

The full-on part-time job: TEACHING/RESEARCH NOTES

Synopsis of case

Prue successfully applied for an advertised full-time role on a part-time basis with provision for work from home, plus study. She envisaged good short and long term career prospects from the role in a newly-created division of a government department. However, a high priority but unplanned work stream for her unit has led to work intensification and overload. Prue is now experiencing fatigue and physical symptoms which she attributes to the stress of work overload. At her urging, her manager Marcus has negotiated extended work deadlines, secured resource for a temporary contractor and now has approval for an extra team member. These achievements should improve the balance between the team's available resource and work demand. But will it be enough to "re-connect" Prue with what she hoped would be a long-term career, working hours that meet her needs for a balance between work, family, and personal development?

Teaching purposes

The case study illustrates both the challenges that flow from planning and developing a new work team, and the dilemma that managers face every day: how to care for staff while getting work done as efficiently and effectively as possible. There is also the broader issue of how to balance available resource and work demand, especially when there is an unplanned but unavoidable increase.

The case can be considered from the perspective of what Prue could and should do, what Marcus as her line manager should do, but perhaps most profitably by examining what role a Human Resource Management professional could take to ensure this turning point is an opportunity for the team as a whole.

This teaching/research note has been edited by Janet Tyson, Australia and New Zealand School of Government, from material originally prepared for a postgraduate Human Resource Management assignment. The case draws on a real situation but details have been changed to maintain anonymity. The use of teaching materials is restricted to approved persons.

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Target audience

Senior public sector managers, in particular human resource professionals.

Immediate issues

What action Prue, Marcus, and their HR Manager should take to capitalise on the arrival of a new staff member.

Basic issues

Whether it is possible to restore the psychological contract between employee and manager after it has been severely tested by work intensification and overload.

Whether it is possible to “reset” the work expectations of a team that – to this point - has been achieving good results despite numerous challenges and some cost to the health of key members.

Suggested student assignments

1. How could Marcus, Prue and the BOB team take this opportunity to make a new start? What should they take from their past experience, and what new approaches should be made?
2. As a human resource management professional, how might you assist Marcus and the BOB team to move forward?
3. In particular, how might the HRM professional assist Prue to achieve her longer-term career aspirations?

Selected theory to assist with response to student assignments:

The psychological contract

Central to HRM theory and practice is the trust and confidence which must exist between employer and employee. For example, New Zealand law makes this explicit in the *Employment Relations Act 2000*. Section 3 of the Act codifies the requirement for all parties to act in good faith, and acknowledges the inherent imbalance of power in the employer-employee relationship. Trust and confidence are implicit in the concept of the psychological contract. This encapsulates the non-codified expectations and understandings which are bundled up in the employment relationships. For example, the employer may promise job security and progression in exchange for the employee’s loyalty, expertise and effort.

The psychological contract is built during pre-employment negotiations and lives on with the employment relationship itself; it can be undermined or broken through misunderstanding, neglect, or sabotage. Gratton suggests that all managers should start from an understanding of how trust and commitment can be built and destroyed (2000:23). This is essential for

managers to effectively harness and nurture their employees' potential (2000:25). Storey agrees that the job of managing culture, of which people are at the heart, is far more important than managing procedures and systems (1995:6).

Acknowledging the “Backroom Bureaucrat”

Applying HRM in the public service has unique challenges. Public servants or bureaucrats have a specialised function: they exercise power on behalf of the State and public office-holders in whom power is vested. Public servants have limited freedom or choice in their work design or programme. They must fulfil duties established in statute and faithfully serve the government of the day, behaving with the utmost integrity and good conduct.

Many public or state servants deliver services such as health, welfare, education or justice, directly to citizens. Lipsky describes such individuals as “street-level bureaucrats.” (1980). These workers are the face of government agencies (1980:81-116). But many more public servants are unseen by the public and the Ministers they serve. These can be thought of as “backroom bureaucrats”. This group must follow a chain of command with little direct engagement from which to get feedback or otherwise assess priorities or performance. Such public servants are at risk of operating in a vacuum.

Hargrove and Glidewell suggest that, at worst, the job of a public manager can be impossible (1999). Impossibility occurs when the objectives are too extreme to achieve, and the job is therefore never performed to satisfaction (1999:5). More often, the public management job is just challenging. James Q Wilson describes the procedural complexities and constraints facing public officials, which are not experienced in the private sector (1989:115-153). He suggests that managers are caught in the middle between workers and politicians, and, given, their constraints, it is a wonder there is any management at all. (1989:153-154).

Wilson has also identified that in public bureaucracies both the outputs and outcomes (or results) of work can be unobservable. (1989:158). Managers can observe their subordinates' outputs, but not the results they achieve. (1989:163-164). Wilson suggests that in these organisations, management becomes means-oriented; how workers go about their jobs is more important than whether the jobs produce the desired outcomes (1989:164).

Work intensification, stress and work overload¹

In 1995 Cameron Allan, Peter Brosnan and Pat Walsh studied 10,400 workplaces in New Zealand and Australia, finding evidence of “work intensification” (Allan, Brosnan and Walsh 1999: 828). Many New Zealand employers reported they had explicitly adopted measures to “have staff work harder” (for instance by reducing staff numbers without a concomitant reduction in work volume, speeding up the pace of work, and/or making employees exert

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of these phenomena see the works of Ronald Burke and Cary Cooper, professors of organisational behaviour and organisational psychology and health respectively. Their 2008 publications alone include the *Long Work Hours Culture* and *Building More Effective Organisations*, and provide rich exploration of HRM, organisational and leadership approaches to addressing these issues.

greater work effort through inducements such as performance-based pay). The trend held across private, public and not-for profit sectors (1999: 834). The authors suggested that a work intensification strategy was unsustainable in the long term. Employees were likely to leave or become demotivated, with a deterioration in their work performance (1999: 832).

The relationship between work intensification and negative employee outcomes is established, according to Macky and Boxall (2008: 40). Workload is an important determinant of stress (2008: 40). Where employees feel overloaded and pressured to exceed their contracted hours they are more likely to experience fatigue, higher job stress and job dissatisfaction. (Boxall 2008: 51).

Work overload, or “doing more with less” (Virick et al 2007: 463) was originally defined as “having too much work to do in the time available” (Beehr, Walsh and Taber 1976 in Macky and Boxall 2008: 44). Perrewe and Ganster noted two types of work overload: *quantitative*: defined as where the amount of work exceeds what an individual can accomplish in a given period of time; and *qualitative*: work that exceeds the skills, knowledge and abilities of individuals. They cited research showing the link between quantitative work overload and adverse health effects including coronary heart disease, as well as increased task errors and lower self-esteem (in Perrewe and Ganster 1988: 226).

Work overload, including pressure to work overtime, longer hours and at a faster pace, was targeted by the Public Service Association in Australia in 1998, because of its multiple negative effects (PSA of NSW, 1998 in Fong and Kleiner, 2004). United States researchers Narayanan, Menon and Spector analysing work stressors across three different occupational groupings single out work overload as the most reported stressor (Narayanan, Menon and Spector 1999: 68). Of particular relevance to the HRM professional, they emphasised that although subjective experiences of stress cannot be isolated from the broader context, identifying the specific stressors in a workplace had the practical advantage of making these more amenable to intervention than global measures of “work stress” (1999: 71).

How the HRM professional might assist

“People are an organisation’s most valuable asset and the only source of lasting competitive advantages for business today. Everything else can be replicated – products, services, infrastructure – but not people. Effron and Gandossy 2003:1

The HRM role is to support the employment relations between employers and employees. Ulrich (1997:44) and others assert that HR professionals should be business partners, partnering both employees and managers. When employees have concerns, the HR manager’s job is to ensure that line managers have the skills to respond effectively to employees, and that employees themselves have the skills to overcome challenges. Both HR professionals and line managers should also serve as employee champions who creatively seek and establish ways for employees to voice their opinions and feel ownership in the business (1997:30). This maintains the psychological contract between employees and the organisation.

The case focuses on the relationship between Marcus, the line manager, and Prue, as a senior adviser. The HRM professional can play an active role in improving their working relationship and environment. The arrival of a new team member is a good opportunity for change, as well as for reflection on what they, and the team as a whole have done since the unit's establishment, and where it is now headed.

1. Rebuilding the psychological contract

Prue feels a disconnect with her manager, Marcus. She respects him but the case study indicates a gap between her desired interaction with her manager and their actual interaction. While Prue has a medium to long term focus on her work, and sees flexible working arrangements as crucial, Marcus' focus is necessarily much more short term. Prue and Marcus have maintained their day-to-day working relationship by acting professionally, making compromise, and following good HRM practice. They have maintained mutual trust and confidence; they "get along" and "get the job done" through regular communication and negotiation.

This has come at a personal cost, but they can now draw on a year's practical experience of what is working and what could be improved.

- HR practitioners could facilitate a review to frankly explore successes and opportunities, sourcing information anonymously if necessary.

The reflective process and environment needs to be safe for people to share their experiences (e.g. Prue's physical ailments) and preferences (eg. remote work options), and explore possibilities e.g. how to support staff to take sick and domestic leave when they need it? These questions are both strategic and practical. Even if the answers are not easily implemented, the process of engagement will also foster positive relations within the team and act as a restorative pause.

2. Managing the workload

Many textbooks remind managers that employees are their means of getting the job done (see Rees and Porter 2008 and Templar 2005). Managers are responsible for defining and designing their employees' work. Effective delegation is a key work management strategy. Michael Beer and others of the Harvard School conceptualise work systems as a core management function and area of human resource policy choice, along with employee influence. (Beer et al 1984:16).

Marcus is "leading from the front", and setting an example of commitment above and beyond the call of duty, by shouldering a share of additional and unexpected work. As line manager, he also needs to stand back and analyse business demand and staff performance. How work should be planned, designed and managed is a critical question, which should often be revisited.

Areas where the HR professional can assist both Prue and Marcus include:

- Facilitating an honest and realistic analysis of stakeholder interests and the needs of key clients. Starting and maintaining a dialogue with Ministers and their staff to understand their needs, expectations and priorities, while at the same time keeping them informed of the restraints imposed by the unit's resources and overall work programme.
- Re-evaluating work schedules, setting priorities, and redirecting their energy and resources towards the most important tasks (Neito 2006: 101).
- Recognising the limit to additional work: each person has a responsibility to themselves and their colleagues to recognise that it is not feasible to add more and more tasks to a job role without deleting or delegating some other elements of work to others.

3. Upward leadership

Prue should not expect too much of her manager. Managers often get criticised for not showing enough leadership (see Mintzberg 2000 and earlier works, and the President and Fellows of Harvard College 1998). But expectations are also unrealistic. Prue must be prepared to drive her own career and be her own champion. As team manager Marcus has been responsive to her and has many other concerns to manage. Prue needs to be self-aware and self-motivated and utilise resources available to her, including DIA's in-house HRM staff. The HR professional can help Prue become aware of the concept of upward leadership.

This is described by Useem as the delicate art of subordinates taking charge when they are not in charge (in Efron and Gandossy 2003:1). The approach is to offer strategic advice and suggestion to managers without appearing to seize power or question authority. To be successful it requires fortitude and responsiveness (Useem in Efron and Gandossy 2003:15). This capability is regarded as a good test of an organisation's health, ensuring staff are able to function without direct management for whatever reason. The Ministry where Marcus and Prue work has a supportive culture, so Prue could expect HR support to develop this capability.

4. Clarifying the way forward

It is inevitable that the pressures of work, exemplified in the case by the strains on the working relationship between Prue and Marcus, will be reflected elsewhere in the team – which collectively has contributed to the successful outputs for demanding clients.

The appointment of a new member is a good opportunity for the HR professional to discuss future changes and challenges, as well as.

- Clarifying team objectives, and how achievement is measured and acknowledged.
- How they see priorities, especially in managing work overload; whether the potential of individual staff members is being fully utilised.

Some useful resources might include:

Swanson, Richard A (1994) *Analysis for improving performance: tools for diagnosing organizations & documenting workplace expertise*: Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

Dyer, William, Dyer, Gibb and Dyer, Jeffrey H (2007) *Team building: proven strategies for improving team performance* (4th ed.) Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

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