

Chapter 57

From Control to Commitment Work Systems: The Role of HRM in the Post- Bureaucratic Transition

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ABSTRACT

The shift towards a flatter, more networked and flexible organization has required an alternative approach to employment issues - from a normative and prescriptive “Personnel Management” approach to a broader “Human Resource Management” (HRM) approach - so as to foster employees’ commitment and empowerment. Through a range of HRM practices, so-called High Commitment Work Systems (HCWS), organizations seek to engender higher level of identification, empowerment and autonomy, which are crucial for the ‘post-bureaucratic employee’ who is expected to use intuition, discretion and knowledge to deal with ongoing changes and service demands. Focusing on recruitment and selection, career management and flexible work arrangements, the chapter argues that contemporary HR practices offer a powerful mechanism that modern organizations may use to replace bureaucratic control. However, the analysis also highlights several contradictions and tensions that surface during the adoption of HCWS and may explain some of the unsatisfying outcomes of the post-bureaucratic approach.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8356-1.ch057

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to explore the contributions of High Commitment Work Systems (HCWS) as part of the evolution of post-bureaucratic organizations. Waves of layoffs, fierce competition and technological changes have demonstrated that the traditional, bureaucratic, hierarchical approach is no longer suitable for today's more volatile market conditions. In response, organizations have been forced to introduce a new organizational paradigm that is flatter and more responsive. As a result, it became necessary to rethink the traditional approach to employment issues, which has spurred a move from the normative and prescriptive "Personnel Management" approach to a broader "Human Resource Management" (HRM) approach (Guest, 1991), with the aim of bolstering employees' organizational commitment and involvement. The new organizational challenge has been to achieve and sustain competitive advantage by winning employees' "hearts and minds" rather than simply changing formal structures and systems. The adoption of HR initiatives that could foster the internalization of values and principles represents the basis for this new employment relationship.

In consideration of these issues, this chapter first presents an overview of the pressures faced by contemporary work organizations that have contributed to the widespread adoption of HCWS. Next, the chapter focuses on a few specific HR domains - such as the areas of recruitment and selection, development and career, and flexible work arrangements - and analyses how these practices have developed into sophisticated systems capable of fostering employees' internalization of clearly enunciated company values. The final section of the chapter considers the contradictions and tensions that can arise during the adoption of HCWS.

BACKGROUND

The Rise of a New Paradigm

The emergence of a new organizational paradigm in the last two decades has compelled organizations to reconsider their internal structure and processes. The classical, hierarchical and bureaucratic form - characterized by:

- Centralized control,
- Multiple layers,
- Vertical integration,
- An internal labor market

- lacks the flexibility needed to meet shifting market conditions. In the wake of destabilized "hypercapitalism" (Rifkind, 2000), characterized by a globalized competitive environment (Heckscher & Applegate, 1994) and "time-space compression" (Castells, 2004), organizations need the ability to cope with high discontinuity and uncertainty. Hence, the move toward a flatter, more networked and more flexible organization "wherein 'empowered' employees are capable of using their intuition, discretion and often superior local knowledge to creatively and flexibly deal with unpredictable variations in production and service demands, as and when they arise, rather than merely complying with pre-formulated

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