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Human Resource Management Best Practices and Globalization: The Universality of Common Sense

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Abstract

Popular strategies for reform have come directly from the private sector in what is perhaps the most profound redefinition of "public" administration since the field first emerged as an identifiable specialty. The purpose of this paper is to examine the context out of which these reforms have grown, the challenges that have arisen as a result, and cases where private sector reform strategies have been successfully (and sometimes unsuccessfully) applied in human resource management (HRM). We discuss the benefits and hazards of many of the reforms and conclude that restoring a measure of confidence in the legitimate role of the civil service is essential for nations dealing with the challenges of globalization.

Introduction

In the race to reinvent government and to develop a new public management (NPM), government leaders, both elected and administrative, have excitedly drawn on the popular strategies of the private sector to guide change. The "business model"—complete with an emphasis on the old-time values of economy and efficiency—has swept across industrialized countries in what is perhaps the most profound redefinition of "public" administration since the field first emerged as an identifiable specialty. The purpose of this paper is to examine the context out of which these reforms have grown, the challenges that have arisen as a result, and cases where private sector reform strategies have been successfully (and sometimes unsuccessfully) applied in human resource management (HRM).

A subplot in our discussion is the recurrence of a mistake that has been made frequently in the history of public management reform: private sector "solutions" are slathered over public sector wounds as if they are a magic salve. Too often, the fundamental differences between the public and private sectors are minimized or ignored. Especially insofar as civil service systems are concerned,

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the favored strategies tend to emphasize downsizing and, as Margaret Thatcher phrased it, "the de-privileging of the civil service" (Hood, 1991). Assaults on public personnel systems strike us as particularly counterproductive at a time when most of society's problems transcend jurisdictional borders. Our primary argument is that the major thrusts of reinvention and NPM—decentralization, decreased reliance on government, privatization, and managerialism—swim upstream from what the demands of globalization would otherwise suggest. Using this premise as an underlying theme, we examine some successes of HRM "best practices" in an international context. In essence, we make an effort to identify those best practices that offer promise in the struggle of public bureaucracies to overcome the challenges that threaten to overwhelm them.

Admittedly, this essay focuses more on "technical fixes" (Ingraham, 1996: 248) than on the broad structural changes that characterize public management systems in most industrialized nations. Devolution, de-concentration of authority, and the overall dismantling of many civil service systems are fairly pervasive phenomena that—at least for the foreseeable future—will dictate the rules of the game in public bureaucracies. Our focus is not really to offer a critique of these trends, since that particular die has already been cast. Instead, our goal is merely to chronicle some of the HRM best practices that might help civil service systems respond to the dual demands posed by globalization and new public management.

The context of current reform

We begin this paper with a consideration of factors that have forced change in the private sector and, consequently, have brought about new means by which the public evaluates government. We argue that globalization and administrative reform spring from a remote yet common gene pool. They share many parents, although—as is discussed below—the exact lineage of administrative reform is difficult to fix with certainty in any particular governmental jurisdiction. One overriding aspect of the interplay between managerial reform and globalization is that the two trends have almost merged in many locations. That is, the basic reform themes of NPM have become "internationalized." As Aucoin opined in 1990, "the internationalization of public management parallels the internationalization of public and private economies" (1990: 134). An interesting consequence of this convergence is that management thought tends to flow across jurisdictional boundaries as easily as goods and services. Indeed, it might even be argued that the flow of reform ideas occurs much more quickly than commercial trade. The existence of international consulting firms, the dominance of a few world-wide accounting and auditing entities, and the interconnectedness of the professional and academic communities all contribute to the fluidity of ideas across borders.

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Before jumping to the conclusion that NPM (or other) techniques are destined to become universal, we need to acknowledge that the effects of globalization are highly variable. Both the economies and the administrative apparatuses of every country differ depending upon their stability, level of advancement, cultural heritage, and type of government. For the most part, this paper considers factors affecting some of the most stable and advanced countries in the world, particularly those that are democratic. Nations not yet functioning at this level are likely to be fighting for different reforms, possibly ones that would lead to greater stability or less corruption. In the traditional terminology of developmental administration, the not-yet-developed nations are striving to *become* sufficiently bureaucratized. That is, they first need to institutionalize—to shift from charismatic or traditional leadership to a rational-legal model—before they can begin worrying about the "bureaupathologies" that plague the industrialized world (Thompson, 1967). That is not to say that some of these influences may not be affecting them or that they do not have to contend with the byproducts of these factors. Globalization is quickly placing all countries of the world within a single, competitive arena.

A broad overview of HRM in an international context

Obviously, the personnel function varies wildly across the political landscape. A few gross generalities are hereby offered, somewhat reluctantly due to the diversity of international jurisdictions and the lingering effects of colonialism and other forces that have created unexpected exceptions. By way of example, we tend to expect African and Latin American nations to contain poorly articulated and traditionalistic personnel systems. Yet, some countries on the African and South American continents possess civil service systems that have provided long-term stability during extended periods of economic and political turmoil. The personnel systems of such nations as Chile, Brazil, Liberia and Nigeria are not exactly paragons of administrative excellence, but they *have* provided a stable institutional infrastructure in otherwise fluid political settings (McLennan, 1980). In many instances of this type, the civil service might actually serve as an impediment to development and competition in the global marketplace simply because it is the strongest (and perhaps the most self-interested) governmental institution in the country. A roughly similar situation can be said to exist in Eastern Europe, where entrenched bureaucracies left over from the Communist era sometimes operate according to the old rules—that is, the civil service makes almost no distinction between policy-making and policy implementation (Hojnacki, 1996: 146–147). Obviously, reforms that are attractive to Western European or American personnel managers would not be universally relevant in most of these less conventional settings.

With such exceptions duly registered, the overall story of HRM internationally can be quickly summarized. The more advanced countries usually treat the

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personnel function as a complex enterprise in which highly trained practitioners engage in an array of technical activities intended to recruit, train, and retain civil servants. For the most part, legal (constitutional) guidelines channel the activities of personnel professionals as they strive to achieve multiple goal sets through the operation of the civil service system. In addition to the modern HRM values of "merit" and/or "competence" (however defined), democratic nations emphasize such objectives as social equity and representation. As one descends the development ladder, the amount of specialization among personnel practitioners declines, as does their concern for a pre-established set of rules and procedures. At or near the bottom of the development hierarchy are countries in which personnel decisions are made by individuals who have no specialized expertise, or perhaps even responsibility, for managing the civil service system. Instead, their influence over appointments and other emoluments is based on other roles—institutional, familial, corporate—that they play in the governmental infrastructure. Our discussion focuses mostly on the developed nations of the world, with some minor references to countries that do not meet that threshold either economically or politically.

Supposed precursors to public management reform and globalization

Current reform efforts for the most advanced and stable democracies have their roots in markets and in competition. At least five generic influences have putatively led, over the past 35 years, elected officials and public administrators to begin adopting innovations and reforms at a pace that is both unprecedented in history and that makes significant, identifiable improvement extremely challenging. These same factors have played greater or lesser roles in the globalization movement.

First, governments in the most advanced nations in the world, by the 1980s, had grown in size beyond that ever known in modern times. In the United States, much of this growth was propelled by the advent of *social regulation*. Whereas bureaucratic involvement in economic regulation had been accepted (grudgingly) since the Great Depression, government expansion truly accelerated when society began to accept greater responsibility for promoting such goals as social equity, environmental quality, workplace safety, income distribution, and broad public health objectives. One obvious characteristic of these societal problems that became "public" after World War II is that they are not confined by jurisdictional boundaries. Pollution, contagious diseases, stateless crime, poverty, illegal drugs, *ad nauseam* were all international in scope long before most governments tried to tackle such problems.

In contrast to the United States, many European countries pursued expansive social agendas decades before they became fashionable here. And, predictably, European governments experienced rapid bureaucratic growth between World War II and the 1980s. The so-called "welfare states" of Northern and Western

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Europe witnessed nearly geometric growth in the size of their public sectors, just as the federal civil service in the United States grew from less than 1.5 million in 1965 to over 3 million in the late 1980s. Meanwhile, comparable trends were occurring in the federal systems such as Canada, Australia, and Germany. Employment in sub-national governments often exceeded the growth rates in the nations' capitals, thereby fueling across-the-board tax increases and the ever-present "regulatory ratchet" that accompanies bureaucratization.

Second, public trust in government began to decline by the mid-1970s (or even earlier in some locations). Factors that contributed to this phenomenon included dissatisfaction with "the tax bite," excessively optimistic promises by politicians, and inadequate delivery on those promises by public bureaucracies. In effect, most Western nations emerged from World War II with a heightened faith in government's ability to solve broad societal problems. This faith was soon shaken when governments began to target the intractable issues mentioned above—poverty, environmental degradation, drug abuse, social injustice and other broad maladies that don't honor governmental boundaries. Although important strides were made in attacking social problems in almost every industrialized country, the benefits were often obscure, slow to materialize, and/or difficult to measure. Meanwhile, opportunistic politicians were quick to play on the prejudices of citizens by blaming "bureaucrats" for the resulting tax burdens and for failing to "solve" the problems that they had been hired to address. (The fact that these social programs had been created *by* politicians in showy public relations campaigns that were short on substance but long on rhetoric was conveniently forgotten in most settings.)

As the scapegoats for many of society's problems, civil servants experienced a continuing decline in public confidence. This picture is clouded somewhat by the fact that public opinion polls show that citizen confidence in *all* government institutions has dropped (Rainey, 1996). Separating out the effects of dissatisfaction with legislators, executives, and other political actors from specific opinions about civil servants is not an easy methodological nut to crack. This point notwithstanding, the evidence is clear that the residents of many industrialized nations blame their public servants for waste and inefficiency (Lipset and Schneider, 1987). Similarly, the civil services in the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany all placed in the lower half of societal institutions in terms of public confidence. Typically, only about 40% of the public expresses positive attitudes about their public employees (although corporations, the press, and labor unions receive even lower scores) (Dalton, 1988).

In response to the general view that governments were too big and inefficient, calls for downsizing, rightsizing, privatization, and (more recently) public-private partnerships escalated. To the extent that government services *are* offloaded to corporations, the rate of globalization is probably accelerated. Given the nature of most large corporations today, any displacement of a nation's public programs into private hands is likely to "internationalize" that activity to some extent. When a company such as Automatic Data Processing (ADP) becomes the chief payroll

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and benefits agent for a foreign civil service, for instance, the lines between public/private and national/international become extraordinarily blurry.

Third, advances in technology and communications began bringing the nations of the world closer together, making comparisons more regular and more relevant. Long before the Internet created an instantaneous flow of worldwide interactions, citizens in the developed nations could follow political and economic trends elsewhere. Educated Americans were well aware of the privatization trends in Commonwealth countries at the point that Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan elevated that theme to iconic proportions. As the Information Age reached full flower, the flow of information and other exchanges (including management thought and reform agendas) across borders became a raging torrent.

Fourth, increases in global trade, facilitated by advancements in technology, communication and transportation, began to bring the markets of the world into greater competition. This increased competition spawned private sector battles for customers and reform initiatives. During the initial confrontations in the global economic war, the United States experienced a succession of humiliating defeats. The Big Three automakers, manufacturers of electronic equipment, and many other businesses lost a significant share of their home market to Japanese companies in the 1970s and 1980s, prompting reform efforts focusing on higher quality products and greater efficiency. Labor costs, meanwhile, began to play a critical role in worldwide economic competition. Trade barriers, borders, or an absence of overseas competitors no longer insulated producers. Low-cost producers quickly emerged with an important market advantage, forcing corporations to respond or die. Some of the byproducts included pressures for cheaper domestic labor (leading, in part, to a major decline in union membership within the American private sector), offshore production facilities, and increased irritation with government regulations that inflated the costs of doing business.

Fifth, economic woes in the 1970s in Europe and in the United States led to significant questions about the appropriate role of government in society and in the economy. Great Britain led the movement toward privatization with its efforts to transfer publicly provided services to the private sector. This trend grew rapidly under Margaret Thatcher but continued apace even under more liberal administrations in Great Britain, most of Western Europe and the Commonwealth. Canada aggressively cut its federal labor force by 25% during the 1980s, a phenomenon that attracted considerable attention in the United States. And, as noted, the world's affection for "big government" and reliance upon public solutions to the entire array of societal problems ebbed quickly in the latter part of the 20th century. Indeed, by the 1990s, financial pressures had created broad support for de-bureaucratization in many industrialized countries across Asia, Europe, and North America. As globalization became more pronounced, the ability of each country's industrial enterprises to compete was increasingly tied to concerns about overhead costs. And, of course, one of the most significant overhead costs is that of regulation. Ever since the days of Adam Smith,

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government's involvement in economic and social decision-making has been regarded as a ''dead weight loss.'' Sensitivity to this perception—whether it is fair and accurate or not—has seldom been greater.

Alternative explanations for new public management's rate of acceptance

The preceding list of root causes of NPM and globalization ignores some of the more academic analyses of how and why governments reform themselves. In addition to the economic and technological forces that figure into the equation, researchers have pinpointed at least three other variables that (theoretically) help to explain the diffusion of reform. More specifically, Hood (1996) analyzes inter-country differences concerning the prevalence of NPM strategies across a spectrum of nations. In so doing, he examines three popular explanations.

"English awfulness." A cursory glance at the list of nations that have enthusiastically embraced NPM reveals a heavy Anglo-American influence. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain, and the United States all have implemented diverse reform programs that seem to share a common genesis. Castles (1989) called this phenomenon the ''awfulness of the English,'' reflecting that a lion's share of NPM occurs in English-speaking countries. Although Hood's study confirms the obvious—that Anglo-American countries *are* fond of NPM—he dismisses the overall argument as too facile because of the numerous exceptions that exist. On many measures of NPM-type reforms—such as decentralization, privatization, the adoption of pay for performance plans, and the like—countries such as Sweden, Denmark, France, and The Netherlands boast relatively high scores. While the seeds of NPM were probably planted in England and Canada, and a common administrative tradition *and* language hastened diffusion, it is far more pervasive than just an English-speaking phenomenon.

The Ideological motive. The rise of conservative political parties is thought to be a major propellant for NPM. New Right politics of the late 20th century emphasized anti-government themes that dovetailed nicely with calls for decentralization, rightsizing, and similar strategies. Here, too, the correlation is ''uneven'' (Hood, 1996: 276). Very liberal nations such as Sweden score at the high end of the NPM scale, while several conservative governments across the globe (e.g., Turkey, Japan, Portugal) have not pushed the reform agenda very enthusiastically. There is no doubt that the dominance of a conservative political party provides fertile ground for NPM reforms, but their presence or absence is no guarantee that such developments will occur.

Economic viability. Another explanation for the diffusion of NPM is that it offers an attractive antidote to economic malaise (Downs and Larkey, 1986). By making government leaner and meaner, societies can more effectively combat such problems as inflation, unemployment, and high levels of public debt. Again, however, the evidence does not support a purely economic motive for management reform. Some of the countries that are economic basket cases

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(Greece, Spain, Turkey, Japan, Portugal) are laggards in the race toward NPM, while high-performing economies exhibit mixed tendencies toward comprehensive administrative reform.

About the only conclusion that can be definitively drawn from this review of reform antecedents is that simple explanations don't exist. A complex brew of social, political, economic, and cultural factors undoubtedly contribute to any nation's receptivity to the NPM agenda. Likewise, the effects of globalization no doubt vary on the basis of a different but closely related set of variables.

The impact of NPM on Human Resource Management

Despite our inability to offer a straightforward rendering of the causal factors for reform in every setting, there isn't much mystery surrounding the *impact* of these trends on the public personnel function. At the risk of stating the obvious, we will briefly detail the most influential effects upon HRM, and then offer a somewhat polemical analysis of their collective consequences.

Taking the public out of public administration

Clearly, the most significant byproduct of NPM is the privatization of government services. By attempting to introduce the benefits of competition into the public sector, government leaders have created opportunities for organizations, both private and non-profit, to bid on the delivery of services or goods that government employees had traditionally provided. Growing in popularity, however, is the concept of hybrid organizations that are part public and part private. Hybrid organizations have provided yet another solution to the limited flexibility that naturally occurs through increased regulation.

In the United States, elected officials are *creating* organizations for the specific purpose of administering public programs from outside the traditional sphere of government. Collectively referred to as the "quasi government," hundreds of these entities exist within the United States federal government. Of particular concern to those monitoring this trend is the limited federal understanding, supervision or accountability of the quasi government. These innovations, while successful in many respects, have ushered in a new era in government. Citizens, more than ever before, receive services not from government employees but from private organizations, non-profits or any of seven different types of quasi-governmental organizations (Moe, 2001).

Several creative expressions have been coined to describe the impact that widespread privatization has had on civil service systems. By distributing the responsibility for providing public services among legions of contractors, consultants, part-time employees, and corporate entities, we are left with a "hollow government" (Goldstein, 1996–1997: 15). Other authors have labeled the

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emerging approach to governance as "the fragmented state," "the disarticulated state," and even "the end of state" (Frederickson, 1997). This topic has been thoroughly covered elsewhere (e.g., Kettl, 2000), so little elaboration is needed here. For our purposes, the essential point is that the underlying *capacity* of the civil service to do its job has eroded. Government is badly understaffed and overly reliant upon external agents. The fundamental role of public agencies is shifting away from service delivery to that of "contract monitor" or "mediator of interests." Moreover, according to many critics, some central governments don't even have the requisite tools and resources to hold their many private counterparts accountable in any traditional sense of the word. Paul Light (1999) estimates, for example, that there are 35 contract employees for every single civil servant in the Department of Energy. "Shadow" employees of the United States federal government—those funded directly or indirectly by federal dollars but employed in state, local, and nonprofit agencies—"outnumber federal workers by nine to one" (Kettl, 2000: 492). This dynamic situation raises fundamental questions about the true meaning of sovereignty, and leads political theorists to question the basic premises of the reform movement (Kettl, 1988). To summarize a large number of thoughtful arguments, the devolution revolution is pushing nations toward "government by adhocracy" where nobody is really in control.

Once the bulk of a nation's administrative responsibilities are privatized or otherwise outsourced, what role does the public personnel system play? Or, do we even *need* a government human resource office (OHR)? Can't most of the functions that have traditionally been performed by civil service systems be privatized as well? Later in this essay we argue that government's human resource managers not only remain relevant under NPM and globalization, but that their roles are more critical than ever. No matter how pervasive the privatization and devolution movements become, there will always be a critical core of civil servants performing functions that are essential to the administrative and political integrity of governments. The challenges facing the HRM profession have changed, and the tasks have been completely reformatted, but the essentiality of a public personnel function remains indisputable.

The de-privileging movement

Another critical component of NPM is the tendency of most reformers to treat civil servants shabbily. Although wrapped in the rhetoric of "worker empowerment," the major elements of reform have a decidedly anti-bureaucrat tone. These sentiments are only occasionally mentioned by politicians, yet represent an unmistakable facet of the reform agendas in most countries that have embraced NPM. Margaret Thatcher's comments when she was promoting the Next Steps initiatives represents one of the rare instances when the iron hand emerged from the velvet glove in public discourse. She stated quite pointedly

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that the pampered British civil service needed to be ''de-privileged,'' downsized, and made accountable (in Hood, 1991).

Similarly, the American experience with National Performance Review (NPR) was predicated—whether its proponents would admit it or not—upon a similar value set. NPR emphasized flexibility and accountability in the operation of the public personnel system. In practical terms, this translated into enhanced supervisory authority over employees, the application of additional controls and monitors on behavior, and the reduction of grievance rights (Kearney and Hays, 1998). An earlier but useful example occurred in the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978, which was the first official manifestation of the managerial model in the United States. Anyone who is familiar with the CSRA knows that it was passed in a flurry of ''bureaucrat bashing,'' and promised to expose civil servants to greater managerial control (with the history of the Senior Executive Service being the most notable confirmation). Managerialism, one of the basic foundation stones of NPM, suggests that public agencies ought to emulate the private sector. This may not sound like such a bad idea until one recognizes the long-term implications. Unless they are unionized, privately operated personnel systems are not known for their observance of worker rights, due process, neutrality, and other values upon which some merit systems were created. One need not be very cynical to perceive NPM as an assault on the professional civil service.

The bureaucratic malaise

By the 1990s, governments in most industrialized nations were beginning to reap what had been sown. No less that six other countries published reports that echoed the sentiments of the Volcker (1989) and Winter (Thompson and Radin, 1997) Commissions concerning the sad state of affairs among their civil servants (see Pfiffner, 2000). After years of downsizing, coupled with economizing moves that adversely affected their work environments, public employees in many nations were a demoralized lot. The so-called ''quiet crisis'' in public employment had evolved into a loud chorus of complaints and concerns about governments' inability to recruit, retain, and motivate the next generation of civil servants. Awaiting new recruits in many bureaucracies were ''staff shortages, antiquated facilities, shoddy financial management, rapid turnover, ... and a crippled capacity to effectively do their jobs'' (Goldstein, 1996–1997: 15).

Within this context, it should surprise no one that retention rates within government agencies have never been lower (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 1998). Attrition varies dramatically by function and country, but clearly is on the upswing in most countries where NPM has a firm foothold. Within the United States, some social service agencies experience turnover rates that exceed 100% annually (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2002). The *average* rate of turnover is about 40% among front-line workers in most client-based agencies,

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and the ability of public agencies to attract new workers to fill the vacancies has probably never been worse. Many more details could be provided, but the central point is all too obvious to HRM practitioners around the globe: government is at a competitive disadvantage in the worldwide labor market. Vultures, not chickens, have ''come home to roost'' on the bones of civil service systems in many of the world's most advanced societies.

Globalization and HRM: combatants or allies?

An implicit theme of the preceding discussion is that, by spreading the mantra of NPM, globalization has generated serious problems for the world's civil service systems. Another point that seems obvious to us is that the destruction or dissolution of the professional civil service is exactly what is *not* needed to meet the emerging challenges of globalization. De-emphasizing the role of merit systems at a time when the world's problems are defined in cross-national terms seems both counter-intuitive and counter-productive. How can disabled and demoralized civil service systems be expected to resolve problems that transcend national borders and which involve forces and interests that are often larger than nation-states? We suspect that long-term solutions to such crises as population migrations, deadly communicable diseases, malnutrition, income maldistribution, terrorism, and stateless crime syndicates can only be found through the cooperation and collaboration of governments. Private corporations and non-governmental entities (NGOs) simply do not have the motivation, the capability, or the legitimacy to respond effectively. At the heart of every government's ability to participate in this mutual campaign will be reliable, competent, and professional civil services. To expect otherwise is to embark upon a fantasy that would make even Pollyanna blush.

But, by the same token, globalization's knack for diffusing ideas and managerial innovations provides a more positive side to the bleak picture that has been painted here thus far. Good ideas travel quickly, just as bad ones sometimes do. One of the remarkable characteristics of global trends in HRM is the extent to which many nations are already experimenting with techniques and strategies that are intended to slow some of the bleeding within their civil service systems. Although clearly a stop-gap measure, the use of temporary, contingent, and part-time employees to fill gaping holes in their staffing systems is a widespread practice in such countries as Great Britain, Sweden, and Germany (Osterman, 1988). More sophisticated strategies aimed at improving the utilization of human resources are evident in the frequent application of rank-in-person career systems and pay for performance programs (both of which can admittedly be criticized as easily as they are praised). Flexible career systems that enable agencies to move their managers from job to job according to their talents and abilities are now fixtures in Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and (of course) the United States (see Ingraham, 1996: 302–307). Merit pay—a

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centerpiece in the struggle to motivate civil servants while also holding them accountable for goal accomplishment—has spread like wildfire. At one time or another in the recent past, Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Ireland, Great Britain, Japan, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, and Sweden have experimented with varying approaches to pay for performance. Although the record is mixed, there is at least one international example in which very high levels of employee satisfaction are reported with their pay-for-performance system, The Netherlands (OECD, 1999). One would expect that, should reports of the Netherlands success story be accurate, other countries will soon begin emulating any transportable components of the reform.

In effect, then, globalization appears to be both a cause of many problems within the world's civil service systems, and a potential avenue for improvement. Given the critical role that we have hypothesized for professionalized bureaucracies in the struggle to combat super-national crises, only one conclusion is logical. Specifically, human resource managers in "reformed" civil service systems are searching for more effective ways of dealing with the realities of NPM and its aftermath. And, because there *is* such a rapid convergence of management trends in the industrialized nations, we can expect useful innovations to spread rapidly when the conditions are right. Human resource managers everywhere are being asked "to do more with less," to motivate employees under highly stressful circumstances, and to engineer inexpensive improvements in the operation of their staffing, compensation, and employee retention systems. Therefore, one of the major manifestations of globalization—the tendency of governments to borrow useful ideas—might present one of the few valuable opportunities available to HRM in an otherwise turbulent and tense environment.

HRM best practices: potential tools in the struggle to stay afloat during globalization

The remainder of this essay is devoted to an overview of the HRM "best practices" that might help the international community restore some vitality to civil service systems. Minimally, the techniques and strategies that are discussed can permit public agencies to do a more effective job of competing with the private sector for valuable human resources. Ironically, *many* of the technical tools that are mentioned stem from long-standing practices in private industry. Only recently have government agencies been given the flexibility (or perhaps the incentive) to import reform ideas from international corporations. By now, however, almost all of the reform programs being implemented in public agencies have simply been borrowed from the private sector. As such, few of them are novel or truly innovative. Their chief attraction is the fact that one or more public jurisdictions have proven that they "work" in the governmental setting.

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For the most part, the experiences that are reported here arise from state and local governments in the United States. This focus is in no way intended to imply that admirable personnel practices are confined within American borders. Indeed, United States managers no doubt have much to learn from their European and Asian counterparts (see Rowat, 1988). Our reliance on American examples is dictated by the fact that this account of HRM best practices stems from a comprehensive study funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The objective of that research was to determine what, if any, HRM innovations are taking place in American jurisdictions that might aid in the battle to recruit, retain, motivate, and reward workers in human and social service agencies. Approximately 85 best practice sites were identified. Although many of the reforms being employed in the jurisdictions overlap (i.e., the same idea appears and reappears thanks to intra-national diffusion), there are some truly unique programs that can hopefully serve as models for personnel managers in many settings, both national and international. The major reform initiatives are organized according to four major categories: role and structure of the OHR, employee recruitment, retention and quality of working life, and performance appraisal/compensation.

Role and structure of the Human Resource Office (OHR)

The reliance upon private sector strategies for managing human resources is nowhere more evident than in the recent attention that has been paid in the public administration literature to the so-called "IBM model." As the name implies, this approach to organizing and operating the OHR is credited to IBM, but the concept has spread throughout most large corporations. It is just now beginning to make inroads into public agencies in the United States. The most notable example is the state of South Carolina, which was recently recognized by *Governing Magazine* as the most highly ranked state on the basis of its HRM system. A huge measure of that rating is attributable to the thoroughness with which the IBM model has been integrated into personnel management in that state.

Consistent with practices in merit systems throughout much of the world, public OHRs are often criticized for emphasizing rules and procedures (control functions) over other objectives. Wallace Sayre offered the classic statement of this phenomenon in 1948 when he coined the famous criticism that HRM represents "the triumph of technique over purpose" (Sayre, 1948). The IBM model redresses this imbalance by redefining what a "personnel department" ought to be. Instead of a centralized control unit that polices the organization's line managers, the new OHR is far more organic. The traditional domination of specialists—classifiers, benefit counselors, recruiters, etc.—is replaced with a *generalist* focus in which the personnel operatives are cross-trained into jacks-of-all-trades. Most operational decisions, if not all, are decentralized to the agency

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level. To keep the proponents of privatization happy, this format also allows public agencies to outsource some of the routine personnel functions such as testing and recruiting. The remaining HRM practitioners essentially assume the role of organizational consultants. As applied in South Carolina, every state agency is assigned a consultant from the central OHR. That person works with the agency's indigenous personnel department as an advisor and expert resource, not as an enforcer of rules. Together the consultant and agency representatives (HRM and/or line managers) work out solutions to such problems as employee retention, labor-management disputes, workforce planning, and quality of work life enhancements. Obviously, the OHR's role has been redefined from control to service, and from policeman to ally.

According to one author, this emerging organizational model looks ''like a three-legged stool'' (Johnson, 1999: 44). The first leg contains all of the old specializations that remain, except that they are conceived as a ''service center'' that processes paperwork efficiently and assists line managers with their technical human resource needs. The second leg is a ''center for excellence'' that is responsible for training, employee development, and other long-range strategies to enhance organizational performance. The final leg consists of a pool of generalists (''business partners'' in the language of the private sector) who provide the consultative services mentioned above. Interestingly, the South Carolina OHR has an internal structure that closely mimics Johnson's characterization. A training and employee development center augments the consultant staff and designs educational programs tailored to employee groups with varying needs (e.g., to keep up with technological change, to prepare some workers for eventual promotion, or to increase their skill levels so as to improve efficiency). Because the IBM model is a common fixture in the corporate world (it is used in such high-profile companies as Siemens, BMW, and Honda), the international community does not lack for both private and public sector examples for reinvigorating their personnel functions.

Another notable reform site is Sacramento County, California. That jurisdiction's contribution to the knowledge base in HRM is the proactive way in which it has pursued change. Specifically, a unique team of full-time employees was created within the OHR to systematically study the county's problems, investigate alternative solutions (including a major research effort that involved over 60 site visits of their own), and make policy recommendations to the governing body. Various elements of the program include regular employee attitude surveys, suggestion awards, and the vetting of proposals before all employees. The policy analysis group (as it is generally known) has successfully gained approval for and implemented initiatives involving tuition reimbursement for county employees, a revised labor-management negotiation protocol, and compensation reform. In the latter case, the county was struggling with the need to hire and retain employees with 91 different language capabilities (obviously, due to a very diverse population). Court reporters, police, EMS, and other public agencies required at least one worker with a facility in each language. Through an

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innovative approach to skill-based pay, much higher compensation can now be provided to retain workers with rare abilities (language or otherwise).

Examples such as these reflect the fact that human resource managers can, when sufficiently motivated and empowered, alter the *modus operandi* of their entire profession. The first step in fashioning meaningful civil service reform that can help to counteract the worst fallout from NPM is to internalize a proactive organizational role for HRM. Whether through structural, procedural, or behavioral changes, personnel practitioners need to find ways to make themselves relevant. The IBM model, the adoption of a consultative orientation, and/or the aggressive pursuit of a reform agenda can all help redress some of the shortcomings that plague civil service systems in many industrialized countries. These are not ''solutions,'' but they are intermediate steps that are worth serious consideration.

Recruitment innovations

The lion's share of attention to HRM reform in the past decade has been devoted to improving government's ability to attract workers in high-demand fields. A notorious example is information technology (IT), but the dilemma extends to nurses, social workers, teachers, engineers, scientists, and innumerable other professions, depending upon the country or region being discussed. For this obvious reason, the array of best practices affecting the staffing function is both broad and diverse. This diversity does not preclude a rather basic categorization of the reforms into two broad classes: those aimed at making public personnel systems more responsive to applicants and those using specific measures borrowed directly from the private sector.

Greater staffing flexibility. One of the most legendary traits of public personnel systems is their user-*un*friendly nature. To an individual pursuing a public sector job, the application process often seems like a bureaucratic maze that is intended to discourage rather than attract employees. The process can be complicated by infrequently administered tests, narrowly defined job classifications, lengthy delays in appointment, restrictive interview requirements, and time-consuming authorization and approval periods. To make a long story short, public sector recruitment programs are often pathetically slow and inadequate.

A truly impressive range of reforms has been implemented in numerous locations to loosen up the staffing function. Following the lead of the private sector, paper and pencil examinations are rapidly disappearing. Some jurisdictions have eliminated them altogether, while others only use ''merit exams'' for very narrow classes of jobs. Relatedly, the old days of ''single point of entry'' recruitment are just about over. Instead of requiring applicants to seek employment through a centralized office that screens everyone, the recruitment function has been delegated to line agencies in virtually every progressive state

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and local personnel system. Other developments of this kind include the expansion or elimination of the rule of three (thereby allowing the appointing authority to interview a larger number of qualified applicants), selective certification (agencies can quickly hire workers with special skills), and outreach programs that aggressively solicit applications from certain groups (Hays and Kearney, 2001). One interesting example of an outreach effort that has attracted national acclaim is the program in Maricopa County, Arizona. Via fax, e-mail, and telephone calls, the OHR in that county automatically notifies all non-profit agencies in the jurisdiction about job openings as soon as they become known. The idea is to provide instantaneous information about job opportunities to citizens with special needs (indigents, handicapped, etc.). In so doing, the county is tapping a labor pool that is often ignored, yet which is eager to seek public employment.

Borrowing from the private sector. In addition to alleviating the merit system's case of bureaucratic constipation, a few public agencies have liberally applied recruitment strategies that have proven to be successful in business and industry. These include (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2001):

- The continuous acceptance of applications from job candidates, whether or not a particular opening has been declared.
- On-the-spot hiring by which a recruiter can offer highly qualified applicants a job without any administrative delay.
- Signing bonuses for workers in high-demand fields such as IT or nursing.
- Heavy reliance upon on-line applications, including the use of ''paperless'' applications.
- Increased use of resume databases.
- Expanded use of brochures, toll-free numbers, and other outreach techniques that portray government as a desirable and aggressive employer.
- Salary bonuses and longevity pay that are exclusively targeted at retaining valued workers.
- Employee referrals are used to identify and pursue potential employees; the referring workers can qualify for cash payments when the individuals they recommend actually accept jobs with the agency (this is a tactic used by over 90% of private companies, which makes it the most common *and* effective recruitment measure in business and industry).
- Walk-in testing.
- Low-interest or no-interest mortgage loans are provided to workers who agree to stay for a given period of time.
- The use of private ''head hunter'' firms, or even the formation of their own internal search firms, has been authorized in some cities, counties, and states.

One additional strategy deserves special attention. Within some job classes, the biggest problem is not attracting employees but *keeping them* beyond the first few days or weeks. Especially where the working conditions are unduly

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stressful and/or unpleasant, nearly half of all newly arrived workers quit within two months. Another fact that is not widely known is that workers who remain in a job—no matter how unpleasant—for three years are very likely to stay in that position for an extremely long period of time. The ''trick,'' therefore, is to find some way for workers to pre-select themselves.

This puzzle has been solved to a large extent in the state of North Carolina, at least in some job categories. There are two primary components of the program, which can be thought of as a ''grow your own'' strategy for recruitment. First, paid internships are used to attract college students to the positions that are most difficult to fill (the classic example is child abuse caseworkers). This allows the students to become gradually adjusted to the demands of the job, and to determine whether or not it is a suitable career option. Although most interns quickly elect to pursue alternative paths, those that stay for one or two years provide the labor pool from which new workers are hired. The second strategy is more sophisticated and expensive. Rather than using internships, college students are recruited for jobs before receiving their undergraduate degrees, and then offered a free education when they pursue a graduate professional diploma (Master of Social Work, Master of Public Health, Master of Criminal Justice, etc.). The *quid pro quo* is that, by accepting the financial assistance, these students obligate themselves to work in the designated job categories for a certain period (usually three years). Because workers who pass a certain threshold of time in a job are most likely to make that field their permanent career, the ''grow your own'' approach has been a spectacular success (Coggburn and Hays, 2003).

In sum, public agencies are not completely defenseless in the struggle to compete for workers. Many of the strategies that have been listed here are virtually cost free, yet they are not very widely used even in the United States. We can only assume (hope?) that, as the pressures upon civil service systems build, the willingness to embrace these types of innovations will intensify.

Retention and quality of working life

A truism of public employment is that few individuals are in it for the money. Financial rewards are certainly important to all of us, but most civil servants are presumably motivated in part by intrinsic factors. It is difficult to imagine how government could otherwise attract teachers, military personnel, law enforcement officers, fire personnel, social workers, and dozens of other occupations that require an unusual level of commitment without a corresponding degree of compensation. The intrinsic rewards of public service were thought to be greater at one time than they are now. As pressures for accountability have grown, and as the public mood toward the civil service has darkened, there is little inherent gratification in many jobs that were once revered almost as a calling. In the stressful environment of NPM, along with recurrent attacks by the media and

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politicians, civil servants can expect their intrinsic rewards to be few and far between. Compounding this dilemma is the pervasive culture of deprivation that characterizes public agencies in many locations. Understaffed, overworked, with inadequate support services, and often located in grim and dilapidated settings, public employees have to look long and hard to find much satisfaction through their jobs.

Due to this depressing state of affairs, a considerable amount of energy has been invested in the search for inexpensive ways to improve the quality of work life for civil servants. This goal is widely viewed as an imperative, since worker retention *and* job satisfaction are thought to be directly correlated with the intrinsic qualities of jobs. Although no panaceas have been found, there has certainly been a great deal of experimentation in this area. Most of the strategies are so well known that they do not warrant extensive coverage here. Scheduling innovations (e.g., flextime), telecommuting, the use of exit interviews to identify problem areas, regular job satisfaction surveys, employee assistance programs (EAPs), mentoring programs, and thousands of variations of employee recognition programs (e.g., plaques, small cash awards, parties) pervade the practice of public management today. Letting staff know they are appreciated has become almost a fixture in public agencies that have few other ways to enrich their workers' jobs. The effects of such programs are nearly impossible to gauge, but their popularity suggests that they are worth the effort that is being expended.

A more concrete approach to worker retention is to engage in a concerted program of career management, succession planning, and employee development. This approach is predicated on the notion that workers will be motivated to stay when they perceive their employer as an interested party in their career development efforts. By investing time and energy in helping workers to refine their talents so as to enhance their chances for promotion, organizations gain several advantages. They improve the quality of the workforce, ensure a ready supply of promotion-worthy talent, assist workers in addressing skill deficiencies, and reap the rewards of greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Model programs of this type exist in Phoenix, Arizona and Rochester, New York.

One final strategy for improving worker morale has attracted the most attention from NPM proponents but seems to be most seldom used in the real world. Empowering workers through delegated and participatory decision-making is one of the pillars of NPM, yet a century of management practice indicates that this is not an easy goal to accomplish. There are very few best practice sites in which anything approaching worker empowerment can be said to exist. The closest example might be the city of Durham, North Carolina. In that location, the city manager earnestly tries to use a form of collaborative decision-making in which administrative priorities, hires, and most other important matters are resolved in a collective (or at least participatory) fashion. A different approach is used in Rochester, where workers are authorized to reengineer their own jobs as a means of maximizing their talents and improving morale. Individuals looking for models of this type might also be interested Santa Clara County, California. By

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flattening the hierarchy and nurturing an open and supportive organizational culture, the county has achieved an unusual level of worker participation.

Because powerful unions are far more evident in most European and Asian countries than in the United States, there is another best practice that offers greater potential abroad. Researchers have argued for many years (Kearney and Hays, 1994) that the quickest path to true worker empowerment is through labor organization. Labor-management committees, productivity bargaining, "win-win" (consensus) negotiations, and other forms of labor-management cooperation provide an institutional means of empowering workers without having to rely upon the good offices of managers who might find a decentralized workplace threatening. Even in the adversarial American work setting, there are several startling success stories where worker empowerment has been realized as an offshoot of the labor-management process. The states of Wisconsin and California both have made significant investments in forging collaborative relations that are reaping huge benefits. Local government examples also exist, such as in Marion County, Oregon (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2001). With the head start that they already enjoy in dealing with unionized labor forces, many industrialized nations already enjoy an institutional framework that can be harnessed to make worker empowerment more of a reality.

Performance appraisal and compensation

As was noted above, a laundry list of industrialized nations have made attempts to tie public employee pay to objective measures of their output. Merit pay (pay for performance) has been an incredibly elusive goal of government managers since the very beginning of the managerialism movement (Perry, 2003). Obstacles standing in the path of effective merit pay systems include inadequate funding, ambiguous measures of objectives and outcomes, and woefully inadequate systems of employee appraisal. While no one has yet come up with the complete solution to these impediments, advances in the technology of performance assessment and career management offer hope that a breakthrough is near. Perhaps the most glowing example of an effective approach to performance evaluation is offered in the state of Washington. By implementing a collaborative goal setting phase at the beginning of the evaluation cycle, tailoring each assessment to the worker's job requirements, and building in frequent inter-term planning sessions, the level of worker satisfaction with their evaluation process has been transformed. Whereas the evaluation process was the single biggest source of worker *dissatisfaction* prior to reform, the new system has generated satisfaction rates exceeding 97% (a phenomenon that is almost shocking, given the problems that public managers have endured with traditional evaluation approaches).

A related piece of the compensation puzzle is the fact that public personnel systems are often too rigid to permit meaningful salary adjustments. Similarly, managers have little flexibility when making decisions about starting salaries, or

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in the allocation of job assignments that might bring workers greater financial rewards. These shortcomings are amenable to a disarmingly simple solution, should the personnel system designers be willing to surrender some measure of control and/or if powerful unions can be cajoled into trusting the management cadre. As has been exhaustively discussed in the American PA literature (Stevens, 1995), the broad banding of job classifications provides instantaneous flexibility for those who are intrepid enough to use it. The technique calls for narrow job classifications to be collapsed into much broader groups, and for the corresponding pay grades to expand accordingly. This leaves a system in which only (perhaps) ten or twelve pay bands encompass all of a jurisdiction's employees, who are placed in generically labeled positions that permit them to be reassigned with relative ease. Thanks to highly successful experiments with broad banding in *many* United States jurisdictions (e.g., state of South Carolina; city of Greensboro, North Carolina; Maricopa County, Arizona), the technique has a proven track record. If combined with new technologies of evaluation—such as the Washington State system, or the 360-degree approach in which workers are assessed by peers, subordinates, and even clients—"broadbanding" may be one of the most influential HRM trends of the new century.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion provides only a quick overview of the range of HRM reforms that are being aggressively pursued in disparate locations throughout the United States and, notably, parts of Europe (Ingraham, 1996). We are not so naïve to assume that these measures can single-handedly resolve the plight of civil service systems that have been ravaged by years of inattention and/or attack. But, to paraphrase a mantra of one revered American organizational theorist, W. Edwards Deming, organizations that do what they have always done will always get what it is they have always gotten. The validity of this observation has already led many public administrators to seek new strategies for dealing with the increased demands of the publics they serve. Given that some of these measures have already worked successfully in industrialized nations, the natural assumption is that they might work equally as well within a broader national and international setting. The convergence of management thought that is propelled partly by the forces of globalization will hopefully sew the seeds of civil service reform broadly across those nations in which comparable initiatives are compatible.

The function of HRM is one that has valiantly tried to adapt to the pressures placed upon it by an ever more demanding public. Its success or failure in meeting today's challenges is important not only to this field but also to others affected by the same or similar forces. Public support for the provision of government services is influenced by perceptions of efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. A program, then, could face elimination not only because the public no longer believes it is necessary, but because the public does not believe

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it can be delivered effectively and efficiently. Anyone who believes in the provision of services in pursuit of the public good would want to see programs eliminated because they had outlived their useful life and not because the administrators in charge failed due to ineffectual HRM systems or demoralized civil servants.

In some ways, we perceive the current efforts to reform HRM as a battle for the survival of professional civil service systems. While they may have their failings, we do not believe that worldwide problems can be addressed successfully without the active (if not instrumental) involvement of a professional and respected corps of government employees. Restoring a measure of confidence in the legitimate role of the civil service is therefore a basic element in nations' efforts to deal with the challenges of globalization. Viewed in this manner, even the search for mere "technical fixes" is a worthy and noble endeavor.

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