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## HRM devolution to middle managers: Dimension identification



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Received 28 November 2012; accepted 9 May 2013  
Available online 13 April 2014

**JEL CLASSIFICATION**  
M12;  
M54

**KEYWORDS**  
Devolution;  
Middle managers;  
HRM function;  
Case study;  
Dimensions

**Abstract** The phenomenon of devolution, or transfer of human resource management (HRM) responsibilities to middle managers (MM) has mainly been studied and measured as a homogeneous and unidimensional phenomenon. However, the variations found in the literature suggest that this key HR concept may be of a heterogeneous and multidimensional nature. This inductive study explores whether devolution may be broken down into different dimensions, beyond the simple addition of transferred areas (selection, training, etc.). To do so, case studies are carried out in the hospital sector. The results identify the existence of four dimensions of HRM devolution to MM: task execution, decision making power, financial power and knowledge transfer. A number of propositions around these dimensions are presented. The recognition of the multidimensional nature of the concept and the different degrees of transfer, around which a set of propositions is presented, is intended to act as the basis for subsequently carrying out explanatory, predictive studies.

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### Introduction

The current economic climate has forced organisations to once again question their own structures, with the resulting management decisions to cut back on management levels and employee numbers in certain areas, including, most notably, that of human resources. Some areas of people management have been outsourced (Valverde et al., 2011)

or transferred to middle management (Cascon-Pereira et al., 2006) to create more streamlined human resource departments.

Although the topic of devolution of the HR function is well-developed research in the literature on human resource management, there are still many questions to answer regarding what devolution actually means. What is actually transferred—the implementation of staff management tasks or the decisions to be taken in this area? For example, the term devolution is used to refer indistinctly both to the responsibility for evaluating the performance of employees by middle managers and to the ability of these managers to make decisions as a result of this evaluation, despite the fact

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that these represent very different situations and responsibilities. Therefore, we need to specify certain nuances to be able to differentiate between such distinct types and degrees of the same phenomenon.

Likewise, the one-dimensional way of dealing with the concept has not allowed us to explore the mechanisms and diverse situations of devolution in terms of different contingent variables such as a company size or industry. Thus, we need to fully operationalise the concept so this phenomenon can be measured in future studies and then relate it to different contextual variables or internal, organisational variables.

In this context, the aim of this article is to explore the true nature of the role of middle managers in order to identify whether the devolution of human resource management (HRM) responsibilities to them is simple and homogeneous or whether, on the contrary, it occurs in different degrees or dimensions. This will be done with an inductive approach to the phenomenon to form the basis upon which to operationalise the concept and to carry out subsequent explanatory and predictive studies.

## The devolution literature: explored and unexplored

HRM devolution to middle managers has been defined as “the redistribution or transfer of personnel tasks or activities traditionally carried out by human resources specialists to middle managers” (Hoogendorn and Brewster, 1992:4; Brewster and Larsen, 1992:412; Hall and Torrington, 1998a:46). Probably because of its apparent clarity, this is a concept that has not received much academic discussion. Instead, it has received plenty of empirical attention, particularly at specific times usually linked to the economic cycle. For example, the current need to reduce costs and improve efficiency in HRM (Sheenan, 2012), and the interest for the link with the company’s results (Azmi, 2010), have resulted in a renewed attention on devolution, although once again the specific nuances that this concept entails remain unchallenged. The popularity of studying devolution in sync with the economic cycle is easy to understand given that its main aim is to respond to competitive pressures from the environment by reducing hierarchical levels and restructuring an organisation (Armstrong, 1998; Storey, 1992; Beer et al., 1988). Although some place the advent of the human resource management (HRM) movement as a possible reason for the use devolution to middle managers (MM), Armstrong (1998) asserts that, while this approach has had a great influence on making more line managers responsible for personnel decisions and other key resources in the organisation, it cannot be regarded as the sole cause.

It is possible to distinguish between two types of studies about the devolution of HRM to middle managers. The first group of studies is descriptive and explanatory and focuses on determining what are the most frequently devolved areas of HRM and what are the consequences of this. The second group is mainly explanatory and it focuses on exploring the impact that devolution has on the role of the middle manager.

Within the first group of studies we can identify:

1. General studies that explore which areas of HRM (recruitment and selection, training and development, etc.) are transferred and how they are distributed among the different members of the organisation and in particular among the HR department and middle managers (Merchant and Wilson, 1994; Hall and Torrington, 1998b; Armstrong, 1998; Valverde and Gorjup, 2005; Mesner Andolsek and Stebe, 2005; Maxwell and Watson, 2006; Valverde et al., 2006; Conway and Monks, 2010).
2. Specific studies concentrating on devolution in a single area such as performance assessment (Redman, 2001), the administration of economic incentives (Currie and Procter, 1999), change management (McGuire et al., 2008) or other areas (Heraty and Morley, 1995; Bond and Wise, 2003; Fenton-O’Creevy, 2001; and others), and the consequences of such practices. These consequences have been evaluated in terms of quality in HR management (Renwick, 2003a; Thornhill and Saunders, 1998; Perry and Kulik, 2008), the achievement of organisational objectives, economic results and organisational efficiency (Renwick, 2003a; Azmi, 2010; Sheenan, 2012), the relationship between middle management and HR specialists (Currie and Procter, 2001), the effect on employees (Gilbert et al., 2011b) and the actual role of HR specialists (Renwick, 2003b; Hall and Torrington, 1998b; Currie and Procter, 1999; Budhwar, 2000; Renwick, 2000, and others).

In the second group of studies, which includes the perceptions of middle managers (Watson et al., 2006; Bondarouk et al., 2009; Brandl et al., 2009) and concentrates mainly on the impact of the HRM devolution to middle management, we can find identify:

1. Studies highlighting how devolution has negative effects on middle managers by imposing changes such as increased workloads, a decline in the number of middle managers and their status, the need to deal with conflicting expectations, the loss of technical expertise, and diminished opportunities for promotion (Torrington and Weightman, 1987; Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999; Vouzas et al., 1997; Holden and Roberts, 2004).
2. Studies highlighting the positive impact of this change in terms of greater autonomy and empowerment of middle managers within the organisation (Storey, 1992; Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Cunningham et al., 1996; Yusoff and Abdullah, 2008).
3. More recent studies that provide mixed evidence regarding the effects of devolution on MM and question the usefulness of the debate on whether these effects are positive or negative because of the difficulty of making generalisations about it (Currie and Procter, 2005; McConville, 2006; Thornhill and Saunders, 1998; Renwick, 2003a; Mesner Andolsek and Stebe, 2005; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Gilbert et al., 2011a). Although these studies recognise these difficulties and try to counter them by carrying out empirical studies in many different types of companies, they do not emphasise the possible contingent nature of devolution.

Despite the variety of studies that have been carried out about devolution, no attempt has been made to study

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