Institution: University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol
Unit of Assessment: 19 – Business and Management Studies
Title of case study: Recognising and supporting front-line managers in delivering effective people management

1. Summary of the impact

UWE research has informed the implementation of HR policy to support front-line managers more effectively in their role as people managers in diverse organisations (e.g. Selfridges, the Royal United Hospital, Bath, and the MOD). This research has provided empirical evidence that front-line managers (such as team leaders) are critical to organisational effectiveness and makes recommendations on the supportive conditions necessary to improve their behaviour in people management. It has also directly influenced the policies and learning materials of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, as well as advisory materials produced by ACAS, and a variety of public policy documents that have informed organisations' HR practice in supporting and developing front-line managers.

2. Underpinning research

The role of front-line managers (FLMs) in people management, has, until fairly recently, been a much neglected area of study. Sue Hutchinson (Principal Lecturer and then Associate Professor in HRM at the time of the research) has been involved in a range of projects in this area, most recently (since 2006) at the University of West of England (UWE). An earlier project she was involved in **'The impact of people management on organisational performance'** provided clear empirical evidence that, as 'HR agents', these line managers can influence employee attitudes and behaviours by the way in which they interpret and apply people management practices and show leadership. These first and middle level managers are in regular and close contact with employees, tend to have the bigger teams to manage in most organisations and thus wield the potential to have a significant impact on employees. They are thus vital to organisational success. The study also found that these managers were largely neglected in practice and in research.

Subsequent project work undertaken at UWE sought to understand the role of these managers, the factors that enable and inhibit FLMs in delivering effective performance and the skills, behaviours and environments that make FLMs effective. Since the role of FLMs is context specific, all of this research has been case-study based, covering organisations from a wide range of sectors and sizes. Organisations studied include Tesco, Selfridges, John Lewis, the MOD, PWC, DAS, Nationwide and a number of NHS Trusts. Sue Hutchinson has been the principal investigator in all of the projects undertaken since 2005/06, some of which transferred with her when she moved to UWE from the University of Bath.

This research shows that these managers are no longer traditional supervisors and have increasingly complex, and often ambiguous roles, with growing responsibilities particularly in the area of people management. Despite their important role they are frequently overlooked and often unsupported in organisations (Hutchinson and Purcell 2010) and blamed when strategies and policies fail to be implemented effectively. The research also reveals that line managers face considerable barriers in implementing their people management role. Common constraints include issues of role conflict, work overload, lack of appropriate skills and knowledge, inadequate training, pressure to focus on short-term priorities and poor motivation and commitment to embrace people management and lack of support from the HR function and senior managers (e.g. Purcell *et al.* 2009). Outputs from the research have focused on the practical implications in terms of what skills, behaviours and supportive conditions are necessary to make effective FLMs. The most recent project has extended this work to also examine the nature of the relationship between FLMs, the HR function and other support functions.

3. References to the research

Hutchinson, S and Purcell, J (2010) Managing ward managers for roles in HRM in the NHS: overworked and under-resourced. *Human Resource Management Journal* 20 (4). pp. 357-374. ISSN 0954-5395. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-8583.2010.00141.x

Hutchinson, S. and Purcell, J. (2007). *The role of line managers in reward, and training, learning and development*, Research Report: CIPD. http://www.cipd.co.uk/Bookstore/_catalogue/CorporateAndHRStrategy/9781843981954.htm

Hutchinson, S. and Purcell, J. (2008) *Front-line managers and the effective delivery of people management in the NHS*, Department of Health http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/bl/bbs/bbsresearch/cesr/cesrreports.aspx

Purcell, J. and Hutchinson, S (2007) *Rewarding work: the vital role of line managers*, CIPD http://www.cipd.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/72035864-98CD-495A-8CB9-96989B96E73C/0/vitalrolmgrca.pdf

Purcell, J., Kinnie, N., Hutchinson, S., Swart, J., Rayton, B. (2009) *People Management and Performance,* Routledge. ISBN 9780415427791. http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415427791/

Purcell, J. and Hutchinson, S. (2007). 'Front-line managers as agents in the HRM–performance causal chain: theory, analysis and evidence' *The International Journal of Human Resource Management.* 17 (1), pp. 3-20. ISSN 1748-8583. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-8583.2007.00022.x

Peer reviewed grant awards for the underpinning research include:

3.1 **The role of front-line managers in delivering effective people management** (November 2009-current). Case study research funded by CESR, UWE (internal funding)
3.2 **Improving the effectiveness of line managers in managing sickness absence strategies** (April 2010-2011/12). Funded by European Development Fund. Pump priming project in collaboration with University of Bath (£1,500 awarded to UWE)
3.3 **The role of front-line managers in reward and learning and development** (2006- 2008). Funded by the CIPD (£46,000). Initially awarded to Bath University, then transferred to UWE
3.4 **Front-line managers and the effective delivery of people management in the NHS** (2005-2007). Funded by Department of Health (£59,457). Initially awarded to Bath University, then transferred to UWE

4. Details of the impact

This research has had a wide impact and influence on the HR professional community and public policy. A common approach in all of the projects has been to disseminate the research findings through extensive feedback and recommendations for practice. This has resulted in some positive action by many of the case studies to improve line management performance and effectiveness. At Selfridges, for example, one of the early case studies, the role of front-line managers (team leaders) was redefined and changes made to the selection criteria for these managers. Senior managers at the company attributed improvements in sales performance, wage costs and labour turnover to these changes in the team leader role This organisation has continued to invest in its line managers over successive years following the research through ongoing training and other support mechanisms. At the Royal United Hospital in Bath, training and support was offered to ward managers both during and after the course of the research, and a new appraisal process introduced. Consequent improvements in ward management behaviour were evident in improved employee attitudes and reduced vacancies. At the MOD the findings of the research were used to inform the 'People Plan' designed to improve employee engagement and link to the organisation's HR strategy. The former HR Business Partner and Board Member in the MOD's Information Systems and Services organisation reported that the UWE research was '*used to develop the organisation's research-based People Plan which defined how we would achieve an engaged, empowered and accountable workforce - which was fully aligned to MOD's personnel strategies. The research was considered invaluable.*'

One of the most significant impacts has been the use of the research material by the CIPD (the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) – the professional body for HR practitioners. The research has informed CIPD policy and its qualification syllabus. For example, a range of publications, guides, factsheets and practical toolkits have been produced for members which recognises the influential role line managers play in delivering HR policy, the constraints that they face and the support needed from the HR function. The research on **the role of front-line managers in reward and learning and development** has been particularly influential in this respect. Sue Hutchinson also acted as consultant in the design of a diagnostic toolkit for improving line management behaviour which is available on the CIPD web site for members. The new qualification standards for the profession introduced in 2010 recognised (for the first time) the critical role of line managers in people management and this is reflected in some of the module learning outcomes. The latest CIPD book on core HRM has a new chapter on line managers. The then Policy Advisor at the CIPD highlighted that the UWE research, '*fed into the CIPD's policy work with government agencies and other bodies. The work was also used to inform the CIPD syllabus and is quoted in teaching materials for CIPD.*'

Public policy is also paying particular attention to the role of line managers in aspects of people management. For example, the research inspired and informed the *ACAS advisory booklet - Front-line managers*, produced in 2009. Sue Hutchinson acted as a consultant in the production of the booklet, and most of the content of the guide draws on the research projects undertaken prior to 2009, and references the research sponsored by the CIPD. This is a practical guide used by senior managers to help them get the best from their line managers, and covers the role of line managers, what problems they face and what support organisations can provide. Other policy documents which have been informed by all of this research include *Engaging for Success: Enhancing performance through employee engagement. A Report to Government* London: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills by MacLeod, D. and Clarke, N. (2009). This national review on engagement emphasises that the most important relationship in the workplace is with the line manager. The publication by UKCES (2009) *High Performance Working: A synthesis of key literature.* London: United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills also recognises the critical role of these managers.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 **Testimonial** from a former Policy Adviser (2009-12) at the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development, London, is available from UWE Bristol

5.2 **Testimonial** from a former HR Business Partner and Board Member responsible for People Capability and Risk Management in the MOD's Information Systems and Services (ISS Programme), Abbey Wood, Bristol, is available from UWE Bristol

5.3 ACAS Advisory booklet – Front-line managers (2009). Available at: http://www.acas.org.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=308&p=0

5.4 MacLeod, D. and Clarke, N. (2009). *Engaging for Success: Enhancing performance through employee engagement. A Report to Government* London: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file52215.pdf

5.5 CIPD Factsheet on front-line managers *The Role of Line Managers in HR* http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/role-line-managers-hr.aspx

5.6 CIPD toolkit on coaching *Coaching at the sharp end: developing and supporting the line manager as coach* http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/practical-tools/developing-line-manager-coaching.aspx