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1

Profiling Change at Work

Human beings, with their capacity for hope and dread, crave to look into the future. In ancient societies, this need was met by the utterances of oracles, and the auguries of priests or soothsayers. In the Middle Ages, public prayer and private magic were the comforts for uncertainty. But as reason and knowledge became pillars of society, the craving took a new turn: the age of Newton was also the age of astrology, regarded then as a science second to none.[1] It is not surprising that towards the end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first, the desire to know or guess the future should reassert itself as strongly as ever. This has been a time of momentous change, in politics, technology, lifestyles, and not least in the business world and the world of work. *Where is all this leading? What lies ahead? What must we do to cope?* We yearn for answers to these questions yet our science and our technology remain silent. To satisfy the yearning, a group of imaginative thinkers has emerged, gurus and futurologists, pioneering a novel kind of literature which has found a large and appreciative audience.[2]

This book is concerned with the same three questions highlighted above. Its focus is upon the changes unfolding at present in British workplaces, and upon the recent trends that underlie them. But it approaches these changes and trends by a wholly different route from that of the gurus and futurologists. Our portrayal of current change is based on up-to-date evidence, drawn from managers, owing little to imagination or speculation but everything to experience. From these sources it is possible, we believe, to see the direction of change – *not* in the long-term, but in the *immediate* future. The new century's first decade is taking shape now in the detailed decisions being taken and the plans being laid in a million workplaces large and small. These decisions and plans will affect every working person, and their families, over the next 5–10 years. Understanding this process of choice and change is the task of this book.

The value of imaginative futurology is perhaps not in whether it turns out to be right or wrong but in stimulating readers' imagination and shaking their complacency. In contrast, getting it right – or as right as possible – is crucial for our own evidence-based approach. Our aim is not only to engage with readers' thought processes, but particularly with those thoughts *which lead to action*. It is to stimulate thinking about the practical challenges, now and in the near future, which need to be tackled by employers and trade unions, by managers and employees, and by government policy-makers. For this, *reliable* knowledge is essential.

Our effort would of course be pointless if current changes and trends were already well-known or self-evident. But they are not. What is stated as fact in the business press, or assumed by academics, is often grossly different from what we find in our evidence. Moreover, some of the major changes which are currently spreading across industry have largely been ignored until now. This is not to point a finger of blame at anyone. Change in the workplace is rapid, complex and varied, and without systematic information it is impossible to get a reliable view of what is going on. That is where this book is meant to make its contribution.

Competitiveness

Why focus on change? In part because Britain was for decades characterised as a nation that was loath to change its ways of working, and this was seen as a prime reason for its dismal decline relative to other leading countries. This was not just a populist view or a media cliché, but was put forward by deep thinkers both from within Britain and from outside. Past diagnoses of this unwillingness to change – the 'British disease' – have included the rigidity of over-complex institutions,[3] the under-qualification of management and employees,[4] and an excessive attachment, among the business class, to fine culture and country living.[5]

Most recently, Professor Michael Porter, the corporate strategy expert, was engaged by the British government to provide an assessment of the nation's competitive strengths and weaknesses. The resulting report[6] in many ways makes comforting reading. For instance, it concludes that Britain has more than held its own in recent international competition, points out the advantages of a stable economy and an efficient labour market with low unemployment, and emphasises the great contribution made by an exceptionally hard-working British populace. Yet the Porter report baulks at endorsing British management. Instead, it points to the 'slow adoption of modern management practices' (page 40) as a probable weakness. If this is so, then the British disease has yet to find its full cure. Our evidence relates directly to this issue, since it gauges the adoption and extension of management practices in all kinds of workplace.

People

But why do we focus on the management *of people* – or human resource management (HRM), as it is now usually called? To this question there are two main answers. The first follows on from the issue of competitiveness. It has been strongly argued by business strategists that people constitute the most important competitive advantage for an organisation, especially in a world awash with information and patrolled by international predators, so that the imitation rate of products and services is greatly increased.[7] It is the abilities of people, and the way those abilities are brought together, encouraged and applied, that offer the best chance of competitive success. The management of people, and the introduction of new-to-the-firm HRM practices, thus directly connect with the competitiveness debate.

The second answer is that people are deeply affected, for better or worse, by the way employers treat them, by the practices governing their work, and by the changes in those practices which they must try to adapt to. This applies in an obvious way to any employee, but it applies in an additional way to managers, whose largest task is often to manage people, and who carry the biggest responsibility for implementing change. What to Professor Porter or other business analysts are 'modern management practices' can mean, for individual employees (including or especially managers), the gain or loss of a job, the progress or collapse of a career, greater job satisfaction or intolerable strain. Our inquiry, therefore, bears directly on some of the most important aspects of personal well-being for both managers and other employees.

Ideas of change

Our primary information on current changes in the management of people has been collected through a national survey of managers. This will be sketched at a later point in this chapter (more detail is also provided in Appendix 1). Since time is strictly rationed in a management interview, designing the survey involved carefully focused selection of the key themes and issues. Equally, if we are to make sense of the mass of details provided by a large survey, we need a framework of ideas about the types of change taking place and about the important drivers of change.

In this section, we display the ideas which guided both the design of the survey and the way this book has been organised and presented. We stress, though, that these are the preliminary or *ex ante* ideas, not the end results of the inquiry. Along the way, we may well need to modify these ideas, subtracting, adding, altering the priorities, adapting the interpretations. This, then, is where we started from and how we structured our approach.

A background of long-term change

Our inquiry into change at the workplace begins with the judgement, which we believe is widely shared by people in Britain, that there has been massive long-term change in the structure of the economy, industries and jobs impinging on every working person. For example,

- Britain, like other industrial nations, has changed in the space of one generation from being a manufacturing nation to one where most employment is in services.[8]
- In the same time-scale, manual work has shrunk from providing the majority of jobs to providing less than one job in three.[9]
- Along with this, management and professional jobs have steadily increased until they provide almost 40 per cent of current employment.
- In the early 1970s, half the workforce had no educational qualification whatever.[10] But in the early 2000s, the government's plan is for half the population to go to university.
- Over the post-war period, the proportion of jobs held by women has shifted from one-third to nearly one-half.
- In 1979, one in four women employees resumed paid work within (roughly) a year of having a baby. By the mid-90s, the proportion rose to two in three.[11]
- In 1980, seven in ten employees (inclusive of managers) had their pay set by collective bargaining between employers and trade unions, while by 1998 the proportion was only four in ten, the majority of whom were in the public sector.[12]

These background changes have many implications for the design of an inquiry about change at the workplace. For instance, the survey needs to cover small workplaces, which typify much of the service sector, as well as the larger ones which are more dominant in manufacturing or the public sector. Questions need to be asked about the types of working arrangements, rewards and controls that are applied to white-collar and professional employees, rather than being (as in most past research) preoccupied with manual jobs. Issues about working hours and work-life balance must be given a prominent place in a world of working mothers and two-earner families. And management-employee relations can no longer be equated with relations between employers and unions: they are affected by a whole raft of management practices many of which have been developed and applied in non-union workplaces.

The background of change which we have just sketched is mostly of a gradual kind and covers the entire second half of the twentieth century. But there are several types of change which have come more rapidly to the forefront in the last decade or so. We consider four to be most important:

intensifying competition, accelerating technology, a more proactive business and management ethos, and renewed external regulation.

An ultra-competitive world

The pressures of change have come most persistently from increasing competition. Of course, market economies have always been based on competition, but this competition was for long kept within bounds through government protection or industry and inter-firm agreements.[13] Now the once-cosy front parlour of domestic business deals has been breached and opened to the competitive winds. From the 1980s, international trade and finance expanded at an accelerating rate bringing more overseas goods and services to Britain. British companies of course were also engaging in more overseas activities of their own. Between 1990 and the end of 2002, Britain's trade with the world more than doubled, and more than half of this trade was with the highly sophisticated and productive countries of the European Union.[14] Over the same period, total GDP (the usual measure of the economy's size) increased by 87 per cent, so international trade continues to outstrip overall growth.

The competitive pressures were initially felt most sharply in manufacturing but also progressively extended to services: the symbolic arrival of the McDonalds franchise in the 1970s was followed by a wide-ranging American and European entry into British retailing, hotels, and banking. During the 1980s, the USA itself removed controls and protections from many service industries, including banking, telecommunications, and air transport, and this deregulation had knock-on effects in Europe, forcing such industries to become more open to competition.

One of the most visible results of more intense competition, both in the USA and Europe, was business rationalisation. 'Downsizing' (cutting employee numbers) and 'delayering' (removing whole tiers of management or supervision) entered the English language along with the phrase 'lean production'.[15] The metaphor was one of stripping away the fat, to leave a fitter, meaner organisation. Many business giants who were unable to keep up the diet, died. Others were swallowed up in the endless series of takeovers and mergers, often the prelude to still more downsizing. In Britain, the Thatcher government spread the slash-and-burn treatment to the public sector through privatisation, and by progressively squeezing central and local government spending. Between 1979 and 1996, employment in the public sector fell by nearly one-third.[16]

Yet Britain appears to have survived this competitive pressure in good shape. In the late 1990s, companies operating in the UK for a time were the most profitable in the world. Although this crown subsequently slipped, UK business remains among the profit leaders[17] and growth in profits, at an average around six per cent per annum, has outstripped economic growth over the past decade. Although the picture has been much less rosy in manufacturing, the financial sector has taken over as the engine of the economy and profitability has remained on average high across the service industries, which now provide the great bulk of employment. So, if competition has provided an extreme pressure for change, it is one which Britain seems to have met with reasonable success.

But was this business success bought at employees' cost? Just how lean and mean did businesses get? Clearly a great deal of change was necessary to meet the rise in competition, but were employees winners or losers from that change process? For many commentators, increasing competition was *all bad*: it meant fewer jobs – perhaps eventually no jobs – and it also meant worse jobs.[18] Did British competitiveness result, as this would imply, in more insecurity for employees, fewer prospects, a stripping-away of pensions and fringe benefits, longer hours, more pressure?

These questions provide one of the main themes of the book.

- In Chapter Two we ask about the employment of temporary, casual and agency staff – groups with less security and fewer prospects – and about the use of freelance, self-employed, sub-contracted and 'outsourced' services, all of which reduce the workplace's regular workforce.
- We also ask whether downsizing and delayering continue to be widespread and where they are most often found.
- At various points in later chapters, we probe whether cuts in the workforce affect the organisation's ability or willingness to train, develop and motivate its managers and employees.

From the management viewpoint, labour *flexibility* – the usual label for this whole group of practices – helps to cope with competitive pressures by cutting costs. The unpopularity of the policies has given flexibility a bad name. Yet there are other ways of getting flexibility which meet with more public approval. For example, employees themselves can be made more flexible, or adaptable, through training, varied tasks and jobs, multi-skilling, and team-working – what we call 'intelligent flexibility' because it relies on the intelligence and adaptability of the individual.

- Chapter Three explores the growing use of intelligent flexibility, and related management practices, to arrive at a more balanced view of the flexibility issue.

Flexibility is not the only response to competition. To meet relentless pressures on costs, business and public sector organisations alike must continually find new methods of cost reduction and cost control. Two such developments that are rapidly impinging on managers and other employees are reviewed in the book.

- Organisations are attempting to cut their space requirements and hence their premises costs: the main developments are covered in Chapter Five, including the growth of teleworking, hot-desking and working from home.
- Chapter Six examines the main ways in which organisations are extending or intensifying controls over individual or team performance.

Both these topics also have a new technology dimension which is considered in the section immediately below.

New technology and the shift to 'knowledge work'

While increased competitive pressures initially work themselves out in terms of cost-cutting, subtler forces of change, to do with knowledge and technology, may be equally important for competition now and in the near future. We say 'may be' because there are heated debates about these changes and their implications. Yet, as noted earlier, there can be no doubt that levels of qualification have risen hugely in the workforce, and that there has been a swing from semi-skilled to managerial and professional jobs. Moreover, in the past decade there has been a striking surge in the use, at work, of information and communications technology (ICT), associated with the advent of the Internet and of networked communication systems. The question is how these changes are linked, and how the two together are changing management practice and the jobs and work which people do.

At the technology end, some of the changes involved are fairly obvious. To purchase anything from a theatre ticket to a week-end break to a life insurance policy now involves a telephone transaction with a call-centre, where the friendly voice (if you are lucky enough to get through to it) is just the front for a computer system. Down at the local supermarket check-out, nowadays, every transaction is processed electronically. At the same time the purchases are being automatically logged into a computer database which aids a multitude of behind-the-scenes tasks and provides an inexhaustible supply of information for management's planning and control.

Technology's tentacles reach into unexpected quarters.[19] Virtually every job advertised in the fast-growing world of creative media specifies the requirement for a high level of computer skills. Up-market hairdressers are showing their clients how different styles would look on them, through 'virtual reality' images. The door-calling occupations, from meter-readers to market research interviewers, come with laptops in place of clip-boards.

Knowledge as an aspect of change in the workplace is more abstract than technology, and less easy to get a handle on. It was that doyen of management gurus, Peter Drucker, who already in the 1960s coined the idea of knowledge workers. For him, the shift to knowledge work (typically, the work done by professionals) and to competition on the basis of knowledge is the most important change of the era,[20] heralding a post-industrial age. In the industrial age, businesses competed through their ownership of products, plant and equipment. In the post-industrial age, competition is based on knowledge which is held by key employees who can walk away with it at any time. The point was brought home to the business world in the late 90s when Internet software company Netscape was bought for around $10bn., its real assets consisting mainly of its 2000 staff.[21] Many large companies have responded to the idea of competition via knowledge by launching 'knowledge capture' and 'knowledge management' programmes[22] to preserve the asset value of their own expertise.

The idea of knowledge work, which as we have seen is not a new one, has certainly been given a fresh lease of life by the advent of the Internet, and by other high-profile new technologies, such as advanced materials, biotechnology and the Genome Project. These, it is said, open up huge opportunities for business innovation and create an insatiable demand for creative and technical talent.[23] But just how large is the proportion of employment which involves, or is likely to involve, knowledge work? Robert Reich, former advisor to President Clinton, has estimated that 25 per cent of the US workforce already consists of what he calls 'creative workers' even after excluding public sector jobs, many of which require high levels of qualification.[24] Timothy Bresnahan,[25] who has carried out detailed case studies on the application of ICT, estimates that about one in five working people are now high-level users of technology, which fits reasonably well with Reich's estimate. But Bresnahan considers that the most significant contribution of ICT is to facilitate innovation in the routine administrative and customer service functions which now form such a huge slice of business and employment. All the people caught up in the innovative restructuring of business and public services may be considered, in a sense, knowledge workers. But their knowledge depends less on qualifications than on know-how gained at the front line of implementing organisational change. If the pace of innovation with ICT is rapid enough, the *majority* of employees can be regarded as knowledge workers.

All this is 'in principle' but how *in practice* are these types of change affecting employees and their jobs? This is where differences in the current predictions are sharpest. New technology and especially ICT has been portrayed by some as a job-eating dragon, leaving in its wake a society ravaged by insecurity, where only the smartest and most powerful can prosper.[26] Even professionals, it has been argued, are undermined by the rapidly changing knowledge base and by employers' increasing tendency to seek the best available talent in the job market. As a result, lifetime jobs and corporate careers have come, or are coming, to an end. Even the most cautious analysts admit that, while many more creative or high-level jobs are being created by new technology or the hunger for applied knowledge, some jobs are continuing to be down-graded or down-skilled by technology – as has always been the case.[27]

A jobs scenario with a more positive tone owes its birth to the British management guru Charles Handy,[28] although many others have re-cycled his ideas. As a substitute for fixed jobs and standard careers, knowledge workers will develop ever-shifting portfolios of self-employed project work, much of it in fluid teams and co-operative networks or partnerships. Knowledge workers will not have fixed workplaces but will be highly mobile, many of them with home-based operations. While working life will become more risky, it will also become more varied and more creative. The large hierarchical organisation will dissolve into looser confederate relationships.

Against these bold predictions, there have been quieter voices urging that while some things will change, there will also be much continuity with the past. For Drucker, the original prophet of knowledge work, organisations continue to be needed by professionals because they can network the specialists more efficiently than the market-place. Knowledge workers may be footloose between employers, but it will be in organisations' own interest to develop means of retaining them. Outsourced knowledge services will grow, predicts Drucker, but the companies that outsource will have to learn to look after their external experts as carefully as their internal ones. Others have argued that careers and promotion remain the most persuasive inducements for attracting qualified and talented people. Then again, not all knowledge is portable, and specialised in-house knowledge can only be gained by people who stay around.

The issues emerging from these debates around knowledge work and new technology run through much of this book.

- The role of new technology is investigated through a focus on ICT, the technology which is most widely used and most rapidly expanding. At the end of Chapter One, the scene is set by looking at current rates of ICT usage and extension. Most of the subsequent chapters involve an ICT sub-plot.
- Chapter Four examines what organisations are doing about career opportunities. Are they fostering them or winding them down? Are they ripping out career ladders through delayering, are they shrinking the management jobs which many aspire to, or are they developing and extending them to offer opportunities and hold on to expertise? Do workplaces which are advanced users of ICT – hence more dependent on knowledge workers – provide more or fewer career opportunities?
- Are organisations serious about offering employees, including middle management, a long-term future? Chapter Four also assesses this question, looking at policies around pensions and benefits, and personal development, as tests of corporate intent.

- Part of Chapter Five considers changes in work-space and workplace, such as teleworking or working from home, that are facilitated by ICT.
- Part of Chapter Six considers the potentially great increase in detailed control over individuals' work and performance, which becomes available when they are networked into an ICT system.

Management's cultural revolution

The kinds of change so far stressed – intensifying competition and burgeoning technology – seem to come from outside and then press in on the organisation and on its people. But this is one-sided. An external change only becomes a pressure when it is brought inside the organisation. Competition exists in the market-place, but what ultimately counts is how the organisation, the management and the individual change their behaviour in response. New technology emerges, but then has to be adopted and adapted. This can happen slowly or rapidly, reluctantly or eagerly, clumsily or adroitly. The way an organisation, a management or a workforce encompasses change depends on its habits, its style, its *culture*. If change is now accelerating in the workplace, this has to involve a change in culture as well as in context.

A striking difference between current experience and previous eras is that management, at least in the more successful firms, no longer waits around for changes to hit them. Change is *promoted* by the organisation, and it is promoted continuously. This message comes across loud and clear from our own case studies in a varied mix of organisations, small as well as large. Change is now too rapid for management to sit tight until it is pushed into action.[29] The organisation must continually be on the move, adapting to external change but at the same time pressing towards its own change objectives. Continuous change is part of the current management culture. This is not by any means confined to the business world. Government departments and agencies, for instance, are typically swept by reorganisations at intervals of 12 to 18 months and are continually involved in massive changes of methods and procedures resulting from new ICT systems.

The crucial importance of the organisation's people has been underlined at several points in this chapter, and the capacity for continuous change evidently depends on people as ever. A new leading model of how to manage and motivate people came to the forefront in the 1980s. It involved ideas about team-working, communication, involvement, individual development, continuous learning, pay for performance, and personal empowerment and responsibility. These ideas, and the management practices which help make them happen, have been progressively incorporated into mainstream human resource management (HRM), which has come to replace the more limited idea of 'personnel'.

It is important to stress that none of these ideas is, in itself, particularly new. Those with an interest in business history can trace them back to such unlikely sources as World War II research on morale in the armed services, or British coal-mining in the 1950s. As early as the 1960s, large innovative companies were experimenting on green-field sites with new forms of organisation and new motivational approaches. What worked eventually became the stuff of HRM. Another key influence was the rise of Japanese manufacturing, and the challenge of their management ideas, which stressed continuous improvement rather than working to standard. Some ideas, such as 'quality circles' (now often referred to as work improvement groups) were borrowed directly from standard Japanese practice.

What was new, at the outset of the HRM movement, was the belief that only a comprehensive change in the approach to managing people would equip organisations to compete internationally.[30] More recently this has grown into the idea that there is a 'best practice' in developing HRM to produce effective innovation and performance. In the USA, especially, claims have been made that when certain bundles of HRM practices are brought together and animated by a clear strategy, the result is a 'high performance work system' (HPWS) which delivers major rather than minor gains for the organisation, and also benefits employees. Eileen Appelbaum and her colleagues have carried out research, involving detailed case studies and surveys in the steel, clothing and medical instruments industries, and produced impressive evidence in support of this view.[31] As yet, however, the evidence for Britain remains less convincing,[32] perhaps in part because British organisations have gone less far in implementing these ideas.

Whatever their effectiveness, HRM practices and the search for HPWS have themselves become a source of change. Such practices provide a model which many organisations now seek to imitate and pursue. Adopting such practices as open communications, consultative systems, or team-working organisation, obviously in itself involves a large effort by managers and other employees. But this effort is believed worthwhile, indeed essential, to develop a workforce that can cope effectively with continuous change.

This development poses issues which are addressed and answered in the following chapters. Throughout, we investigate what are the factors that are either speeding or delaying adoption of HRM/HPWS practices at the workplace.

- The 'intelligent flexibility' discussed in Chapter Three itself involves a range of the classic practices of HRM/HPWS, notably team-working, multi-skilling, and individual development. We ask how rapidly these practices are spreading and in what circumstance they are being adopted.
- Various aspects of performance management, such as appraisals and pay for performance, are covered in Chapter Four as part of the review of

career development policies. Appraisals are further discussed, from the viewpoint of controls over performance, in Chapter Six.
- Communications and consultation have in the past been regarded as a weak area in British management: how far is this weakness now being addressed? The answers can be found partly in Chapter Four, with further discussion in Chapter Ten (see next section).

Alongside the goals of improved performance and adaptation, HRM has inherited a goal of fair treatment of employees which was central to old-style personnel management. Central to this, at least in many large employers, is equal opportunities policy which endeavours to remove discrimination towards women, minorities, and disadvantaged groups. Increasingly, this branch of corporate policy has moved out of the welfare wing and towards the front office of HRM. Making best use of the skills of those formerly given second-class treatment, or even excluded from jobs, is seen as a way of increasing the pool of talent, and of adapting the organisation's services to a diverse population of customers. Moreover, under the shadow of external regulation (see below), organisations' chances of staying in control in these areas depend on their taking the initiative themselves.

- Chapter Seven focuses initially on the desegregation of jobs on lines of sex. How far are employers recruiting women into jobs formerly done only by men, and *vice versa*? Where is this process taking place most rapidly and where is it lagging?
- Chapter Seven then goes on to look at work-life balance and family-friendly policies. What flexibility over hours do employees get? What help do they receive during the years when they have young children? What priority does management attach to further steps in this direction?
- Chapter Eight investigates the broader issue of diversity in recruitment – older workers, returners, unemployed people, disabled, those with poor English, and ex-offenders. What kinds of organisations recruit from these groups? Is this kind of recruitment linked with exploitation or with progressive HRM practices?

Experts usually stress that the effectiveness of HRM practices depends on them being combined systematically rather than used piecemeal. The workplace has to reach some critical mass of HRM innovation before it gets the real benefits. This idea is followed up in Chapter Nine, which considers how practices are combined into 'strategies'.

- The centre-piece of Chapter Nine is an assessment of how many workplaces are now following a recognisable HRM/HPWS strategy, and what distinguishes such workplaces from others.

- Chapter Nine also looks at some other people-related strategies – both 'lean and mean' and welfare-orientated. The question asked is how far such strategies are compatible with HRM/HPWS or whether they are distinct alternatives.

Regulation's come-back

The pressures of market competition and of new technology on employers' working practices are for the most part indirect, and leave employers ample room to develop their own choices and strategies. Alongside these, however, there are renewed pressures from government regulation of the workplace, which in a direct way constrain what employers must do. Familiar examples are the National Minimum Wage, the Working Time Regulations, or new provisions requiring equality of treatment for part-time and temporary employees. Furthermore, the Employment Relations Act 1999 re-established routes for unions to gain recognition at workplaces where they have sufficient support from employees, even where managements are reluctant. Employees meanwhile have been making extensive use of legal routes to press their grievances or claims against employers. Individual cases mediated by ACAS[33] have been running at about 165,000 per annum in recent years, and 2000/1 saw a sharp peak in cases reaching an Employment Tribunal – up 30 per cent on the previous year.

It is no coincidence that this movement towards a renewed regulation of the workplace, which comes from the European Commission (EC) as well as from the British government, is taking place at this time. It reflects the anxiety of governments about the recently growing global dimension of the competition which we were focusing upon earlier in the chapter. Governments are especially concerned about the massive power of global business alliances which can make use of low-cost labour from countries around the world, thus side-stepping governments' attempts to set minimum wage levels or to raise working conditions. Regulation embodies governments' determination to stay in control of social and employment policies, rather than permit global competition to rule the roost.

However, the ultimate effect of State regulation can be unexpected, especially when employers counter-attack. This can be illustrated by employment contracts, which are more regulated in most European countries than in the UK. In Spain, for instance, temporary employment has soared to constitute one in five jobs, largely because employers have sought an unregulated corner of the job market to escape severe regulation over hiring and firing for permanent posts. In Italy, another country which has long attempted to make jobs secure through the statute-book, one in four jobs now exists beyond the pale of statutory regulation, and the government there has recently felt obliged to legalise and place limits upon some 30 types of non-standard labour contract.[34]

So how will British employers respond to the rising tide of regulation: will they conform, evade, or pre-empt? The biggest test, perhaps, is still to come with the implementation of the Directive on Information and Consultation (ICON), due to start in 2005. Management's response to regulation is considered in detail in Chapter Ten. That chapter consists of four main strands:

- What changes has management made following the Working Time Regulations (WTR)? How often have working practices been changed as a result, and where has this happened?
- How hard is management being hit by employee litigation?
- What is the impact of having a recognised union at the workplace? Do unions appear to hinder or help the various management practices and strategies discussed in the previous sections?
- Is there a growth in consultative committees in advance of ICON? If so, where is this growth taking place – for instance, in unionised or non-union workplaces?

Finally, regulation is a type of change which specially puts pressure on those who manage people. Throughout Chapter Ten, therefore, we ask how each aspect of regulation affects the time-pressures that managers experience.

Finding out about change in the workplace

We have now outlined the ideas and questions behind the research. We have also indicated where to look for the answers to the questions posed, in the coming chapters. In this final section we briefly sketch how the research was carried out, and explain how the findings are presented.

To get answers to our questions about people policies at the workplace, we carried out a national survey of British employers in the second half of 2002. This covered 2000 workplaces, ranging in size from 5 to 7500 employees, in both the private and the public sectors. This is called the Change in Employer Practices Survey 2002 (CEPS-02). More details of the survey are provided in Appendix 1. In this and subsequent chapters, key findings from the survey are shown in the form of simplified charts, and a smaller number (mainly where wording is complex) in table form. Appendix 2 explains more about how the tables and charts have been calculated.

What makes the survey *unique* is its emphasis on change. At each workplace, the manager responsible for HRM or people policies was asked a wide range of questions about changes which took place recently – most of these questions referred to the preceding three years, some to the last 12 months. In addition, she or he was asked about changes which were *likely* to take place over the current year, and especially about *planned* changes. In all, about half the questions in the interview relate to change. So, as well as giving a snapshot of people policies at each workplace in 2002, the survey provides a view of where the organisation is coming from and where it is heading.

In presenting the findings, we also frequently refer to another national survey, this time of employees, which we carried out in 2000/1, with the title Working in Britain in the Year 2000 (WIB-00). This *companion survey* (as we will usually call it) is particularly useful in cross-checking results from CEPS-02 to test their reliability.

There is one point which it is particularly important to understand before dipping into the charts and the other results which we will present. Most workplaces are very small, but a large proportion of total employment is concentrated in a small number of large workplaces such as the major manufacturing plants, local authority offices, universities, and hospitals. If we simply counted workplaces, then the large employers would be swamped by the multitude of very small employers. This would give a very misleading picture of how changes affect employees, as those in larger workplaces would in effect vanish from sight. To prevent this, we weight each establishment by the number of employees there. Suppose for instance a workplace is the average size, it will then be counted just once (weight of 1). If it is twice the average size, it will be counted twice (given a weight of 2), while if it is half the average size, it will be given a weight of one-half.

Our results accordingly are equivalent to counting the employees at workplaces rather than just counting the workplaces themselves. When we say, for example, that ‘70 per cent of workplaces practice such-and-such policy’, we could say more precisely that ‘the workplaces practicing this policy cover 70 per cent of employees’. The less precise wording is followed, because it is far less tedious for the reader, but the tables and charts contain a reminder that the results are based on proportions of employment, rather than proportions of workplaces. There is one chapter (Chapter Ten) where the results are differently calculated: the reason for this is explained there.

As a curtain-raiser, the rest of the present chapter offers a simple outline of the main background changes which have recently been taking place in British workplaces. This will provide an initial impression of the relative scale of changes from one group of workplace policies to another. But at this stage there will be no exploration of the reasons for change, or of how one kind of change is (or is not) connected with another. That will follow later. Managers’ expectations about changes in the immediate future will also be considered in the following chapters, rather than in this one.

Background 1: Competition and confidence

A good place to start the story is with the growth or contraction of workplaces. We claimed earlier in the chapter that Britain’s businesses have been performing well, but is this how managers see things? And how confident are they about the immediate future? Everything else is likely to be coloured by these perceptions.

The managers' replies, covering the period 1999–2002, are in accord with the national trend of growing employment.[35] True, one in four have experienced contraction, but twice as many (one in two) have experienced growth, and for one in four there has at least been stability in numbers.[36] On the whole, then, recent experience has been good.

There are however large industry variations (Chart 1.1), with marked contraction apparent in the engineering industries. In contrast, a more positive experience of employment growth runs right across construction and services. This includes the public services, which suggests a recently improving deal from government despite the general public perception of continued under-resourcing.

Chart 1.2 shows the same question with comparisons by size of workplace – small (5–24 employees), medium (25–99 employees) and large (100 and over). A clear surprise, bucking the trend of many years, is that large workplaces are contracting no more often than small workplaces, and a little more often they are actually growing. Moreover, the large establishments are also – for obvious reasons – more than twice as likely to be relocating part of their business, either elsewhere in Britain or overseas, than in the case of small establishments.[37] When this is taken into account, their growth advantage in these recent years becomes still clearer. Small is beautiful no more – or large is lovelier.

Does recent experience carry over into confidence about the future? The survey interviews were taking place against the background of a sliding stock-market, and anxiety about war in Iraq. Yet confidence

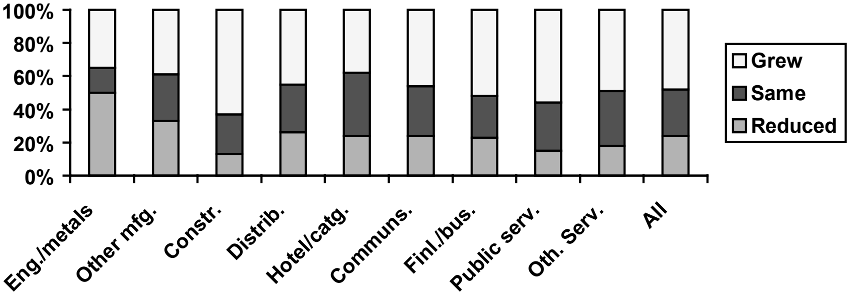

Chart 1.1 Change in employment 2000–2, by industry group
Note: Column percentages, weighted by employment. Full key to industries (left to right): Engineering and metal manufacturing; Other manufacturing; Construction; Distribution and repair; Hotels and catering; Post, communications and transport; Financial and business services; Public services; Other services (leisure/personal service, etc.); All. Agriculture, extraction and utilities not shown because of small numbers, but included in All.

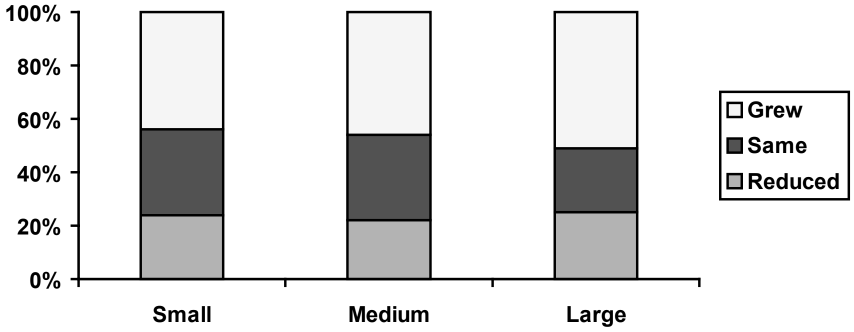

Chart 1.2 Change in employment 2000–2, by size of workplace
Note: Column percentages, weighted by employment.
Small = 5–24 employees, Medium = 25–99, Large = 100 or more.

remains strong. Over one third say they expect their employment to grow over the coming year, while only one in 11 expect it to shrink. These figures probably reflect a general mood, rather than forecasts for particular industries, since industry differences are negligible. This mood of confidence indicates a more robust frame of mind among British managers than was usual in the past, when pessimism tended to set in at the first sign of a downturn. With this confident mind-set, managers are likely to feel positive about pursuing and achieving change at the workplace.

Background 2: Technology's advance

Earlier in the chapter we presented a picture of rapidly advancing technology, especially ICT, but how far is this supported by recent experience? Chart 1.3 shows managers' estimates of how many employees are using 'PCs or other computerised equipment' in their jobs, in small, medium-sized and large workplaces.

A striking point from the chart is that already at one in three workplaces there is a complete penetration of ICT to every job, or something very close to that. Moreover, these fully-wired workplaces are evenly spread across the small, medium and large size-groups. Equally striking, at the other extreme, is how few workplaces are virtually without ICT: only one in 20 overall, and just one per cent in the large workplaces.

The figures provided by the managers can be used to make a rough estimate of what proportion of employees, nationally, are using ICT in their jobs.[38] The estimate which we have derived is, *around two-thirds*. This is very close to the figure obtained from the companion survey of employees (WIB-00), where 65 per cent of employees said that they currently use PCs or computerised equipment in their own jobs. There is no reason to suppose, then, that the managers' estimates are exaggerated. Using ICT is very much the norm in British workplaces.

Has the situation reached a plateau, or is ICT still continuing to advance? To gauge this, managers were asked to judge how much change there had been over the preceding three years. Chart 1.4 shows that ICT use has been increasing during this recent period in one-half of the workplaces, and in one-quarter it has increased a lot. The rate of increase has been particularly high in large workplaces, but less in small workplaces.

More interesting, though, is to see where that growth has been taking place, compared to the current level of ICT usage. This is shown in Chart 1.5. The greatest rate of increase has taken place in workplaces which

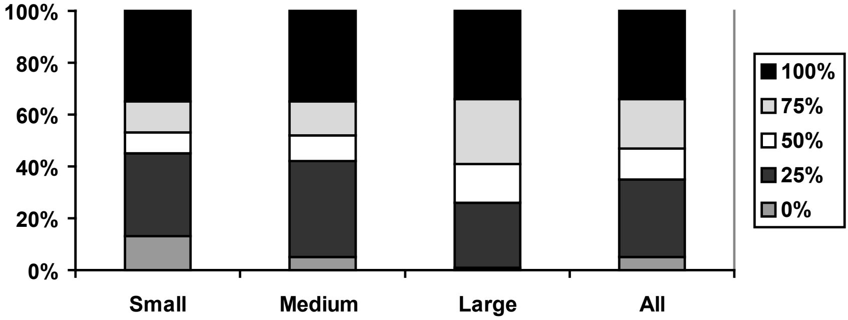

Chart 1.3 ICT usage* by employees at workplaces of different sizes
* The proportion of employees using PCs or other computerised equipment, estimated to the nearest 25 per cent (see legend at right of chart).
Note: Column percentages, weighted by employment.

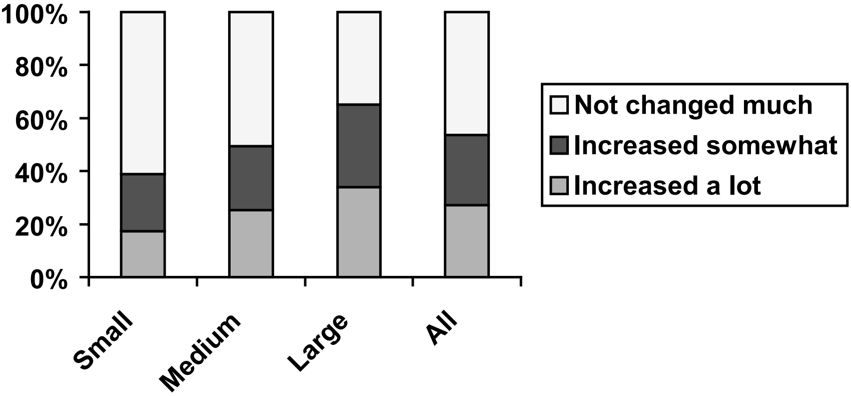

Chart 1.4 Change in ICT usage, by size of workplace
Note: Column percentages, weighted by employment. Response 'Decreased' not shown: it was given by one per cent in all size groups.

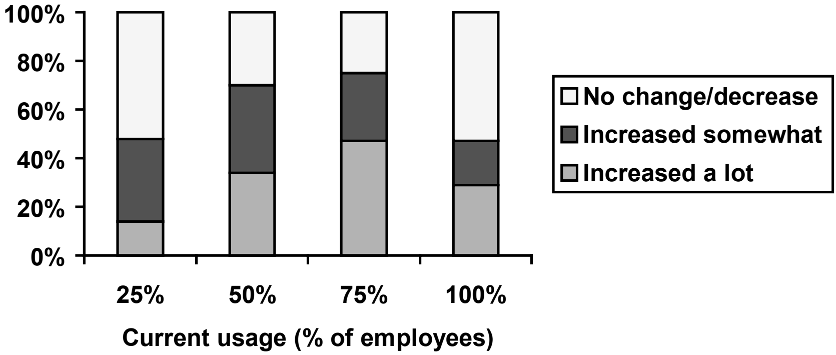

Chart 1.5 Change in ICT usage 2000–2, by present level of use
Note: Column percentages, weighted by employment. Those with (nearly) no employees using ICT are omitted from the chart (five per cent of the sample).

have now reached around 50 to 75 per cent utilisation of ICT by their employees. No less than seven in ten of these have been advancing on the ICT front in recent years. There is however a relatively low rate of change in workplaces which have a low utilisation rate, suggesting that these may move only slowly along the ICT learning-curve in the future. About half the workplaces with nearly 100 per cent staff coverage by ICT have also experienced no change in the past three years, indicating that they reached saturation coverage at least three years ago.

It would therefore be going too far to claim that *all* organisations or *all* jobs are going to be ICT-based in the near future. In around one in three workplaces, ICT plays only a minor role and will probably continue to do so. However, in the remaining two thirds, ICT is already pervasive or is rapidly becoming so.

Background 3: Managing people

Against this background of business confidence and rapidly advancing technology, how are managers faring in their responsibilities for people? Strikingly, nearly two in three overall (62%) say that compared with three years previously more time is now being spent by management on personnel, and only two per cent say less time (Chart 1.6). This increasing emphasis on people is, in fact, *the most widespread change across the whole survey*. There is little difference between industries in this respect, and it is only in the smallest workplaces – those with less than 25 employees – that the proportion giving increased time to people falls fractionally below one-half.

As we suggested earlier, a factor in this pressure on management is likely to be the expansion of regulatory change. Another indicator of this is the amount of money spent on legal advice around employment issues, which has been increasing in three in ten workplaces overall, and in nearly four in ten of the larger workplaces (Chart 1.7). This suggests that many employers are struggling with the implications of changing employment law, coupled with the rising tide of employee complaints.

However, as we also stressed earlier in the chapter, the level of personnel and HRM activity is not set solely by external pressures: in many organisations, HRM policies and practices are now developed internally in a process of continual change. To conclude this introduction to the survey findings, we provide a selection of the changes in people policies that are reported by managers. Immediately upon looking at this information (Table 1.1), the time spent on people management across the whole of industry becomes more understandable. Bearing in mind that the table relates to *changes taking place in the past three years*, both the amount and the range of activity are impressive.

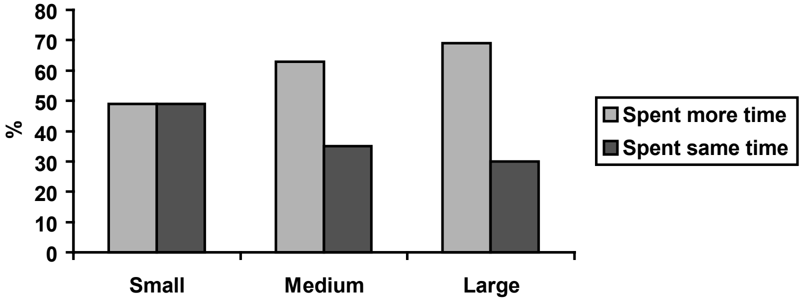

Chart 1.6 Management time on personnel matters, by size of workplace
Note: Column percentages, weighted by employment. Management time refers to change over the past three years. Response 'Spent less time' not shown – it was given by two per cent of small workplaces and by one per cent of medium and large workplaces.

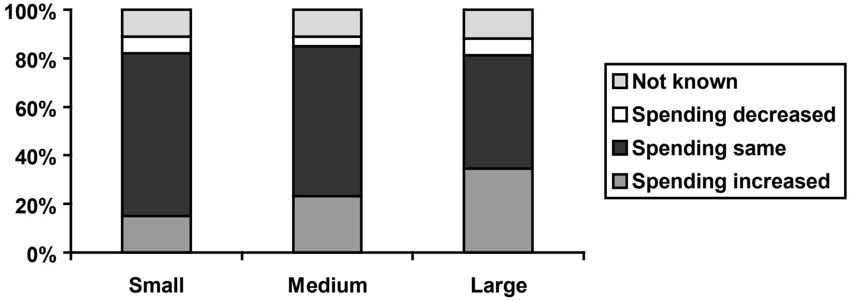

Chart 1.7 Change in spending on legal advice, 2000–2 (by size of workplace)
Note: Column percentages, weighted by employment.

Table 1.1 Selected changes in people practices in the past three years

	Increased	*Decreased*
Training to cover other jobs	50%	2%
Variety of work that staff are expected to do	48%	2%
Amount of job rotation	30%	1%
Team-working	28%	2%
Individual performance assessment	39%	1%
Group-based incentives	21%	3%
Proportion of managerial/professional staff	28%	13%
Number of management grades	24%	10%
Number of employee grades	21%	7%
Outsourcing of activities previously done in-house	24%	n.a.
Introduction of teleworking	11%	n.a.
Encouraging some staff to work at home	11%	n.a.
Harmonisation of conditions of employment	26%	3%
Use of agency staff	32%	25%
Outside contractors in place of own employees	18%	n.a.
Temporary employees	14%	10%
Casual workers	6%	6%
Freelance (self-employed) workers	5%	3%

Note: Row percentages weighted by employment. The response 'no change' is not shown.
n.a. = not applicable/not asked.

The initial impression is of a tumult of change with no obvious pattern or dominant theme. Explanation of these, and many other, changes will follow in the coming chapters. These will, for instance, consider what kinds of workplaces are experiencing each type of change, and how far the various kinds of changes tend to go hand-in-hand.

But we can surely say already that management is not focusing all or even most of its efforts on one group of policies, but seems to be mixing together a wide and varied range. We can guess that the future implications for both management and employees will also be varied, both across jobs and workplaces. Understanding those future implications, with both their down-side and their up-side, is a main task of this book.

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