

# **NETWORK RAIL HUMAN RESOURCE FUNCTION**

**HR performance, approach, tools utilised and environmental factors**

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# NETWORK RAIL HUMAN RESOURCE FUNCTION

## Performance of the Human Resource Management function

Huslid (1995) claims that organisational work practices should contain both PM (“People Management”) and SHRM (“Strategic Human Resource Management”) strategies embedded within. He adds that the nature of the integration of such principles, will have a direct impact on the performance of the organisation.

This paper analyses the processes set up by NR (“Network Rail”) HR (“Human Resource”) function, its efficiency, and the tools and factors interfering with the HR Agenda. It will then conclude by summarising the HR performance and potential factors of risk, which may keep the conversion of the Business Strategy into the Workforce Strategy and later into the HR Agenda.

## HUMAN RESOURCE FUNCTION IN NETWORK RAIL

NR’s HR function is centralised and uses 6 roles and duties: administrator, gatekeeper, HR expert, collaborator and valued business partner. HR also benefits from a variety of web and desktop software packages, to aid with the recruitment process (The Hackett Group, 2010).

Generally speaking, the HR function captures resource or training requests from a variety of business functions, processes them and returns the outcome to the originator i.e. scheduled interviews, training course allocation, etc.

Only 19% employees from the NR HR function act proactively to improve the HR strategy, whilst 37% responds reactively to queries issued from both inside or outside of HR (The Hackett Group, 2010) (Annex 17).

A considerable 33% from NR HR staff are categorised as HR Experts, addressing HR queries by hiring managers. The GSK HR model identifies Strategic Positions, as having maximum strategic value and wealth creation value. This shows the emphasis put on HR Experts by NR.

The GSK model emphasises the financial motivation provided for all employees sitting in Strategic Positions. It can be argued that for the existing 35,000 NR employees (National Audit Office, 2015), 33% of the HR staff are in Strategic positions (HR Experts required to address managerial queries) therefore for an increase of NR employees, further HR Experts would be required.

Ulrich & Brockbank (2005) claim that the format of the HR department should fit the needs of the organisation, NR are currently facing a considerable volume of HR enquiries which do require HR expertise, which may suggest volatility and risk within the central HR function.

The Hackett Group (2010) also state that the internal architecture of the NR HR function leaves room for improvement, in terms of both effectiveness and the efficiency, raising questions about the expectations set for the workforce going through the HR practices.

# STRATEGY AND APPROACH - PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

## Soft and Hard variation HRM

NR combines both soft and hard HRM (“Human Resource Management“) strategies (Beardwell and Claydon, 2004) through emphasising both extensive employee development, internal labour markets and job security; but also introduces performance rated pay, flexibility and multi-skilling concepts for the employees.

Gratton et al (1999) claims that hard and soft HRM approaches are not mutually exclusive, but both are malleable concepts which can be deployed to create a competitive advantage through effective management of human resources, which is what NR aim to achieve.

## Strategy alignment

NR claim to align their business strategy with their workforce strategy which later becomes their HR Agenda. (Beardwell and Claydon, 2004)

Apart from standalone recruitment, NR run 7 other hiring programmes including graduate and apprenticeship schemes, which suggests that the business targets a wide audience, by providing multiple routes into the business.

This strategy provides a competitive advantage to NR in terms of access to labour market (Bratton and Gold, 2003) and would benefit the business even more should external factors such as Brexit shake the UK labour market.

## Best Practice vs Best Fit

The amount of principles identified with the workforce strategy such as extensive training, employment security and high compensation would suggest that NR follows best practice methods when managing their employees.

However, research shows that alongside 35,000 employees (National Audit Office, 2015), there are also around 45,000 contractors (UK Trade and Investment, 2014) working alongside, which suggests that NR are selectively mobilising 3rd parties via 6000 suppliers (Network Rail, 2013). This suggests that they are bypassing the normal HR recruitment processes and selectively embrace Best Fit policies.

## HR architecture

The HR architecture is created by connecting the business strategy (Annex 20 - NR Strategic Theme) with the workforce strategy and producing a HR Agenda (Leepak and Snell, 2002).

<b>Business Strategy (Annex 20)</b>	<b>Workforce Strategy</b>	<b>HR Agenda</b>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- everyone home safe every day</li> <li>- maintaining and building reliable infrastructure</li> <li>- reliable timetables</li> <li>- The biggest investment programme since the Victorian era</li> <li>- a technology enabled future</li> <li>- a customer-focused organisation</li> <li>- Investing in our people</li> <li>- opening up</li> <li>- a railway for the future</li> <li>- reducing public subsidy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specialised (technical) trading</li> <li>- differentiated training</li> <li>- customer service</li> <li>- forecasting</li> <li>- empowered workforce</li> <li>- competitive wages</li> <li>- bonus scheme based on company performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- performance review and appraisal policy</li> <li>- transparent hierarchy and career paths</li> <li>- clear job requirements and descriptions</li> <li>- exposure to multiple disciplines</li> <li>- 1500+ training courses</li> <li>- 7 academic training programmes</li> <li>- engineering conversion programmes</li> </ul>
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The HR architecture is designed at the HR function level and implemented through line managers across NR.

## KEY TOOLS

### Learning and Development

Learning and Development programmes

NR run a variety of programmes to provide entry routes for new staff and train existing employees.

Programme	No. of discip.	Length	Salary (p.a.)	Qualification	Location/approach
Advanced apprenticeships	9no (Annex 4)	3 years	£14,364	NVQ (Railway Engineering)	Westwood Development Centre (Jaga Heating, 2015)
				ILM Level 3 (First Line Management)	National High Speed Rail College (Bham, Doncaster) (Rail Technology Magazine, 2016)
CIPT Lvl 5 part-time course	5no+ (Annex 2)	2 years	(part time)	Level 5 - CIPD	Milton Keynes NR offices
Engineering conversion programme	3no (Annex 3)	9 months	£32,000		<i>online assessment and web wizard</i>
Placement schemes (2:2)	6no (Annex 5)	1 year			
Graduate schemes (2:2)	6no+ (Annex 6)	2 years (6mo/unit)			<i>online assessment and web wizard</i>
Trainee track engineering	5no+	2 years	£14,000	Foundation Degree in Railway Engineering	Sheffield Hallam University
Signaller designer scheme	5no+	3 years	£14,000	Electrical engineering	Sheffield Hallam University

### Strategy behind L&D (“Learning and Development”)

Apprenticeship programmes generate a sentiment of belonging by soft-integrating apprentices within the NR’s culture and as Maslow (1943) and Alderfer have identified, these employees may seek affiliation as part of their personal needs.

All hiring schemes involve remuneration, therefore according to Taylor (2008) financially-driven candidates may see this as an advantage.

The above two strategies have the potential to increase the resource retention rate within NR.

The development of a highly committed and capable workforce (Storey, 1995) benefits the company by retaining the knowledge within the business, after the accreditation point, when employees obtain access to a UK wide job market, managed by NR.

## **Online assessment tools for strategic roles**

NR have identified 7 strategic roles including project manager, construction and project engineer (Annex 7) and have created online tools designed to assess the candidates in order to facilitate the right set of skills being put forward to the next stage.

NR have engaged with SHL Talent Measurement (<https://www.cebglobal.com/shldirect/en/practice-tests/>) to implement specified algorithms, to achieve the best results in terms of the candidate online assessments (Job Test Prep, 2016) (Annex 10).

Harris et al (2003) identified the above alongside careful selection, clear job description, performance appraisals and other strategies implanted by NR as good HR practices to maximise HR performance.

## **Differentiation**

NR's internal training and development programmes are differentiated based on disciplines and level of skills sought.

Porter (1980) considers internal differentiation as being a business strategic decision, whilst Richard. W. Beatty (2009) claims that internally differentiated workforce can successfully deliver the business strategy externally.

Although it appears that NR implements internal differentiation, it structures all resources based on bands (Annex 15), allocating remuneration based on band ranges, meaning that two resources from different functions will have the same payment range, challenging the argument that NR is a workplace where differentiation takes place.

## **Defenders model**

NR are running a variety of entry-level hiring and development programmes and are promoting a transparent salary policy (Office of Rail Regulation, 2008), (Annex 14, Annex 15), offering well defined career ladders through clear grading structures, which according to Miles and Snow (1978) forms the definition of the Defenders strategic configuration.

Delery and Doty (1996) find specific to the Defenders model a well-established HR function with large influences on the resource development, working alongside strong governance procedures and trade unions, which can be identified within NR.

Although the evidence suggests that NR are following a Defenders model, research shows that the business interacts with up to 80,000 resources (UK Trade and Investment, 2014) from which only 35,000 are employees (National Audit Office, 2015).

The findings are challenging the company's HR's efforts to maintain a uniform Defenders' model, questioning its entire characteristics. Furthermore the effects are maximised if the above 45,000

contractors work alongside or directly manage NR employees, in which case transparent pay systems, L&D and other characteristics would not be applicable and the entire HR agenda may be affected.

## **Efficient recruitment**

NR have clear hiring policies including drug and alcohol testing (NR, 2013), a variety of online test tools, online video interview systems (Annex 10), face to face and phone based interviews.

On the company's recruitment page, job adverts use clear descriptions (Annex 9) including requirements for responsibilities and competencies, designed to avoid ambiguity, which is considered a good HR practice by Harris et al (2003).

The high level of detail in the job adverts and the variety of interview methods show great concern for quality and process, which according to Beardwell et al (2004) involves high standards for selection and it is expected to witness high levels of effectiveness.

## **Bundles of HRM**

The multitude of HRM strategies implemented by NR are recognised by Pfeffer (1998) as best practice policies:

1. Employment security
  1. Long term career development programmes
  2. Engagement trade unions - RMT ("Rail, Maritime and Transport National Trade Union") (Annex 11)
2. Careful hiring
  1. Comprehensive recruitment stages: online assessment (Annex 10), video/face to face/ phone interviews
  2. Integration of 3rd party recruiter for expert advice and effective filtering
3. Extensive use of self-managed teams
  1. Independent management functions for 87 local depots UK wide (NR, 2014) (Annex 12)
  2. Independent directorship for 5 large projects of £39 billion (NR, 2015) and dozens smaller projects managed locally
4. Extensive training, learning and development
  1. Up to 1500 training courses held by experts from the private sector: ILS, Parallels Training (Annex 8) or QA Training (QA Training, 2015)
  2. Trainee schemes, graduate and placement schemes (2:2 acceptance criteria), advanced apprenticeships in 9 disciplines, engineering academic, engineering conversion programmes, and CIPD Level 5 formal education
5. Rewards based on organisation performance via NR bonus scheme (Annex 13)

Although it may seem that NR HR are aiming to set up the above strategies to increase the level of efficiency, Purcell and CIPD (1999) talk about environments with bundles of HRM where strategies may clash leading to very different levels of performance between business units.

## **AMO model**

Harrison (2005) describes the AMO model as having the capability to deliver performance beyond minimal requirements if ability, motivation and opportunity exists with a business.

NR claim to integrate the AMO model with their SHRM strategy as per:

- ability - detailed recruitment process and multiple assessments in order to identify ability
- motivation - tools and strategies to maintain employee motivation



- opportunity - opportunities in terms of career progression and internal job market

## **Financial compensation**

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Competitive packages including benefits for all entry-level positions

Employees are entitled to a variety of benefits including 75% subsidised travel on rail or underground season tickets, bonus scheme based on the overall company efficiency, ability to buy or sell annual days, childcare vouchers and volunteer leave (NR, 2016) - Annex 1.

Herzberg (1968) claims that HRM policies including pay and benefits which are comparable with or greater than competitors, are likely to have a motivating influence on employees, therefore the initiative of introducing the above may lead to maximising employee motivation levels.

Barber and Bretz (2000) suggest that money is the most important factor in deciding on a role, therefore variations in payments and benefits may have an impact on the resources. The research shows a considerable number of contractors (UK Trade and Investment, 2014) working alongside the 35,000 employees (Annex 15) (National Audit Office, 2015), therefore variations in pay are expected, which may have unwanted effects on NR employees.

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Training schemes including remuneration

NR run a series of training schemes including trainee track engineering and signaller designer schemes, where employees undergo academic training whilst working.

The company has introduced competitive financial remuneration within all schemes to maintain candidates' interest and to capture their focus on the learning element throughout the duration of the programmes.

According to Barber and Bretz (2000) financial stimulation is the most important factor considered by candidates when deciding on a job, therefore it can be concluded that NR's approach to training whilst involving competitive wages maximises staff motivation and performance.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**

### **Substituting employees with contractors**

- 2009 - Bechtel Limited (2009) announced NR's decision to appoint the private sector business as Delivery Partner for NR's Crossrail and Reading Programmes, with an allocated budget of £8.9 billion
- 2014 - Crossrail defines Bechtel as a Project Management contractor and main Stakeholder to oversee the development of Crossrail (National Audit Office, 2014)
- 2016 - NR lists Bechtel Ltd in July 2016 on the Annual supplier list
- 2016 - Rail Technology Magazine (2016) states that Bechtel lead Ailie MacAdam is also the Director of High Speed Rail Industry Leaders (HSRIL - "High Speed Rail Industry Leaders")
- 2020 - Albion Economics (2016) claims HS2 ("High Speed 2"), having Prime Minister's Theresa May full support, forecasts an additional 27,000 jobs to be created by 2020

It is evident that an increased continuous trend for NR to selectively enable companies from the private sector to gain strategic advantage by working closer to the public sector body, through placing resources to deliver alongside Network Rail employees.

The phenomenon raises questions about the HRM strategy and whether the NR workforce strategy and NR HR Agenda are still valid, considering all contractors are recruited and placed by external companies.

The research could not produce statistics about the existing number of Bechtel contractors working alongside NR employees. However, UK Trade and Investment (2014) claims 35,000 NR employees are part of an 80,000 workforce which also includes Bechtel alongside 1st Inrail, Rail Hire (UK), etc (Annex 16).

## **Brexit**

Brexit brings risks within the NR HR space in terms of a potential resource crisis. However, evidence shows that Network Rail relies heavily on contractors, having used more than 6,000 suppliers since 2009 onwards (Network Rail, 2013). This suggests that if a shortage of resources was to occur, the considerable number of suppliers will minimise the effects of a downfall.

Both graduate and placement schemes state that Network Rail supports non-EEU employees subject to their Visa status (Annex 5, Annex 6). This encouragement may also facilitate NR HR to assist in the relation between candidates and Home Office by issuing support letters. This strategy may provide NR competitive advantage by providing access to the overseas labour market, which would otherwise not penetrate UK.

## **LINE MANAGERS**

### **Role of line managers**

NR HR policy provides monthly time allocations for one-to-one sessions between members of staff and line managers, for career advice, comprehensive feedback on performance, recommendations and future development.

NR HR run a formal campaign every 6 months with the above activities, centralising the findings in terms of performance and training demand. Purcell et al (2003) states that line managers play a key role in the policy delivery process and that the overall outcome impacts their employees and their performance.

This is reflected in the trust given by HR to all line managers, enabling them to capture the input from the one-on-one sessions, to document the findings and report back to HR, for further analysis and corrective course of action to align with the business strategy.

According to Torrington et al (2008) line managers' level of proficiency to interpret HRM policies becomes questionable, especially if detailed poorly, lacking accuracy or with ambiguities. In order to address this NR have organised an internal training course for all employees who have direct reports.

Although it appears that NR HR have addressed all potential issues which may arise in the quality of the line management service, the above services are available only for employees and not for contractors. Therefore, contractors, particularly line managers, may fail in implementing the HR agenda (Bonn, 2010, p 5), by not understanding the strategies behind the policies.

### **Performance review and goal setting**

NR runs a performance review programme every 6 months in the form of one-to-one sessions between members of staff and their line manager.

The aim of the program is to facilitate time between each pair, to discuss the completion of previously set goals and to provide comprehensive feedback. They then agree on the new performance objectives, for the next 6 months.

Vroom (1964) claims that policies that enable individuals to agree targets, instead of imposing them are more likely to result in employees achieving them. Locke (1968) talks about the importance of the line manager providing concise feedback on employee performance.

According to NR, the nature of the objectives must follow the SMART format - specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic and time-based. Locke (1968) also talks about the SMART method of setting goals within the Goal Setting Theory, suggesting that such objectives must be challenging, attainable and time bound (time based management), owned and accepted by employees.

It is evident that NR are using the line managers strategically, according to Vroom (1964) and Locke (1968) this maximises the chance of employees completing their professional tangible objectives, therefore remaining motivated and maintaining a high level of performance.

However, the research shows that NR engages with contractors which may have contracts extended on a monthly basis and may not perform performance reviews and goal setting sessions as effectively as permanent members of staff.

## **Identifying skills, future training and development opportunities**

NR offer 1500+ training courses to existing employees, organised through 3rd party training specialists such as ILS, Parallels Training (Annex 8) and QA Training (QA Training, 2015).

NR use an appraisal system through which line managers play a key role by recommending their reports for a certain course relevant to their job title and duties.

Recommending staff to seek progression through training and mentoring may generate satisfaction and belonging which secures a high priority in Maslow's priorities of needs (1943).

Bonn (2010 p 5) claims that line managers play a fundamental role in the implementation of SHRM, through their duty to find practical solutions whilst implementing the business strategy. It can be observed that NR relies heavily on line managers for making decisions about the development of their reports whilst fulfilling the HR Agenda.

The certifications issued by the training bodies are recognised at an international level. NR believe that by providing international accreditations to their staff, there will be increased appreciation, which will lead to a higher level of motivation. A policy described by McGregor (1960) claims that strategies which promote responsibility and self-motivation are more likely to succeed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research shows that NR HR have designed and implemented a variety of HRM strategies both soft and hard, based on best practice and best fit policies, aiming to gain competitive advantage through differentiation and the use of key tools such as L&D, financial compensation and AMO models etc.

However, working alongside contractors introduces external influences that break the intended NR HR agenda. The effects are increased in situations where contractors or temporary staff become a line manager and are required to manage permanent NR resources.

Environmental factors have the ability to affect NR workforce strategy. However, it seems that NR have optimised their recruitment policies to gain a competitive advantage by adjusting their acceptance criteria and welcoming international labour markets.

# ANNEXES

- Annex 1 - Entry level opportunities -Network Rail.pdf
- Annex 2 - Human Resources - Network Rail.pdf
- Annex 3 - Engineering Conversion Scheme - Network Rail.pdf
- Annex 4 - Advanced Engineering Apprenticeships with Network Rail.pdf.pdf
- Annex 5 - Placement Scheme - Network Rail.pdf
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- Annex 7 - Key roles - Network Rail.pdf
- Annex 8 - Network Rail.pdf
- Annex 9 - Job specs - project planner.pdf
- Annex 10 - Network Rail Numerical, Verbal and Situational Judgement Test.pdf
- Annex 11 - 109463-rmt-news-november1-lr.pdf
- Annex 12 - Network Rail depot list.xls
- Annex 13 - Network-rail-short-guide1 .pdf.pdf
- Annex 14 - Staff salary breakdown in £20k bands from £0.numbers
- Annex 15 - pr08-empcsts\_rep\_130209.pdf
- Annex 16 - Supplier list July 2016.pdf
- Annex 17 - Review of HR Costs.pdf.pdf
- Annex 18 - PM Group\_Work\_Signed.pdf (module requirement)
- Annex 19 - People Management - ALDI - Final Cut.pdf (module requirement)
- Annex 20 - How-we-will-get-there.pdf.pdf

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