

## LINE MANAGER'S ROLE IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AT INNOVATION CENTERS IN POLAND

Sylwia WIŚNIEWSKA

Cracow University of Economics, Poland; sylwia.wisniewska@uek.krakow.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-4760-2634

**Purpose:** The main aim of this paper is to analyze the roles performed by line managers in human resource management at innovation centers in Poland.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study reviews the subject literature, as well as discusses the results of surveys carried out among line managers of innovation centers from Poland and analyses the research problem applying a descriptive method.

**Findings:** Thanks to empirical research, the paper analyses the roles of line managers in human resource management at innovation centers in Poland and determines the level of fulfillment of individual roles. The importance of different roles for effective implementation of statutory objectives of innovation centers was also identified. The results of empirical research allowed to create certain generalizations concerning the roles performed by line managers of innovation centers in Poland.

**Research limitations:** The limitation of the conducted research consists in, most of all, carrying out surveys only among line managers of innovation centers and, on the basis of the answers given, defining their roles in human resource management.

**Originality/value:** The results of the study complement the gap in knowledge regarding the roles of line managers in human resource management at innovation centers in Poland. The conducted studies of the subject literature confirm the lack of research in this field.

**Keywords:** line manager, human resource management, innovation centers.

**Category of the paper:** research paper.

### 1. Introduction

In the era of building a knowledge economy, innovations are considered a key source of competitive advantage of an organization. The multifaceted nature of innovation processes, which are often connected with high risk of failure and the need for considerable financial outlays, puts many small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in need of support of other organizations during the process of creating, adapting and implementing innovations. In particular, business environment institutions play a crucial role in the process of supporting

enterprise innovativeness. The non-profit business institutions include innovation centers (ICs). These organizations do not aim at profit maximization and the profit they do make is assigned to fulfil statutory aims concerning stimulating enterprise innovativeness, especially in the SME sector, by offering a wide range of strictly pro-innovation services, as well as services connected with informing, consulting, training and financing. Innovation centers include: technology parks, technology incubators, academic entrepreneurship incubators and technology transfer centers (cf. Wiśniewska, 2015).

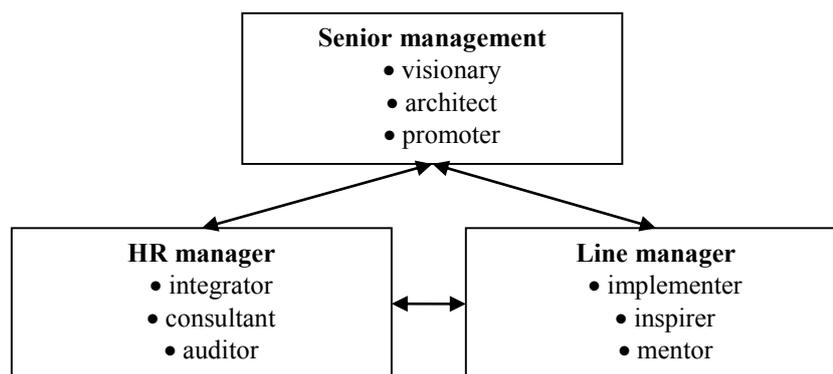
The effectiveness of IC actions depends on a variety of factors, including human resources and their competencies. This poses new challenges to human resource management (HRM), implying changes in personnel function realization. This, in turn, requires the management staff of ICs to play a number of roles in HRM, thus facilitating the achievement of the organization's strategic aims and ensuring flexible response to market challenges. Nowadays, both the subject literature and economic practice emphasize the key role of line managers in HRM. Literature studies present a number of models describing the roles of line managers in HRM. However, there is no single universal model, as the roles of line managers are defined by the specificity of a given organization. The aim of this study is to analyze the roles performed by line managers in HRM in Polish ICs. The study reviews the subject literature in the field regarding the roles of management staff in HRM, applying a descriptive method. Also, the findings of the author's own empirical research are presented, concerning the roles played by line managers in HRM in ICs in Poland.

## **2. Literature review**

In the literature on the subject, there are many definitions of human resource management, ranging from brief and simple to lengthy and comprehensive descriptions. In short, HRM is understood as the productive utilization of human resources in order to achieve strategic business goals of the organization (Stone, 2013). HRM assumes involving a number of entities in performing personnel function. In HRM, these entities play diverse roles, which are a set of expected behavior patterns attributed to someone occupying a given position in a social unit, such as an organization (Maund, 2001). In the organizational system, a role represents the position in the organization. Fulfilling certain roles contributes to the achievement of the organization's strategic aims. Surveys of economic literature show that the roles played by line managers in HRM have been widely discussed (Nik Mat, and Susomrith, 2014; Martins, 2009; McGuire et al., 2008; Papalexandris, and Panayotopoulou, 2005; Holt Larsen, and Brewster, 2003).

In the increasingly competitive market environment, it has become vital to decentralize HRM actions in favor of line managers (Budhwar, 2000). The main aim of decentralizing the HRM process is to focus the actions of HR specialists on the strategic level, which allows organizations to successfully include the personnel function in their business strategy. As a result, line managers are responsible for HRM on the operational level. The increasing significance of line managers in HRM results from their involvement in many practices from the HRM area, such as: recruitment and selection, evaluation, training and development, remuneration, employment relationships, safety and health protection or dismissal (Currie, and Procter, 2001; Holt Larsen, and Brewster, 2003). What is more, involving line managers in HRM practice implementation supports strategic development of the organization (Ulrich, and Brockbank, 2005).

Literature on the subject features a number of models describing the roles of management staff in HRM. The model by Pocztowski (2018) defines the roles played by the line manager, HR manager and the senior managers (Figure 1). One of the key tasks of senior management entails outlining and implementing the rules, which facilitate HRM activity performance. Thus, senior managers play the role of visionaries, architects and promoters. An active part is also played by the HR manager, who is often equated with the HR department itself. The main task of the HR manager is to integrate HRM practices with strategic aims of the organization, to provide factual support for line managers and to add value for all stakeholders. Therefore, HR manager plays the role of an integrator, consultant and auditor. Another important agent, actively involved in HRM, is the line manager, also known as the operations manager. Their main task is to oversee the work of their subordinates and implement HRM actions in cooperation with HR managers. Therefore, a line manager plays the role of an implementer, inspirer and mentor.



**Figure 1.** The roles of managerial staff in HRM, according to Pocztowski. Source: own elaboration.

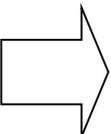
According to Pocztowski (2018), the strategic level of HRM should actively include line managers, who play three key roles: of an implementer, inspirer and mentor (Figure 1). The role of an implementer consists in using a personal strategy to achieve organizational aims in the areas of line manager responsibility. This is done by optimal allocation of human capital, contained in the employee teams led by line managers. The role of an inspirer entails creating

an organization climate, which is conducive to knowledge exchange among the employees. This, in turn, leads to an increase in total intellectual capital of the organization, and also includes enhancing its integral component – human capital. The role of a mentor, in turn, is expressed by multifaceted support given to the employees, in areas related to their work and professional development, according to the implemented personnel strategy. By performing the role of a mentor – providing emotional and factual support for the workers – line managers stimulate the development of the organization’s human capital.

One of the most popular models of various roles of managerial staff was created by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005). The model presents the roles performed by line managers and HR professionals, who are HR champions and play key functions in HRM (Table 1). This model points to the evolution of the employee champion role towards the roles of employee advocate and human capital developer, stressing the significance of supporting employee development and the need to represent employees’ interests. The role of an administrative expert evolves into that of a functional expert, whose task is to provide specialist knowledge on various levels of personnel function. Nowadays, the role of a strategic partner refers both to participating in change management and integrating personnel function with organizational strategy. The authors also define the new role of a leader, who leads within the personnel function.

**Table 1.**

*Evolution of roles performed by line managers and HR professionals, according to Ulrich and Brockbank*

Past HR roles	Characteristic	Evolution	Current HR roles	Characteristic
Employee champion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>develops the employees in order to facilitate meeting organizational goals</li> </ul>		Employee advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cares for employees, listens to them, answers their questions and represents them</li> </ul>
			Human capital developer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>develops employee competencies with reference to future organizational needs</li> </ul>
Administrative expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>builds effective organizational infrastructure and reengineer processes</li> </ul>		Functional expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>meets the organization’s functional needs</li> </ul>
Change agent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>participates in change management and the process of revitalizing the organization</li> </ul>		Strategic partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>integrates personnel function with business strategy; provides HRM knowledge in order to build organizational development strategy and manages change</li> </ul>
Strategic partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>integrates personnel strategy with organizational strategy</li> </ul>			
-	-		Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>leads personnel function, supports value creation processes within other functions</li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration.

Specific roles of managerial staff in HRM are also defined by S. Carroll (1991). His approach sees the managerial staff not only as performing traditional roles of policy formulator and provider of personnel services, but also the roles of delegator, technical expert and innovator. These roles result from an increasing significance of integrating the personnel function with the organization's strategy. The role of a delegator entails the responsibility of line managers for implementing HRM practices. The role of a technical expert is manifested in specific competencies, which facilitate task performance in areas, such as remuneration, training or employee development. The role of an innovator is performed when HR manager recommends new solutions to HRM problems, such as sudden increase in illness-related absence or decreased work effectiveness.

Also Martins (2009) stresses out the role of a leader, claiming that line managers should be leaders, enablers and facilitators, in order to create an environment conducive to human capital growth within the organization. With regard to the statutory aims of ICs, it is vital to involve line managers in their subordinates' training and development, due to the fact that effective support of SMEs is connected with continuous qualification and competency development of IC employees. This is confirmed by results of empirical research (cf. Rimi et al., 2017; Azmi, and Mushtaq, 2015; Tan, and Nasuridin, 2011).

The models summarized above represent standard approaches to the roles of managerial staff in HRM. However, they do not exhaust the subject area, as the roles are performed to various extents in different organizations. Author's own research, presented in this paper, concerns the roles performed by line managers in HRM in non-profit organizations, which include innovation centers. The literature on the subject emphasizes the key role HRM plays in managing non-profit organizations (Ridder and Baluch, 2010). Also, it points to the possibility of transferring to non-profit organizations the HRM practices and instruments, which have already been found effective in commercial organizations (Dover, and Lawrence, 2012; Pynes, 2009). However, the effectiveness of implementing HRM solutions in a given non-profit organization depends on a wide range of factors. Therefore, it is crucial for HRM tenets coming from the commercial sector to be adapted to the specific needs of non-profit organizations.

### **3. Methods and research sample**

The main aim of the research has been to analyze the roles performed by line managers in HRM in Polish ICs. Two specific goals accompanied this aim. The first specific goal was to diagnose the level of fulfilling the roles by IC line managers. The second, in turn, was to evaluate the significance of line manager's role in HRM for effective implementation of IC statutory aims. The research hypothesis was: IC line managers perform various roles in

HRM, thus supporting the realization of IC statutory aims. Effectiveness was defined by the degree of achievement of IC statutory aims (cf. Wiśniewska, 2015).

Both primary and secondary information sources were used in order to achieve the research goals and verify the research hypothesis. First, a survey of available literature was conducted, in order to establish a theoretical foundation for empirical analysis. In order to obtain information from primary sources, the author performed her own empirical research focused on managerial staff of ICs and examined the roles performed by line managers in HRM. The territorial scope of the research covered the entire Poland.

The research was conducted using the survey method, including a structured interview technique, which was chosen as a tool enabling rich data collection. The interview technique helps to motivate the respondents to provide answers and additional explanations. The research tool was an original questionnaire, created by the authors basing on the existing literature on the subject. The questionnaire mainly included closed questions (most of them being questionnaires), but also some open questions. Closed questions allowed us to obtain unambiguous responses. Open questions, in turn, triggered more free, subjective answers. Also scale questions were used, in order to investigate the respondents' opinions on research topics.

The choice of the research sample was deliberate. The conducted empirical research was comprehensive. All (155<sup>1</sup>) ICs operating in Poland were asked to participate in the interview. Many of them refused to participate in the research project – completely or partially. Eventually, 37 ICs were surveyed, which constitutes a return rate of 23.9%. In May 2019, a pilot study was conducted, which led to questionnaire verification and necessary adjustment. The main study was conducted between October and December 2019. The respondents were encouraged to cooperate via a cover letter attached to the questionnaire.

The research encompassed managerial staff of all types of ICs. The study involved 19 women (51.4%) and 18 men (48.6%). The line managers taking part in the study represented the following levels of education: bachelor's degree (5.4%), engineering degree (5.4%), master's degree (62.2%), post-graduate degree (5.4%), doctorate (21.6%). The greatest number of respondents (48.7%) came from technology transfer centers. Representatives of technology parks accounted for 35.1% of the respondents, while academic business incubators constituted 10.8% of the surveyed. The smallest group included representatives of technology incubators (5.4%).

#### **4. Research results and discussion**

Due to both complementary and substitutive nature of the roles presented in the above models, empirical research used various elements of respective models, thus creating a set of following roles: implementer, inspirer, human capital developer, employee advocate, functional

expert, strategic partner, innovator and leader. The study used role characteristics described in section 2 of this paper.

The study shows that line managers play a variety of roles in the HRM at IC. The study analyzed the degree, to which line managers fulfilled individual roles. The obtained results indicate that a medium amount of the surveyed managers hold such roles as an inspirer, leader and executor. Finally, only a few line managers have such roles as a strategic partner, human capital developer and employee advocate. Table 2 shows the detailed results of self-evaluation conducted by the surveyed group.

**Table 2.**

*Role fulfillment degree – self-evaluation of studied line managers fulfilling specific roles*

Role	Degree			The role is not fulfilled
	Large	Medium	Small	
Inspirer	18	6	6	7
Leader	12	16	0	9
Executor	12	12	2	11
Functional expert	10	10	4	13
Innovator	8	18	0	11
Strategic partner	6	14	8	9
Human capital developer	6	14	4	13
Employee advocate	4	10	12	11

Source: own elaboration.

Line managers also evaluated the significance of their roles for effective implementation of statutory objectives of the IC. The following roles: the inspirer, innovator and leader, defined as the “main role”, were assessed as the most important. “Moderately important role” was indicated as follows: the executor and strategic partner. Finally, roles such as the functional expert, employee advocate and human capital developer were considered “small roles”. Table 3 shows the detailed assessment results of the importance of different roles for the effective implementation of statutory objectives of the IC.

**Table 3.**

*The importance of line manager roles in HRM for the effective implementation of statutory objectives of the IC – evaluation of the surveyed line managers*

Role	Importance		
	Main role	Moderately important role	Small role
Inspirer	31	3	3
Innovator	20	12	5
Leader	18	12	7
Executor	15	17	5
Human capital developer	11	11	15
Strategic partner	10	18	9
Employee advocate	8	14	15
Functional expert	5	14	18

Source: own elaboration.

As for the research hypothesis, it is worth noting that it has been verified as true. Importantly, the surveyed line managers play a variety of roles in HRM at the IC in Poland, which, in their opinion, supports the achievement of the IC's statutory objectives.

Considering the roles of line managers, it can be seen that, according to the surveyed line managers, the most important role is that of an inspirer. This is the role that is most often taken by the respondents. Moreover, this role was considered by the respondents as the most important for effective implementation of the statutory objectives of the IC. The results indicate that, for the surveyed line managers acting as an inspirer, it is important to create an organizational atmosphere that fosters knowledge exchange between employees. This contributes to the growth of the overall intellectual capital of the organization, with its integral part in the form of human capital.

The fact that the respondents often perform the roles of leader and executor to a large extent is a positive aspect. This indicates that, within the IC, employees appreciate the benefits of leadership in a personnel function that supports strategic development of the organization. In this context, the role of the executor is also important in order to implement HRM activities and use personnel strategy to achieve the organization's objectives in the field of line managers' responsibility. The study also shows that line managers, acting as human capital developer and employee advocate, focus on creating a friendly working environment that contributes to the use of the organization's human capital. However, the negative aspect is that these roles are most often not filled by the respondents, alongside the functional expert.

## **5. Conclusions, limitations and future research**

Thanks to empirical research, the article analyses the roles of line managers in HRM in ICs in Poland and determines the level of fulfillment of individual roles. The importance of different roles for effective implementation of the statutory objectives of the IC was also identified. The results of empirical research allowed to create certain generalizations concerning the roles performed by line managers of ICs in Poland. Results of the study lead to the conclusion that line managers are primarily acting as the inspirer, leader and executor. In the era of intensifying market competition and growing expectations towards HRM, the defined roles should not be treated as unchangeable. It is likely that the defined roles will change.

The results of the study complement the gap in knowledge regarding the roles of line managers in HRM in ICs in Poland. The conducted studies of the subject literature confirm the lack of research in this field. Empirical research conducted so far focused on the issues related to the state and structure of employment at the IC (cf. Bąkowski, and Mażewska, 2015, 2018; Matusiak, 2010). The qualifications of employees of innovation and business centers operating in Poland were also analyzed (cf. Wiśniewska, 2014). However, so far, the research has not

addressed the issue of the roles of managers in HRMs in ICs in Poland. Due to the diagnosed knowledge gap in the analyzed area, the results of the empirical research presented in this study can be considered valuable and worth disseminating among a wide range of recipients.

In the context of the involvement of different actors in the HRM, it would be important to diagnose the roles played not only by line managers, but also by senior management of HRMs. The study concluded that there are no HR managers at the analyzed ICs. The lack of HR managers results from the specificity of ICs and their considerable diversity. Among the ICs, there are both organizations with a slender and a flat organizational structure. The gaps that have arisen in this area are worth filling by conducting further empirical research. In fact, it seems appropriate to identify at least two groups among the innovation centers, which can initially be described as “slender ICs” and “flat ICs”, and then to analyze the roles of management at different levels of management according to the type of center. Another limitation is to carry out surveys only among IC managers and, on the basis of the answers given, define their roles at HRM. It would be valuable to obtain subordinates' opinions on the roles of line managers, and for subordinates to assess the level of fulfillment of each managerial role. This would significantly enrich the results of empirical research presented in this article. Moreover, performing specific roles requires the management to have the competence to perform HRM effectively and, consequently, to achieve the statutory objectives of these organizations. Therefore, a desirable direction for further research would be to develop a competency model for the IC line manager.

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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. <http://www.sooipp.org.pl/osrodki>, 27.03.2019.