

19. The influence of national ownership on the nature and effectiveness of human resource management in UK greenfield establishments: The peculiar case of Germany¹

Abstract

This paper reports some results from a survey of human resource practices and outcomes in new establishments operating in the UK. Comparisons are made between establishments which are UK, American, Japanese and German-owned. Contrary to expectations, the German-owned establishments are less likely to use either innovative human resource practices or to emphasise training and close links with unions; they also tend to reveal poorer outcomes. The possible reasons for this are discussed.

Introduction

Moves towards more widespread use of new approaches to human resource management (HRM) have been widely documented (Beaumont, 1992; Guest, 1990, 1991; Hegewisch and Brewster, 1993). The main reasons for this growth are generally linked to market forces driving companies to make fuller use of human resources as a basis for competitive advantage. Other factors include evidence from 'excellent' companies and from social science research

pointing to advantages to both employees and employers in the use of HRM techniques.

Some observers are sceptical about the novelty of HRM. They suggest that it is either a refocussing of personnel management (Legge, 1989) or that, where innovative approaches are used, they are little more than a new form of Taylorism (Keenoy, 1990). Even those sympathetic to the potential of HRM point out that there is no single model. Indeed a fairly cursory review (Guest and Rosenthal, 1993) indicates that there are at least four alternative models of apparently innovative approaches to the management of human resources that can be fairly readily identified. These fit rather conveniently with stereotypes – and it must be emphasised that they are stereotypes – of national management culture and, by implication, national ownership of companies.

The first model is an American version of HRM. Despite the concerns of the more thoughtful writers from within a traditional pluralist industrial relations perspective (e.g. Beer et al., 1985; Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1986; Strauss, 1992), this proclaims an essentially individual, unitarist approach to HRM based on high commitment and high trust. It is perhaps best captured in Walton's (1985) distinction between control and commitment philosophies, HRM being linked to the commitment philosophy. It is manifested in the practices of the high technology companies such as IBM, DEC and Hewlett Packard in their heyday in the 1980s.

The second model is Japanese. The Japanese approach to management is by now well-known and it shares a number of similarities with the American approach. However rather more emphasis is placed on teamworking, consultation and collective approaches. They share an emphasis on high commitment through a form of clan culture but the Japanese approach can more readily accommodate a representative system, as long as it is carefully managed. Unlike American companies, the Japanese might therefore recognise a single trade union, often with some kind of 'single union deal'.

The third model is the European one based on a more traditional view of industrial relations. It acknowledges the importance of a

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pluralist perspective and of the need for arrangements to accommodate the concerns of key stakeholders. It has evolved to place particular emphasis on policies and practices likely to enhance the quality of working life at the same time as seeking high performance. It has probably reached its most advanced form in the Scandinavian countries and in Germany. Within the European Community, Germany is its best representative, not only because of the well-established system of industrial democracy but also because of the emphasis placed in Germany on training and on the quality of the workforce. German practice can therefore be said to provide an exemplar for a European model of HRM which can be contrasted with the American and Japanese approaches (Guest, 1994).

In marked contrast to the German model, the British government, strongly supported by industry, has been highly critical of the German approach as manifested in the Social Chapter of the European Community. It has therefore opted out of this part of the Treaty. In doing so, it is proclaiming the advantages of an alternative approach based on the operation of the marketplace and of management's right to manage without the hindrance of expensive legal restrictions on the way it manages the workforce. This represents an alternative approach to HRM which claims to be innovative and different although it may use a number of techniques associated with other approaches to HRM. However the central motivation for their use is to develop a regime which promotes efficiency and low costs as the strategy for competitive advantage. One key element is to minimise wage costs and more particularly indirect 'social' costs. The kind of techniques which might be adopted include the use of selection tests, careful socialization and some forms of performance-related pay. However flexibility will be achieved by edict rather than through job redesign. It is in this context that an amended form of Taylorism might be found. Well-known American examples operating in Europe include McDonalds and Disney. But it is in the UK that this approach has been most enthusiastically advocated at national level and

implemented in varying degrees in service sectors such as retail and finance.

It must be emphasised that we are presenting stereotypes. However they are testable stereotypes and for those who are interested in the impact of the various approaches to management on employee well-being and on organizational performance, it is important to try to determine the use and the impact of the different approaches to HRM. One way of attempting to do so is to explore the impact of national ownership of establishments on their policies, practices and performance.

Human resource management in UK greenfield sites

The opportunity to study the impact of national ownership and national stereotypes of HRM arose in the context of a study of HRM in greenfield (ie. new) sites in the UK. The study had three main objectives. The first was to examine what happens when greenfield sites turn brown. There is quite a lot of information about policy and practice at new establishments, immediately after start-up but rather less about what happens once the initial excitement has worn off and a more conventional day to day routine becomes established. It was hypothesised that those establishments that did not have a strong culture imposed by the parent would 'brown' more rapidly. The second issue was to determine the impact of national ownership on the type of HRM that was practised. It was hypothesised that distinctive national patterns would emerge along the lines described above. Finally, the study was designed to explore outcomes in an attempt to begin to fill the gaps in our knowledge about the impact of HRM. In what follows, we will be concentrating on the second of these objectives while touching on the third.

Greenfield sites in the UK are arguably a particularly suitable setting for a study of this type. They provide a level playing field in which companies can choose HRM policy and practice. Because they are new establishments, both the 'parent' and the local managers are likely to think through the policy and practice they wish

to pursue and the parent has to decide how far to interfere and impose a corporate model or leave local management to fend for itself. We chose as our operational definition of greenfield sites those employing more than 50 and set up since 1980. This approximates the time since the Conservative government started to remove the legislative and other restrictions on managerial choice with respect to employment and industrial relations policy.

The research has three elements. The first is a re-analysis of aspects of the third Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (Millward et al., 1992). This is a comprehensive survey of industrial relations practices in a carefully selected and representative sample of 2000 establishments in the UK. The second part is a survey of establishments in the manufacturing and finance sectors set up in the UK since 1980. The third part, which is still in the process of completion, is a series of case studies. In what follows, we will concentrate on the results of the second phase, the survey of greenfield sites.

A questionnaire was sent, in the summer of 1993, to 1036 establishments in the UK. Approximately 800 were relatively new establishments, opened since 1980. A control group of 200 were older establishments, although these cannot be claimed with any confidence to be representative. In selecting the new plants, we attempted to include those of either UK, American, Japanese or German ownership employing more than 50 staff. However since there is no established data base, we had to build our sample through local development agencies and chambers of commerce whose records were not always accurate. After a follow up letter and some telephone calls, we obtained 399 responses. Excluding six which were seriously incomplete and 46 with fewer than 50 employees, we were left with 347 establishments for detailed analysis. Of these, 97, were 'pure' greenfield sites, new purpose-built establishments. A further 154 were refurbished sites; in other words, there had been something there before or the factory/office had already been built. However the site had either been shut down and completely refurbished before re-opening under the present ownership or had experienced a less dramatic shut down but had nevertheless

gone through a change of ownership and of business. As a result, there was sometimes but not always a fresh workforce. The final group consisted of 96 establishments opened prior to 1980.

The sample included 64 American-owned establishments, including 45 set up since 1980; 56 Japanese-owned establishments, including 52 set up since 1980; 33 German-owned establishments, including 19 set up since 1980; and 31 from the Rest of the World, including 24 set up since 1980. The remainder were UK-owned, including 104 set up since 1980. The establishments owned by companies from the Rest of the World slipped into the sample because of inaccuracies in our data base. In fact they are made up entirely of European-owned establishments apart from four from Canada, two from Australia and one from Singapore. They therefore potentially represent a European comparison group for the UK and German samples so they are retained in the analysis. It is also worth noting that the proportion of post-1980 establishments is lower in the German sample than in those of other countries. This may reflect levels of investment in the UK.

We excluded from our analysis those establishments employing less than 50 people. This left 25 per cent employing 50–99, 42 per cent employing 100–249, 19 per cent employing 250–499 and 14 per cent employing 500+. Although we had tried to target both the manufacturing and financial sectors, it proved very difficult to get a good response from the financial establishments. As a result our final sample contained 84 per cent from manufacturing, 10 per cent from financial services and 6 per cent, again a function of the poor data base, from other services.

The questionnaire consisted of four main parts. The first part asked for some details about the establishment including size, location, age, type of business and ownership. The second part asked a series of questions about HRM strategy including influence of the parent, the existence of a mission statement and the degree of formalisation of HR strategy. The third section asked about a wide range of innovative HRM techniques and whether they were practised now and a year after the establish-

ment first opened. The final section asked about outcomes including HRM outcomes, employee relations outcomes and performance outcomes. All the data were inevitably self-reports from the senior personnel or plant manager who completed the questionnaire. This may lead to certain biases but we were interested in variations within the sample and there is no reason to believe that sub-groups would be consistently more biased in one direction or another. Our case studies have been partly designed to follow up and check the accuracy of completed questionnaires and our experience strengthens our confidence in the accuracy of the data in the questionnaire returns.

In presenting the results for this paper, we will restrict our analysis to new workplaces set up since 1980. We believe our sample is reasonably representative of the relevant population, more especially for the manufacturing sector; the same cannot be said for the pre-1980 control group. Our main focus in the analysis of results is on the impact of differences in national ownership on HRM policy, practice and outcomes.

Results 1. National variations in HRM strategy

The first set of results is concerned with whether the establishments were heavily influ-

enced by their ‘parents’, whether they had a mission statement and if so whether it referred explicitly to HRM issues; and whether there was an HRM strategy formally endorsed and actively supported by the top management team. We had no specific hypotheses about differences in the presence of a strategy between the establishments of different national ownerships although we expected UK establishments to have a less carefully thought out HR strategy. The descriptive results are summarised in Table 1. Asterisks indicate that in the multivariate analysis, controlling for a range of background factors such as size, sector and location, the country results differ significantly from those in the German-owned establishments, which were used as the default category. (Full multivariate results are available on request from the author).

The results show that American parents are most likely to lay down an HR philosophy and guidelines. However multivariate analysis, controlling for other factors, shows that only the UK-owned are significantly more likely than the German-owned to do so. The results also show that the German-owned establishments are least likely to report that they have a human resource strategy formally endorsed and actively supported by the senior management team, the difference from the American and more particularly the British-owned reaching significance in the multivariate analysis.

Table 1. HRM Strategy

%	UK	USA	Japan	Germany	Rest of the World
n	104	45	52	19	24
Parent influences HR philosophy	48*	62	47	44	37
Has a mission statement	50	77	66	58	70
Mission statement refers explicitly to HR	67	48	68	64	75
Has a formal HR strategy	58*	62*	59	42	46

N.B. The first item shows the percent where the parent company lays down a general philosophy and guidelines or provides an even firmer steer. All the other items are percentages based on yes/no responses.
 An asterisk indicates a significant difference from the German-owned establishments on the basis of the multivariate analysis. A 10 per cent significance level has been used although in most cases the results are significant at the 5 per cent level or better. In all cases, the comparison is with Germany as the default category.

Although the differences are not consistently clearcut, the pattern suggests that German-owned establishments are less strategic in their approach to HRM. One further point is worth emphasising; almost half the German establishments report that their parent has made absolutely no attempt to influence what they do.

Results 2. National variations in HRM practices

Data were collected on 23 HRM practices of the sort which are conventionally associated with innovative best practice. The results, showing the percentage of each national ownership group that have adopted the practices, are presented in Table 2. Where there are significant differences on the basis of the multivariate analysis, these are asterisked in Table 2. In all instances, the comparison is with German-owned establishments as the default category.

One initial finding of note is that in this sample of new establishments, with its bias towards the manufacturing sector, the majority are using most of the techniques. Furthermore, the analysis of the control group of older establishments shows widespread adoption of them during the 1980s. Turning to national ownership, the pattern of use of techniques indicates that the American and Japanese establishments largely conform to the 'national' stereotypes outlined earlier. The UK-owned establishments make rather more use of a range of techniques than we had anticipated. The German-owned establishments however do not conform with the expected model of industrial democracy coupled with extensive training provision; but they are also less enthusiastic about the new HRM techniques. In both respects, they differ somewhat from the predominantly European Rest of the World sample.

There are a number of respects in which the German establishments do not readily conform to the model hypothesised at the outset. Against expectations, they are the least likely to recognise a trade union and the least likely to emphasise trainability as a selection criterion. They tend to be less enthusiastic about training issues. They are the least likely to have a policy of no compulsory redundancy. They are also

the least likely to use briefing systems of communication and the least likely to use appraisal systems throughout the workforce. Finally, they are the least likely to claim an integrated HR strategy.

The most telling results are to be found in the multivariate analysis where the other factors have been controlled and where German-owned companies can be compared in particular with the predominantly European Rest of the World group. On only two items – internal promotion and formal communication of company values to newcomers – do the German-owned establishments show more extensive use of the practice. The Rest of the World group of establishments report significantly higher use of six of the 23 practices listed. A number of significant differences also emerge when we compare German with British and Japanese-owned establishments, always indicating lower use by the German-owned establishments. Only the American-owned show no statistically significant difference from the Germans. Nevertheless the American establishments report higher use of 16 of the 23 practices. For some reason, the German-owned establishments do not fit the expected pattern that might be imported from Germany, nor do they demonstrate enthusiasm for any alternative based on human resource management techniques.

Results 3. National variations in outcomes

This study was unusual in having a range of outcome measures. Inevitably, given the nature of the study, these are self-reported outcomes, provided by the survey respondent. However, some are subject to verification. Three sets of outcomes were examined. The first concern HR outcomes such as levels of commitment, quality and flexibility among the staff. The second are three specific and more objective employee relations outcomes of levels of disputes, labour turnover and absence. The third set are performance outcomes and are mainly concerned with quality and productivity indicators against national and international benchmarks. The results are shown in Table 3, with the asterisks again indicating those cases where significant

Table 2. HRM Practices

%		UK	USA	Japan	Germany	Rest of the World
	n	104	45	52	19	24
Union Issues						
Union recognised of which:		32	14	36	19	24
Single union deal		31	23	53	60	50
Union seen as helpful		74	42	76	60	58
Terms and Conditions						
Harmonised terms and conditions		56	62	71*	63	79*
Single status		33	55	65	63	48
Internal promotion the norm for appointments		77	84	90	84	83
No compulsory redundancy		30*	31	50*	11	37*
Recruitment						
Trainability a major selection criteria		69	59	75	50	74
Psychological tests the norm in selection		14	11	29	10	33
Realistic job previews		60	56	47	56	56
Company values communicated to new staff		66	69	83	84	71
Training						
A learning organization		60	53	67	58	58
Minimum annual training time specified		17	13	4	5	21
Job Design						
Flexible job descriptions		82*	69	72	63	83*
Job design for full utilisation of workers		55	55	39	47	50
Teamworking		77*	71	71	68	75
Staff help to set performance targets		54*	60	52	42	61
Quality						
Staff responsible for own quality		82	84	88	83	83
Majority involved in quality circles or QITS		46*	40	52	32	54*
Communication						
Use of attitude surveys		22	29	18	21	37
Use of team briefing		61	58	77	47	83*
Staff informed about market position etc.		67	80	86	89	96
Pay Systems						
Merit pay for all staff		55	60	51	47	58
Appraisal for all staff		61	71	71	58	91*
HR as Formal Policy						
HR policy integrated with business strategy		57*	59	74*	50	62
HR policies integrated with each other		52	57	69	50	61

differences emerged in the multivariate analysis. In the multivariate analysis the comparison was always with German-owned establishments as the default category.

A clear pattern of results emerges on the human resource outcomes with the German-owned establishments performing consistently less well, significantly so in several cases. The exceptions are, surprisingly, the quality of the staff, and more predictably, ability to adjust the size of the staff (others made more use of no redundancy policies). The differences are most marked on employee commitment and flexibility of staff where the link to the earlier data on human resource practices can easily be traced.

On the employee relations items, it is interesting to note that although the German-owned establishments are the least likely to recognise a trade union, they are the most likely to report an industrial dispute. This may well be a stark reflection of the quality of their human resource policy and practice. However the pattern is much less clear-cut for labour turnover and absence levels. There are virtually no significant differences in quality and productivity outcomes. Although both the bivariate and multivariate analyses show that the German-owned establishments consistently report the poorest outcomes, the differences are small and generally fall well short of significance.

Table 3. Outcomes

%	UK	USA	Japan	Germany	Rest of the World
HR Outcomes					
Commitment among lower grade staff	3.5*	3.6*	3.7*	3.3	3.5
Quality of staff	3.8	4.1	4.2	3.6	4.0
Quality of work among lower grade staff	3.8	4.0	3.9	3.7	4.0
Flexibility of staff	4.0*	4.0*	4.2*	3.6	4.0*
Ability of staff to move between jobs	4.0*	4.0*	3.9*	3.6	3.7
Flexibility to adjust size of workforce	3.6	2.9	3.1	3.4	3.5
Quality of HRM policies	3.1	3.6*	3.4*	3.1	4.0*
Line management enthusiasm for HR practices	3.3	4.0*	3.4*	3.2	3.3
ER Outcomes					
Ever had a dispute (%)	16	22	10*	26	21
Labour turnover (%)	11.4	7.0	9.4	7.6	5.2
Absenteeism (%)	5.0	5.4	4.1	4.5	5.3
Performance Outcomes					
% of quality targets attained	89	91	87	93	93
How well recession has been handled	4.0	3.8	3.8	3.9	4.0
Quality against UK sector benchmark	4.2*	4.2	4.3	3.9	4.2
Quality against world sector benchmark	3.9	3.7	3.9	3.7	3.9
Productivity against UK sector benchmark	3.9	3.9	4.0	3.8	4.0
Productivity against world sector benchmark	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.3	3.6

HR Outcomes show mean score on 5 point scale from very low (1) to very high (5).
ER Outcomes are all percentages.
The first Performance Outcome measure is a percentage. The second shows mean score on a scale from much worse (1) to much better (5).
The remaining Outcome Measures show mean score on a scale of Bottom 10% (1), Next 20% (2), Middle 40% (3), Next 20% (4) and Top 10% (5).

Taking the three sets of outcomes together, it can be seen that it is those most closely linked to human resource policy and practice where the German establishments have the weakest outcomes. As we move away from outcomes closely linked to human resource practice and other factors become likely to exert greater influence, the size of the difference diminishes. This is very much in line with what we would expect, although it does raise interesting questions about the influence of human resource management in shaping performance outcomes.

Discussion

These results imply that HRM pays off. Those establishments that report highest use of HRM practices, and which also have a more carefully thought out strategic approach to HRM, are also those that report highest outcomes. Conversely those that report lowest use, and here the German-owned establishments stand out, report the poorest outcomes. These results are reinforced in a separate analysis taking a crude count of number of HRM practices being used (Guest and Hoque, 1994). This reveals that establishments with an HR strategy and high use of HR techniques (what might be construed as a typically American or Japanese approach but which in fact includes many UK-owned establishments) report consistently higher outcomes. In contrast, those with no strategy and low use of practices report poor outcomes. Interestingly those with a clear HR strategy but one which entails low use of HR practices do well on a few outcome criteria but are notably worse on employee relations indicators. Workers do not like this approach, which we described earlier as a new form of Taylorism, and vote with their feet.

The second key result and the one which forms the basis for the rest of the discussion is the pattern of responses from the German-owned establishments. Although the differences are not always statistically significant, it is clear from the pattern of results that the German-owned establishments are least likely to embrace HRM. It could be argued that this is

perfectly plausible because the type of HRM implicit in the practices listed is essentially American and Japanese and managers in Germany have evolved their own distinctive and successful system of management.

However, the Germans also do not appear to follow a set of practices reflecting the type of industrial democracy inherent in the European Community Social Chapter. They have the lowest level of trade union recognition; although they promote single status, they are reluctant to provide job security; and they are among the least enthusiastic about training. If they conform to any pattern, it is to the new UK ideology of free market cost-minimization. It is possible that these results reflect either the small sample size or, since the questionnaire items reflected a different HRM ideology, we have failed to ask the right kind of questions and are therefore misrepresenting the German establishments in the UK. Certainly there are one or two notable exceptions of which perhaps the best known is Bosch which has enthusiastically embraced a range of innovative HRM techniques at its new plant in South Wales. Set against this however, there is strong evidence in support of our findings from an earlier and more extensive study of German establishments in the UK reported by Beaumont et al. (1990). They were more interested in industrial relations but found little readiness to recognise trade unions and little enthusiasm for policies linked to the Social Chapter. German firms, it appears, do not export their industrial democracy and investment in training to the UK.

If these results for the German-owned establishments are valid, why are the managers of German-owned establishments behaving in this way? We hope to be able to provide better answers once we have completed more case studies. However a number of possible explanations come to mind.

1. As already noted, German companies may have been slow to adopt many of the American and Japanese-style HRM techniques in Germany, preferring instead to maintain the traditional German approach. When they set up new establishments in the UK, this presents a problem because the context is different from

Germany, making the German system less appropriate but they are unfamiliar with the American/Japanese alternative. This leaves a vacuum which they do not fill in any coherent way.

This explanation is unconvincing because firms which are operating in an international marketplace cannot really claim ignorance of key developments in HRM. Also we know that many of the HRM innovations have been extensively debated in Germany (Muller, 1993).

2. The UK is seen as a convenient cheap base from which to operate. There has been considerable publicity for the high costs and in particular the high direct and indirect labour costs of operating in Germany. For the UK market, it makes much more sense to utilise the opportunities presented by the UK legislation and take advantage of the low cost base. In such a context, it is not necessary to adopt either the German or any other 'foreign' system of HRM. Instead managers can do more or less what they want. If there are costs in somewhat poorer performance, higher absence and the like, these are trivial when set against the cost advantages of cheaper manufacture.

There is some evidence to support this explanation. Many of the German-owned establishments in our sample appear to be medium-sized suppliers of components, perhaps to the car industry. It makes sense to be close to the customer. In doing this they keep a fairly low profile. This can be contrasted with many of the American and Japanese establishments for whom their UK operation is their main European base and something of a high profile shop window. In this context they will wish to be seen as innovative in their approach as an extension of their wider marketing strategy.

3. German establishments do not know what to do in the UK. They are accustomed to a centralised system of industrial relations and to operating within national laws for codetermination and national norms for training and development. In the UK these institutional arrangements are absent. German managers are not used to this freedom to choose policy and practice at establishment level and do not know how to use it. The result is a vacuum in which no coherent strategy evolves. This position is

reinforced by the absence of any reported influence from the 'parent' in many of the German establishments. Without guidelines, the local managers fall back on their past experience or look to fads and fashions to guide a form of pragmatic opportunism.

There is modest evidence to support this view. Managers of the German-owned establishments are the least likely to have developed a coherent HR strategy. It may well be reflected in the absence of recognised trade unions since plant level trade unions are alien to the German system. But many of those who completed questionnaires from German-owned establishments were British managers who do not have this excuse.

Probably the answer lies in some combination of these explanations. One of the key confounding factors is the contrast with the Rest of the World sample. This is made up of predominantly European-owned establishments but they behave very differently from the German-owned establishments. They are more ready to adopt HRM practices even though they share similar levels of parental influence to the Germans. They are closer to both the Social Chapter approach and the American/Japanese HRM approach. Could it be that the management of the German-owned establishments reflects the discomfort of German companies when removed from their familiar home environment? Are they less able to display flexibility of approach than companies from most other countries in Europe? Whatever the answer, there do appear to be costs for the German-owned establishments. If, as seems plausible, we discount any consistent German tendency to pessimism and gloom, and accept that the results are reasonably accurate, then it appears that as a consequence of adopting neither their home grown approach nor any distinctive and innovative HRM alternative, the German firms operating in the UK experience poorer outcomes which in the long run seem likely to put them at a competitive disadvantage.

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- David Guest is Professor of Occupational Psychology in the Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck College, London.