

EXPLORING THE HR PROFESSIONALS' EMPLOYEE ADVOCATE ROLE IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: The case of Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study specifically explored the key factors that significantly influence the performance of the employee advocate role by HR professionals in a developing country context – Malawi. The study used a standardised questionnaire administered to a random sample of 305 respondents (95 HR professionals, 121 line managers, and 89 employees) drawn from public and private sector organizations in Malawi. The standard multiple regression results revealed that the perception that HR professionals perform the employee advocate role was mainly influenced by the HR professionals' ability to motivate employees through organizing regular staff meetings. The main implication of the results of this study is that organization of regular staff meetings to listen to the views and concerns of employees is fundamental to the enhancement of the HR professionals' employee advocate role. Such meetings provide an opportunity for the employees to have their views and concerns heard which is in line with the current wave of democratic dispensation and freedom of expression in many African countries.

Keywords: HR Roles, HR Professionals, Employee Advocate, Staff Meetings, Institutional Theory, National Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relentless pace of organizational change has given HR professionals' enormous opportunities to assume high profile 'architect' roles that place them at the forefront as a source of competitive advantage (Tyson, 1995). Similarly, Ulrich (1997) argues that the changing business environment and a growing focus on strategic management have led to HR functions gaining status and influence within organizations. Indeed, research has shown that in recent years, the HR function, like other organizational functions, has been called upon to contribute to new organizational demands and requirements (Murphy and Southey, 2002; Ulrich, 1998). This is due to the perceived transition of the role of HR professionals from administrative "clerk of works" to a role oriented towards organizational performance (Murphy and Southey, 2002). HR professionals must create and deliver value by bringing a perspective that is compatible with but distinct from other business perspectives. For example, according to Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), an HR perspective that is both unique and powerful is the one that establishes the linkages between employee commitment, customer attitudes, and investor returns. Although HR functions are gaining increasingly more influence in the business operations, it is note worthy that HR professionals are struggling to make top executives and colleagues recognize the value of their operations and initiatives (Lemmergaard, 2009). Since HR professionals also deliver value through the roles they play as alluded to by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), Lemmergaard (2009) contends that the first step towards measuring the value of the HR function is therefore to define and clarify the roles and role expectations of the HR function in the organization.

Over the years, several HR roles have been identified. For example, Storey (1992) as cited by Armstrong (2009), suggested a two-dimensional map: interventionary /non-interventionary and strategic/tactical, from which he identified the following four HR roles: change makers (interventionary/strategic) – which is close to the HRM model; advisors (non-interventionary/strategic) – who act as internal consultants, leaving much of HR practice to line managers; regulators (interventionary/tactical) – who are 'managers of discontent' concerned with formulating and monitoring employment rules; and handmaidens (non-interventionary/tactical) – who merely provide a service to meet the demands of line managers. Then, Ulrich (1998) produced a model in which he suggested that as champions in creating and delivering value HR professionals carry out the roles of strategic partners, administrative experts, employee champions and change agents as follows (1) Strategic partners – who deliver business results. (2) Administrative experts who deliver efficient HR practices; (3) Employee champions who deliver competent and committed employees, and (4) Change agents who deliver capacity for change in

individual behavior and organizational culture. Later in 2005, Ulrich in conjunction with Brockbank reformulated the 1998 model and identified the following five HR roles (Armstrong, 2009:116): (1) Employee advocate – focuses on the needs of today's employees through listening, understanding, and empathizing; (2) Human capital developer – in the role of managing and developing human capital (individuals and teams), focuses on preparing employees to be successful in the future; (3) Functional expert – concerned with the HR practices that are central to HR value and acting with insight on the basis of the body of knowledge they possess; (4) Strategic partner – consists of multiple dimensions: business expert, change agent, strategic HR planner, knowledge manager and consultant, combining them to align HR systems to help accomplish the organization's vision and mission, helping managers to get things done, and disseminating learning across the organization; and (5) Leader – leading the HR function, collaborating with other functions and providing leadership to them, setting and enhancing the standards of strategic thinking and ensuring corporate governance.

This study is based on Ulrich's model of roles of HR professionals. This model has been adopted for this study because (1) it is a model which lends itself to empirical investigation because it has precisely identified the elements that constitute each role, (2) the model was derived from previous empirical research which revealed that HR professionals do indeed perform such roles (Corner and Ulrich, 1996), and (3) the model has been used or examined widely by researchers (for example, Caldwell, 2001, 2008; Keegan and Francis, 2010).

Although there is no shortage of literature on HRM practices in developing countries (Baruch and Clancy, 2000; Blunt and Jones, 1992; Kamoche et al., 2004; Mamman et al., 2006; Mamman et al., 2009;). the available literature has however, focused largely on defining and explaining the landscape of people management in developing countries rather than explaining HR professionals' role within the context. Therefore, given the dearth of research on the role of HR professionals in developing countries, a study was done between November 2011 and February 2012 to investigate the roles played by HR professionals in Malawi. This paper is based on that broader study whose results revealed that the HR professionals in Malawi were indeed performing all the five roles as follows: Employee advocate ($\bar{x} = 3.14$; $\sigma = 0.993$); Human capital developer ($\bar{x} = 3.47$; $\sigma = 0.982$); Strategic partner ($\bar{x} = 3.57$; $\sigma = 0.881$); Functional expert ($\bar{x} = 3.61$; $\sigma = 0.768$), HR Leader ($\bar{x} = 3.90$; $\sigma = 0.961$). Based on these results, the HR leader role had the highest mean score whilst employee advocate role had the lowest mean score. Therefore, this paper sought to investigate further the underlying reasons why employee advocate was regarded as the least role performed by HR professionals in Malawi. Specifically this paper uses insights from institutional theory and cultural perspective to understand individual perceptions regarding HR professionals as employee advocates.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 HR Employee Advocate Role

Human resource is regarded as a valuable resource in any organization. Armstrong and Baron (2002) state that people and their collective skills, abilities, and experience, are now regarded as making a significant contribution to organizational success and as constituting a major source of competitive advantage. Similarly, Aydogdu and Asikgil (2011) assert that in view of rapidly changing business environment, it must not be forgotten that the success and competing power of the organization depend on committed, highly motivated, satisfied and innovative human resources. Therefore, the overall purpose of HRM is to ensure that the organization is able to achieve success through people (Armstrong, 2009). But HRM has an ethical dimension which means that it must also be concerned with the rights and needs of people in organizations (ibid). In fact, based on social exchange theory, the employment relationship can be regarded as an exchange type of relationship. As argued by Armstrong (2009), many employers simply want employees who will do what they are told without costing too much, they want engagement and commitment. In contrast, employees want a say in how much they are rewarded, their terms and conditions of employment and the way in which their work is organized. Pluralism therefore prevails since management expectations will not necessarily coincide with those of employees. An important point to remember about the employment relationship is that, generally, it is the employer that has the power to dictate the contractual terms, individual employees have little scope to vary the terms of the contract imposed upon them by employers (Armstrong, 2009). With the balance of power between employer and employees tilting more towards the employer, there is need for the existence of some entity inside the organization to monitor employee situations and respond to employee complaints about unfair treatment or inappropriate actions. Accordingly, HR professionals are called upon to be employee advocates, charged with making sure the employer – employee relationship is one of reciprocal value (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005).

Employee relations processes consist of the approaches, methods and procedures adopted by employers to deal with employees either collectively through their Unions or individually (Armstrong 2009:906). HR professionals as employee advocates are expected to creatively seek and implement the means for employees to voice opinions and feel ownership in the business. Whatever the context within which the HR professionals find

themselves, according to Ulrich and Brockbank (2005: 201), caring for, listening to, and responding to employees remain a centre piece of HR work. The employee advocate role of HR professionals encompasses their involvement in the day to day problems, concerns, and needs of employees. Furthermore, the HR employee advocate role requires HR professionals to see the world through employees' eyes – to listen to them, understand their concerns, empathize with them and champion their concerns and issues, while at the same time looking through managers' eyes and communicating to employees what is required for them to be successful (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Hence, the role of the HR employee advocate is to make a clear alignment between the interest of the employees of the organization and the business goals and objectives and also to help maintain a positive psychological contract between employer and employees.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives: The Institutional and Cultural Perspectives

Various theoretical perspectives including, among others, cultural (Aycan, 2005; Aycan, et al., 2007; Brookes et al., 2011; Katou et al., 2010) and institutional (Brookes et al., 2011; Gooderham et al., 1999) have been used to explain variations in HRM practices across organizations and societies. According to Aycan et al., (2007) culturalist school argues that, while institutional factors can determine organizational structure and the role of its members, the behaviour of organizational members is influenced by national culture. Therefore, the HR employee advocate role would be enabled or constrained by the institutional framework as well as the societal cultural values.

2.2.1 Institutional Perspective

The development of institutional theory has led to significant insights regarding the importance of institutional environments to organizational structures and actions (Goodstein, 1994; Teo, et al.; Tolbert and Zucker, 1993). This theory views organizations as social entities that seek approval for their performances in socially constructed environments (Jackson and Schuler, 1995:240). As social entities, organizations have to respond to institutional pressures and demands which are embodied in regulations, norms, laws and social expectations regarding what constitutes acceptable behaviour (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Thus, institutional theorists generally reason that because an organization depends for survival on the support of external constituents, it must conform to accepted social norms (Gupta et al., 1994). Such conformity facilitates acceptance and legitimacy which in turn contributes to organizational success and survival (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Jackson and Schuler, 1995). Therefore, institutional theory is useful for examining the factors that lead organizations to adopt similar structures, strategies and processes - institutional isomorphism (Deephouse, 1996).

According to Scott (1995), isomorphic pressures refer to influences for conformity exerted on organizations by the government, professional associations and other external constituents that define or prescribe socially acceptable behaviour. In the context of this study, some studies have shown that institutional factors influence HRM practices, for example, Gooderham et al. (1999) argued that the formal institutional framework backed up by legislation affects HRM practices and the role of HR professionals. Similarly, Brookes et al. (2011) also found that institutional factors have more power in explaining HRM practices. In particular, labour relations factors were found to be significant in shaping organizational practices.

2.2.2. Cultural Perspective

Hofstede (1980) emphasizes that management is culture – dependent. That is, cultural assumptions play a critical role in determining appropriate management systems and practices (see Rees and Althakhri, 2008). According to Granovetter (1985), culture defines a people's way of life such that the values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours which employees bring into the organization are shaped by those prevailing in the society at large. This suggests that the social context surrounding organizations affects the means by which managers' carryout their jobs and seek to implement organizational strategies (Rees and Althakhri, 2008). Therefore, culture in Africa, like elsewhere, plays an important role in shaping management practices (Beugre' and Offodile, 2001). In the context of this study, to the extent that national culture influences how members of an organization behave in a workplace setting, a society's beliefs, values and norms would impact on the way HR professionals perform their roles.

One dimension of culture relevant here is the aspect of power distance. Hoffman and Hegarty (1993) define power distance as the degree to which people accept centralized authority and status differences in society and their organizations. High power distance can therefore be defined as a high willingness on the part of less powerful individuals in a society to accept an unequal distribution of power without question and to regard it as normal (Blunt and Jones, 1992:190). In countries that value high power distance, organizations tend to be more hierarchical and centralised, with greater control and coordination from the top levels of the organization (Daft, 2004:224). Thus, high power distance cultures tend to centralise (Hoffman and Hegarty, 1993).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In an attempt to examine the underlying reasons why employee advocate is regarded as the least role performed by HR professionals in Malawi, this paper investigated the following questions:

1. Which factor(s) significantly influence the perception that HR professionals perform the employee advocate role?
2. In what ways would the HR employee advocate role be influenced by the institutional framework and the national culture?

4. METHODOLOGY

The study upon which this paper is based used a random sample of 305 respondents (95 HR professionals, 121 line managers, and 89 employees) drawn from public and private sector organizations in Malawi. Specifically, data were collected using a structured questionnaire that focused on the perceptions of different categories of staff regarding the roles performed by HR professionals in their respective organizations. The respondents were requested to rank each item on a 5 point Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The results were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

With specific reference to the employee advocate role, the following 12 independent variables were identified as measuring the employee advocate role by HR professionals – (1) HR Professionals listen to employees, (2) HR professionals try to implement employees' suggestions, (3) HR professionals care for employees financial needs, (4) HR professionals care for employees family needs, (5) HR professionals care for employees health needs, (6) HR professionals defend employees rights, (7) HR professionals encourage employees, (8) HR professionals strive to be fair to all employees, (9) HR professionals share the happiness and sadness of employees, (10) HR professionals organize trips for staff members, (11) HR professionals organize regular meetings with staff to listen to their views and concerns, and (12) HR professionals contribute in motivating employees.

All independent variables were checked for any evidence of multicollinearity. According to Pallant (2010), multicollinearity exists when the independent variables are highly correlated ($r = 0.9$ and above). In addition, the variables in a scale were assessed for reliability and validity. Cronbach Alpha coefficient assesses reliability and to be reliable, a scale should have as high an alpha coefficient as possible of at least 0.7 (Vaus de, 2002:127). A valid Likert Scale should be unidimensional in the sense that it should measure only one concept rather than a mixture of different concepts and corrected item total-correlations provide evidence for the unidimensionality of the scale (ibid:127). To retain in a scale an item should have an item – total correlation of at least 0.3 (Pallant, 2010).

To identify the key factors that significantly influence the perception that HR professionals perform the employee advocate role, correlation and regression analysis of survey data was done. Correlation analysis was done to establish the strength and direction of a linear relationship between various pairs of variables of interest. Regression analysis was done to determine (1) how well a set of variables was able to predict a particular outcome, and (2) which variable in a set of variables was the major predictor of a particular outcome. All statistical testing was conducted at the significance level of 0.05.

5. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

5.1 Factors Explaining the HR Employee Advocate Role

Correlation analysis results revealed the existence of significant and positive relationships at the 0.05 level between all the independent variables and the dependent variable (HR professionals perform the employee advocate role). However, two variables (1) HR professionals care for employees health needs and (2) HR professionals care for family needs had the weakest correlations ($r = 0.245$ and $r = 0.212$ respectively) with the perception that HR professionals perform the employee advocate role, whilst the rest of the independent variables had correlations of greater than 0.390. Therefore, HR professionals care for employees health needs and HR professionals care for family needs were not included in further analysis.

A scale comprising the following 10 variables (1) HR professionals listen to employees, (2) HR professionals try to implement employees' suggestions, (3) HR professionals care for employees financial needs, (4) HR professionals defend employees rights, (5) HR professionals encourage employees, (6) HR professionals strive to be fair to all employees, (7) HR professionals share the happiness and sadness of employees, (8) HR professionals organize trips for staff members, (9) HR professionals organize regular meetings with staff to listen to their views and concerns, and (10) HR professionals contribute in motivating employees, was assessed for reliability and validity. The corrected item-total correlation for each one of the 10 variables was greater than 0.3, hence the scale could be regarded as valid with this study sample. Furthermore, the Cronbach Alpha for the

above 10 variables was 0.919, hence the scale could be considered reliable with this study sample. Using these 10 variables regression analysis was then done to determine (1) how well the above set of 10 variables was able to predict the perception that HR professionals perform an employee advocate role (2) which variable in the above set of 10 variables was the major predictor of the perception that HR professionals perform an employee advocate role. The regression analysis results are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for HR Professionals Employee Advocate Role

Variables		Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	HR Employee Advocate	3.14	.993	1.0										
2	HR listen to employees	3.62	1.175	.469	1.0									
3	HR implement employee suggestions	3.33	1.115	.443	.746	1.0								
4	HR care for financial needs	3.31	1.179	.498	.621	.538	1.0							
5	HR defend employees rights	3.47	.991	.507	.607	.528	.614	1.0						
6	HR encourage employees	3.57	1.060	.509	.568	.577	.482	.624	1.0					
7	HR strive to be fair	3.66	1.230	.498	.630	.633	.669	.589	.544	1.0				
8	HR share happiness and sadness	3.89	.974	.412	.537	.495	.527	.432	.323	.544	1.0			
9	HR organize trips	2.42	1.244	.403	.394	.417	.455	.444	.339	.371	.301	1.0		
10	HR organize regular staff meetings	3.27	1.218	.582	.543	.508	.547	.508	.448	.571	.543	.395	1.0	
11	HR motivate employees	3.32	1.109	.716	.584	.541	.600	.617	.618	.630	.496	.462	.716	1.0

Table 2: Regression Analysis – Key Predictors of HR Employee Advocate Role

Variables		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised coefficients	<i>T</i>	Sig.
		<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>		
HR employee advocate role (Constant)		.631	.194		3.251	.001
HR listen to employees		-.019	.059	.022	-.319	.750
HR implement employees' suggestions		-.001	.060	-.002	-.024	.981
HR care for financial Needs		.037	.053	.044	.690	.491
HR defend employees		.031	.062	.031	.492	.623
HR encourage employees		.087	.057	.092	1.541	.124
HR strive to be fair		-.008	.053	-.009	-.143	.887
Share happiness and Sadness		.033	.055	.032	.591	.555
HR organize trips		.050	.039	.062	1.271	.205
HR organize regular staff meetings		.095	.051	.116	1.852	.065
HR motivate employees		.455	.064	.506	7.154	.000
<i>R Square</i>	53.6%					
<i>Adjusted R Square</i>	52.0%					
<i>Regression F (df = 10, 280)</i>	32.362					
<i>P</i>	.000					

The results presented in Table 2 revealed that the regression *F* was significant ($F = 32.362$; $df = 10, 280$; $p < 0.05$) and the model was able to explain 53.6% of the variance in the perception that HR professionals in Malawi perform the employee advocate role. However, HR professionals contribution towards the motivation of employees had the largest beta coefficient and was the only variable with a statistically significant result ($\beta = 0.506$, $t = 7.154$, $p = < 0.05$), implying that when all the 10 variables were taken together, only this variable made the strongest unique and statistically significant contribution towards explaining the perception that HR professionals in Malawi perform the employee advocate role.

5.2 How do HR Professionals Motivate Employees?

The next step in the data analysis was to examine further what was it that the HR professionals did that motivated the employees to the extent that the HR professionals were therefore regarded as playing the employee advocate role. To address this question another regression analysis using the same elements under the HR employee advocate construct was done to establish the variables that influenced employee motivation.

Correlation analysis results revealed the existence of significant and positive relationships at the 0.05 level between all the independent variables and the dependent variable (the perception that HR professionals motivate employees). However, only one variable (HR professionals care for family needs had the weakest correlation ($r = 0.238$) with the perception that HR professionals motivate the employees and was therefore dropped from further analysis.

A scale comprising the following 10 variables (1) HR professionals listen to employees, (2) HR professionals try to implement employees' suggestions, (3) HR professionals care for employees financial needs, (4) HR professionals care for employees health needs, (5) HR professionals defend employees rights, (6) HR professionals encourage employees, (7) HR professionals strive to be fair to all employees, (8) HR professionals share the happiness and sadness of employees, (9) HR professionals organize trips for staff members, and (10) HR professionals organize regular meetings with staff to listen to their views and concerns, was assessed for reliability and validity. The corrected item-total correlation for each one of the 10 variables was greater than 0.3, hence the scale could be regarded as valid with this study sample. Furthermore, the Cronbach Alpha for the above 10 variables was 0.879, hence the scale could be considered reliable with this study sample.

Using these 10 variables, regression analysis was then done to determine (1) how well the above set of 10 variables was able to predict the perception that HR professionals motivate employees and (2) which factor in the above set of 10 variables was the major predictor of the perception that HR professionals motivate employees. Variables whose results were not statistically significant have been excluded. The results of the following five variables were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3: Regression Analysis – Key predictors of the Perception that HR Professionals’ Motivate Employees

Factors		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised coefficients	<i>T</i>	Sig.
		<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>		
HR motivate employees (Constant)		-.301	.209		-1.142	.150
HR care for health needs		.144	.054	.103	2.671	.008
HR encourage employees		.282	.044	.268	6.372	.000
HR strive to be fair		.148	.041	.165	3.587	.000
HR organize trips		.097	.035	.108	2.783	.006
HR organize regular staff Meetings		.383	.040	.420	9.581	.000
<i>R Square</i>	66.7%					
<i>Adjusted R Square</i>	66.1%					
<i>Regression F (df = 5, 286)</i>	114.480					
<i>P</i>	.000					

The results presented in Table 3 revealed that the regression *F* was significant ($F = 114.480$; $df = 5, 286$; $p < 0.05$) and the model was able to explain 66.7% of the variance in the perception that HR professionals motivate employees. However, when all the 5 variables were taken together, HR professionals organize regular meetings with staff to listen to their views and concerns, had the largest beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.420$, $t = 9.581$, $p < 0.05$), implying that this variable, in comparison to the other variables made the strongest unique and statistically significant contribution towards explaining the perception that HR professionals motivate employees.

Regarding organization of regular staff meetings, it is noteworthy that an assessment of the responses from the employees only (excluding HR professionals and line managers) revealed that 56% of the employees either strongly disagreed/disagreed that HR professionals organize regular staff meetings compared to only 36% who either strongly agreed/agreed. The mean score for this variable was, 2.74, S.D. = 1.105, $n = 87$, indicating that employees held the perception that HR professionals were not holding regular staff meetings to hear their views and concerns.

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Based on the results of this study, the perception that HR professionals perform the employee advocate role is mainly influenced by the HR professionals’ ability to motivate employees through organization of regular staff meetings. One critical role of management is to create a work environment that will endear the organization to employees (Samuel, 2008). Providing employees with the opportunity to contribute is not just a matter of setting up formal consultative processes, although they can be important, rather, it is about creating a work environment that gives employees a voice by encouraging them to have their say, and emphasizes as a core value of the organization that management at all levels must be prepared to listen and respond to any contribution made by their employees (Armstrong, 2009). Research in various sectors has demonstrated that employees feel better motivated when, for instance, managers give them the opportunity to participate in regular meetings and allow their voices to be heard (see Hagopian et al., 2009). Therefore, by organizing regular meetings with staff, HR professionals are able to listen to the views and concerns of the employees which in turn motivate the employees since the employees know that their views and concerns have been heard. The results of this study seem to provide empirical evidence corroborating what Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) alluded to in their book entitled *HR the Value Proposition*. According to Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), HR leaders add value when they set up regular opportunities for workers’ thoughts and feelings to be heard. If employees have a voice that is listened

to, engagement is enhanced. This enables them to feed their ideas and views upwards and feel that they are making a contribution (Armstrong, 2009). An engaged employee, as defined by Bevan et al. (1997), is someone who is aware of the business context, and works closely with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization.

In spite of the enormous value of giving employees a voice through organization of regular staff meetings, the results of this study revealed that such meetings are rarely organized to the extent that employees even doubt the HR professionals' employee advocate role. Since literature has shown that national culture and the institutional framework backed up by legislation would affect HRM practices and impact on the way HR professionals perform their roles (Aycan, 2005; Aycan, et al., 2007; Brookes et al. 2011, Gooderham et al. (1999), probably, drawing upon insights from these two perspectives would shed some light on the dynamics involved.

According to Beugre' and Offodile (2001), despite diversity, some common features of African cultures emerge such as deference to authority. Thus, one characteristic of African culture is high power distance (Blunt and Jones, 1992). Consequently, African leadership styles are characterised by highly centralised power structures (ibid). Beugre' and Offodile (2001:539 -540) state that in Africa:

"There are sharp distinctions and status differences between management and workers. Management has the power, the control, the authority, and regulates reward and punishment mechanisms. The workers are expected to do their work and obey management's instructions and directives."

Apart from the influence of culture on the management styles, in the view of Abudu (1986) as quoted by Blunt and Jones (1992), some of the causes of the highly centralised style of management can be traced back to Africa's colonial past.

"Colonial administrators had scant faith in the ability of their African subordinates and therefore tended to keep all managerial authority in their own hands. The menial work which was assigned to subordinates was closely supervised. No real authority was delegated. And thus was created the typical African management style which tends to concentrate managerial authority and functions in a small number of positions at the apex of the organization."

Abudu (1986) as quoted by Blunt and Jones (1992:81-82)

This implies that based on the cultural values as well as the effects of colonialism, the organizational structures in many African countries, including Malawi, would be strictly hierarchical and largely based on patronage. As a result, one would expect only managers to be in charge of the affairs of their organizations. In such circumstances it would indeed be rare to expect the workplace to have opportunities whereby employees are able to voice their concerns.

It is however, worth noting that the dawn of multi-party democracy, in many developing countries including Malawi, has brought about a new way of looking at issues including the management of people in organizations. Due to increasing awareness of human rights which is characteristic of democratic principles, freedom of speech is encouraged so that people are expected to express their views freely. In the case of Malawi, the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi, clearly states that the provisions of the Constitution shall promote the values which underlie an open and democratic society. As such, chapter (iv) section 34 and section 35 of the Malawi Constitution, state that every person shall have a right to freedom of opinion and freedom of expression respectively. Furthermore, the Malawi Labour Relations Act of 1996, gives employees the freedom of association e.g. freedom to belong a Trade Union for purposes of effective collective bargaining with employers. It is therefore not surprising that democratization and the existing institutional provisions as enshrined in the constitution and the legal framework, have created unprecedented opportunities for organizational members in Malawi to expect more participation in matters that affect them at the workplace. This expectation requires that managers interact with employees in ways that are different from the traditional directive management style. Employees recognise that it is only when their voice is heard that managers can clearly comprehend their concerns and manage them better. As such management styles which used to be based on authority and hierarchy might no longer be adequate to deal with the new situations facing organizations in the democratic dispensation which provide for more employee participation and involvement in matters that affect them. This could probably be the reason why in the context of this study, the fact that the HR professionals were not organizing regular meetings to hear the views and concerns of employees, made respondents to view HR employee advocate role as the least of the roles performed by the HR professionals in Malawi.

7. CONCLUSION

Human resource is the primary asset of any organization and the treatment employees receive shows in the treatment of customers and, ultimately, of investors, as such, indirectly, caring for employees builds shareholder value (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). An organization cannot treat its employees badly and expect them to treat customers well since what goes on inside an organization transfers quickly to customers (ibid). Employees are motivated to contribute towards the achievement of organizational objectives when they hold the perception that management is committed to good people management and strive to create an open and comfortable work environment. Such an environment, among other things, provides an opportunity for employees to participate in meetings and discuss matters that concern them and their workplace. It is part of the HR professionals' employee advocate role to ensure that employees' concerns and needs are heard and understood by management in their respective organizations. HR professionals, as employee advocates, should therefore endeavor to create a work environment that enhances the motivation of employees by organizing regular staff meetings.

8. CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY

One contribution of this study is the focus on HR roles in a developing country. As observed earlier, roles of HR in developing countries is under-researched. Therefore, this study provides empirical evidence on the factors that significantly influence HR performance of the employee advocate role hence presenting an opportunity for improving our knowledge and understanding of how the HR employee advocate role manifests itself particularly in developing countries. More specifically, the results of this study appear to add value by providing empirical evidence to the effect that organization of regular staff meetings to listen to the views and concerns of employees is fundamental to the enhancement of the HR professionals' employee advocate role in developing countries.

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