

**Unfairness and injustice in HR practices:
Who is to blame?**

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Abstract

In this study we look at how fairness and justice is enacted within the UK businesses of eight large and complex companies. Building from detailed analysis of over 300 interviews we examine the role played by line managers and members of the HR function in the creation of fair and just people practices and processes. Our findings point to the differing justice roles of line managers and the HR function and the critical importance of treating people with sensitivity and concern.

Introduction

The ability of a company to deliver superior business performance is dependent in part on the strength of the alignment between business goals and people practices such as selection, performance management and development (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer 1994; Patterson, West, Lawtham & Nickell, 1998). What is crucial here, however, is not simply the *policy* or *intent* of these practices, but rather how those are deployed and employee's perception and experience of their deployment, in effect the *enactment* of people practices (Truss & Gratton, 1994). In this paper we examine a crucial aspect of enactment, employee perceptions of the justice and fairness of key people processes. A focus of our interest is on the *agents* of deployment, who employee's believe to be responsible for delivering just and fair policies and practices, and how these agents interface and work together.

Justice and fairness is not a unitary concept but rather has three clear dimensions: the equity of the outcome of the process (*distributive justice*), the structural features of the process such as its consistency and accuracy (*procedural justice*), and the actions and manner of those deploying the process (*interactional justice*). We know that employees' intention to stay in a job and their attitude to management and the organisation is influenced by their perception of these three dimensions of justice and fairness (Moorman, 1991; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Dailey & Kirk, 1992; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1993). However, we know less of what these incidents of injustice may be and of how the agents of deployment are viewed.

In this study we intend to bring greater understanding of the delivery of justice and fairness by examining the *agents of deployment*: employees, line managers and members of the HR function. We use the concept of *naming* as the employee's recognition of unjust outcomes,

procedures and processes; and the concept of *blaming* to signify to whom employees (including HR and line managers) allocate blame for these incidents of injustice (Sheppard, Lewicki & Minton, 1992).

Clearly our aspirations to examine employee perceptions in such a fine-grain manner has significant methodological challenges. Much of our understanding of organizational justice has been developed through cross-sectional analysis of the perceptions from a one-level perspective supported by rigorous statistical methods (Greenberg, 1990; Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997). Our aim here is to augment these insights by creating a rich and deep analysis by building on the work of Sheppard, Lewicki and Minton (1992) and Mossholder, Bennett and Martin (1998) who have advocated the examination of justice from a multi-level perspective. This study through its qualitative and in-depth interpretive approach provides a unique insight into the creation of justice and fairness in the context of the multiple interests of the key agents.

Literature Review

Whilst there is a growing body of research on the impact of justice and fairness on employee commitment and attitudes, less is known about the role of the key agents in the deployment of just and fair processes and procedures. There is case based, anecdotal evidence that the responsibility for the deployment of key people processes such as rewards, appraisal and career development is taken by line managers and HR professionals with day-to-day delivery increasingly devolved to line managers (Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997). Members of the HR function may indeed have an elevated status in policy creation (Guest, 1990) and a role in ensuring that human assets are appropriately managed, but many have argued that the

principal responsibility for the delivery of people processes must reside with line managers (Angle, Mantz & Van de Ven, 1985; Tichy & Devanna, 1986; Metz, 1998).

Yet whilst the role of the line manager as the principle agent in deploying people processes is strongly endorsed, there are practical difficulties in delivery, particularly in the potential role ambiguity between the line managers and members of the HR function. For example, in a study of career processes, Hall (1986) reports that many line managers considered the career review process the responsibility of members of the HR function rather than their own. In some cases effective deployment failed to be supported, at other times there was collusion between line managers and employees. Schein (1978) has observed employees and their line manager colluding with each other and against the HR function as they appear to 'go through the motions' of process deployment. This creates what Gouldner (1954) has termed *mock bureaucracy* 'the kind of social relations that emerge if the norms of the indulgency pattern are administratively implemented' (1954: 187). In these situations the people processes such as career review or performance appraisal become a sham or collusion, with the rules enforced by neither management nor employees.

Despite the potential role ambiguity, time pressures and 'mock bureaucracy', the means by which the line and the HR function interface and work together becomes particularly crucial in times of organizational change. As Greenberg (1990) has argued, during times of intense organizational change, employee expectations of being treated in a procedurally fair manner are raised since change profoundly effects both the quality of communication and the overall social interaction. At these times employee practices such as redundancy or the reduction of benefits may not be perceived to be in the interests of all employees. It is at this point that the strength of the interface between line management and the HR function is tested, as both

parties are required to 'toe the line'. As a consequence the interface and potential tension between these two agents may well have a profound effect on employees' perceptions of justice and the allocation of blame. In our analysis of the *mechanisms* and *agents of deployment* of just and fair people processes and practices we have developed two guiding questions:

1. What roles does the HR professional and line manager play in delivering processes which are perceived by employees to be unjust or unfair?
2. How does the dynamic interface between the line manager and HR professional impact on the creation and implementation of just and fair people processes?

Method

Sample

The study is a part of a larger project which began in 1992 focusing on the alignment of business strategy with people processes and practices in the UK businesses of eight large companies, five headquartered in the UK and three in the USA (Gratton, Hope Hailey, Stiles & Truss, 1999). The sample consists of a telecommunication company, a food company, a pharmaceutical company, a high-tech company, a hospital, a postal service and two banks. In the period of this study from 1993 till 1999 all had undergone significant cultural and structural change through a combination of mergers, acquisitions or downsizing.

Methods of data collection

Our aspiration to examine perceptions of justice and fairness in such a fine-grained manner had a profound impact on methodology. At the center of our method was a qualitative and in-depth analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups we conducted with a sample of line managers, members of the HR function and employees from all levels of the UK business operation of each participating company. Members of the research team conducted between 15 and 20 interviews in each business at three periods of time; in 1993/4, 1996/7 and in 1998/9. The interviews were designed to capture a broad spectrum of employee's experiences of people processes and practices in terms of the quality of their design and the process of their implementation. In each organization, at each point of time, we also ran focus groups with members of the HR function to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and intent of the HR processes and practices. During the period from 1993 to 1999, 310 interviews and focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

Our analysis of this qualitative data set was influenced by Eisenhardt's (1989) work on inductive theory. Following her method we embarked on four phases of analysis: the creation of categories and coding of the interview and focus group transcriptions; the creation of broad patterns; the comparisons of patterns between employees, line managers and members of the HR function; and the identification of illustrative examples.

1. Category creation and coding of transcripts. First, we reviewed the research literature on organizational justice and from this created a coding scheme of 12 possible categories of incidents of unfairness in people procedures and processes shown in Table 1. The subcategories of *distributive justice* were designed on the standards of comparison with

different points of reference (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975). These were (1) *internal equity* which refers to whether an individual receives an outcome in an amount which he or she believe to be consistent with their contribution; (2) *external equity* which refers to whether an individual receives an outcome which he or she perceives to be fair in comparison with others; (3) *equality* which refers to whether an individual believes he or she has an equal chance of receiving outcomes regardless of their personal characteristics and (4) *individual need* which refers to whether an individual believes he or she receive outcomes which are based on their relative individual needs. The subcategories of *procedural justice* were designed according to the structural features of the procedure (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Leventhal, Karuza & Fry, 1980). They combined: (5) *accuracy* which is the extent to which procedures are based on high quality information and well-informed opinions; (6) *consistency* which focuses on whether procedures are consistent across different groups of employees; (7) *bias suppression* which deals with the ability of agents who implement procedures to suppress their personal bias and avoid discrimination; (8) *voice* which refers to any manner of communication between employees and agents of deployment of the procedures and (9) *ethicality* which is the criterion of taking into account prevalent standards of moral conduct. The major subcategories of *interactional justice* reflect the informational and interpersonal components of implementation (Konovsky & Folger, 1991; Bies & Moag, 1986). These included: (10) *quality of information* which refers to the adequacy and timeliness of information provided by the agents of deployment about the procedures; (11) *concern and sensitivity* which is the quality of interpersonal treatment which employees receive from agents during the implementation of the procedures; and (12) *politeness*, the quality of interpersonal interaction between employees and agents.

We then identified employee, line manager and members of the HR function descriptions of incidents of injustice in the interview transcripts and coded them into the 12 categories keeping a note of who described the incident and to whom they referred. Samples of the incident transcripts were coded by a second person to assess the reliability of the coding.

2. *Patterns creation.* Next, we took a closer look at the nature of the unjust incidents in each group and the reasons behind them. Here, we looked for the unique patterns which emerged within and between groups. For the group of employees we were interested in the *naming* of incidents of injustice or unfairness and in the *blaming*, the allocation of blame to some agent for their unfair treatment. For the group of line managers and HR professionals we were interested in their descriptions of why they felt unable to provide fair practices, and to whom or to what they allocate the blame for this inability.

3. *Cross-group comparison.* Finally, we looked across the three groups for emerging patterns. We conducted a group search for within-group similarities and across-group differences by conducting three types of comparisons: employees and line managers descriptions; employees and HR members descriptions; line managers and HR members descriptions. When a pattern from one group was corroborated by the evidence from another, the finding was stronger and better grounded. When evidence conflicted, this guided our further analysis to explore the deeper meaning of differences. The first two comparisons increased our understanding of differences and similarities in the roles of the line and HR function as seen by employees and by the agents themselves. This addresses the first question in our study. The third comparison between line managers and members of the HR function provided a picture of their interface, this addressed the second research question of the study.

4. Identifying illustrative examples. In order to illustrate the emerging patterns as objectively as possible, we looked for illustrations of the perception of the same justice and fairness incident as seen by all three groups. Extreme opinions were rejected and the most illustrative interview comments were chosen for the manuscript.

Results

What roles does the HR professional and line manager play in delivering processes which are perceived by employees to be unjust or unfair?

Our analysis of the interview transcripts showed that incidents of injustice took place around all the key people processes (selection, performance management, rewards and recognition, promotion, training and career management) and across all the companies. Perceptions of who was responsible for the three dimensions of justice and fairness differed somewhat for line managers and members of the HR function. We have shown the broad perceptions of responsibility by the allocation of ticks in Table 1. In the next section we illustrate these perceptions with interview quotes.

1. The role of members of the HR function. As Table 1 shows, members of the HR function play a key role in the delivery of many aspects of distributive, procedural and interactional justice. Of these, the most frequent incidents of injustice concerned interactional justice, specifically, the quality and depth of the information about decisions around selection, rewards and development. Many of the incidents we heard which created the greatest outrage were when employees felt that satisfactory explanations were not provided by the HR function, and they were not given feedback about the outcomes of procedures. These aspects

of information were particularly sensitive for pay and reward decisions. Perceptions about the lack of information on how bonuses were allocated, how salaries were determined, and how they compared to others in the business caused deep employee resentment. In the case of selection and promotion, employees blamed the HR function if they perceived the selection and promotion procedures to be mute and secretive. For example, an employee of a telecommunication company said this: *'Personnel could do a lot better in communicating their policies. Everyone should get a fair crack of the whip. You should hear about all vacancies. There should be some sort of publication to allow you to do this'*. Here the employee was particularly concerned with the lack of basic information on recruitment and selection, the lack of openness with which vacancies were communicated and the 'secret' criteria of promotions. These findings, indicating the critical role of fairness of employee outcomes, confirmed what others have argued - that the processes concerned with economic and social gains such as pay and promotion play a central role within the work life of employees (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997).

The provision of adequate and timely information was seen by employees to be the most important role of the HR function, and this was particularly the case during times of organizational change. The interviews revealed that employees could take bad news in times of change, but what they found more difficult was the insecurity of not knowing, and of not having adequate and up-to-date information. This is how an employee from the telecommunication company expressed his concerns: *'At the moment, we have a lot of excellent people saying, "Is it me who is going to be next?" and that is terribly destabilizing. Even though we are dealing with it incredibly sensitively and very generously, we are not forcing people out against their will, but the company has to take a decision - whatever the final number is, let's get there a bit more quickly and stop the uncertainty. That would do*

wonders for morale.' Many other incidents of interactional injustice were caused by inadequate information given about cost cutting or by the medium by which such unfavorable information was conveyed to employees. For example, a line manager from one bank had this to say: *'There was a recent decision to withdraw the staff benefit of buying foreign currency at a slightly better rate than the customer buys. The way that was communicated to staff was by way of a circular from the HR function with no input from Area Director or Branch Manager. This is a crazy way of sending down bad news, particularly when there were good reasons for the decision and it conformed to the bank's general policy of paying staff by salary and performance but not by way of perks'*. These findings, of the crucial role of the quality of information, support the results of other studies showing that providing employees with information that justify the need for negative outcomes enhances the extent to which they come to accept those outcomes as fair (Greenberg, 1993).

Apart from the provision of adequate and timely information, the equity (both internal and external) particularly for pay, was also seen primarily as the responsibility of the HR function. For example, an employee of the pharmaceutical company said this: *'The pay reward system is a complete sham. I have now been off my pay curve for the last 2 years and yet getting high grading at every appraisal. The pay curves should either be changed or HR practice what they continually preach'*. Members of the HR function were also seen to play a key role in many aspects of procedural justice. They were expected to act as the guardian of the formal characteristics of procedures such as consistency and accuracy by creating and designing, with senior managers, fair policies and procedures. For example, a manager in the telecommunication company expressed these expectations as follows: *'People feel more comfortable if there are some formal processes. Even when they don't necessarily rate formal processes, they still like to feel they are there, rather than that nothing is there.'*

Finally, for a number of incidents of injustice, employees felt that members of the HR function had failed to demonstrate interpersonal justice by showing concern and sensitivity to them. For example, an employee of the food company expressed his views as follows: *'Personnel don't help with development; they don't cater for people on a personal level. People are afraid to go to them and they tend to patronize you. People are afraid to approach our Personnel officer, they feel patronized'*. Employee expectations of sensitivity from the members of HR function differed according to the closeness of the function to employee groups. For example, in the food and telecommunication companies where the HR function played an active role - the major employee perceptions of unfairness were the lack of sensitivity and a 'human face' when interacting with employees, poor ethics, and lack of respect for the employees' privacy. In the high-tech and pharmaceutical companies - where people management was primarily delegated to the line manager - employees assessed the fairness of members of the HR function in an 'inductive' way. By this we mean they experienced the HR function through the form of people process outcomes and procedures, without knowing the HR professionals directly. Instead they used inference to make general judgments about the function. One of the employees of the pharmaceutical company recalled: *'There are a couple of people in HR with great reputations but there are some people with horrendous reputations and no matter what they do no one will go down and see them... It's their attitude to managers and there is no level of trust. Some people in HR I wouldn't go and ask there advise because I wouldn't trust them with that information. They would use that information inappropriately'*. Here the role of rare face-to-face encounters with members of HR function was even more crucial in creating the image of the whole function. We observed, like other researchers, that under these circumstances employees drew upon information

gleaned from the critical interactions of other employees to make more informed inferences about procedural fairness (Mossholder et al., 1998).

Our interviews and focus groups with members of the HR function revealed the potential differences between the employee expectations of them and their perceptions of their own role. We found a general perception that many employees expected HR to be 'for the people', to be supportive and show the 'softer' side during interaction. However, many HR professionals viewed their roles differently, on one hand as designers of distributive justice who allocate rewards and training in a fair manner, and on the other hand as 'strategic architects' delivering the 'hard' vertical alignment between business goals and processes (Truss & Gratton, 1994). They placed less emphasis on the politeness, sensitivity and concern of interactional justice. For example, a HR professional from the food company expressed their role in the following terms: *'The HR department is very commercial minded and proactive, we are hard nosed. We have a close involvement with the business and influence through culture programs. We are not about holding people's hand'*. This conflict of expectations, particularly around interactional justice and the strategic role of the HR function, is a theme we return to later in the discussion and recommendations.

2. The role of line managers. As Table 1 illustrates, the question of internal and external equity was seen as the primary responsibility of the HR function with their remit to design and develop fair processes. However, the line managers were seen to be responsible for two other aspects of distributive justice; equality and tailoring policies to meet individual needs. With regard to procedural justice, they were expected to suppress their biases and provide opportunities for employees to voice their opinions when implementing policies. For example, an employee of the food company described his disappointment with his line

manager during the pay procedure as follows: *'You are told that the percentage you get depends on the grade you are in the firm but you don't know what that is. So you don't know how well you have done, if it's good or bad, you can't compare with other people in the department because you don't know what grade they are on. I don't know why this should be secret. I tried to ask my manager but he wouldn't tell me'*. Line managers were expected to be the guardians of the fair processes of implementation and enactment of the procedures rather than their formal design. For example, an employee of the postal service complained about poor enactment of the procedure of performance appraisal in the following way: *'For the last 3 years I have had a face-to-face appraisal with my manager. However, she never completes/returns the paperwork. This in turn means that when I apply for jobs, I have nothing to show for the past three years'*. These findings, support what other researchers have argued that in comparison with members of the HR function, the line role is seen more as a guardian of *'the spirit of the law'* rather than *'the letter of the law'* (Folger & Bies, 1989).

For most employees the enactment of the people processes such as selection, pay or development took place in their interactions with their line manager. At this point the issue of interactional justice was key. Employee's expect that their line managers will show sensitivity and concern to them and provide them with adequate and reliable information. Our analysis of the interviews showed that in many cases it was the apparent insensitive treatment they received from their line managers rather than the procedure itself, which captured significant attention and emotional energy and generated feelings of unfairness. This is how an employee of the hospital recalled her experiences of a selection interview with a hospital manager: *'During the interview one thing I didn't like is that they had me on a seat that was much lower than them and psychologically I felt affected by that. I would have much-preferred better eye contact. I have noticed when I go to see my manager now, her seats for other*

people are always lower than hers. I am sure she does that purposely to not put you on edge, but to let you know who is the boss'. Many of these recollections of being treated in an insensitive and undignified manner were charged with emotion, and it is clear that the emotions generated were very critical to the individual's overall perception of fairness. These results would lend support to the view that interactional justice and specifically the quality of the interpersonal treatment that employees receive in the hands of decision-makers, can be more important than the outcomes of the procedures themselves (Bies & Moag, 1986).

3. *Comparison of the roles.* Both members of the HR function and line managers were assessed and judged primarily on their *individual style*, so a skilled HR professional or line manager with clear people-centered values and behaviors could have a positive effect on perceptions of justice. For example, this is what the representative of HR function from the high-tech company said: *'The value of HR still depends very much on the individual who is in front of the particular manager and they will judge the whole function by the one individual they deal with it'*. Similarly, in the case of line managers, we found many incidents which were deemed unfair by the majority of employees but could be seen in a more favourable light by those employees who had managers that were particularly skilful in explaining the process, listening to their voice, and treating them with concern and sensitivity. For example, an employee of the pharmaceutical company praised his manager as follows: *'My manager is a great leader and cares about our team. He allows our team to lead itself when we are doing things well. He makes my working life enjoyable and satisfying. But, other managers care little about salesmen on their team. They care only for their careers. They are blinded by power and have a one dimensional management style which never uses the ability and energy of the teams to its full.'*

On the other hand, those employees whose managers were unskilled in providing explanations and listening to their views, or who were rude and insensitive, could see a process that was deemed relatively fair by the majority in a less favourable light. For both the HR professionals and line managers their individual style in enacting people processes and procedures was crucial. They were both subject to the phenomena of 'fair process effect' that is the tendency of individuals to be more tolerant about the consequences of a process if they consider the way in which it was enacted to be fair (Folger & Konovsky, 1989).

How does the dynamic interface between the line manager and HR professional impact on the creation and implementation of just and fair people processes?

Our earlier analysis of the incidents of injustice highlighted the importance of interactional justice, and so it is to this that we first turn. For members of the HR function their key expectation of line management was that they would demonstrate interactional justice, by showing sensitivity and concern to the members of their team. But both line managers and members of the HR function spoke at length about the difficulty they faced in being caring and sensitive. This example from a manager in the postal service captures the views of many line managers we interviewed: *'The problem with my organisation is that it doesn't seem able to decide whether it wants to be hard-nosed or a caring employer. Given our financial position, what seems to happen is that it creates lots of well-intentioned policies that it can't afford. As a manager I have been instructed on leadership, appraisal, training and development etc., but no allowance is made within my working time to fulfil these requirements'*. Similar observations were made by members of the HR function from the food company: *'If people have a problem, we can deal with it very competently or efficiently. But*

caring? We don't have time. We don't have enough people to see everyone. It should be the line managers' job.

It seems that neither members of HR function nor line managers took full responsibility for interactional justice. Both groups talked of the same issues: the time pressures they were under; the increasing number of employees for whom they were responsible; the primacy of the business focus and the lack of a coherent approach to the management of people. It is clear that this lack of clarity in the responsibility for interactional justice increased the potential for employees to feel they were treated in an unjust manner. This is an issue to which we return in the recommendations.

It is clear from our interviews that the dynamics between the line and members of the HR function is crucial in the delivery of interactional justice, but this relationship is severely tested during times of organizational turbulence. During the time of our research two of the companies we studied experienced significant down-sizing, three merged with other complex businesses and one fundamentally changed the structure of the business. As the processes and practices from the merged companies were collapsed together, as re-structuring created re-aligned core processes, as down-sizing put enormous strain on the communication capability and costs, so the basis of organisational justice was put under immense strain. For example, this is a remark from the HR professional in the telecommunication company: *'Downsizing touches everything. The fact that we are now in the fifth year of it is demoralizing. It impacts on everything - all personnel work. Trying to cope in that environment and do proactive work is very hard. How can you have elaborate career management systems when in the instance a post becomes available it lapses. It is difficult looking at training and development and appraisal, where you can't motivate people about getting on'*.

During these times of organizational turbulence we observed that the tension in the relationship between the HR function and the line had various potential implications: the unsupported role of the HR function in announcing unpopular decisions made by senior managers; the victimization of the HR function; and the development of cycles of mutual blaming. During the mergers, downsizing and re-structuring the HR functions of many of these companies were required to announce and implement unpopular decisions such as to implement employee lay-offs during restructuring, to remove employee allowances during cut costing, or to remove a well-loved and traditional career path structure during a merger. Our interviews during this period revealed the stress members of the HR function experienced when faced with generating plausible explanations and justifications for the unpopular decisions taken by the senior team of the company. A member of the HR function from one of the banks had this to say: *'It is very difficult if you are a successful organization making £3billion a year, and then say to people, I can't afford this. It is a hard message to sell. It is trying to build understanding as to why it should be'*.

Being the messenger of bad news led to the second tension point as members of the HR community ended up in what can only be described as a *victimized* situation where they were generally blamed by line managers and employees as the perpetrators of injustice. We observed a number of incidents where members of the HR function became the target of incorrect accusations by employees, and where blamed for taking an unpopular decision over which they had very limited involvement. For example, a member of HR function of the telecommunication company said this: *'Personnel don't take as much of the line's responsibility as we used to. We want to make personnel invisible. We are an industry in our own right. We have asked line managers to make some very hard decisions and they have blamed Personnel for*

it'. During these times of turbulence members of the HR function experienced a 'social predicament' in terms of the contradictory role perceptions. They were perceived by line managers as a 'support function' to the business, and yet were seen by employees as a function 'for the people'. They may not have been the sole originator of unpopular decisions, yet were seen as being responsible for subsequent violations of justice.

It was clear from the interviews with members of the HR function that during many of these incidents the function had endeavored to design processes and take decisions in a fair manner. However, many described themselves as continuously in a 'catch-up' mode, re-structuring processes, merging processes and reacting to senior management decisions. In this 'catch up' mode what often suffered was the communication to employees and training of managers in the new processes. As a consequence the processes were judged to be unfair by employees and the strength of these emotions had not been predicted by members of the HR function. Faced with the extent of the emotional response we observed a cycle of blaming, with line managers typically distancing themselves from the unpopular decision, and the HR function blaming line managers for poor implementation and employees for misunderstanding the policy and underestimating the business impact. Clearly from our study the interface between managers and the HR function emerged as critical and we will return to the implications of this in the discussion that follows.

Discussion and Recommendations

In this study we have been able to more finely delineate the roles of the line and the HR function in delivering just and fair practices. We have also identified potential sources of tension between the two roles. These findings have important implications for the study and

practice of just and fair processes in contemporary organizations. In this discussion we focus on two issues: the crucial impact of a single unjust incident or individual, and the need to create clarity around the roles of delivering interactional justice.

Generalising from the single to the multiple

When we considered the patterns of injustice it became clear that employees generalize from the particular to the general; from the actions of one agent to many agents, and from the experience of one process to the wide portfolio of processes. For example, when an individual line manager or member of the HR function treats an employee in an unjust way we found that it sent out powerful general signals that employees were not valued. In the same way, perceptions of unfairness in one people practice, particularly in pay procedures, had an impact on how employees viewed justice across the portfolio of practices. So whilst the major processes may be fair, relatively insignificant but sensitive decisions had a major impact on the perception of fairness and the attitudes toward line managers and the HR function.

The notion of generalisability places enormous emphasis on the justice within the complete portfolio of practices and processes and on the agents of deployment. First, it points to vigilant monitoring of processes, whom ever is responsible for the design of them. Second, it suggests that emphasis should be placed on the interpersonal style and behaviour of individual managers and members of the HR function. If the insensitive, undignified or unfair behaviour of a single manager or HR professional is seen to be condoned then this jeopardises the general perception of fairness outside of their immediate sphere of influence. This has profound implications on the selection and promotion of managers who are fair in their dealings with employees, and on the monitoring and rewarding of these behaviours.

Creating clarity around the responsibility for interactional justice

Both employees and the agents see responsibility for creating fair people processes residing with both line management and members of the human resource function. However, we observed that especially during times of organisation turbulence, this division of responsibility can become dysfunctional, neither agents taking responsibility for interactional justice and both blaming each other for incidents of injustice. The study highlights a number of areas where progress can be made by line managers and HR professionals to work together to create fair practices during times of organisational change.

The first concerns the broader organizational context in which decisions are agreed and communicated. Specifically, the recognition and legitimization of employee interests during the period of people process design. In many of the incidents of injustice the HR function had created a “single voice” system, designed to maintain and preserve the interests of one party, namely the senior management of the business (Sheppard et al., 1992). This ‘single voice’ system did not legitimize the interests of employees since their interests were not recognized and included during the creation of the process. Our results suggest that building integrated people processes through the creation of guiding coalitions which involve all levels of employees would substantially reduce the incidents of injustice (Gratton, 2000).

The second concerns the ‘employee advocate’ role of the HR function. The provision of interactional justice is increasingly seen as a line management responsibility. Our study suggests that this delegation can be problematic, not least because of the time pressures under which line managers operate. We are not advocating a return to the ‘handmaiden’ role of HR

where the function is seen as the primary source of help and support to employees. But we do advocate an honest and open appraisal of the role of interactional justice in people processes and practices and the potential role ambiguity between the HR function and the line which may arise. This importance stems from the vital need of employees for respect, politeness and concern during their day-to-day interactions, and the provision of high quality and timely information.

Whilst the HR function cannot play a hands-on role in the delivery of fair procedures, never the less it has a strategic role to behave as an 'employee advocate' (Urlich, 1997). If fairness in the process of people practices depends on the quality of the interpersonal treatment, then organizations do not necessarily have to change their practices in terms of 'quantity' and 'quality', but rather focus on interpersonal behavior and the climate of the workplace as a 'human' place to work. The employee advocacy role of the HR function is to create this context by monitoring and reinforcing interactional justice. The economic cost of acting in a morally responsible and sensitive manner, and treating individuals with the respect by providing explanation and justification is minimal, particularly when this is compared with the cost of new resource allocation such as rises in salaries or bonuses.

Members of the HR function and line managers have specific roles and responsibilities to accomplish if they are to be guardians of justice. These comprise a number of tasks grouped under distributive, procedural and interactional justice divided into quite distinct bundles of activities. For example, the responsibility for the procedural justice of a selection process can be divided into accuracy of the procedure, as designed by the HR function, and into the bias suppression of the line manager who implement the selection process. Similarly, the responsibility for the provision of information can be divided into the quality of information

provided by the HR function and the timeliness of feedback given by line manager. However, as our study indicated, not all responsibilities can be easily divided. The responsibility for interactional justice is not divisible and must be held by all agents of people practices and processes. The horizontal differentiation into task and function between line managers and the HR function is not applicable to the creation of justice that derives from day-to-day interpersonal interaction. Both line managers and members of HR function must work more closely together to take collective responsibility for fairness if we are to build organizations in which people feel cared for and valued.

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Table 1: Employee expectations of key roles of the members of HR function and line managers in delivering just people processes..

Categories of Justice	The HR Function	Line Managers
Distributive justice		
Internal equity	✓	
External equity	✓	
Equality	✓	✓
Individual need		✓
Procedural justice		
Accuracy	✓	
Consistency	✓	
Bias Suppression		✓
Voice	✓	✓
Ethicality	✓	
Interactional justice		
Quality of information	✓	✓
Concern and sensitivity	✓	✓
Politeness	✓	✓