CHAPTER 3

What is human resource management?

HRM . . . It's a posh way of describing a personnel manager . . . but it goes a bit farther than that.

(A caller to BBC Radio 4's Call Nick Ross phone-in (15 October 1991) describing his occupation)

Introduction

In the last ten years, in both the UK and USA, the vocabulary for managing the employment relationship has undergone a change. 'Personnel management' has increasingly given way to 'human resource management' (HRM) or, better still to 'strategic human resource management'. Nor is this shift exclusively confined to those followers of fashion, the commercial management consultants. It may be charted first in the writings of US academics and managers (for example, Tichy et al., 1982; Fombrun et al., 1984; Beer et al., 1985; Walton and Lawrence, 1985; Foulkes, 1986). Quickly, however, the term was taken up by both UK managers (for example, Armstrong, 1987; Fowler, 1987) and UK academics (for example, Hendry and Pettigrew, 1986; Guest, 1987; Miller, 1987; Storey, 1987; Torrington and Hall, 1987). By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s the floodgates were open. Although both the WIRS 3 survey of 1990 and the second Warwick Company Level survey of 1992 reported that only a small minority of personnel specialists have 'human resource' in their titles (Millward et al., 1991, p. 29; Marginson et al., 1993, Table 4.1) this was not evident from the media. Not only were job advertisements in the professional magazines and in the appointments pages of the quality press as likely to ask for a 'Human Resource', as a 'Personnel' manager, but
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In discussing personnel management in Chapter 1, four different models were identified: the normative, the descriptive–functional, the critical–evaluative, and the descriptive–behavioural. In theory it should be possible to identify the same range of models with reference to HRM. And, in practice, it is. In subsequent chapters I will attempt to develop a descriptive–behavioural model of HRM, in considering the gap between the normative models and company practice, as it is being revealed by recently published and on-going research studies. At this point, though, I will concentrate on the other three – in particular on the normative and critical-evaluative models of HRM.