


Managerial Imagination: HRM and “The Imaginative Performer”

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Abstract

This article analyzes the links between imagination and human resource management. The concept imagination has received little scholarly attention within the field of management, despite its potential to inform a number of lines of inquiry. At the present time, much of the research literature on imagination is confined to the visual arts, literature, and education. Human resource (HR) professionals could play a part in aligning employees with organizational goals and bring about organizational change if they developed their thinking in a more imaginative way. Developing managerial imagination can help solve the dilemmas and contradictions they face. A diagram is developed, which maps the development of the personnel function and offers four possibilities within a framework. They are biography, personal framing, history, and social structure. The outcome of this analysis provides a development of the personnel function one of which is a globally imaginative HR management. Within such a framework, the concept of “the imaginative performer” is discussed. The implications of combining imagination with management may provide a theoretical and practical way to understanding HR management.

Keywords

imagination, managerial imagination, human resource management, imaginative performer, global human resources

“This history, my Friend! hath chiefly told
Of intellectual power, from stage to stage.
Advancing, hand in hand with love and joy,
And of imagination teaching truth ...”
(Wordsworth, 1805, *The Prelude*, Book Eleventh).

Introduction

Business and management research seems reluctant to consider or even acknowledge the managerial imagination as a viable concept of study and application. Instead, management researchers have left imagination as largely the preserve of other disciplines, such as literature (Hughes, 1988), philosophy (Gaut, 2003; Sallis, 2000; Satre, 1972; Warnock, 1994), psychology (Murray, 1987), educational studies (Egan, 1992; Egan & Nadaner, 1988; Robinson, 2001, 2009), music (Harvey, 1999), and sociology (Mills, 1973). Mills (1973) described the sociological imagination as an intellectual craft for scholarship conferring the ability to shift perspectives and obtain a totality of view by connecting history, biography, and social structure. He suggested that imagination is the “most fruitful” and cultivatable form of self-consciousness in which “men, whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves familiar” (Mills, 1973, p. 8).

Osborn (1953) was one of the earliest management writers to explicitly recognize the importance of imagination in business. More recent forays into the field are those of Schon

(1983), Spender (2007), and Martin (2010). Spender built on Schon by suggesting that the role of the imagination found in art could be applied to management, a subject area dominated by rationalist philosophy and the application of scientific method.

In this article, the author follows Spender’s suggestion by building on Mills’s idea that social science deals with problems of biography, history, and their intersection with social structures. A fourth dimension also has been added, namely, “personal problem farming” (Schon, 1983) to capture the way individuals perceive problems and make sense of them essentially in a subjective manner. The article then goes on to suggest that through the use of the managerial imagination, a manager can develop into what is termed “the imaginative performer” and apply this to the area of human resource management (HRM). The human resource (HR) manager

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can use imagination to solve two particular dilemmas, namely, a balancing act between a positive contribution to organizational success and acting as a guardian of fairness in the treatment of employees, and coping with the tension personnel professionals can experience between being managerialist and being professional (Pilbeam & Corbridge, 2002).

The article is structured in the following way. The concept of imagination is discussed in “The Development of the Meaning of Imagination” section of this article. The literature covering the managerial imagination is discussed in “The Managerial Imagination” section, whereas “The Managerial Imagination and Its Application to Human Resource Management” section discusses the concept of the imaginative performer. A summary and conclusion follows in “Summary and Conclusion” section.

The Development of the Meaning of Imagination

Various definitions and descriptions of imagination are summarized in Table 1. From this, one can see why (Gaut, 2003) called it a slippery concept.

One of the problems identifiable in Table 1 is the variety of meanings of imagination inherent in the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept, and the fact that imagination lies at the crux of those aspects of our lives that are less well understood (Egan, 1992). In describing the imagination, scholars “refer to the capacity we have in common to hold images in our minds of what may not be present or even exist, and sometimes to allow these images to affect us as though they were present and real” (Egan, 1992, p. 3). By nature, an internal and personal and subjective, and hence hard to describe, they are unlike other kinds of images we are familiar with in the “external world.” People also differ in the quality of the experience associated with such images some having a clear access to vivid quasi-pictorial images (e.g., Kekulé in discovering the ring structure of the benzene molecule in a reverie involving snakes swallowing their own tails), and other people only having such vague experiences as the word “image” seems almost inappropriate. However, in this study, the author is more inclined to perceive the imagination as having the inclination and ability to consciously conceive of the unusual and effective in particular ways (Barrow, 1988).

For example, through storytelling (Gabriel, 1997), we conceive of and interpret the unusual and effective in a particular way and thus trigger the imagination and insight. By applying the imagination, one can link one thought or object with another and create a reason for the price or create value for a product or service. In this case, a general story that provides an example of imagination in use can illustrate the power of imagination and insight in developing a creative solution to a problem. It involves a car journey in which a fan-belt broke in a rather isolated country area on a Sunday afternoon. The occupants had to return home reasonably quickly.

There were no garages in the vicinity. One solution was to call the Automobile Association (AA) breakdown service. However, no one in the car was a member. An alternative solution was put forward by one member of the group. He asked his wife to remove her tights so that they could be used as a temporary fan belt. The tights were then applied and the excessive ends of the tights that might interfere with the engine were burnt off with a lighter. With the tights sufficiently installed, the car was able to run and the car limped home. This example could arguably be perceived as someone in the group using imagination by relating one thought or object with another, using the tights as a fan belt and creating a value for the product of service.

An example from business management is the way Mike Lazaridis founder of Research in Motion (RIM) imagined what an executive’s life would be like if you receive your emails on a handheld device. How compelling would a phone be if you can have a BlackBerry attached to your belt? He could not “prove” that this would be a good idea. There were no data on the demand patterns for smartphones, because smartphones existed in his *imagination*. However, only 11 years after the launch of the product of his imagination, RIM led Motorola by an even greater margin in sales-market shares and profitability (Martin, 2010).

The Managerial Imagination

This article suggests that imagination involves imaginings of various types involving, but not equivalent to, the forming of images and the capacity to think in novel and unusual ways. It is not being argued here that imaginings should replace other forms of cognition such as deliberative and reasoned rational analysis. However, imaginative management would involve the disciplined and crafted use of the imagination as opposed to the idle and naïve play of fancy. Managerial imaginings would acknowledge and accommodate the vital significance of history and biography as in Mills’s (1973) sociological imagination. This use of history and biography and their intersection within social structure and the added concept of personal problem framing would help to uncover the turning points in individuals’ lives that these create and reflect, and recognize the profound influences that these exert on past, current, and future ways of perceiving and knowing.

Martin (2009) has perceived of imagination as a tool of the design thinker. In Martin’s view, the tools of the craftsman are efficiency vehicles. “Without a conceptual tool kit, you would have to tackle every problem from first principles” (Martin, 2009, p. 154). Theories and processes make it possible to categorize problems, and apply tools to them that have proved effective in similar circumstances in the past (Martin, 2009).

The managerial imagination, therefore, consists of the use of the imagination as a tool to combine ideas that no one expected were combinable. As Mills (1973) suggested,

Table 1. Various Definitions and Descriptions of Imagination.

Various definitions of imagination	
Barrow (1988)	To be imaginative is to have the inclination and ability to consciously conceive of the unusual and effective in particular ways. (p. 84)
Blackburn (2006)	Imagination most directly, the faculty of reviving or especially creating images in the mind's eye. But more generally the ability to create and rehearse possible situations, to combine knowledge in unusual ways. (p. 180)
Egan (1992)	When people try to describe the imagination, most frequently they refer to the capacity we have in common to hold images in our minds of what may not be present or even exist, and sometimes to allow these images to affect us as though they were present and real. (p. 3)
Egan (1992)	Imagination entails the ability to transcend the obstacles to thinking with which easy acceptance of conventional beliefs, ideas, interpretations, representations, and so on, confront us. (p. 47)
Hughes (1988)	The imagination usually denotes not much more than the faculty of creating a picture of something in our heads and holding it there while we think about it. Since this is the basis of nearly everything we do, clearly it's very important that our imagination should be strong rather than weak. (p. 35)
Mills (1973)	Imagination is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self and to see the relations between them. (p. 12)
Mock (1970)	Imaginative understanding gives an extra dimension to our rational thinking and understanding, making us capable of responding to imaginative truth which is embodied in the arts and cannot be expressed by any other means. (p. 32)
Robinson (2009)	Imagination is the power to bring to mind things that are not present in our senses. (p. 58)
Warnock (1994)	Coleridge divides the imagination itself into primary and the secondary. Primary imagination is that which we deploy in all perception, by which in some inexplicable manner we create the real world, with which we are familiar. Secondary imagination is, Coleridge says, "an echo" of primary. It, unlike the primary, "coexists with the conscious will." It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate. It is the imagination at work in great works of art. (p. 41)
White (1990)	To imagine something is to <i>think of it</i> as possibly being so. (p. 184)

"Imagination is often successfully invited by putting together hitherto isolated items, by finding unsuspected connexions" (p. 221). Such a capacity cannot come from just mere technique or expertise. A manager can be "well trained" but given that one can be educated or trained only in what is already known (what Revans, 1983, referred to as "programmed knowledge"), training may incapacitate one from being able to learn new ways of seeing. These new ways may sometimes be loose and unclear, but it is necessary to cling to such vague images and notions, for it is in such forms that original ideas may first appear.

To stimulate the managerial imagination, a number of practices can be adopted and adapted from Mills' work with regard to "intellectual craftsmanship." For the manager part of such a craft is learning to use one's life experiences in one's work on the assumption that by continually examining, reflecting, and interpreting one's own reactions in certain situations, they might better understand how they might react in similar situations.

A further element of an intellectual craftsmanship inspired by Mills is the adoption of an attitude of playfulness toward phrases and words with which various issues are defined. Original thinkers in other disciplines have also highlighted the importance of playfulness as being the key to scientific originality (Ramachandran, 2011). Both believe this loosens the imagination, and for Mills, this may involve looking up synonyms for key terms in dictionaries, to know the full range of their connotations. Playfulness toward words could implicate the deliberate use of metaphor to stimulate the imagination or articulate intuitions (Vaughan, 1979). Such an approach has proved fruitful in developing understanding and conceptions of the complexities of organizational problems by encouraging individuals to think and act in new ways by extending horizons of insight and creating new possibilities (Morgan, 1997). Gaut and Livingston (2003) argued that metaphor-making is a paradigm of the creative use of the imagination, because it mirrors some of the functioning of imagination and so supports a metacognitive understanding

of imagination, that is, metaphor-making is an instance of deliberative creative imagining.

Another aspect of Mill's intellectual craftsmanship is the skill of making up ideal types, as opposed to stereotypes. Ideal types are abstractions that may be used to better understand reality. Weber (1949) gave us the example of the ideal type of bureaucracy, but they could be charts, tables, diagrams, and so on. For Weber, ideal types were mental constructs that are ideal in the "logical sense," that is, they state a logical extreme, they "distort" and abstract from reality, they can be used to formulate an abstract model of the general form and interrelated causes and effects of a complex phenomenon (Jary & Jary, 1991).

Finally, part of such craftsmanship may involve thinking in terms of extremes or taking polar opposites to what one is directly concerned with to achieve alternative insights. Taking extreme positions may help individuals to think from a variety of viewpoints, which enables the mind to become a moving prism, catching light from as many angles as possible, hence "release of the imagination can sometimes be achieved by deliberately inverting your sense of proportions" (Mills, 1973, p. 236).

Method

This article sets out a theoretical framework to encourage a debate about the managerial imagination and its implications for HRM. The article comes from reflections on my reading (Martin, 2010; Schon, 1983; Spender, 2007; Vance, Groves, Paik, & Kindler, 2007) and experience as a researcher and teacher on this subject: It includes examples in which the author has been involved in a formal setting and informal experience.

The author's interest has also been stimulated by finding that the physical sciences imagination is also required. In his biography of Einstein, Isaacson (2012) acknowledged the importance of imagination in his work: "Einstein had elusive qualities of genius, which included an intuition and imagination that allowed him to think differently" (p. 40).

This then is an introduction to ideas for a new way of thinking about HRM. It cannot be perceived as fully developed at this stage. The outline of imagination as one conception of nonlinear thinking has a considerable history in many disciplines such as fine art and literature. It now requires development both analytically and creatively in HRM and management generally. Once greater clarity is achieved between imagination and HRM, further research and empirical work are possible. The next section will therefore explore the links between managerial imagination and HRM.

The Managerial Imagination and Its Application to Human Resource Management

Stone (2007) and Deadrick and Stone (2009) took stock of the status of theory and research in HRM, questioning "where have we been and where should we go from here?"

From time to time we believe that researchers need to pause and reflect on the status of theory and research in human resource management. The reason is that this is the only way we can continue to make important contributions to theory, research and practice. (p. 51)

Dipboye (2007) responded to some of these issues and argues that HRM falls short in three areas: first, cumulative progress in theory development; second, rigorous methodology; third, relevance to important stakeholders. Scholars of HRM need to reflect on these comments. Academic progress in particular is an issue of concern for advancing HRM. Dipboye offers two further useful insights: First, HRM researchers should be monogamous in their questions but promiscuous in their methods; second, they should simultaneously embrace the simplicity of science and the complexity and confusion of practice. Our response to these critiques is as follows: A reconceptualization of HRM as a craft through the engagement with and embracing of the managerial imagination can address some perceived shortcomings and support and facilitate the practices of imaginative performance.

More recently, some senior HR professionals have referred to "insight" as an important ingredient for future HR leaders (Orme, 2010), arguing that the next generation of HR leaders should have such an insight that she defines as the leader having business "savvy," practical understanding of their organization, understanding the context of markets, and the influence of technological changes. Orme argued for different types of insight, for example, insights into the strategic health of the organization, its organizational ability and adaptability in facing challenges in the future, insights into people and culture, and insights into transactional enablers. The development of such insight draws fundamentally, essentially, and necessarily on use of the managerial imagination by HR leaders. If Orme is arguing for practical "insights" for future HR leaders, Martin (2009) is arguing for design thinking for leaders in which imagination is part of a personal knowledge system, and is a further development with regard to management.

In support of the argument, imagination is applied to HRM and personnel management. The framework depicted in Figure 1 is derived from but is not exclusively linked to Mills (1973). It documents a transition from personnel management into imaginative HR. In the pursuit of a pragmatic and even normative outcome, the concept of the Imaginative Performer is introduced. In providing a framework that links the imagination with HRM a challenge is posed to the functionalism (Watson, 2009), which has tended to dominate HRM. In drawing on Mills, this article offers an alternative conceptualization with implications for both theory and practice and builds on Watson's (2009) critical and pragmatic account of the realities of HRM.

The dimensions of the framework are biography and social structure, and history and personal problem framing. The development of the personnel function can be traced

	Biography	Social structure
History	1. Traditional personnel management	3. International human resource management
Personal framing	2. Human resource management	4. Globally imaginative human resources

Figure 1. From traditional personnel management to globally imaginative HRM.

within the model, and different conceptions of HR as they have evolved over time may be categorized in the framework: retrospectively (a) traditional personnel management, (b) HRM, (c) international HRM, and prospectively toward (d) globally imaginative HR. The four elements of the framework are discussed below.

Originally, biography, or life story, referred to the account given by an individual about his or her life. This personal account (sometimes backed up by additional external sources, such as official records, letters, diaries) constitutes a life history of substantive events in chronological order and is “the account given by an individual, only with the emphasis upon the ordering into themes or topics that the individual chooses to adopt or omit as s/he tells the story” (Miller, 2007, p. 19). Mills’s (1973) position was that social science deals with problems of biography, history, and their intersections within social structures: Biography applies to HRM in that it is associated with what Mills referred to as personal troubles, in this case of particular employees. It has to do with his or her self and those “limited” areas of social life of which they are directly and personally aware. Such troubles are private matters. They may represent the values and norms of specific individuals who perceive that these values and norms are threatened by the organization in which they work.

The historical dimension or history provides a methodical record of past events. For historians, the goal has usually been the understanding and explanation of specific historical situations (Jary & Jary, 1991). More recently, Jordanova (2006) argued that it is difficult to say what the defining characteristics of history are, although eclecticism and analytical flexibility are major features: “Integrating apparently diverse sources and approaches to produce more holistic accounts is an important goal of the discipline” (p. 4). History is important to HRM because without the use of history and without a historical sense of psychological matters, the HR specialist cannot adequately state the kinds of problems that ought *now* to be the central point of their studies. They cannot easily identify what are the critical issues that need to be addressed in their own time and specific to their organization. A historical dimension provides a way in which HR managers can “read” the situation within the “lesson” of history.

Both biography and history are dimensions that can be linked to the managerial imagination. Mills (1973) echoed Thomas and Znaniecki in that “social science deals with the problems of biography, of history and of their intersection with social structures—these three biography, history, and

society are the points of the proper study of man” (p. 159). It is an approach that features both breadth and process, which distinguishes biographical and history methods, which arguably cannot be captured by predetermined quantitative methods of research. Therefore, attempts to capture the future is arguably a dimension of history that relies on the use of the imagination and not measurement. To imagine a future, one has to look beyond the measurable variables, beyond what can be proven with past data (Martin, 2010). This is what Lazaridis was attempting at RIM in developing the smartphone.

Personal Framing is concerned with how an individual sees a problem in his or her own way depending on prior events and predispositions (e.g., experiences and personality). Pragmatically, one has to decide what the problem is (or frame it) before one can decide what to do about it, and different individuals may frame the same problem in different ways, and may reframe the same problem differently in the light of experience. Thus, they may transform it differentially. Problem framing is concerned with how an individual perceives, interprets, and makes sense of a personal problem, and which may not be shared with others. The personal framing can also be perceived as constructed and reconstructed within a sociohistorical network of associations. Networks such as nuclear and extended families, job history, and personal life course can be compared and evaluated in relation to the wider societal and historical events that have taken place during one’s lifetime (Miller, 2007). Personal framing can be associated with the shift from a positivist to an interpretivist perspective in social analysis (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, Virk, 2007). Research in the interpretivist tradition is more often linked by researchers studying organizations in the 21st century. It is also associated with cultures such as the United Kingdom, which emphasizes the value of individualism as opposed to collectivism (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). This suggests that HRM needs to take account of how an employee interprets his or her personal understanding of organizational issues. Employees may interpret their problems as a private matter. However, when such a “problem” is interpreted by many employees, it may become a public issue, which goes beyond the individual’s understanding. This then becomes an issue that could be understood at a social structural level of analysis.

Social Structure is a complex concept on which there is disagreement even among social scientists. Giddens defines “structure as the ‘rules and resources’ that act as common interpretive schemes in a particular social system” (Calhoun

et al., 2007, p. 221). Structures are related to practices in roughly the same way that language is related to speech. Structures organize practices, but at the same time, structures are enacted and reproduced by practices (Calhoun et al., 2007). It should be further argued that although we can experience structures as something external to us, they cannot be observed except through their effects on practices. Finally, for Giddens (1976), the notion of structure is important because it emphasizes that it is not just constraining, but it is also enabling.

It could be argued that social structure is linked to HRM because to use an analogy from Mills, it is linked to public issues. Such public issues have to do with matters that transcend the “local” context of the individual and the range of his or her inner life. An issue becomes a public matter and is not exclusive to one individual. Thus, we will further argue that issues that transcend the “local” are more associated with international and globally imaginative HRM.

Traditional personnel management lies at the intersection of biography and history. Much of traditional personnel management deals with employees’ well-being and needs and reactively resolves problems linked to the individual welfare of employees. Personnel professionals dealt with the personal troubles of individual employees in a reactive way if this affected individual and organizational performance. The biography and history of employees thus become important to understand what Pilbeam and Corbridge (2002) called sensitive employment issues such as stress in the workplace and how this affects absentee rates.

HRM lies at the intersection of biography and personal framing. For example, HRM came to prominence during the 1980s when greater emphasis was given to an individualistic rather than collectivistic approach to employee relations. Arguably, this shift from a collectivistic to a more individualistic approach to the relationship between an employer and employee requires the HR manager to understand not only the biography of employees but also their personal frame of reference. It could be argued that employees, given their increasing individualistic approach to the workplace, framed and reframed their situation in the changing context of employability and hence careers since the 1980s. Writers such as Kanter (1989) suggested that managers can no longer rely on the organization for their career development and must learn to manage themselves and their work independently. Early HRM models offered the possibility that the personnel function could not only meet the challenges created by increasing competitive pressures and industrial restructuring in many Western economies but also embody a strategic role if it utilized its philosophies and practices (Guest, 1987). Employees are valued assets and a major source of competitive advantage, and managers need to engender commitment and loyalty to ensure high levels of performance. Through knowing each employee’s biography and personal problem frame, the HR manager would be better placed to perceive the *turning points* in the lives of such

employees with the possible implications for the organization. These turning points could be crucial in understanding individual employees’ ambitions, strengths, skills, and knowledge, and how best they can contribute to their organization.

International HRM lies at the intersection of history and social structure. One variable that differentiates international from “domestic” HRM is complexity (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2008). This complexity is due to firms operating in different countries with and across different cultures and employing different categories of workers (Dowling et al., 2008). Such complexity can be attributed to a number of factors including the need for a broader perspective. Thus, such complexity requires greater versatility in using both linear and nonlinear approaches in today’s not only complex but also uncertain and unpredictable global business environment. Such a business environment requires managers and HR professionals to reach beyond linear thinking involving rationality, analysis, logic, reason, and prediction based on cause and effect (Siggelkow & Rivkin, 2005). To complement such thinking, recent writers have advocated the importance of nonlinear thinking (Vance et al., 2007), which includes imagination.

As Warnock (1994) suggested, if we can educate a person’s imagination, we will give him or her a place in time. We will allow them to stretch the sense of the present back into the past, both their own individual past, and that of the world as a whole. One could argue that the education of managers and HR professionals has tended to be ahistorical and not always emphasizing nonlinear thinking styles such as the imagination.

A globally imaginative HRM lies at the intersection of personal framing and social structure. The reason why personal framing may be perceived as important is that an HR/personnel manager needs to define and redefine his or her definition of the situation. It is argued that such a manager needs to use his or her personal framing in a complex world. For the globally imaginative HR manager, the capacity is to also think in a particular way, thinking of the possible. Engaging the imagination is nurturing this capacity in one’s self or in others. Some have argued that “management may be more about the exercise of the managerial imagination rather than a rigorous body of academic knowledge” (Spender, 2007, p. 38). Imagination presents a means to pose challenges to the taken-for-granted assumptions offering the potential to enable practitioners to stand outside their taken-for-granted practice. If as Spencer argues, conceptualizing imaginative management as a process involving serious hard work and commitment that pushes the limits of practice, then one could argue that such an approach is what Mills referred to as “craftsmanship.” If the personal framing dimension of the model requires a more imaginative and reflective practitioner, then the limits of his or her constraints would emerge at a structural level of analysis. This dimension will now be discussed.

A central issue at a social structural level is the continued impact of globalization, which reflects international economic integration arising from the revolution in communication technologies, the growth and dominance of international capital markets, labor migration, and the global reach and influence of multinational corporations (Bach, 2005). Accordingly, the volatility of employment due to globalization has promoted more contingent work, which has meant a shift in the management of the employment relationship away from a single employer, who has influence over HR practices and seeks employee commitment. It could be argued that there is a diversity of the employment relationship that exists in multiemployer, networked organizations. This can be seen in the ways staff are employed and whether they are full-time, part-time, or temporary workers. If the social structural part of the model in this segment is about globalization and its influence on the nature of work, the personal problem framing is about the individual employee and how he or she interprets and gives meaning to the nature of work. If globalization provides the framework at a structural level, the individual employees' frame of reference makes sense by constructing and reconstructing the employment relationship. However, this reconstruction takes place within a framework created at a structural level. Thus, the commitment-based approach at the heart of the early HRM models has given way to an emphasis on ensuring that employees are engaged and gain emotional meaning from work. In such a scenario, a pragmatic approach toward HR entails engagement with the managerial imagination to cope with complexities and ambiguities of contemporary workplaces, and to imagine useful tools rather than pursue universal generalized and "correct" solutions (Watson, 2009).

The next section of this article discusses the concept imaginative performer using a specific example from HRM, namely, recruitment and selection.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD Professional Standards, 2009) has referred to the model of the "Thinking Performer" as someone who (a) consciously seeks to contribute to underlying organizational purposes, (b) when necessary reinforces compliance of the HR role but realizes that doing so is not sufficient of itself to add value, (c) challenges the way things are done, and finds alternative solutions, and (d) keeps in touch with "customers" and reacts to feedback and proactively develops as an individual.

One could argue that finding alternative solutions to an HR problem requires linear and nonlinear thinking. The form of nonlinear thinking emphasized in this article is imagination.

Therefore, this article is putting forward the concept of the imaginative HR performer by offering an example related to one aspect of the role, namely, that of recruitment and selection. This will be conducted at a number of levels of analysis. At the individual level, the author's experience of teaching HRM practitioners observed that some were highly

structured, bureaucratic and conventional in their thinking and practice. They wanted highly structured situations and perceived as deviant or unimportant knowledge and practice, which did not contribute to a particular norm or frame of reference familiar to them. They appeared to be deductive/inductive thinkers. However, more recent business research has focused on the importance of abductive thinking (Martin, 2009). In abductive thinking, the goal is to posit what could possibly be true. It is usually associated with more nonlinear forms of thinking such as imagination and intuition. This is not to suggest that all personnel practitioners should be abductive thinkers but that they should find a balance between deductive/inductive and abductive thinking. It is argued here that the imaginative performer should develop a balance in their thinking.

As part of the role of the personnel practitioner, Brown and Hesketh (2004) highlighted the complexities of the recruitment and selection process in their research on graduate employability. They found a range of techniques adopted by assessment centers on behalf of companies wishing to recruit staff. Apart from a range of techniques associated with deductive/inductive thinking, they also partially refer to constructive imagination and intuitive originality under a chapter called a "science of gut feeling." Clearly, they found in their research that assessors were considering not only deductive/inductive but also abductive approaches. It could be argued that the imaginative manager in his or her recruitment and selection process needs to consider such a balance, and that part of such a process will be the importance of future scenarios; such scenario building requires imagination as well as deducing the past performance of candidates.

At a further level of analysis, we return to the dilemmas facing personnel professionals highlighted earlier in this article, namely, the case of experiencing tension between being managerialist and being professional (Pilbeam & Corbridge, 2002). An emphasis on competitive advantage and "added-value" may be perceived as threatening some aspects of professionalism, and the HR manager may take actions that are in conflict with his or her professional and ethical standards. The professional demands require members to continuously update knowledge and expertise to ensure professional standards are maintained. Thus, ambiguities and tensions can be reduced, but these first have to be recognized and clarified. The personnel manager has to balance making a positive contribution to organizational success and acting as a guardian of fairness in the treatment of employees. One could describe such a balance as the manager oscillating between these two positions. It is therefore argued that this requires both linear and nonlinear thinking. Thus, such a balance requires nonlinear thinking such as imagination.

The imaginative performer, through scenario planning, needs to also demonstrate leadership and ability to facilitate organizational change. In the case of recruitment and selection, the personnel professional oscillates between these tensions. For an international assignment, these tensions are

potentially even greater. Some have argued that the key difference between international and domestic HRM is the greater complexity of operating in different countries and using different national categories (Dowling et al., 2008).

The lesson to be drawn about international recruitment and selection is that such a tension between the skills and competencies that organisations think they should be looking for when they recruit and on the other hand the skills that are actually needed to make a success of working abroad. (Sparrow, 1999, p. 173)

It is argued in this article that the imaginative performer should not only be aware of such tensions but also reduce them by creating a reason and a value for the service. This requires one's own personal knowledge system part of which is imagination (Martin, 2009). Such a personal knowledge system in an international setting requires certain leadership characteristics such as self-confidence, curiosity, communication skills, care goals and expectations, and also imagination (Schneider & Barsoux, 2003).

There are several possible future research directions relating to the concept of managerial imagination. One such direction is concerned with the notion of a learning organization. Senge (1990) referred to identifying five vital dimensions in building organizations that learn. Two of these dimensions are mental models and team learning. In the former, the managerial imagination can help HR managers redefine the deeply ingrained assumptions they may have about the organization and their role as HR professionals. Rothwell, Prescott, and Taylor (2008) argued that HR professionals are being asked to transform their organizations better, by playing an important role in aligning talent with organizational goals, and in bringing about organizational change. They further argued the transformation of the HR function should begin by focusing on these future trends. The discipline of working with mental models starts with learning to unearth our internal pictures or images of the organization, to bring them to the surface and to scrutinize them. It also includes the ability to reflect on various imaginative options where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others. This can be achieved in team learning. This starts with dialogue, with the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a process of thinking together. This allows the group to discover insights that may arise.

Another research direction is the training and development of future HR leaders. Some have argued that in terms of HR development, there is some element of personal imagination and creativity involved (Gibb, 2004). This researcher argues that what makes the difference is not the possession of scientific knowledge but the use of imagination and creativity. As has been argued earlier, imagining means the capacity to think in a particular way, thinking of the possible. Enabling the use of the imagination is helping to develop this learning

in oneself and in others (Gibb, 2004). One writer has provided a planning framework for imaginative learning and development (Egan, 1992). Admittedly, this was structured for the development of the imagination in secondary school children. Nevertheless, Egan's comprehensive research into the concept and specifically the planning framework can be adapted for the development and training of HR leaders and practitioners.

Summary and Conclusion

This article has outlined how the managerial imagination can be linked to HRM and is developed with a model to help better understand such a link. In this process, it was necessary to also outline and explore the concept of imagination as one form of nonlinear thinking. Imagination may be perceived as important to HR practitioners because it can help clarify organizational problems, and as such, it can help individuals and their organizations help design policies and practices that will lead to better solutions. A further argument is that more imaginative ways of solving problems and adding greater competitive advantage are neglected in the formal and informal education, training, and development of HR managers.

One could conceive of HRM as a "bridging culture" in resolving two dilemmas with the use of imagination. First, the HR manager can use imagination to solve the balancing act that is required between a positive contribution to organizational success and acting as a guardian of fairness in the treatment of employees. Second is the tension HR professionals can experience between being managerial and being professional. It is being suggested that to bridge these two dilemmas, it is worth returning to Mills (1973). Instead of the sociological imagination, one can talk about a managerial imagination. This can be conceived as an intellectual craft, which enables the ability to shift from the concrete to an abstract, from simplicity to complexity in understanding an organizational problem. It enables the HR manager to shift perspectives and obtain a totality of view connecting history, biography, social structure, and personal framing.

The model provided in this article attempts to locate various dimensions of the personnel function at various positions in the model from traditional personnel to a globally more imaginative HR. It is in the latter that arguably deeper thinking is required because of the greater complexity of the HR function. In this situation, the HR professional needs to develop approaches better suited to his or her organization, its business goals, culture, and its competitive context. This requires more imaginative thinking at macro and micro levels when constructing HR policies and practices for cross-cultural people management and development.

To develop a managerial imagination in HR professionals both at a domestic and international level, the ideas under discussion could be developed into a craft involving tools for imagination to help support changes in HRM. The research questions that might be asked may include the following:

In what ways do you resolve an HR problem using a mental or visual image?

In what kind of situation is your imaginative decision process triggered?

How is it possible to debate about storytelling in a discussion on imagination?

How is it possible to use metaphors to better understand organizational problems?

How can we develop more unconventional, original, or inventive ways at work? Can you visually describe such a situation in the past and future?

In conclusion, it appears that compared with other forms of nonlinear thinking such as creativity and intuition, imagination has had less consideration and acknowledgment in business research. This article is an attempt to help further develop imagination as a fruitful avenue for research. The concept of managerial imagination and the imaginative performer can bring new insights to the HR professional and offer a new set of solutions that would benefit both employees and the organization.

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