

Professionalisation of HRM in Great Britain

John Berridge

Manchester School of Management
University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology
Manchester, England

RESUME

The development of the occupation of personnel management in Britain has been greatly influenced, as in other countries, by the social, cultural and economic factors prevalent in the world of work during its formative period. The occupation initially grew up as a practitioner-led activity, characterised by autodidacts, who owed allegiance primarily to management. But it was subsequently taken over in its early evolutionary stages by two groups of persons. First, these were the enlightened philanthropists, often imbued with notions of Christian moral philosophy. Secondly, there were refugees from social work, who saw employment as an eminently-suitable area for their zeal in striving toward a more liberal and humanistic society. Both groups were predisposed through their socio-economic origins and intellectual training to seek a normative model for the emerging occupation of personnel management, as an antidote to entrepreneurial pragmatism and opportunism.

The model which was readily available was that of the self-regulating profession, which holds a singularly dominant position in the Anglo-Saxon social hierarchy if not even occupational demonology. The state had adopted its customary post-nineteenth century role of abstinence from its potential functions of definition of the occupational domain, of training and licensing, or of regulation. The nascent professional body (the Institute of Personnel Management - IPM) took upon itself the function of acting as the qualifying association, exercising occupational control, and representing the practitioners in economic and political forums. This role was not unique in the expert business occupations, having been already played by accountants and administrators, and being developed at the same time as the IPM by marketers, purchasing managers and operations managers alike.

The model, however hallowed by time and the acquisition of privilege and influence, was formulated on earlier ideal-typical models of the independent and liberal professions -- such as found in medicine, law and architecture, as well as among engineers and accountants among the employee so-called professionals. The paper examines the implications and dysfunctions of this occupational-professional model in the context of changing business philosophies, economic conditions, and social definitions of the legitimacy of occupational power. It delineates the impact of HRM notions and practices upon the model, and offers some suggestions for future occupational structural patterns for the people-management function which could evolve in the future within a structural-functional framework or within a more radical future scenario.

The development of the occupation of personnel management and subsequently, human resource management in Britain has been greatly influenced, as in other countries, by the social cultural and economic factors prevalent in the world of work during its formative period. The occupation initially grew up as a practitioner-led activity, characterised by autodidacts, who owed allegiance primarily to management. But it was subsequently taken over in its early evolutionary stages by two groups of persons. First, these were the enlightened philanthropists, often imbued with notions of Christian moral philosophy. Secondly, it was alternative social work, with employment as an eminently-suitable area for striving toward a more liberal

and humanistic society. Both groups were predisposed through their socio-economic origins and intellectual training to seek a normative model for the emerging occupation of personnel management, as a counterpoise to entrepreneurial pragmatism and opportunism.

The occupational association for personnel and human resource management in Britain which grew from these origins is the Institute of Personnel Management (or IPM). For over 75 years it has held a dominant position over practitioners and academics alike.

This paper, without belittling its past achievements or present standing looks critically at the IPM as a model for the organisation of an advanced business specialism within the context of the social, economic and political systems of Britain and Europe. It examines the IPM's definition and operationalisation of profession, professionalisation and professionalism, and suggests future forms of organisation and activity which could be suited to emerging demands in the next century. It is not the intention in this paper to posit the British professional model of HRM as ideal, nor indeed to subject it to comparative analysis with alternative occupational models from other countries. Neither does the article move outside a structural-functional analysis of the personnel profession, although more radical approaches represent a rich and stimulating area of critical study in the sociology of the professions.

During the whole period of its existence through different phases, the IPM has had no real rival in the practitioner or academic world and so its commanding position (IPM, 1992) had enabled it by 1992 to:

- °have a membership of almost 50,000
- °create a country-wide coverage of colleges offering its courses
- °have an impressive system of administration and governance for its activities
- °possess an asset base of about £6.7 million
- °operate a fully-dispersed network of some 50 very active local branches
- °offer a range of specialist services including courses and training
- °provide an excellent library and information service
- °organise an impressive three-day annual national conference with 2000 delegates alongside a dazzling exhibition attracting over 5000 personnel staff
- °represent the personnel voice with government and at EC and international levels and
- °provide the secretariat in London for the European Association for Personnel Management (EAPM)
- °publish the largest list (around 150 titles) of personnel and HRM books in Britain
- °edit a well-informed and best-selling monthly magazine [Personnel Management] which disseminates information, norms of practice and popularised research.

The IPM has passed through a number of distinct stages since its foundation in 1913, as an informal practitioner group concerned with industrial welfare. By 1931 it had formalised itself into the Institute of Labour Management with unitarist implications. In 1946, it became the Institute of Personnel Management, meeting the needs of practitioners and personnel managers in tackling operational problems. Increasingly from the 1970s onwards, it has adopted a more expert-professional stance, encouraging the creation of a conceptually-based corpus of knowledge, publication and research. This shift aligned the IPM with the peculiarly Anglo-Saxon model of the profession, as an organisational-institutional ideal form to which any occupation may aspire. This model's origins are in the nineteenth century organisation of the liberal independent professions, notably medicine, law and architecture (Carr-Saunders, 1933). Later the model was

adopted by the technological occupations, such as engineering and accounting. In the twentieth century, it has been sought by those in other occupational areas such as science, social work and the many functional areas of business and public administration - including personnel management.

The concept of profession has a powerful place in Anglo-Saxon culture (including that of the US) as a:- "higher grade, non-manual occupation, with both objectively and subjectively recognised occupational status, possessing a well-defined area of study or concern, and providing a definite service after advanced training or education" (Millerson, 1964:10)

It is qualitatively different from the general body of occupations and in the case of many of the new business-related professions, it is far from the wider European model of the "liberal, free professions", since it is often employer-dominated, technologically driven and anathematic to radicalism in its practice or wider orientations (Johnson, 1972). In the restricted Anglo-Saxon terminology, profession is a major determinant of social status, if not of economic status, although frequently the two are conflated in a wider analysis which includes dimensions of power (Freidson, 1973). The profession in Britain, far from being viewed as a meritocratic means of social mobility, has often been viewed as another instance of social stratification, since access to professional training has been influenced by social class, informal networks or by limitations on educational opportunity.

Nevertheless, for practitioners, the advantages of Anglo-Saxon professionalisation are varied, including self-regulation and protection (sometimes statutory) of the occupational area and its practice, control of entry and advancement, and definition of the occupational knowledge.

Outside the occupation, the advantages are high social prestige and power, public acceptance and, of course, considerable financial security. In Britain, the state conspicuously abstains from intervening in the affairs of professional associations (Larson, 1977) - unlike trade unions whose activities were constrained by five major acts of Parliament between 1980 and 1990 alone. So in Britain professional associations have considerable powers over occupational labour markets, in terms of defining their size, nature, internal configuration (e.g. dispersion between senior and junior ranks, use of technology, or the role of supporting sub-professionals), entry criteria, training, licensing and regulation - and more controversially, exclusion criteria (McClelland, 1991), for instance, in respect of ethnicity, gender or socio-economic origins. The state in essence, cedes the determination and codification of the occupational practice to the occupational body.

In turn, this body often decides on a considerable degree of professional and organisational indeterminacy in the long Anglo-Saxon tradition of pragmatism (Jamous and Peloille, 1970).

Not surprisingly, the IPM has purposively sought professional status, along with the other business and administrative functional specialisms, by the route of becoming the institutional-qualifying association for personnel management. The institutional-qualifying association combines two linked sets of ideal-typical occupational definitions: institutional (Hickson and Thomas (1969), and qualifying (Millerson, 1964). Both definitions differentiate between occupations by means of their characteristics, and both have been demonstrated to have considerable operational cogency.

The institutional model shows a correlation between objectively- and subjectively-accorded status of professional bodies and possession of defined attributes in large number. The highest-status professional bodies (especially in medicine) possess almost all of the characteristics.

As can be seen in Table 1 (see page 47), the IPM has purposively structured itself to meet many of the characteristics required to achieve high status in the institutional professional model. Negative ratings are shown however on three dimensions and queries raised on several others: all of these aspects relate to the external environments which may not be so benign to the IPM as its own internal environments. The question may legitimately be raised whether status acquired purposively as a result of such internal action is as valid as that externally accorded. In the same vein, one may ask whether such initiatives benefit either the clients (employees and employers) or are in the interests of society, or whether the balance of benefit could be argued to be in favour of individual IPM members in terms of salary, prestige and organisational power.

The qualifying association model represents an ideal type set of characteristics towards which many of the employee-professional occupations have directed their efforts, including accountancy, engineering, social work and healthcare sciences. It de-emphasises the institutional aspects of organisational structures and procedures, and gives more weight to knowledge, skills, testing and occupational socialisation. On such criteria (see Table 2 on page 47), the IPM can be evaluated to have met substantially all the criteria, thereby demonstrating itself to be in the mainstream of current patterns of occupational specialisation. This professional model bestows on the IPM a parity of status, training and orientations along with the other professionalising business specialties, thereby helping with occupational acceptance and smoothing relations with other functional experts within organisations. But it also in its turn raises issues of the value schemas of IPM members, for instance, their frame of reference for their activities (employing organisation or professional association) and loyalty (professional colleagues or management team).

Undoubtedly, there were in the past persuasive arguments for the IPM to follow the institutional-qualifying model. In the 1960s there still was the optimism that professional models would enable employee-professionals to humanise employment in a world of expanding resources, as well as of low and relatively predictable rates and patterns of environmental

change. In British industry of the 1970s, characterised by conflict to an extreme extent, the IPM's increasing professionalism offered the hope of peace with justice through the personnel manager's expert knowledge, mediation skills, and impartial independence of advice. The personnel function sought for itself a consultant and advisory role, above the politics and the wheeling-dealing of conflict, which could be left to and progressed by less-punctilious line managers. As professionals, personnel managers sought to distance themselves from the business activities of the enterprise, and to develop their specialty even further. In progressively more bitter and damaging labour conflicts, they wished to be regarded as independent specialists, giving their services equally to management and to the workforce. The large volume of the IPM's publication activities at the time often took a prescriptive and idealistic stance toward problems, formulating best practice upon the increasing body of theory. So it was unsurprising that professional personnel managers sought to become ever more professional in their behaviour, and reciprocally, that boards of directors and executives felt alienated from the professional objectives that their personnel managers were pursuing (Davies, 1983).

In the 1980s, the institutional-qualifying professional model of the IPM was increasingly beset with wide-ranging and fundamental difficulties. Challenges, both within organisations and within the IPM itself, occurred on many fronts:-

(a) Managerial: with increasingly bitter and important incidence of workforce conflict, line (and even general) management took a more active role in tackling and resolving disputes. Since personnel managers were showing distaste for a "hands-on" role, aligned closely with assertions of managerial authority, as a consequence they found themselves marginalised by line managers in handling disputes. Managers wanted answers, not best professional advice. Even worse, a tendency arose to transfer non-personnel managers to be placed in charge of the function, often for reasons of strengthening its resolve and business orientation. Employment and progression prospects of IPM members with high professional values were thus diminished.

(b) Political: the election of the Conservative administration of 1979 brought into power politicians who were pledged to break the power of unions, both for ideological reasons and as part of economic strategy. The subsequent steady torrent of legislation was aimed at increasing managerial power and rolling back unions and had to be implemented at enterprise level by the personnel manager. The professional values of even-handedness, altruism and best impartial service to the workforce individually and collectively were severely strained by new legislation which allowed companies far greater powers of dismissal, strike-prevention and opposition, union derecognition, locally and unilaterally-determined wages and many other issues. Again the professionally-advocated values and behaviours were at variance with those which were legally-permissible and demanded by business imperatives as seen by top management. The credibility of IPM's professional stance was thus weakened further.

c) Economic: the several recessions of the early 1980s and 1990s (still deepening) struck at personnel activities, in particular by making them responsible for dealing with wide-spread redundancies, transfers, outplacements, redeployment, and restructurings. All these economically-driven activities were pervaded with negative sentiments of individual hardship and trauma, and they hardly accorded with the humanistic, developmental ideal of personnel professionals. Such downsizing was also directly damaging to IPM members' ideals and employment prospects.

d) Human resource management: in the mid-1980s, this reformulation of the philosophies, activities and emphases in the management of people arrived in Britain from the US. It resulted from a combination of influences, including internationalisation, Japanisation, new technology, entrepreneurialism, excellence and quality notions; it was linked to corporate strategy, and was planning and data-driven, emphasising performance and results outcomes as the criteria for reward. These activities, again, were antithetical to the traditional professional values of the IPM, and a keen debate took place in the IPM before a *modus vivendi* was reached between the two ideologies. But many senior practitioners still remain unreconstructed old-style personnel professionals.

The impact of all these changes upon the professional role at the level of the enterprise was that the would-be independent-professional personnel manager was no longer able to distance her or himself from the enterprise's business activities (Shapiro, 1985). But instead they had to become an integral part of the business team, adopting a business results logic, rather than the external referent of the IPM's statement of objectives, formal mission or codes of conduct. It was the rational, unitary, goal-seeking business model which became dominant rather than the professional model (Oppenheimer 1973) and the importance of people skills became mixed with the importance of business and organisational skills - the newly-rebuilt HRM professional wanted to stay in business.

At the level of the IPM itself, on the surface, no crisis of occupational and professional functionality appeared. Membership rose continually, especially that of students; publications abounded and a major new thrust of commissioned research went ahead; conferences sparkled - but more and more members were becoming unemployed. But by 1991, the large institutional edifice of the IPM was beginning to show organisational and functional strains.

e) Administration and Finance: in 1991, the IPM's asset base declined by £1 million (-12, 5%), it lost operationally £1.9 million, in 1992 £1.4 million, in spite of making many redundancies, and simplifying its professional committee structures to a modified system of working groups. Deficits are expected to continue for some years, thus querying the viability of the complex structure of the institutional professional model.

f) Professional Education and Development: the structure, pedagogic methods and modes of delivery of

the IPM's professional education programmes came under criticism from the late 1980s, in spite of new ventures such as continuing professional development, and a Flexible Learning open programme. Firstly, a major overhaul of management education driven by management, the Management Charter Initiative (MCI) sought to introduce as the criterion of achievement, the possession of competencies at the output stage, rather than knowledge at the input stage. This initiative ran counter to much of research-based traditional professional education. When the new governmental agency, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) criticised the IPM's traditionalism and threw its weight behind the assessment of skills, workplace-based competencies and a common base of capability for management, the IPM had little choice but to accept this highly pragmatic, job-related method of assessment, which is far removed from the qualifying association ideal of advanced specialist knowledge based on a corpus of fundamental disciplines and research. But obtaining agreement in the Personnel Standards Lead Body (responsible for defining what are professional personnel competencies) proved equally problematic in methodology and substance, among practitioners and educators [Holmes 1992].

Other aspects could be cited of dysfunctional phenomena in the equation of the institutional-qualifying association professional model with the current situation and practice of personnel/HRM in organisations. But the six sectors of discongruity mentioned above give rise to questions over the appropriateness of the IPM's current role, in conditions which are very different from those which existed when the model was adopted some twenty-five to thirty years ago. This potential mismatch is the subject of the concluding section of the paper.

The future configuration, nature and values of an occupational association for HRM need to be teased out from a number of tangled strands. For an occupational area of employee professionals, is the traditional institutional-qualifying association model well-adapted to the needs of practitioners, of clients, of employers, or of society? In a structural-functionalist perspective, it would need to represent the most suitable form to satisfy all these legitimate needs.

The evidence adduced in this paper suggests that while it may have been so in the past, shifts in the environments have been substantial, and the unwieldy, expensive, restrictive and static structural nature of the IPM will need to adapt to survive. Can simple, flexible, cheap-to-run, non-prescriptive structures and procedures meet the external demands, and still fulfil the traditional professional qualifying role for personnel? Or is the monolithic professional association outmoded in new more individualised society? Is the concept of employee professionalism for the IPM so retrospective to former bureaucracies that it can never be viable in a flexible disaggregated future? Is the degree of overlap between personnel and line management activities under HRM so great that a distinctive occupation of personnel is superfluous? Is the concept of the institutional profession, with its structural-functional collective mind-set, so embedded in practitioners that they are incapable of adapting their occupational role image?

It could be that the advent of HRM has spot-lighted one key issue - the fact that people management is business management.

On that basis, is the narrow sectionalism of the IPM not inimical to, or restrictive of good management? Perhaps the way forward is not in ever more-narrowly professional HRM, but in ever more-integrated HRM. Not only at the level of practice, but also in the education and skills training for practitioners, linkages could be sought with line management. This could represent a single Institute of Management, with many discrete yet inter-connected specialities, possessing a widely-drawn corpus of management knowledge, a common approach to skills and competencies - yet recognising the specific role, competencies and knowledge of each managerial specialism including HRM. The wide scope could ensure wide abilities; the heterogenous membership yet unified training process could create a sense of business realities, but also specialist "chapters" could deliver specific expertise. Arguably the institutional-professional model has been historically overtaken by a new flexible business environment, which has revealed its economic and functional weaknesses as well as its institutional rigidities. But whether the tendency to sectionalism and schism, currently so fashionable in national politics, will reassert itself in occupational specialisations such as the IPM, is a matter for further projective research.

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	Criterion	Exists in IPM	Comment
1	Relevant work experience between completing exams and full membership	—	Two years' acceptable, verified work required
2	Up to three years' occupational training	?	Only applies for certain entrants, and may well not apply for graduates
3	Three-stage examination process	—	But initial examination stage may be not personnel-related
4	University entrance standard required of all entrants	—	With certain experiential exemptions and preliminary course provisions
5	Length of training up to five years	NO	Only if non-relevant degree studies and experience included
6	Organisational structure of eight or more specialist committees	—	These include education, membership, international, employee relations, etc.
7	Disciplinary processes with sanctions existing and used	—	Professional conduct general code and ten detailed codes; enforcement problematic
8	Explicit ethic of confidentiality, impartiality and altruism	—	Specified in codes, but conflicting loyalties may exist
9	Set fee scales for clients and no criticism of fellow-professionals	NO	Employers determine salaries, and business competition causes conflicts
10	Award of a Royal Charter, formally denoting official professional recognition	NO	Eagerly and actively sought; may entail further strengthening of above

Source: criteria adapted from Hickson and Thomas (1969)

Table 1: Extent of institutional professionalism of the IPM

	Criterion	Exists in IPM	Comments
1	Accepted corpus of professional knowledge based on fundamental disciplines and research	—	Purposive policy of publication from 1970s, and later research funding
2	Accepted, demonstrable skills of practitioners and defined area of expertise	—	Graduateship grade introduced, but exclusion of unqualified not achieved
3	Knowledge and competence both rigorously and impartially tested	—	Increasingly complex and demanding examination system and standards
4	Comprehensive professional code of conduct with operational enforcement methods	—	Codes of conduct as managers or consultants made more rigorous
5	Impartiality and altruism in the treatment of clients	—	Members sought to become advisers, mediators and arbitrators
6	Occupational association has advanced structure and processes	—	Complex divisional structure of officers and lay member committees introduced

Source: criteria adapted from Millerson (1964)

Table 2: Extent to which qualifying association criteria met by IPM