap (Gennard and Kelly, 1997: 40). But this does not invalidate the search for the rhetorical, theoretical and empirical differences that constitute the problematic identity and ambitions of HRM. In this sense, the 12 propositions used in the survey research are as much concerned with mapping the ‘inner logic’ of ‘HRMism’ as a worldview, as they are with the facts of practice.

To complement the survey a series of face-to-face interviews were conducted during 2000 with 12 of the 34 respondents who volunteered to be interviewed. Following a review of the findings a further 12 interviews were conducted during 2001. The interviews used a semi-structured agenda and were conducted in a probing and investigative style to counteract the possibilities of ‘functional bias’. In terms of position, 16 of the 24 interviewees were Board members or Directors reporting to the Board. Most of the interviews lasted from one and a half to two hours, and all the interviewees were assured that their individual identity and company name would remain confidential.

PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTING HRM: SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

The main survey findings are summarised in Table 1 below and then discussed in more detail within the context of the interview evidence. Overall, the survey findings suggest a significant dichotomy between the ranking of the most important policy goals of HRM and the areas where major or substantial HR progress has been achieved. For example, ‘Managing people as assets which are fundamental to achieving and sustaining the competitive advantage of the organisation’, was considered the most important policy goal of HRM, but just over a third of organisations had made major or substantial progress towards implementation. Conversely, the six areas where most progress had been made were the six areas that were considered of less importance (Table 1). For example, ‘Developing reward strategies designed to support a performance-driven culture’, was characterised by major or substantial progress by around three quarters of the respondents, although it was considered a less important policy goal of HRM.

The relationship between policy importance and progress can be presented by using mean scores as a ranking mechanism (Table 1). This suggests that the six most important policy goals were the six areas where least progress toward implementation had been made. This relationship was also confirmed by the use of the Spearman Test, which established a statistically significant negative correlation between importance
Table 1: Policy Importance and Progress in Implementing HRM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking: Most Important, Least Progress</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Progress</th>
<th>Importance Rank</th>
<th>Progress Rank</th>
<th>Spearman Test p values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing people as assets which are fundamental to the competitive advantage of the organisation</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.099*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a close fit of personnel policies, procedures and systems with one another</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a flatter and more flexible organisation capable of responding more quickly to change</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.030**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging team working and co-operation across internal organisational boundaries</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a strong customer-first philosophy throughout the organisation</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.007***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing line management responsibility for personnel management and HR policies</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.037**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking: Least Important, Most Progress</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Progress</th>
<th>Importance Rank</th>
<th>Progress Rank</th>
<th>Spearman Test p values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improving employee involvement through better internal communication</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligning HRM policies with business planning and corporate strategy</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering employees to manage their own self-development and learning</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing reward strategies designed to support a performance-driven culture</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing the facilitating role of managers as enablers</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.062*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building greater employee commitment to the organisation</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.556</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistically significance at *.10 level; at the **.05 level; at the ***.01 level. Percentages include those saying very important/important and major/moderate progress.
and *progress* rankings for five of the results. This suggests that as the ranking of importance of a HR policy goal increases, the progress ranking decreases.

One of the many issues raised by the survey findings is the potential for endogeneity, both in the interpretation of the connotative meanings respondents attach to *importance* and *progress*, and in the perceived ranking of their interrelationships. For example, was importance associated with desirable HR policy goals or difficult to achieve goals? Alternatively, were the importance rankings based on the assumption that progress had already been achieved, and so they were less important? While it is difficult to avoid these sorts of endogenous influences, the interviews provided substantive evidence that helps to unravel the nature of the relationship between the importance and progress rankings.

**AREAS OF LEAST PROGRESS: THE INTERVIEWS**

Why were the six policy areas ranked most important by the survey respondents the areas where least progress had been made? What were the main obstacles to progress? How are they related to the role, influence and limitations of the HR function? These questions were the central focus of the interviews. Each of the six propositions is examined in their perceived order of importance (Table 1).

**Managing Human Assets**

The statement that ‘people are the most important assets of an organisation’ is, of course, a ubiquitous cliché, yet it is probably the central presupposition of HRM as a philosophy of competitiveness (Beer et al., 1984). Certainly, the idea applies to ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ versions of HRM, both of which gravitate towards a ‘resource-based’ or *inside-out* view of the firm. However, most hard versions are compatible with externally focused and instrumentally rational views of ‘human resources’ as a key economic factor of production and therefore the ‘dominant lever for creating value’ (Ulrich, 1997: 232). In contrast, softer more inclusive versions of HRM tend to focus on the ‘human relations’ aspects of internal organisational effectiveness and emphasise the importance of employee participation, commitment and motivation (Guest and Peccei, 2001; Storey, 1995).

While many of the interviewees appeared broadly to endorse a soft interpretation of HRM, there was some scepticism regarding its embrace by senior management. A characteristic, if rather blunt response of one HR director summed up the problem: ‘The idea that people are assets is just paid lip service to by senior management . . . people are treated as costs and every economic downturn reinforces that message’. However, another HR manager assumed a more self-critical position: ‘Until the HR function can really measure value we are going to keep treating people as costs’. In this formulation, the managerial mind-set of costs was turned inward in evaluating the validity and developmental rationale of the HR function.

These two responses suggest some of the inherent contradictions at the heart of ‘HRM’ as a belief system. At one level, a major obstacle to progress in treating people as valuable human assets is the cost-driven mindset of many senior managers, a very familiar problem in the UK (Guest et al., 2000). However, the second response suggests that HRM is failing to make progress precisely because it is not providing the hard data required to justify the value-creating role of employees, and the HR func-
tion itself. In other words, even the ‘believers’ in HRM appeared to be split on a crucial doctrinal issue: how do you measure the ‘value’ of human resources?

This split, of course, raises broader theoretical issues. Is there an inherent contradiction between the harsh ‘commodification of labour’ as a cost and its ‘relative’ humanisation as a valued asset by HR philosophies of employee commitment? (Hyman, 2001: 285) The issue is compounded by the increasing pressures of a global marketplace where organisations have to be both cost and quality competitive. It is no surprise then, that the implementation of HRM tends to be ‘contingent’—policies and practices are tailored to suit particular circumstances; and this appears to be at odds with the universal applicability of ‘soft’ models of HR best practice (Sisson, 1995: 88). For these reasons and others, industrial relations specialists have tended to argue that the failure of HRM up-take in the UK can be explained by financial short-termism of UK companies which regard labour as a variable cost to control, rather than a valuable asset to develop by investment in training and development programmes (Ackers, 2002; Kelly, 1998).

Some practitioners were understandably reluctant to locate the obstacles to the uptake of HR practices within the inner tensions of HRM, while a few argued that ‘costs’ and ‘value’ had to be quantified if HR was to become more performance based. When pressed, however, it became clear that some of the interviewees were essentially pragmatic realists, who recognised that the dichotomy between hard and soft HRM was paradoxical. In practice they went together: ‘In an ideal world I would like to spend more on training and development . . . Managers are not going to spend unless it delivers more value. You’ve got to demonstrate the link’. This comment and others suggested that short-termism and a cost mindset may not be inimical to HRM, but simply an intrinsic aspect of a new managerial rationale that affirms the causal links between ‘value creation’ and ‘competitiveness’. The competitive imperative means that investing or not investing in people can be compatible with a mix of short-term or long-term goals, allowing a range of strategic possibilities from ‘high-commitment’ HR practices to ‘low-skill/low quality’ approaches to training and development (Keep and Mayhew, 1999). Given this compatibilism of choices and outcomes with respect to apparently alternative industry-specific goals of competitiveness, then some personnel and HR practitioners may simply be perpetuating a soft illusionary ideal of progressive HRM: they may be seduced by their own rhetoric.

**Integrating HR Policies**

One of the distinguishing characteristics of HRM is that it seeks to transform the often disparate array of policies associated with traditional personnel management into a strategically co-ordinated or ‘integrated’ set of policies and processes that improve organisational performance. Where this has been achieved there is empirical evidence that organisational performance can improve (MacDuffie, 1995). Conversely, when HRM is unable to affirm its integrative ambition, it loses much of its significance as a distinctive approach to people management and becomes old-style personnel management: ‘a collection of incidental techniques without much internal cohesion . . . a hodge podge’ (Druker, 1961, quoted in Sisson, 1995: 87).

The interviewees, like the survey respondents as a whole, placed considerable emphasis on the ‘close fit’ or integration of HR policy, and some were aware of the ‘HR bundles’ debates. ‘If you isolate HR policies you lose the overall effect . . . It is no use recruiting highly motivated people if you don’t have a good system for rewarding them.
properly’. Yet, these sorts of linkages often proved extremely difficult to achieve. Few of the interviewees could point to specific examples of successful ‘HR bundles’ in their organisation, although some indicated that there was ‘certainly more coordination’.

Various reasons were given for this lack of progress. Most of the interviewees believed that there was no universal or ‘magic formula’ for achieving HR ‘best practice’; it varied with each organisation. Some interviewees also believed that the size, complexity and multi-divisional structure of their organisation impeded coordination, while others worried that the ubiquitous process of ‘devolvement’ allowed the line to ‘buy in’ HR as required and that this was causing both fragmentation in policy and practice (Adams, 1991; Gennard and Kelly, 1997). Paradoxically, some practitioners objected to the central co-ordination of HR policy ‘because it restricts my freedom of action’. Many of these views are echoed in other studies of the corporate HR function in large British companies (Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1994; Scullion and Starkey, 2000).

The issue, however, that caused the most concern was the inability of the HR function to break out of its operational regime: ‘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’. If the mundane task of delivering HR was a precondition of any bigger integrative enterprise, this reflected a set of related problems. The internal domain of the HR function was usually focused on delivering administrative efficiency. This tended to make it intrinsically risk adverse: ‘You’ve got to realise two things: we are constantly being asked to deliver more for less . . . and we are rarely in a position to directly influence strategy’. These factors meant that HR policy integration, when it did occur, was often a selective, short-term and reactive exercise. Tellingly, one interviewee referred to personnel people as ‘reactive pragmatists’. Moreover, the day-to-day operational emphasis on ‘getting the job done’ appeared to create a form of administrative myopia. For example, some of the interviewees were somewhat befuddled when asked to draw a distinction between HR ‘efficiency’ and ‘effectiveness’. This is an essential distinction in clarifying the long-term role of the HR function in integrating policy processes and ‘delivering value’ in the form of improved organisational performance. The inability of some interviewees to clarify the distinction suggests that the strategic tasks of HR integration are still deeply submerged in the immediate task of delivering efficiency.

The ‘Flexible’ Organization?

Most models of HRM extol the universal virtues of ‘flat, fast and flexible’ organisations and production systems (Sisson, 1995: 95). In theory, at least ‘delayered’ organisations and flexible manufacturing systems appear to improve responsiveness to change and increase productivity, while dispensing with all the apparently negative features of ‘Fordist’ mass production and ‘bureaucracy’: hierarchy, standardisation and an inward looking organisational focus (Vallas, 1999). Unfortunately, the empirical evidence is more complex (West, 2002). MacDuffie’s (1995: 218) research on ‘HR bundles’ was unable to establish if flexible production constituted ‘a superior strategy for automotive assembly’. Nor was he able to comment on the extent to which flexibility leads to ‘speedup’: the intensification of work rather than ‘working smarter’. In addition, flatter organisations can create ‘organised chaos’ and a ‘motivational deficit’ unless new forms of control accompany their creation, whether in the form of external market control or the internal self-directive ‘concertive control’ associated with ‘employee commitment’ (MacDuffie, 1995: 201; Walton, 1985: 79).
Most of the interviewees had bought into the ideas of organisational flexibility, and often with a missionary intent: ‘The HR philosophy here is anti-hierarchical. We do not dictate. We facilitate and persuade’. It was also noticeable that the language used to describe the nature of ‘flexibility’ often revolved around the rhetoric of inclusiveness: ‘partnerships’, ‘consensus’ ‘stakeholders’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘mutuality’. This again suggested a general preference for a ‘soft’ version of HRM (Guest and Peccei, 2001).

Despite their advocacy of an employee-centred reading of flexibility, there was considerable realism regarding the gaps between rhetoric and reality. Most of the interviewees described the shift towards flexibility in their organisation as a pragmatic ‘sensemaking’ process, rather than one informed by a unifying strategic ideal of HRM or a general notion of the flexible firm (Weick, 2001: 170): ‘I’ve worked for three world class manufacturing operations; they all had their own model of flexibility. I don’t think you should be looking for trends. Flexibility is more a state of mind, and by that I mean it covers a vast range of practices. Each company really has to find its own model’. Another interviewee also suggested that the process of ‘transferability’ was very unpredictable: ‘We tried to clone the flexible manufacturing process here from our sister plant in Spain. On paper everything looked fine, until we realised the massive skills gap we had to fill if the system was going to work’.

Interestingly, there was also evidence that the issue of ‘flexibility’ provoked reactions at both ends of the employee-management spectrum. One interviewee saw the issue very negatively: ‘flexibility is fundamentally an employee problem’. However, senior management were also seen as a negative force by some interviewees. They exhibited a ‘hierarchical mind-set’, or they conceived flexibility as ‘nothing more than a strategy for cost cutting’, or ‘headcount reduction’—clearly hard versions of HRM. It was these sorts of tensions and contradictions that appeared to undermine progress towards any kind of unified, consistent or transferable organisational ideal of flexibility as a progressive embrace of high-commitment HR practices.

**Teamworking**

Teamworking has gone hand in hand with the emphasis on progressive or ‘high-commitment’ HR practices, although paradoxically, it is partly a by-product of the ‘individualisation’ process that has accompanied the rise of flexible organisations (Beck, 2000: 3). As central hierarchical control is reduced in organisations, self-managed teams are expected to work more closely together to achieve greater horizontal co-ordination across organisational divisions, units or work processes. While teamworking is usually an essential precondition for quality improvements and productivity gains in flexible manufacturing systems, it is also associated with ‘numerical flexibility’ (i.e. cost reduction), the intensification of work and new role pressures for both team leaders and other team members (Barker, 1999; Taylor and Ramsay, 1998).

Almost all the interviewees broadly endorsed implementation of teamworking processes as an essential aspect of good HR practice, although its negative side-effects were rarely mentioned. In contrast, the numerous obstacles to effective teamworking were highlighted. At least four are worth mentioning: lack of senior management support; confusion over team roles during implementation; poor integration of team-work with other aspects of HR practice; employee resistance to new working practices. Together, or in combination with other factors these obstacles appeared to partly explain the somewhat limited progress towards team working.
Despite the reluctance of most of the interviewees to say anything negative about ‘teamwork’, there were some dissenting voices, which partly harked back to an industrial relations era of ‘collective values’. One HR manager suggested with an obvious tone of cynicism that a team working ethos was often a hollow ‘panacea’ that just ‘faked’ cooperation: ‘it was more for the consumption of managers than employees’. Another personnel director felt that HRM advocates can be ‘accused of over-hyping teamwork . . . I think the workplace is a much more ruthless place than it was 20 years ago . . . we [personnel managers] have identified too closely with market values’. This sentiment was also echoed by another HR director, but with a mix of nostalgia and resignation: ‘To me the old IR era has gone forever . . . personnel people were more powerful then . . . We are now just another functional profession serving the needs of business . . . we have given up the role of fair arbiters’.

This curious mix of sentiments may exaggerate the past moral high ground of personnel self-identity as ‘fair arbiters’, while also limiting its future role reincarnation as ‘employee champions’ (Ulrich, 1997). Certainly, there was a strong perception that the displacement of collectivist models of workplace practice by the ubiquitous emphasis on teamwork ran parallel to the marginalisation of the role of personnel in serving the interests of employees. This finding appears to be reinforced by recent CIPD survey evidence from 1188 HR practitioners which indicated that only 12 per cent of respondents see themselves as primarily employee champions, and fewer still wished to do so in the future (2003: 11). Once again, these convergent findings highlight some of the new tensions and dilemmas that characterise the new role envisaged for personnel practitioners as ‘business partners’ (Caldwell, 2003).

**Customer-First Philosophies**

One of the most distinctive aspects of HRM is its focus on the importance of the external competitive environment and the strategic importance of ‘customer-first’ initiatives (Storey, 1995: 14). Although these initiatives often place new demands on employees, they are now very common, and there is growing empirical evidence to suggest that they can be successful (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2001). What is often forgotten, however, is that these initiatives often have a dramatic impact on the personnel function, because they create an internal market or ‘service provider’ focus for personnel services to the line, while also shifting the personnel function away from its traditional inward looking focus and towards new performance measures and outputs.

Although, all the interviewees, with one notable exception, were keen to emphasise the close connection between HR and a new customer orientation, they were also aware of the gaps between theory and practice. For example, when asked if they could explain why survey respondents ranked the customer orientation fifth in policy importance, but last in the progress ranking, at least three factors were consistently mentioned (Table 1). First, the larger the size of the organisation the more likely it was to lose touch with its customers. Second, customer-first initiatives or empowerment programmes were only as good as the investment in the training that underpinned them. Third, customer expectations are always increasing and so organisations were in an ‘endless catch-up state’.

Interestingly, one significantly dissenting voice saw the issue somewhat differently. He argued that where HR concerns are too closely identified with issues of business success and improvements in customer relations practices, the organisation is heading for a disastrous inside-out mindset: ‘M&S was a model of HR best practice, but it
lost its focus on the business’. This criticism runs counter to recent debates over ‘Marksist management’ which revolve around whether or not M&S was a prototypical model of soft HRM (Turnbull and Wass, 1997). Instead, a more disconcerting point was being made: progress towards ‘progressive’ or soft HR practices and policies for business success are not always compatible.

Devolving HR to Line Managers

One of the many paradoxical aspects of HRM is that it advocates devolving important HR activities to the line, while seeking to retain a degree of strategic oversight over policy compliance. ‘The HR function does not own compliance—managers do’ (Ulrich, 1997: 18). In practice, of course, managers seeking to cope with the imperatives of increasing business unit autonomy often initiated the push towards devolvement. Personnel and HR professionals were invariably ‘handmaidens’, or at most ‘advisors’, in this process, rather than proactive creators of a new self-image as ‘flexible business managers’ (Gennard and Kelly, 1997; Storey, 1992). Their role was to accommodate devolution, while avoiding accusations of interference in line management decision-making. Unfortunately, the issues of ownership and compliance engendered by devolvement have continued to circumscribe the influence of the personnel function and create new dynamics of cooperation and conflict between managers and HR specialists (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Gennard and Kelly, 1997; Renwick, 2000).

The interviewees were notably ambivalent in addressing these issues. Most argued that more progress needed to be made, and that managers would often resist taking ‘full ownership’ for HR activities—a finding reiterated in other recent survey evidence (CIPD, 2003: 26). Conversely, HR professionals wanted to retain their policy control over pay, benefits and broader IR issues. But what was most interesting was that the interviewees were generally reluctant to take the process of devolution too far. The danger was that the HR function might lose its perceived value if it did not deliver bottom-line performance. One interviewee partly summed up the dilemma: ‘It’s a delicate balancing act. You’ve got to know when to push forward and pull back . . . if you don’t get the balance right you lose your credibility and influence’. Ultimately, the paradoxical tension at the centre of the end game of devolvement is that too much progress might mean a radical devaluation of the HR role itself.

AREAS OF MOST PROGRESS: THE INTERVIEWS

The six areas of ‘least progress’ that have been reviewed so far appear to be associated with the more strategic and harder to deliver ambitions of HRM. Can we therefore assume that the areas of ‘most progress’ are correspondingly more closely associated with the softer, less strategic and easier to deliver aspects of HRM: those synonymous with more conventional personnel practices? Would this partly explain why the survey respondents ranked these areas as less important? And perhaps, more importantly, what does this tell us about the implementation obstacles and professional limitations personnel and HR practitioner’s face in pushing the strategic agenda of HRM?

Employee Communications

Once a Cinderella aspect of the personnel function, employee communications appear to have become an increasingly vital aspect of HRM. By insisting on communicating
directly with employees, HRM advanced new forms of involvement that sought to partly circumvent union-based forms of consultation and bargaining, often with the ambition of creating a ‘unitarist’ framework of employee relations (Ackers, 2002: 15). This transformation was also closely associated with the increasing need to manage change within the workplace and gain greater employee commitment to new managerial values and business goals.

Almost all the interviewees were generally positive about the enormous gains that had been made in improving employee communications. However, they were less willing to confer ‘strategic’ importance to this area or to perceive it as a broader threat to union consultation. Instead, some interviewees characterised their role as top down ‘messengers of the good news and the bad news’, involved in either ‘internal selling’ or ‘instilling realism’, once a strategic decision had been made: ‘I’ve seen more reorganizations than I care to remember. None of them began by consulting employees’. Alternatively, they could facilitate upward communication by ‘attitude surveys’ and other involvement initiatives that could convey ‘some very uncomfortable truths’ for management (Table 1).

The absence of a more strategic remit to employee communications may also explain why most of the interviewees were noticeably reluctant to include issues of employee ‘representation’ in their generally positive evaluations of progress. There was, of course, recognition that sharing information and consultation was not the same as sharing authority, power or decision-making. But broader forms of ‘representative employee involvement’ such as works councils, joint consultation committees or the possibility of boardroom participation were rarely mentioned in positive terms. Only two interviewees were enthusiastic advocates of representative versus communication-led involvement, mainly because this was essential to issues of ‘trust’, ‘building partnerships’ or broadly convincing employees of the need for culture change. These lone voices underlined how important it is to counterpoise the inexorable rise of employee communication as a ‘progressive’ feature of HRM, with employee-centred perceptions of progress towards representation (Towers, 1997). If these goals are connected then ‘progress’ in one area may appear self-contradictory.

Aligning HRM and Business Strategy

Probably no aspect of HRM has caused more controversy and confusion than the idea that HR policies should be strategically aligned with business goals and objects (Ulrich, 1997: 27). In theory, this sounds plausible, although in practice it requires a significant reorientation in the conventional remit of the personnel function. Ulrich captures the scope of this new role when he argues that: ‘HR professionals become strategic partners when they participate in the process of defining the business strategy, when they ask questions that move the strategy to action and when they design HR practices that align with the business’ (1997: 27). Unfortunately, Ulrich is somewhat vague in describing how this ‘role change’ can be practically enacted and empirical evidence of the emergence of new strategic roles is often contradictory (Caldwell, 2003; CIPD, 2003; Gennard and Kelly, 1997).

While most of the interviewees were optimistic about the growing links between HR policy and business strategy, this rarely amounted to them assuming a clearly defined ‘strategic partner’ role—even though 16 of them were represented in the boardroom. Certainly they offered strategic advice and HR policy was increasingly
featured in business decisions, but overwhelmingly this input came at the implementa-
tion end of the strategic decision making process. One interviewee summed up this
dilemma very bluntly: ‘All this rubbish about strategy is self-delusion . . . personnel
people implement’. Or, in an equally forthright formulation: ‘I have spent eight years
in the boardroom and personnel listens’. These comments and others suggested that
optimism about HR progress at a strategic level needs to be treated with considerable
cautions. Representation in the boardroom may have considerable symbolic value, but
it is not necessarily an assured route to real influence or power.

The Paradoxes of Self-Development

Ideas about empowerment and self-development have come to the fore as a reaction
to formal off-the-job training and because of changes in the workplace that have
undermined conventional career ladders. These ideas are now an integral aspect of
HRM (Grant and Oswick, 1997: 183). While empowerment initiatives are often
directed towards shopfloor employees, self-development programmes are usually the
preserve of managers, although it is often difficult to separate them so easily in prac-
tice. A distinguishing feature of HRM, however, is that more emphasis is placed on
the ‘management of managers’.

Some of the interviewees felt that they were making real progress in the self-
development arena, and that these approaches represented a decisive break with con-
ventional training programmes. However, it was unclear if self-development consti-
tuted such a significant departure from old-style personnel management. One
personnel director insisted that self-development in its multi-various forms was the
’spiritual home’ of the traditional personnel function, and that it had been ‘renamed’
under HRM. The implication was that HRM was making progress by assimilation
rather than transformation. Perhaps this may provide one explanation for the negative
relationship between progress and importance that characterised the survey findings?
If progress was substantially achieved by the repackaging of old ideas, it may have been
evaluated as possibly a less important or distinctive aspect of new-style HRM.

One also needs to be cautious in treating ‘progress’ as an unambiguous or self-
consistent HR policy goal. There was some evidence that self-development initiatives
were creating new tensions within the occupational self-perception of the personnel
role. Increasingly HR and personnel specialists, as middle managers, are expected to
become both the agency and objects of self-development programmes and initiatives
(Goffee and Scase, 1992; Turnbull, 2001). This appeared to be a source of ‘disso-
nance’, in the sense that the rhetoric of self-development was creating a degree of role
conflict or ambiguity for HR professionals who saw their functional roles and career
paths eroded or diffused, while they were expected to facilitate this process. Paradox-
ically, new obstacles to progress appeared to be emerging as an intrinsic aspect of HR
policy success.

Reward Strategies: A Success Story?

The creation of new performance-based reward strategies and more ‘flexible’ pay
systems has been at the centre of HRM, and has helped to differentiate it from the
conventional ‘caring’ face of personnel management (Ulrich, 1997: 18). Individual
performance-related pay, in particular, has been associated with a more general shift
towards the ‘individualisation’ of the employment relationship and a new emphasis
on linking business strategy, HR policies and employee performance. This, in turn,
has been linked to the erosion of collective bargaining and non-union recognition policies, especially on greenfield sites. However, the widespread use of performance pay can arise from a variety of factors, pragmatic or contingent, and often unrelated to individualising HR polices (Deery and Walsh, 1999). Moreover, there is mounting evidence that individualism and collectivism can coexist in a variety of empirically divergent forms.

It was notable and somewhat surprising how broadly enthusiastic most of the interviewees were about the apparently ‘unstoppable rise’ of new reward systems: ‘Conventional wisdom says that money does not motivate, in this organisation it does’. Or in an equally affirmative response: ‘PRP has got such a bad press. Here it has been a resounding success story’. Of course, these statements need to be treated with considerable caution; both because the ascendancy of rewards based on individual performance and the overall success of PRP are controversial (Kessler, 2000). One suspects that some of the interviewees have embraced ‘management by rewards’ as an article of faith, in much the same way that managers have persistently advocated pay as the prime extrinsic motivator. If so, this would reinforce the hard contract-only legacy of reward systems in UK companies and undermine the softer HR case for rewards systems founded on broader ideals of ‘mutuality’ (Guest and Peccei, 2001).

To some extent this issue was touched upon, when the interviewees were asked to explain why there appeared to be a discrepancy between the policy importance ranking for reward systems (10) and progress towards implementation (3): see Table 1. Rapid progress had been achieved because of overwhelming management support, ‘excellent off-the-shelf solutions’, broad acceptance by employees and a ‘supportive political climate’. However, performance-based reward systems were not as integral to HRM as some advocates appeared to maintain. Nor were they a direct threat to collective bargaining. Firstly, because they ‘had been around for decades’ and secondly, because: ‘You can get PRP to take in an organisation much easier than you think . . . The really big challenge is to link it to other aspects of HR’. These comments and others suggested that some of the interviewees related policy ‘importance’ to broader issues of HR integration and performance management systems. If rewards were introduced piecemeal or as mechanistic ‘quick fixes’, they could be successful, but this did not amount to realising the holistic ambitions of HRM. ‘I see HRM as primarily an integrated approach to people management. Ideally it has to be taken on board as a whole or not at all’. Unfortunately, it would appear that many personnel practitioners in UK companies have enthusiastically embraced performance pay policies for more pragmatic reasons, unconnected with the grand ambitions of HRM.

A New Role for Managers?

Most models of HRM are informed by the idea of a paradigm shift from a traditional ‘command and control’ style of management, based on top-down directives and sanctions, to a new ‘involvement and commitment’ style (Walton, 1985). Although the dichotomy is deceptive (e.g. commitment is a form of ‘concertive control’), it does capture an important shift in managerial style and rhetoric (Barker, 1999). From a traditional position of instructing, directing and controlling work processes, managers are now expected to devolve power, while enabling or ‘empowering’ individual employees and self-managed teams to take responsibility for front-line decision making, customer care, quality standards and performance targets (Goffee and Scase, 1992).
Most interviewees felt that there had been a very significant ‘sea change’ in managerial roles over the last two decades in the UK, and that the possession of ‘softer’ attributes or ‘competencies’ had become a more important requirement for career success. HRM in the view of some interviewees had made a ‘vital contribution’ to this progress, either as the leading supporter of the ‘competency movement’ or the most forceful advocate of ‘integrated management development policies’. It had also been influential in developing the facilitating role of the HR function in helping managers implement change.

Despite this overall perception of progress, there was considerable ambivalence about the scope, importance and impact of managerial-style empowerment initiatives. Some interviewees felt that the soft aspects of empowerment were less important to the strategic agenda of HRM, which required a stronger emphasis on the more conventional attributes of leadership, especially at senior level. It was also suggested that empowerment was more of a cultural climate intervention that was often more rhetoric than reality: ‘I can’t empower anyone’. Moreover, interventions in this arena appeared to be creating professional dilemmas for some practitioners. They were increasingly being expected to practice and preach an empowerment philosophy, yet this philosophy dispersed or diffused their apparently proactive role in leading or directing change (Caldwell, 2001). In sum, this complex mix of reactions suggested that the soft rhetoric of empowerment may have been oversold and that practitioners were more realistic about its real strategic importance and potentially negative impact on their own role.

In Search of Commitment

The idea of ‘organisational commitment’ is given a pivotal role in HRM. Guest (1995: 112) has argued that it is in fact ‘the central feature that distinguishes HRM from traditional personnel management/industrial relations systems’. The key assumption of HRM is that a more committed workforce is an essential foundation of competitiveness in that committed employees are more likely to embrace flexibility, strive to achieve performance targets and identify with the mission and values of the organisation (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001).

While most interviewees were supportive of the proselytising beliefs of HRM regarding the virtues of employee commitment, the survey evidence was much less encouraging; it indicated a strong negative relationship between progress and importance rankings (Table 1). A possible clue to this anomaly began to emerge when many of the interviewees expressed considerable caution in making a direct link between commitment and its specific impact on improved business performance: ‘Strong employee commitment is always a great virtue. Every employer wants it, if they can get it . . . I am not sure every business needs it to be successful’. Another interviewee believed that commitment levels had increased in his organisation, but this had not made a major difference to performance. These comments and others suggested that commitment may have been positioned last in the importance rankings partly because it was not perceived to be strongly connected with performance issues.

There was also awareness that progress towards employee commitment took on a variety of forms and that commitment to the organisation was based on ‘intensified communication with employees as part of a heart and minds campaign’. This was, however, potentially a very fragile form of commitment that could easily be shattered. One personnel director of a large multinational manufacturing company that had just
announced a major plant closure was convinced that this decision would open up old battlegrounds: ‘This one decision has destroyed the trust it took a decade to create... I have to anticipate union reaction, fend off confrontation, plug the gaps... It’s a tactical role in damage limitation... and it is going to get very messy’.

Advocates of HRM should view practitioners’ doubts about the links between commitment and performance and the intrinsic fragility of commitment, with some concern (Guest et al., 2000). It may be possible to espouse commitment and make apparent progress in this area, but for many of the interviewees the important issue was its link to performance. The complexity of this issue was further compounded by one HR director who argued that a ‘threshold’ resulting from previously established performance was necessary before the ‘excess capacity’ or resources to follow ‘high-commitment’ practices could be entertained. He therefore asserted: ‘You won’t get high-commitment approaches in companies that are seriously under-performing. In good performers it’s just icing on the cake’.

RHETORIC, FACTS AND SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Perceived from the perspective of HR and personnel practitioners, ‘progress’ in implementing HRM is a fundamentally contradictory and unfinished process. The six areas where practitioners believe most policy progress has been made are the areas they consider less important (Table 1). A plausible interpretation of this inverse relationship is to suggest that the idea of ‘most progress’ tends to correlate with the easier to deliver, softer and less high-level strategic aspects of HRM. For example, improvements in employee communications, management development, empowerment or commitment, are achievable through the relatively low-level and facilitating interventions associated with ‘traditional’ personnel management, rather than the proactive and strategic ambitions of HRM. These softer interventions may also have a distinctly passive or expedient quality when espoused by the personnel or HR function. After all, managers and employees are invariably the crucial players in enacting these policies.

In contrast, the areas where ‘least progress’ appears to have been made towards implementation seem to be associated with the more strategic and interventionist remit of HRM. For example, the shift towards treating people as assets, as the key to quality initiatives, productivity improvements and competitiveness, requires that HRM becomes an integral aspect of strategic decision making at the highest level. The survey and interview evidence indicate that this is the area where least progress has occurred, for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which is the intrinsic complicity between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ versions of HRM (Hyman, 2001). Similarly, the integration or ‘bundling’ of HR policies into a coherent whole is only likely to occur in a situation in which the HR mix is included in the overall recipe for competitive success. Again, this requires recognition of the vital strategic contribution of HRM at the highest level, ideally within the boardroom (Sisson, 1995).

The explanations for lack of progress are undoubtedly complex. Yet, some of the interview evidence strongly indicated that HR professionals may not be closing the implementation gap, not because of management or employee resistance, but because they remain tied to conventional administrative conceptions of the personnel or HR function that leave them unable or unwilling to perform the role of ‘strategic partners’ (Ulrich, 1997). Even those practitioners who had embraced strategic change-
oriented roles were fully aware that the obstacles to implementation were not only external; they also arose within the internal dynamics of the HR function (Caldwell, 2003; CIPD, 2003).

This raises a series of long-standing issues that relate to the traditionally weak role and influence of personnel and HR professionals as an occupational status group (Abbott, 1988; Turner, 1990). Overall there is the issue of ‘powerlessness’ or the marginality of personnel practitioners in management decision-making processes, especially at a strategic level. Closely related to this is the relative inability of the personnel function to maintain or defend the boundaries of their specialist expertise from encroachment or control by managerial intervention. In addition, there are issues of lack of clarity or accountability in specifying the goals, business outcomes, or the contribution of the personnel function, especially when compared to other management functions. Finally, there are tensions in sustaining an ethos of ‘mutuality’ in the face of the opposing interests between management and employees (Legge, 1995; Guest and Peccei, 2001).

It is often forgotten that the advent of HRM has not resolved these issues, and may have in some cases intensified them. Certainly, the forces of organizational delayering and the competitive pressures of devolvement and outsourcing that have accompanied the rise of HRM have had some disconcerting and unintended consequences. Over the last two decades the personnel function has become more fragmented 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; Ulrich, 1997). Moreover, the positive push towards professional specialisation in response to these forces can itself undermine the group identity or solidarity essential to the pursuit of professional status (Turner, 1990: 95). In this respect, a form of ‘deprofessionalisation’, or the erosion of expert knowledge, credibility and role-based or functional status has accompanied the panacea of professional status envisaged by HRM. Ulrich (1997) has partly captured the double-edged logic of this process when he argues that HR professionals must become paragons of competitiveness in ‘delivering value’ or face the inevitable diminution or outsourcing of their role.

These issues have an importance for how personnel and HR professionals perceive and enact their roles in implementing HRM. For the threats to their professional status and identity can derive from the centripetal forces of strategic coordination that accompany the search for progressive people management practices. If key HR activities are centrally coordinated or ‘bundled’ as strategic assets at a corporate headquarters level the pressure on the personnel function to ‘deliver value’ may intensify at the same time as managerial interventions or influence over the strategic remit of HRM increases. And this issue is compounded by the traditional marginality of the HR function and its inward-looking tendency to identify professional expertise mainly with administrative concerns over who controls HR activities, rather than questions of the effectiveness of HR practices or who has responsibility for implementing HR policy (Ulrich, 1997: 95).

Taken together, these external and internal pressures may partly explain why the survey and interview evidence of HR uptake are only mildly encouraging in some traditional ‘soft’ areas of personnel practice, while the evidence of progress in other ‘hard’ areas is charted with a mix of guarded optimism, pragmatic realism and professional self-doubt. Few of the interviewees could really be classified as true ‘believ-
ers’ or ‘evangelists’ inspired by HR rhetoric, even those who were active in progressive ‘change agent’ roles (Caldwell, 2001). Yes, many practitioners espoused HR rhetoric, but it was often from the viewpoint of ‘reactive pragmatists’ who were willing to follow the lead set by managers, rather than coordinate or implement HR initiatives in a direct or hands–on manner. This could explain why many of the interviewees appeared to accept the more mundane realities of piecemeal ‘progress’; it was by definition uneven, fragile and subject to reversal in the face of shifting management interests or other organisational contingencies, over which they had little strategic influence or control. To presume the possibility of the opposite, uni-linear or ‘convergent’ progress, was to assume a degree of prediction and control over longer-term HR outcomes as well as to underestimate the difficulties of practice. It is perhaps no surprise then that most of the interviewees struggled to provide convincing examples of ‘high commitment’ HR practices or quantitative measures of the impact of HR on organisational performance or effectiveness.

The issue of practice raises, of course, the problematic status of the grand ambition of HRM as a worldview. The twelve propositions used in this research to define the ‘normative-descriptive’ policy model of HRM indicate how difficult it is to separate any idea of ‘progress’ towards HRM from prescriptive evaluations. Each proposition forms an evaluative measure of processes that are as much founded on different perceptions of empirical facts as different self-beliefs in what HRM can achieve. This highlights two perplexing issues; that ‘facts’ can be made to fit what practitioners may want or expect to perceive. And, more paradoxically, self-belief in the idea of HRM may partly become a reality by the actions of managers and HR practitioners (Merton, 1948; Weick, 2001). These possibilities, in turn, underscore a central aspect of ‘HRM’ as a worldview; it is an unfinished project informed by a self-fulfilling vision of what it should be, a potentially overarching philosophy of people management that can deliver competitive success (Ulrich, 2001). While many practitioners would be unwilling to embrace this sense of mission or its unifying message, it remains a potent force in understanding their perceptions of the gaps between prescription and practice, rhetoric and reality. If we recognise these persistent gaps, and judge them realistically against the often discouraging picture of progress presented here, then it is clear that personnel and HR practitioners may have to embrace a self-fulfilling prophecy of practice, driven more by the incrementalism of action rather than the reassurances of facts, if they are ever to reach the promised land of HRM.

References

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