Professionalisering van de personeelsfunctie: Een empirisch onderzoek bij twintig organisaties

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11. Summary

In the past decades, both management literature in general and personnel management literature in particular have paid a great deal of attention to what personnel management should entail and how it should be realized in organizations. The literature emphasizes the strategic aspects of personnel management as an important issue. It would appear, however, that there is a gap between personnel management theory and practice, with the latter lagging behind the former. The results of research as to the state of the art in the personnel management practice are reported in this book.

Chapter 1
The background and purpose of the research are discussed in detail in chapter 1. The purpose of the research is:
To obtain greater insight into the performance in practice of the personnel function in organizations.
The term 'personnel function' refers to a separate, internally developed and specialized unit or department within an organization. Given the research purpose, the research seeks to answer three questions:
1. Which are the main activities executed by the personnel function?
2. How is the personnel function valued by stakeholders (i.e. providers and consumers of services), as component part of the legitimization process?
3. How is the position of the personnel department legitimized in terms of scope and latitude (i.e. the adjudicated authority and responsibilities)?

The societal relevance of the research is as follows: In order for an organization to become and remain successful, the adaptability of both organization and organizational membership must be substantial. Adaptability requires personnel management to stimulate, support and sustain change. Personnel management can, therefore, influence the success of the organization.

As regards the scientific relevance of the research, it is noted that Dutch personnel management research is highly fragmented and focused on specialized sub-areas. The linkage between knowledge supply and demand is weak. A tradition of empirical research into the quality and effectiveness of personnel management in organizations is virtually non-existent in the Netherlands and abroad. This study aims, in the first place, to provide greater insight into the state of the art of the personnel management practice in the Netherlands and, secondly, to recommend points of departure for future research.
Chapter 2

The concept of 'professionalization' is discussed in chapter 2. Human Resource Management (HRM) is difficult to research in practice due to the lack of a clear-cut definition of 'Human Resources Management'. Theories of professionalization provide a useful alternative framework, and are used as such in this research.

The question whether the occupation of 'personnel functionary' could be considered professional work has been a subject of discussion for decades. Two theoretical approaches are used to elaborate on the term 'professionalization'. In the functionalist approach, the key criterion for determining whether or not an occupational group should be considered professional is the function of that occupational group in society. By contrast, the 'characteristics' approach requires that the occupational group displays certain characteristics in order for it to be considered a profession.

As it turns out, however, neither approach provides grounds for labeling the specialized personnel positions found in organizations as "professional". Furthermore, both conceptualizations of professionalization are difficult if not impossible to study empirically. This is due, among other things, to the fact that the approaches focus too much on the specific situation surrounding independent or autonomous occupational groups. There is also too little consensus about the characteristics to be considered. The approaches nonetheless provide valuable insights into the professionalization debate.

More useful are the theoretical approaches of Perrow (1970) and of Jamous & Peloille (1970). Both center on the nature of the work performed by the professional. Certain types of tasks are considered more professional than others. Tasks that involve problems and questions for which there are no fixed research techniques and many possible exceptions, Perrow argues, require a great deal of intuition and creativity in generating solutions and answers.

Jamous & Peloille use an Indetermination/Technicality (I/T) ratio. Tasks with a high degree of 'Technicality' allow for easy capturing and transmission of problem solving rules. Such tasks are fundamentally different from tasks with a high degree of 'Indetermination'. With the latter type of tasks, no two problems are alike. Generating solutions to problems is therefore highly dependent on the ability, creativity, and talent of the individual performing the tasks.

In addition to the nature of the work performed, the legitimacy of the professional plays an important role: the power and influence of a professional are only accepted when the clients and sponsors of the professional recognize his or her expertise. A professional cannot resort to coercive means. Hence, the interaction process in which the professional engages is of central concern.
The following definition of professional work in organizations is used in the context of this study:

Professional work consists of those clusters of tasks (positions) where one can speak of professional service provision with a high I/T ratio by providers to receivers, where certain responsibilities and authorities are adjudicated to professionals and accepted by the organizational leadership and where receivers of these services accept these responsibilities and authorities in view of providers' knowledge and expertise in handling certain delicate domain specific problems and issues.

Chapter 3
In chapter 3, the development of theory in the area of personnel management in organizations is discussed.

Based on the names of various streams of thought, the transformation of the personnel function in organizations can be illustrated over time. In the 1950s, the personnel function was mainly a department focussed on efficient personnel administration. Over time, the focus of the personnel function first shifted towards personnel policy, eventually expanded into social policy, was then rationalized towards personnel management, which subsequently evolved into Human Resource Management.

The term ‘Human Resource Management’ emerged only relatively recently, during the 1980s.

The origins of the concept are rooted in two theoretical streams:

• the Human Relations movement, dating from the 1960s, which emphasizes employee development and job satisfaction;
• Human Resources Accounting, dating from the 1970s, which emphasizes effort to make the cost and cost-effectiveness of personnel policy measurable.

The literature suggests that HRM differs from traditional personnel management in that HRM is more focussed on the long term, more oriented towards strategic issues, and largely integrated with line-management. Characteristic is furthermore that HRM constitutes a transparent and steerable whole, and that the set of instruments employed for the purpose of managing human resource displays coherence and congruence.

In the course of the 1980s, various authors have leveled criticisms at HRM. The term ‘HRM’ is, in fact, an umbrella-term that is used to refer to a collection of approaches rather than a single one. The most important distinction is between: 1) a ‘tough’ approach which can be described as rationalistic, quantitatively oriented and aimed at organizational goals, and 2) a ‘soft’ approach that emphasizes the optimal use of human potential as the central issue and, therefore, focuses on the development of personnel.
Two important theoretical schools have emerged in the area of HRM. The basic models and concepts of these schools date from the 1980s: Harvard Business School (‘system model’ of Beer et al., 1984); University of Michigan (‘stream model’ of Fombrun et al., 1984).

The Harvard model may be considered an exponent of the ‘soft’ version of HRM, whereas the Michigan model is more closely associated with the ‘tough’ version of HRM.

Over the course of the 1990s, three theoretical streams have crystallized:

- ‘best practices’ approach: one HR approach is best, regardless of the particular situation;
- contingency approach: an HR approach must be consistent with the strategy of the organization;
- configuration approach: construction of ideal-types i.e., successful combinations of HR-activities.

All HRM theories have implications for the role of the personnel function in an organization, regardless of the particular approach or model adopted. The literature mentions several role changes. These include, among others, functioning more as a sparring-partner for management, as a specialist, as an advisor to line-management and as a consultant. According to many, the ideal personnel functionary is a strategic consultant and agent of change. The question is whether this picture holds up in day-to-day practice. It is a truism that where one stands often depends on where one sits. Likewise, the preference for one type of personnel function or another is likely to vary in organizations, depending on who one asks and what their position is.

In sum, there is no clear conception of what constitutes HRM. As a result, researching the concept HRM in practice is feasible but tricky. This is why theories of professionalization are used to provide the conceptual framework of this study.

Chapter 4

In chapter 4, several empirical studies are discussed that deal with the quality of personnel management in organizations. As noted in chapters 1 and 3, there really is no tradition of empirical research in the field of HRM. The studies discussed in chapter 4 are difficult to compare, in terms of subject matter and scale as well as quality of the research.

The amount of empirical research in the area of HRM appears limited and what research exists is extremely fragmented. One of the focal areas - especially in the
United Kingdom and the United States but also in the Netherlands (Leijten, 1991; Hiltrop, 1996) - is the relationship between the quality of HRM and business results. The - as yet cautious - conclusion of these studies is that qualitatively well thought out and well executed HRM has a positive effect in overall business results.

Other research (Storey, 1992; Ten Have, 1993; Tissen, 1991, Biemans et al., 1991, and Pauwe, 1989), however, points out that there is a gap between theory and practice in personnel management i.e., between the ideas and perspectives on HRM found in literature and advocated in profession publications, and the manner in which personnel matters are handled in practice. Little intentional steering occurs in the personnel practice and much is left to chance. Besides, the quality of social policy in The Netherlands is largely determined by the 'social partners' i.e., the result of agreements between national government, union and business representatives (Pauwe, 1989; Ten Have; 1993).

The perceptions of personnel managers as to the position of HRM are nonetheless rather positive; integration of personnel policy with organization policy does occur, personnel policy does result from cooperative efforts of the personnel department and line management, the personnel department does have a vision and is indeed responsive to the needs of line management (Manders et al., 1993; Biemans, et al., 1994).

As regards activities carried out by the personnel function, various studies (Biemans, et al., 1991; Coopers & Lybrand, 1992; 1996) indicate that administrative and control tasks are much more frequent than other tasks, and they take up a greater proportion of the available time than more long term oriented activities such as workforce planning and management development. This is yet another indication of the previously mentioned gap between personnel management theory and practice.

A survey about 'people management' held among line-managers (Tissen, 1991) indicates that line-managers have a rather lob-sided perception of personnel management and that they are of the opinion that the personnel department has yet to prove itself as a proper management function.

Finally, Van Leest et al. (1997) conclude that personnel management is extremely person dependent and that the advisory relationship between personnel specialist and line manager is still very much evolving. Their proposition is that in personnel management, pragmatism prevails.

At the end of chapter 4, existing empirical research is related to the definition of

*Professionalisering van de personeelsfunctie*
professional work as used in this study. The results of this exercise indicate that:
• I/T ratios are relatively low (i.e. much time is spent on administrative work);
• the staff-line relationship can not yet accurately be labeled a service provider-customer relationship;
• the latitude of personnel departments in organizations to independently shaped personnel policy is relatively limited, due to the specific Dutch context (i.e. personnel policy is largely prescribed by substantial government regulation and the outcome of prevalent collective bargaining processes).

Chapter 5
In chapter 5, the research design and questions are operationalized, analogously to the three questions this study asks:

Research question 1: which are the main activities executed by the personnel function?
First, the activities of the personnel function are elaborated on: which specific and concrete activities are of concern and how can they be categorized? In this research, the following categorization of activities was selected:
• staffing;
• developing;
• rewarding;
• working;
• labor-Management relations;
• support.
The categorization of Beer et al. (1994) and of Buitendam (1997) are extended with two categories (Development and Support). In addition, the terms used by Buitendam are adjusted to fit with terminology currently customary in the field.

Research question 2: how is the personnel function valued by stakeholders (i.e. providers and consumers of services), as a component part of the legitimization process?
To answer this question, a modified version of a questionnaire by Zeithaml et al. (1990) is used which is designed to map the quality of service provision by service organizations. Aspects such as reliability, responsiveness, trust, and empathic ability are studied.

Research question 3: how is the position of the personnel department legitimized in terms of scope and latitude (i.e. the adjudication of authority and responsibilities)?
Although some aspects of this question are covered in the questionnaire, this question has primarily been addressed in interviews. The interviews included questions as to the role of the personnel department in decision-making processes and the scope of the involvement of the personnel department (i.e. was
involvement limited to personnel issues or did it extend beyond that specialist domain).

The research design is also elaborated on. An exploratory approach has been chosen, primarily in view of the limited amount of research-material currently available.

Two criteria were used to determine the eligibility of organizations for inclusion in the study:

- the organization must form a clear, distinct and researchable unit (e.g. main office, branch office, local government office);
- the organization must employ a professional personnel functionary or specialist

Next, organizations were selected in such a way as to maximize the variation between cases.

A total of 20 organizations participated in the study with exactly half of these being non-profit or not-for-profit organizations, and the remainder being for profit organizations.

Data was collected through document research, surveys and (group-)interviews. The data includes responses from:

- management: 84 interviewees, 103 survey respondents;
- personnel functionaries: 32 interviewees, 42 survey respondents;
- employees: 165 interviewees, 195 survey respondents.

Chapter 6

This chapter contains a general discussion of the three research questions (main activities, stakeholder valuation of service provision, and latitude).

The data collected in 20 organizations is reduced using factor analysis. The analysis focuses on which aspects of work content, service quality and latitude are important in the eyes of managers, co-workers and personnel functionaries.

Activities of the personnel function: work-content (research question 1)

First, the main activities of the personnel function and work content are analyzed. The three groups of respondents turn out to have different perceptions in terms of which are important activities:

- managers rank adequate personnel administration as the most important activity, followed by individual personnel counseling;
- coworkers rank rulemaking as the most important activity, i.e. formulating reporting points and requirements, as well as job-descriptions. This is followed by an emphasis on providing clarity in personnel counseling (i.e. in performance evaluation, career pathing, and training- and education programs);
personnel functionaries rank the *development of structured personnel development instruments* as the most important activity (e.g. in the areas of performance evaluation systems and horizontal mobility).

As an extension, the activities of the personnel function which are carried out for managers only (i.e. for the purpose of management information) and not for other members of the organization are analyzed. It appears that:

- managers are especially interested in *personnel cost information*;
- personnel functionaries are more concerned with providing of *general personnel information*.

**Aspects of service provision (research question 2)**

Next, the variables pertaining to the quality of service provision are analyzed. The results indicate that the expectations that managers and coworkers have of the personnel department are different:

- managers value *reliability*. That is, they expect the personnel function to deliver as promised, and to deliver the right things at the right time. Attention or care for the individual client comes second;
- coworkers primarily value *attention* and care for the individual client, with reliability as a secondary concern;
- personnel functionaries, like managers, find *reliability* is most important, with attention and individual client care as secondary concerns.

**Latitude (research question 3)**

Finally, the question as to which aspects are perceived as important by managers, coworkers, and personnel functionaries with respect to acquisition of latitude (i.e., the adjudicated authority and responsibilities) is addressed. A large number of missing values indicates that coworkers appear to have remarkably little knowledge and/or understanding of the latitude of the personnel function.

Once again, the three groups of respondents have different expectations:

- managers consider *verified contribution* to be most important;
- coworkers stress *effect measurement*, to the extent that they respond and give an opinion at all;
- personnel functionaries want to be able to *influence decision making*.

The conclusion is, first, that clients of the personnel department (i.e., managers and coworkers) have different demands and expectations, in terms of main activities, service provision and the acquisition of latitude. Secondly, the analysis indicates that the providers of personnel services (personnel functionaries) have their own ideas and expectations as to what is important in the provision of their services and the content of their work: they
value different activities than their clients. These findings suggest that the work for a personnel department is not made easy. However, it is also clear that personnel functionaries have insufficient knowledge of the expectations and demands of their clients.

Chapter 7
In chapter 7, the general findings of chapter 6 are analyzed with a view to differences between the various organizations involved in the study, extending the analysis to include different contexts.

Research question 1: primary tasks of the personnel function
Research question 1 deals with how managers, coworkers, and personnel functionaries rate their personnel department in terms of the tasks that they find important.

The three groups of respondent emphasize the following activities:
- adequate administration (managers);
- rulemaking (coworkers);
- structured development-instruments (personnel functionaries).

With respect to specific management information tasks:
- personnel cost information (managers);
- general personnel information (personnel functionaries).

The tasks mentioned fall mainly into the categories 'routine tasks' (administration) and 'adaptive tasks' (rulemaking, provision of personnel information in general and of personnel cost information in particular). These are the kinds of tasks which have a high degree of inherent 'Technicality'.

Only personnel functionaries emphasize and value tasks at an 'innovative level' (development instruments), which involve a relatively high degree of 'Indetermination'. The hypothesis of this study is that a personnel department is more 'professional' to the extent that both clients and personnel functionaries display a high score on several aspects.

The research results are:
- personnel functionaries are the most positive: they give themselves high scores on all three task-areas in five of the 20 organizations involved in the study (25%);
- coworkers are most negative in their judgments. They rate themselves low on two or three task-areas in 11 out of 20 organizations;
- congruence between the perceptions of managers, coworkers and personnel functionaries occurs in only 1 organization: administration and development instruments are rated high and rulemaking low;
- clients (managers and coworkers) agree with each other on the manner in which the personnel function executes its tasks in eight out of 20 organizations;
clients (managers and coworkers) do not agree with each other on the manner in which the personnel function executes its tasks in eight other organizations out of 20.

With respect to the tasks that are executed for managers and management information purposes alone, the following has been established:

- personnel functionaries are much more negative about the provision of personnel information than are managers: in seven out of nineteen organizations (37%) personnel functionaries score both aspects (general information and cost information) "low" as compared to three out of nineteen (16%) in the case of managers.

Research question 2: quality of service provision

The second research question zooms in on the aspects of service provision that are the most important in the eyes of managers, coworkers, and personnel functionaries:

- Attention or care for the individual client (coworkers);
- Reliability (managers and personnel functionaries).

Following the ideas of Zeithaml (see chapter 5), the hypothesis in this study is that a personnel department is more professional as it scores higher on more aspects, according to both clients and service providers. The analysis yields the following results:

- personnel functionaries have a rather rosy outlook as far as the quality of the services they provide is concerned: in 50% of the organizations, personnel functionaries score high on both aspects (reliability and attention);
- coworkers have a far more gloomy and negative outlook: in 55% of the organizations, coworkers rate the service provision by the personnel department low on both aspects.

Research question 3: latitude of the personnel department

The third research question deals with granting to and acquiring latitude for the personnel department. The data used to answer this question stems mostly from interviews: the questionnaire contained only a few items which relate to this question.

In this study it is hypothesized that a personnel functionary must 'earn' latitude: by approaching problems and handling questions of clients in a certain way, a basis of trust is established and latitude is subsequently granted/acquired. A personnel department is more professional as it receives a higher rating on latitude from both clients and service providers themselves. The analysis results are:

Professionalisering van de personeelsfunctie
coworkers, as is indicated by the large number that did not answer questions regarding latitude, do not have a clear perception of the latitude of the personnel function in their organizations;

- the perceptions of personnel functionaries, managers and coworkers coincide in none of the organizations involved in this study;

- managers and personnel functionaries of five organizations agree that the personnel department has a lot of latitude (25%);

- managers and personnel functionaries of two organizations agree that the personnel department has little latitude (10%). In one organization, this has to do with the specific culture and structure of a partnership. In the other, this has to do with the specific situation of the organization (i.e. integration with 'parent organization');

- in no fewer than half of all the organizations in the study do Management and the personnel function have mutual expectations: management expects the personnel function to show initiative, whereas the personnel function expects a greater involvement of (line-)management in personnel matters.

Chapter 8

In chapter 8, the different organizations are viewed side-by-side and statements are made with respect to the extent to which a personnel department in an organization is professional and effective.

The degree of professionalism of the various personnel departments is indicated, using the definition of professionalism that was formulated in chapter 2. Four types of personnel departments are distinguished on the basis of an analysis of the overall profiles:

- clear profile and positive self-image (three organizations, 15%);

- management oriented (six organizations, 30%);

- negative self-image (four organizations, 35%);

- overly positive self-image (seven organizations, 35%).

In short: a substantial portion of all personnel departments perceives its own functioning in too positive a manner.

Chapter 9

Conclusions and recommendations are provided in chapter 9. The most important conclusions of this study are presented below.

Research question 1: activities of the personnel function and work content

1. Strategic activities are less important in the eyes of both clients (coworkers and managers) and personnel functionaries than is often assumed in the literature.
2. Routine activities such as administration, clarification of organizational structure and lines of authority, and application of development-instruments (i.e. facilitation and maintenance tasks) constitute the core work content of the personnel department, according to managers, coworkers as well as personnel functionaries.

3. Managers value an adequate administration. The (perceived) degree of administrative adequacy has a major impact on judgments as to the reliability of the personnel department.

4. Managers, coworkers and personnel functionaries have different perceptions of what is important in terms of the work-content in the personnel department.

5. While managers tend to adhere to the 'tough version' of HRM (HRM), personnel functionaries are more favorably inclined towards the 'soft version' (HRm).

Research question 2: aspects of service provision

6. Personnel functionaries and their clients have different expectations regarding the quality of the service provision: managers and personnel functionaries consider reliability the most important, while coworkers consider individual attention the most important.

7. A balance must be created between the personnel department's management support functions, desired by managers, and the maintenance and care functions that coworkers value.

8. The image that personnel functionaries have of their own functioning is (much) too positive in seven out of twenty personnel departments.

9. There is little realization and awareness of these differences in expectations, which is detrimental to the relationship between the personnel department and its clients.

Research question 3: latitude

10. The personnel department can increase its latitude by conducting evaluations of its activities and measuring effect on a regular basis. A pattern of well defined and conscientious actions contributes to the personnel department's legitimacy.

11. When the legitimacy of a personnel department is questioned, there is a tendency to opt for a response best characterized as 'fleeing forward': paying greater attention to policy, or strictly focusing the department on the execution of 'classical' tasks such as recruitment and selection. In such situations, initiatives by the personnel department often bog down and remain at the stage of making plans and discussing these plans. Thus, the personnel department retreats to its primary domain.
Additional General Conclusions

12. The broad 'Harvard' approach to HRM is more connected to the personnel practice than is the narrow 'Michigan' approach, and offers more to managers, personnel functionaries and coworkers alike.

13. A pragmatic, rational and business-like approach is well liked and appreciated by the clients of the personnel department. On the downside, however, little attention is paid to the strategic components of HR.

14. The presumed gap between the theory and practice of HRM exists in fact.

15. Personnel management is not developing towards HRM.

16. Given that the perceptions of various groups of respondents (e.g. managers, coworkers, and/or personnel functionaries) differ, research of the personnel function must incorporate multiple groups.

Recommendations

1. Having the personnel administration in order is more important than is often assumed.

2. Personnel functionaries should make an effort to increase their awareness of what managers want.

3. Don't forget the coworkers! In many organizations, coworkers do not know what the personnel department is really about and for what matters they can - and cannot - turn to it. Many co-workers expect more from the personnel department than they are currently given. The personnel department must and will continue to play a role in this area, at least for as long as managers do not have or fail to acquire the necessary people management skills and qualities.

4. Personnel functionaries must adjust their activities to the situation.

5. Personnel functionaries must take responsibility for making the role of the personnel department and the mutual expectations of client and provider more explicit.

6. Managers should make an effort to increase their awareness of co-workers' needs for clarity and a basic level of security.

7. In order to develop proper insights into the real situation regarding personnel policy, it is necessary to include a variety of groups of organization members in research.
2. Human activities must be balanced with an adequate personnel department.

3. Managers must be capable of managing the personnel department effectively.

4. While managing personnel, it is important to consider the personal functions of the personnel department.

Research question: In aspects of service provision, how important is the role of the personnel department regarding the quality of the service provision?

5. The personnel department must be able to work for the organization.

6. The personnel department must be capable of managing the personnel department's legitimacy.

10. The personnel department must be able to analyze the Personnel department's legitimacy.

11. When the legitimacy of a personnel department is questioned, there is a tendency to not for a response that characterizes the personnel department as paying greater attention to policy or strictly focusing on the execution of "classical" tasks such as recruitment and selection.

These types of situations, initiatives by the personnel department often gain power if they remain at the stage of making plans and discussing these plans. These types of personnel department retreat to its primary domain.