Human resource management careers: different paths for men and women?

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Introduction
The research for this paper focused on the career patterns and career progression of men and women working in human resource management (HRM). In particular the study set out to investigate whether the recent acquisition of a professional qualification had had a similar, or different, impact upon the career progression of males and females. The initial impetus for the investigation came from evidence, partly factual and partly anecdotal, that, although the enrolment of women on programmes leading to a professional qualification significantly outnumbered that of men, posts at senior levels in the HRM (personnel) profession are much more likely to be occupied by men than women. The study sought to establish whether men and women do in fact follow different career paths by exploring the experiences of women and men who had completed the Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Management (PGD in HRM) at the University of Ulster between 1993 and 2000. This is a programme which, in addition to awarding an academic qualification, also confers membership of graduate level of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) the professional body for personnel/HR practitioners.

Women in management and HRM
Women now make up almost half of the UK workforce. In Great Britain, by 2001 women accounted for 45 per cent of all employed people (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002a). In Northern Ireland the equivalent figure was 51 per cent (Equal Opportunities Commission (NI), 1999), and by 1999 66 per cent of all women of working age in Northern Ireland were in employment. Despite the expansion in women’s labour force participation however, horizontal and vertical segregation of the labour market on a gender basis remains a fact of economic life. Women continue to be under represented in some sectors of the economy and over represented in others and women are consistently under represented at senior levels, even in those occupational groupings where they are in the majority. Figures for Great Britain show that women form around 70 per cent or more of administrative and secretarial, personal service, sales and customer service occupations while men make up 70 per cent or more of managers and senior officials, skilled trades and plant and machine operatives (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002a). Since the mid-1990s, there has been an increase in the number of women working in management jobs but, while some 30 per cent of managers and administrators are women, only a small number have attained the most senior positions (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002b). While estimates vary somewhat, it seems likely that women make up just 24 per cent of middle and senior management in the UK with only 10 per cent of directorships held by women (Institute of Management and Remuneration Economics, 2001). In terms of pay, on average female managers earn just two-thirds of the salary of their male counterparts (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002b). This compares unfavourably even with other male-female pay differentials since full-time women employees in general earn some 80 per cent of average male earnings (Office for National Statistics, 1998).

These studies also suggest that women managers continue to be more likely to be found in traditionally “female” service sectors of the economy such as education,
health, retailing, hotels and catering, and in selected managerial functions such as office management, personnel and training. Indeed, the membership profile of the professional body for personnel or human resource management professionals, the CIPD, shows 77,985 women and just 36,475 men in membership. The number of women studying for postgraduate level and professional qualifications in HRM also provides evidence of aspirations by women for a career in that management specialism. Of those classed as “Studying Affiliates” on the CIPD Professional Qualification scheme, 80 per cent are female. This “gender split” is reflected, indeed enhanced, on the University of Ulster PGD in HRM where, since the programme’s inception the enrolment of women has consistently outnumbered that of men by more than three to one. The CIPD itself also provides evidence of a variation in the gender split in the profession according to professional level. While women do outnumber men by more than four to one in “Graduate” membership the level at which “qualified” practitioners enter the profession, and indeed outnumber men at almost all levels of membership, at “Fellow” and “Companion” the levels of membership most commonly attained by senior managers, executives and directors, there are more than twice as many male as female Fellows, and more than four times as many male as female Companion members of the Chartered Institute. The membership profile presented by the professional body portrays a profession in which men are over-represented at the top (compared to the overall numbers of men employed in HRM), with 24 per cent of male members holding job titles of director or senior executive, compared to just 8 per cent of female members, but a profession in which women occupy the bottom rungs of the career “ladder” with 11 per cent of women described as “Administrator” compared to just 3 per cent of men. A similar profile emerges in terms of salary levels with female members of the profession much more likely to be low-earners than their male counterparts. CIPD membership statistics show that in January 2001, 11 per cent of women members were earning less than £15,000 pa compared to just 5 per cent of men. A similar disparity existed at the other end of the salary scale also with males, despite comprising less than one third (31 per cent) of the Institute’s membership, nonetheless making up nearly two-thirds of its highest earning members – those in the £70,000-£119,000 pa salary range. It might be said, of course, that such disparities exist in other areas of business and management such as finance and marketing, nonetheless the differing experiences of men and women in HRM are of particular interest given its traditional image as a “female” profession.

The statistics shown above do seem to sit a little uneasily with the preparations increasingly made by women for careers in business and management. In 1999/2000 just over half of all business studies undergraduates in British universities were female, while in 2000/2001 the majority of postgraduate students were women (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2002). The differing experiences of men and women on such programmes and the diversity of experiences in how men and women learn, has been dealt with in a number of studies (Sinclair, 1997; Harris et al., 1992; Leeming and Barruch, 1998). Although no guarantee of success for a career in management, nonetheless business studies degrees and postgraduate qualifications might well be assumed to give their holders an edge over others aspiring to such careers. It might be said then that indicators point to a strong interest in a career in HRM amongst women, but that, in practice, men and women seem to have rather different experiences of career progression within the profession. It is therefore unclear whether the relationship between a professional HRM qualification and career progression differs depending upon whether it is acquired by a woman or a man.

A possible hypothesis, to be constructed from the discussion above, might be that: although women clearly aspire to a career in human resource management and prepare for such a career by acquiring a professional qualification assumed to enhance career progression, nonetheless the progression of women in the profession continues to lag behind that of men. The research for this paper was designed to test that hypothesis and to help establish, in particular, whether obtaining a PGD in HRM has a similar, or differing, impact upon the career progression of male and female managers.

The study

The target group for the study was male and female HRM diplomates of the University of Ulster who had graduated between 1993 and 2000. Postal questionnaires were sent to all those graduates for whom the University had current contact details (150 in all) and a response rate of 35 per cent was achieved. A high rate of response came from those who had graduated in 1994 and 1995, and while the
reason for this is not clear, it does mean that the majority of respondents had been in the labour market for a minimum of five years with their professional qualification. The questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Of the responses received 60 per cent were female and 40 per cent male. This is higher than the balance of males to females in overall CIPD membership (31 per cent male) and explained by the fact that the proportion of male respondents in this survey was slightly higher than the proportion of men in any cohort of PGD HRM students since 1993. We were interested to investigate changes in their employment level and function, their earnings and the perceived positive and negative influences on their careers in human resource management.

Almost half of the graduates were in the 30-39 age group, with a further third aged 40-49. This age profile reflects the high rates of response from those who had graduated some six or seven years previously and also the fact that the average age at enrolment to the two-year programme is 27 years. The “personal” profile of the female HRM diplomates who took part in this study broadly conforms to previous findings on the profile of the woman manager (Burke, 1997; Vinnicombe and Sturges, 1995). Women in this sample were generally younger than men with 53 per cent of female respondents in the under 35 age group, compared to 29 per cent of males. Nearly 20 per cent of men were in the “older” over 45 age group, as were just 9 per cent of women.

Around three quarters of respondents had a primary degree prior to embarking upon the HRM programme, but amongst this sample, as in the population as a whole, there remained differences between women and men in terms of subjects studied at undergraduate level. Women were, for example, less likely than men to have studied science and much less likely to have taken business studies. Conversely, women were much more likely than men to have studied arts or humanities or social sciences. Just over half of respondents confirmed that they had undertaken some further studies since completing the PGD in HRM, most commonly the linked MA in HRM, though some had obtained an additional professional qualification, most commonly in training, teaching or Chartered Institute of Secretaries. This is perhaps in line with the current ethos of continuous learning/ improvement as a means of staying ahead in today’s competitive world. All respondents were currently members of CIPD the professional body for personnel/HR practitioners. A third held corporate membership while 10 per cent had gone on to “Fellow” level. A very large number, some 90 per cent of respondents, had been funded by their employer to study for the HRM qualification. This again reflects the predominance of part-time and post experience students. The assumption might be made that it also reflects the value and significance which employers attach to the HRM qualification, in terms of employee development and benefit to the organisation.

The vast majority, 93 per cent, were in full-time employment. A little over half were employed in the public sector, perhaps reflecting the continuing importance of that sector for employment in the Northern Ireland economy, and its renowned commitment to employee development. Nationally just over a quarter (29 per cent) of CIPD members are public sector employees. In the private sector, manufacturing and production was the area of employment most frequently represented. Half of the sample worked in large organisations, employing more than 1,000 people.

Around four fifths of male respondents were married or living with a partner and the proportion is very similar for females. However, more men than women in the sample had a child or children living with them, the figures being 71 per cent and 47 per cent respectively. These findings again reflect those of the earlier studies, but the differences in marital status and in the likelihood of having children, in this sample, perhaps also reflect the age differences in the sample. More women were in the younger age groups, and it is acknowledged that in the UK as a whole women are increasingly postponing the age of first pregnancy (Social Trends, 1996). The differences may also suggest that women are still more likely to feel that they must make a choice between career and marriage/children, while men may be more likely to feel that they can “have it all”.

Half of the sample earned more than £26,000 with just under a quarter earning £35,000 or more. These findings suggest that respondents were, in general, highly paid compared to the majority of employees in Northern Ireland’s traditionally low wage economy. When compared to managers in general however respondent’s earnings look rather less impressive, although the earnings profile of the sample was broadly in line with that of HR and personnel professionals elsewhere in the UK. CIPD membership statistics show 25 per cent of member’s earnings £20,000-£30,000 pa. When salary
levels were compared to earnings before embarking upon the PGD in HRM programme it seemed that the majority of respondents in the present study had in fact improved their earnings position. Pre HRM studies almost three quarters of respondents, 73 per cent, had been earning less than £20,000 pa compared to just 24 per cent currently in that earnings group. At the other end of the scale, no-one had been earning more than £40,000 pa prior to HRM studies, compared to 10 per cent currently in that position.

Management level, as well as earnings, had improved for most respondents. Just over half of the sample was in senior management positions, compared to just 6 per cent pre HRM studies. Conversely the percentage of respondents currently in junior management or supervisory positions was just 17 per cent, compared to the 51 per cent who had held such positions before studying for a PGD in HRM. These findings reflect those of earlier studies (AMBA, 1997; Simpson, 1996) which suggested that, in general, managers experience significant improvement in career progression and in salaries following professional management study. This was supported also by the views of respondents themselves in this study, most of whom felt that their careers had been helped by the acquisition of an HRM qualification. More than half of the sample felt that the PGD in HRM had helped “to a great extent” and the remainder that it had helped “to some extent”.

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<th>Career progression of the HRM graduates</th>
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| While the location of respondents, in terms of management function, had not changed substantially, with generalist HR management being that most often cited, the numbers involved in the low paid area of administration declined dramatically and those in organisation development/strategy had gone from nothing to over 13 per cent of the sample. A small number of men (9 per cent) and women (6 per cent) had been employed outside the HR function before their studies and all had now moved into management positions within HR. There were some differences between the male and female graduates in terms of the aspect of the HR function in which they were employed after their studies. For example, more men (19 per cent) than women (9 per cent) now worked in organisation development and strategy. On the other hand, women were more likely to be employed in the training function than were men, at 16 per cent compared to 10 per cent. To some extent, these findings reflected those of other studies (Davidson, 1991; Tomlinson et al., 1997) which suggested that women managers are most likely to be found in traditionally “female” functions. This is reflected too in the CIPD membership profile which shows 11 per cent of women members working in administration compared to just 3 per cent of men.

Turning to management level, we found that before their HRM studies both men and women were equally likely to have been in supervisory or junior management positions, and there were no significant gender differences. Now, both men and women had made significant progress into senior management posts, but more men than women had achieved that level of promotion, nearly 52 per cent of men compared to just 38 per cent of women.

Around 9 per cent of female respondents had, however, moved on to Directorships whilst no male respondents had achieved that level, although one man was now chair/chief executive of his employing organisation. These Directors were mainly under 35 years of age and employed in the private sector, and at first sight this would appear to be considerably at odds with statistics from the broader management sphere which suggest that women hold just 4 per cent of directorships in the UK (Cabinet Office, 2000) and that just 10 per cent of appointments at board level in organisations go to females. The disparity is perhaps not quite so striking, when it is borne in mind that these were Human Resource directorships. Human Resource Management is traditionally regarded as a female profession and a significant proportion of women in management who do succeed in obtaining top management posts do tend to be in aspects of management such as HRM or training and development (Ackah et al., 1999). Nonetheless at first sight this finding does seem to run contrary to the hypothesis above that although women increasingly aspire to careers in HRM, the top posts in HRM are more commonly held by men, and it is certainly at odds with the CIPD membership profile which shows nearly a quarter of male members of the profession with the job titles “director” or “senior executive” (24 per cent) compared to just 8 per cent of female members with similar job titles.

Promotional levels aside however, it might be said, perhaps, that the acid test of how well any individual is doing in his or her career, is how much he or she is earning. Interestingly, before taking the HRM qualification, nearly
65 per cent of male respondents had been in the pay ranges under £20,000 pa, compared to 78 per cent of female respondents. This is reflected in the fact that pre-HRM study, men earned on average just £800 more than their female counterparts. Now, however, women were much more likely than men to earn less than £20,000 pa and the average pay gap had grown to almost £4,000.

Overall, since the attainment of their HRM qualification both men and women in the sample had improved their earnings position but with some interesting exceptions. Some 16 per cent of men were now in the £30,000 plus pa range, which no women had attained, but nonetheless women were now more likely than men to be earning £41,000-£50,000 pa, with some 13 per cent of women but only 5 per cent of men in that pay range. However, 31 per cent of women had either remained or moved into the post HRM pay range of £15-20,000 pa, compared to only 5 per cent of men, though one man remained in the lowest range of under £15,000.

There are some interesting contradictions in the findings above. Both women and men seem to have enjoyed career progression following their HRM studies. While more men than women were found to have attained senior management or head of department status, no men had become directors or partners in companies or organisations compared to 9 per cent of women in the sample. However, of the male respondents, 5 per cent were to be found in the top pay range of £60,000 plus pa, whereas no women had achieved such earnings whatever their job titles might suggest, and indeed no women were earning more than £50,000 pa. Part of the explanation may lie in definitional problems of what constitutes a middle or senior management position or a directorship. The differences between male and female earnings at both the bottom and top of the range are, however, not wholly explained by either definitions or by the sector of employment. The women in this sample were not “average” female employees for whom 80 per cent of average male earnings is often accepted as the norm. They were highly educated, highly qualified and experienced managers as were their male counterparts. Hence we might conclude from this study that some form of “glass ceiling” does exist, with women largely excluded from the “men’s club” at the top of the salary range.

The AMBA survey (1997, p. 5) explained a difference of some £13,600 pa between average earnings for male and female MBA graduates commenting that “men earn more than women, reflecting that some female respondents move into part-time work following a career break”. Such an explanation of earnings differences would not be valid, however, for the sample in this survey, since 93 per cent of respondents were in fact in full-time employment but still a difference existed of some £4,000 pa between average male and female earnings.

Impact of an HRM qualification

Having considered, at an objective level, the effect which an HRM qualification may have had on women’s managerial function, status and earnings, vis-à-vis their male counterparts, it was important to consider also respondents’ own perceptions of what an HRM qualification had done for their careers. This was looked at in the context of what women had expected from a PGD in HRM and their motives in undertaking such studies.

Women, it appeared, had been less likely than men to have embarked upon a PGD in HRM as a means to “improve career prospects”, with 29 per cent of female respondents giving this as their main motive in studying for the qualification compared to 55 per cent of males. However, far more women than men gave as their main motivation the attainment of the Diploma or CIPD membership with 29 per cent of women compared to just 5 per cent of men in this category. Interestingly, 90 per cent of women, compared to 60 per cent of men, claimed that the HRM had helped their career “to a great extent”. This does however seem to have been largely a subjective perception of the impact which an HRM qualification had had.

Indications are that women were significantly less likely to have had two or more promotions since obtaining the qualification. A total of 40 per cent of women had been promoted twice or more, compared to 58 per cent of men. Similarly, overall, 62 per cent of men reported that their careers had progressed within their original organisation since completing their qualification, compared to only 28 per cent of women. This may explain why many more women (53 per cent) than men (14 per cent) had in fact moved to another organisation. This tendency for women to move organisation for career progression has also emerged from a recent Institute of Management survey, which found that there had been a significant increase in the number of female managers contemplating a change of role or organisation (Institute of Management, 2002).
What is noteworthy here is the difference in what might be termed “expectations” between men and women since while more men than women claimed that they had embarked upon study as a means “to improve career prospects” far more women than men clearly felt they needed the qualification in order to progress within their careers. Men were, however, less satisfied with the impact which the qualification had had upon their career. Such differences in levels of expectation and perhaps in aspirations, may, of course, be rooted in aspects of organisation culture and indeed in overall social attitudes. They may be significant, however, in terms of career progression for women and men in HRM careers, and as such will be considered further below in discussion of the “explanations” for male-female similarity and difference.

### Career Influences

The study also sought to establish what positive and negative influences respondents had experienced in their careers. The existence of such influences might be considered to mediate the impact of the HRM qualification on career progression and therefore might help to explain some of the diversity in respondents’ experiences. In terms of negative influences first, indications are that there were differences between male and female respondents, in terms in the type of barrier perceived to exist or actually experienced.

For women, the greatest single barrier, experienced by 26 per cent, was “lack of confidence” and interestingly, this was also cited by 15 per cent of the men. The perception of lack of confidence is difficult to explain amongst women who had clearly been sufficiently confident to embark upon, and endure the hardships of, part-time study over a lengthy and demanding course. An underestimation of competence or efficacy has, however, been proposed by a number of studies (e.g. Dickerson and Taylor, 2000) as an explanation for women’s self-limiting behaviours when considering career advancement or progression opportunities. It was, however, surprising to encounter such an obstacle in the personnel/HR profession which is perceived as overwhelmingly female.

Both male and female respondents cited lack of development opportunities as negative influences, with this the single greatest barrier for men and the second most important for women. The Institute of Management (2002) study has similarly highlighted lack of training and development provision as a barrier to career progress of women, though that survey found just one in five women suffering from a lack of training.

Lack of role models or a mentor was the third most frequently quoted negative influence for women. Similarly, Leeming and Barruch (1998), in their study of MBA graduates, found that senior women felt isolated and unsupported in male dominated organisations, and their leaving created a gap in terms of role models and mentors for younger women while the Institute of Management survey also highlighted lack of career guidance and the existence of a male network as significant career barriers for women.

The study was concerned, however, to establish what HR professionals felt to have been the most positive influences upon their careers, and here again there were differences between male and female respondents. Whilst for both men and women the single greatest positive influence in their careers was felt to be “personal commitment” this was more important for women than men with 60 per cent ranking this first compared to just under half of the men. There was less consensus regarding the other important influences, since one in five men cited “drive and ambition” as the most important influence, while this factor was not rated as most important by any women. However, 44 per cent of the women ranked drive and ambition as the second most positive influence. There was disparity too in the importance attributed by men and women to attainment of the professional qualification with 22 per cent of women but only 5 per cent of men claiming this as most significant. All respondents were asked whether they considered that their gender had been a positive or negative effect on their career. Three quarters of the men said that they felt their gender had no effect at all, while over a third of the women felt that their gender had a negative effect. It was also significant that, in our sample, no men, but 13 per cent of women felt that sex discrimination was the most significant negative influence on their careers.

### Summary

Much of the literature in the area would suggest that men and women continue to have rather different experiences of managerial work and rather different careers in management. Some of those differences have again been highlighted by the findings of this study in relation to the HRM function.
The main aim of this paper, however, was to help establish whether the acquisition of a HR professional qualification, had the same impact upon career progression for both male and female managers, or whether other factors, such as where managers work, or the existence of career influences, have a more significant effect upon progression, regardless of formal qualifications. The findings suggest that the careers of male and female managers do differ, even after a PGD in HRM, with men receiving more internal promotions, while women were more likely to seek career progression in another organisation and to be less successful in terms of earnings.

**Explanations and solutions**

At one level it is tempting to say that there is little need for “explanation” and even less need for solutions* to the differing career experiences of male and female HRM managers. After all, the women themselves who responded to this survey seemed, in some respects at least, more satisfied with their situation than were their male counterparts. More women than men, for example, felt that the PGD in HRM had helped their careers; more women than men felt that their expectations had been met. Nonetheless the fact that women continued to be less likely than men, to reach the top salary scales despite holding the same qualifications; that women were much more likely than men to perceive barriers to their careers and to have experienced specific barriers, such as “lack of role models”, and difficulties with “confidence”, does merit some further comment.

While the media makes much of a thrusting, assertive generation of young female executives, there is evidence from this study of a need to raise the confidence, expectations and career aspirations of female managers. This is something which might be addressed in curriculum design for HRM and other academic programmes, as well as in management development programmes generally. Leeming and Barruch (1998) argued that academic staff on MBA programmes needed to demonstrate greater awareness and understanding of potential labour market discrimination and the same point could be made in relation to HRM programmes. Similarly, those involved in curriculum design and in management development might usefully consider Sinclair’s (1997, p. 313) view that “experimentation with a wider range of learning and pedagogical strategies would better equip managers when working with diverse contemporary workforces” and might incorporate the suggestions for change derived from such work.

The issues raised by respondents’ perceptions of what constituted barriers to their careers are wide ranging. In some respects they are fundamental to the entire area of equality of opportunity for all in employment. Many are issues related to organisational culture, and how cultures might be changed to encourage the greater inclusiveness which will best develop the potential of all employees. Men and women of whatever age, those with disabilities, people from ethnic minorities, may all experience barriers if they are regarded as being “different” (Kanter, 1977). Not going to the pub after work, not having gone to the “right” school, not playing the “right” sport, not spending the “right” amount of time in the office, can all create barriers which exclude both men and women from that “club” or network. As Ibarra (1995) however learned, men are more likely than women with the same education and experience to gain access to the networks of their mentors and to be drawn into key “political” coalitions. Liff and Ward (1998, p. 10), from a study of a company involved in Opportunity 2000, the national business-led equality campaign, found that “women are differentially excluded from those networks through which they can make themselves known and learn about promotion processes”. Similarly, Barker and Monks (1995), in their investigation of the careers of accountants in Ireland, have argued that women lacked the benefits of the support networks focused on golf and rugby which had been established by their male counterparts. Indeed, a survey of employees at Ernst & Young (Accounting) recently suggested that women were leaving the company because they felt “excluded from mentoring and networking capabilities” (Cole, 1999). More could be done within organisations and across the labour market generally to enable the establishment of different and more inclusive networks.

Many of the female human resource managers who participated in this study claimed that the factors which had exerted a negative influence upon their careers had been a lack of role models and a lack of self-confidence. It might be argued that the two are strongly related or intertwined. Although the personnel or HR profession, is in terms of numbers employed, a largely female function, nonetheless women are substantially underrepresented at the top of the profession at director and senior executive level. This, together with the fact...
that in many organisations the personnel or HR function is still not yet regarded as a “board level” function means that the (often female) personnel manager may be somewhat isolated in a middle management support role with no role-model in terms of either gender or function at the top of the organisation. As authors such as Kotter (1985) and Kanter (1977, 1991) have argued virtually all successful top executives have had, on their path to the top, people they could rely on to meet different needs – providing contacts, giving key information in specific areas, teaching valued skills. In other words they had a mentor or mentors. Unfortunately for women, as Vinnicombe and Colwill (1995, p. 85) note “mentors tend to be attracted to their own kind and there are few top-level executives whose mirror reflects a woman”. While it might be argued that women should be mentored by women if role models are to be provided with whom protégés could easily identify and mentors are to be able to empathise with their juniors, the obvious flaw in this argument is that there simply are not enough women in senior positions to make this a viable proposition in most organisations. Until there are, it seems that men may need to be encouraged to think of women aspiring to management positions and with the appropriate abilities and qualifications as being of “their own kind” in everything but gender. Such encouragement together with a review of management development and professional education, could do much to ensure that the full potential of all employed in HRM is realised.

### Conclusion

The career progression of men and women who have completed an HRM qualification is affected by much more than just the qualification per se. In considering the findings of this study and in seeking to draw conclusions from those findings it is important to bear in mind that in the twenty-first century careers are not always as they were in the past, and indeed the very concept of “career” is itself the subject of much debate. Our traditional understanding of the career as a series of upward moves, with increasing income status and security within a functional area and often within a single organisation, is being challenged (Allred et al., 1996; Cappelli, 1999). New ways of thinking about careers suggest that lateral and horizontal movement has become more commonplace and a wider variety of alternatives exist in place of traditional routes. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) have introduced the concept of the “boundaryless” career reflecting the dissolution of boundaries between functions and organisations. Watts (1996) claims that career simply describes an individual’s lifetime progression in learning and work; instead of being constrained by hierarchical promotion within a function and an organisation, progression in learning and work can take place within positions and through any type of movement, not just in the upward direction.

This then is the context within which the findings of this study must be considered. While it seems that there have been different career paths for men and women within the HRM function and profession, new ways of thinking about careers suggest the possibility of greater convergence of experiences for the future. Women’s careers, it might be argued, have always been more likely to be “boundaryless” and “portfolio” in nature than those of men. Women have moved in and out of organisations more readily than men, have been more likely to have discontinuous careers, and have accepted lateral and horizontal moves often as a means of achieving a reasonable work-life balance. It is now possible that we will see men increasingly prepared to move, at least between functional areas. The men who participated in this study were, for example, older on average than the women, and in some cases at least were entering the HRM function from other areas of management and “reskilling” through the postgraduate qualification to do so.

New thinking on careers suggests also that employees are less reliant on employers to “manage” careers and more interested in acquiring marketable skills to add to a portfolio which will facilitate greater mobility between functions and organisations (Mallon, 1999). This may go some way to explain one of the apparent contradictions in the findings from this study, where women felt the postgraduate qualification had helped their careers more than did their male counterparts, despite the fact that men were actually working in more senior positions and earning more having acquired the qualification. An explanation may be that the male participants still saw their careers in “organisational” terms and had not embraced boundaryless careers to the same extent as their female counterparts. Hence women are perhaps more likely to value the qualification as adding to the marketable skills required in moving across organisational boundaries while men see it more in terms of assisting vertical career progression within an organisation.
The overall conclusion must be that careers in human resource management, as in most areas of employment, are changing and the findings from this study should be seen in the context of such changes. The findings do suggest that men and women have had different experiences in their careers but as career paths change and responsibility for career planning and management shifts from organisation to individual, it is not clear whether we will see continuing divergence between the male and female experience in new, less bounded, careers.

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