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Union partnership as a facilitator to HRM: Improving implementation through oppositional engagement

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Abstract

This paper provides a nuanced insight into the workplace level interactions between a union and HRM systems within a union-management partnership arrangement. Soft outcomes of HRM systems typically suffer from compromised implementation by managers struggling to balance competing operational priorities, but we show how a union limits this poor implementation. Qualitative and documentary data were retrieved from a major UK retailer and a trade union to examine how union activity interacts with HRM delivery. Firstly, union communication systems enhanced or replaced company systems of employee voice. Secondly, union activity policed management implementation of HRM practices to limit their subjugation to short-term productivity increases, improving outcomes for employees and the HRM system for the company. These outcomes were achieved through oppositional engagement within the context of partnership, which points towards a persisting and productive pluralism within the cooperative rhetoric.

Keywords: Union partnership; HRM Implementation; Retail sector; Pluralism.

Introduction

This article provides new insights into the complexities of the relationship between union partnership arrangements and HRM systems through a detailed examination of a global retailer's UK operations. In the UK, union-management partnerships formed a key part of contemporary employment relations policy. Theoretically, both parties trade power for mutually beneficial cooperation; unions contribute to the business in exchange for influence in decision-making (Martinez-Lucio and Stuart, 2004). We show the workplace level social interactions associated with partnership and uncover how both oppositional engagement and cooperation drive a union effect on HRM implementation. We use the term 'oppositional' to explain challenging engagement within the context of a cooperative partnership. Firstly, union processes augment and complement specific practices around communication, where company systems fail. Secondly, in an oppositional manner, the union polices implementation of HR practices and mitigates variable implementation of HRM (Vermeeren, 2014). However, because the latter relies on oppositional engagement by the union, and consequent reactions from management, the reality of the relationship is at times more aligned to traditional industrial relations dynamics, and lies far from the partnership based rhetoric of cooperation and mutual gains.

It has been argued in this journal that union presence can act as a determinant of successful HRM (Vernon and Brewster, 2013; Kim and Bae, 2005), so this paper seeks to shed light on the processes behind that association. Commitment-based approaches to HRM typically suffer from variable or compromised implementation due to managerial differences, or competing priorities (Vermeeren, 2014; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). While multiple

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factors may account for variability in HRM implementation, we seek to contribute by exploring the effects of a union on HRM implementation by line managers, and the social processes and power exchanges involved. Building a bridge between HRM implementation and partnership debates, we seek to contribute theoretically to partnership literature by providing insights into the workings of such arrangements. Partnership literature tends to assume effective cooperative working, but we show how complex social processes based on oppositional potential between a union seeking returns to employees (Kinge, 2015; Dundon and Dobbins, 2016) and management pursuing performance returns through their HRM strategy (Danford et al., 2014) make up for lapses in HRM implementation. Therefore the key research questions we focus on are: firstly, how does a trade union, within the context of a partnership arrangement, affect HRM implementation? Secondly, and deriving from the above, how does oppositional union interaction affect HRM practices?

We argue that a union limits poor HRM implementation by providing alternative channels of communication and increasing accountability of managers by policing HRM practices. Our data show how a union's formalised communication systems augmented or replaced parallel company systems. We go on to explore the tensions resulting from union policing of HRM implementation and oppositional engagement with management where the boundaries of company HRM policy and employment law are breached. These empirics follow a review of literature on HRM implementation and union partnership, a discussion of our case based methodology, before a concluding discussion of theoretical and practical implications.

HRM implementation variability

Extensive literature on strategic HRM suggests potential to improve performance (Appelbaum, 2000), and although the workings of this are somewhat opaque, internal interaction with unions has been proposed, particularly in terms of positive employee outcomes (Guest, 2011; Lawler, 1986). A broad range of stakeholders may influence HRM implementation, including employees and various levels of management within an organisation, which begs exploration of interactions between these actors. Furthermore, the concept of 'successful implementation' may be viewed as the implemented practice equating the intended practice (Woodrow and Guest, 2014), shining the spotlight on managers, or quality of 'front line' delivery. Alternatively, Khilji and Wang (2006) focus on performance outcomes through employee satisfaction. Relevant to either definition is the notion of variability between implementation of HRM and its perception by employees (Nishii and Wright, 2008). Variability in implementation by managers has been explained by both leadership style (Vermeeren, 2014), and by quality of their communication (Den Hartog, et al., 2013), which in turn may mediate the performance relationship. Further pressures on line managers are likely to contribute to variability in HRM implementation. For example, competing concerns such as meeting short-term productivity targets discourage managers from making longer-term HRM investments (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003), while HRM outcomes are dependent on mode of delivery by line managers, suggesting that implementation rather than 'policy on paper' determines the success or otherwise of such systems (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Furthermore, a strained relationship is likely between professionals who determine HRM policy and line

managers responsible for implementing it, potentiating manipulation or dilution of HRM practices (McGovern et al.,1997; Truss, 2001). Finally, firm ownership structure and interactions between owners, managers and in some cases unions, may affect HRM implementation, where directors involved in management may incentivise different management behaviour than multiple uninformed owners. For example in the UK, shareholder models of ownership encourage short-term cost cutting (Cook et al., 2016) because incentives may work as a negative catalyst to HRM, making it difficult for managers to 'keep their side of the bargain, even if they want to' (Thompson, 2003: 366;).

There is a longstanding debate on the effect trade unions have on organisational performance. Informed by orthodox economic theory, critics point to the negative impact of trade unions in terms of driving up the labour costs and reducing profitability through redistribution of income to labour (Hirsch and Addison, 1986; Hanson and Mather, 1988). By contrast, Freeman and Medoff (1979) distinguish between 'two faces of unionism': 'the monopoly' face, where wages are raised above competitive levels and wage inequality results from a culture of conflict; and the 'collective voice' face, which recognises unions' wider value through enhancing communication and correcting power imbalances. Similarly, early HRM theory suggested benefits of trade union involvement (Lawler, 1986), and the beneficial impact of unions on the HRM and performance relationship has been cited, either as independent or mitigating variables (Bryson et al., 2005; Kim and Bae, 2005). Questions are raised over how this interaction works and what a union does in terms of complementing, reinforcing or mitigating aspects of the system (Horgan and Muhlau, 2006). While trust in management depends on communication systems (Holland et al.,

2012), employee voice and involvement suffers in the absence of active unions (Wood and Fenton-O'Creevy, 2005). Communication and employee voice are key HRM issues which union presence should augment (Gill, 2009), while Kessler and Purcell (1995) point towards a beneficial synergy of both collective union voice and individual voice. The potential for organisations to adopt and retain strategic soft HRM systems is increased with union presence and a positive employment relations climate (Gill and Meyer, 2013; Vernon and Brewster, 2013). The notion of a positive employment relations climate has been inextricably linked in recent years to debates around union-management partnership arrangements.

Union-management partnership arrangements

Union partnership literature advocates the concept of co-operation and reciprocity (Ackers and Payne, 1998; Kochan and Osterman, 1994). Mutual cooperation, rather than oppositional activity, between unions and management is often taken as given, with debate focusing on the relative benefits for either party. Critics express concern that unions may become complicit with management prerogative (Danford et al., 2014; Godard, 2004; Kelly, 2004), thus reducing their ability to return benefits to members and in the longer term harming ability to recruit new members, threatening their very existence (Taylor and Ramsay, 1998). Regardless of the distribution of gains both parties in a partnership face complex choices influenced by economic, regulatory or political contexts (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2004), which calls for deeper exploration of the social processes at play between unions, managers and employers in a partnership context.

Analyses of the contents of partnership agreements (Samuel and Bacon, 2010) and of their adoption and survival (Bacon and Samuel, 2009), aid understanding of their context and likely success, but omit consideration of interactions with organisational HRM systems. Union partnership agreements may be detrimental to unions (Taylor and Ramsay, 1998; Samuel, 2007); while the notion of mutually beneficial gains, central to the rhetoric of partnership, is refuted in research examining HRM and partnership (Danford et al., 2014), which instead found complicit unions and deteriorating job quality. Geary and Trif (2010) rejected the polarised debate between advocates and critics, suggesting a more complex 'constrained mutuality' thesis which warrants further workplace level exploration. Furthermore, Teague and Hann (2009) suggest that successful partnership would have to encompass pre-existing collective bargaining practices, and management would have to modify their right to manage; essentially establishing a partnership system with an element of oppositional activity and potential for non-cooperation. Cooperation alongside informal opposition and resistance within partnership indicated a fundamentally pluralist view of partnership (Dundon and Dobbins, 2016). It is these notions of oppositional engagement within the context of partnership that we aim to explore, in order to further understanding of the HRM interactions and outcomes within a partnership context.

Taken together, these themes suggest that HRM implementation may be compromised by line manager implementation, while union interaction might mitigate compromised implementation. Notwithstanding the debate between advocates and critics of union partnership, or that over the distribution of gains, there are elements of partnership activity warranting deeper exploration and analysis, particularly those concerning interaction with

HRM systems. Advocates suggest an augmentation of employee voice, while critics suggest complicity in management prerogative regarding HRM decisions; either way, there are avenues to explore in terms of how these interactions with HRM systems occur. Intensive workplace based studies point towards a complex picture involving micro-political social processes working through both cooperative and oppositional channels. We seek to explore these processes and interactions between management, union and other actors in order to further understanding of the social dynamics within partnership systems. To reiterate, as a result of the above theoretical analysis, our key research questions are:

1:      How does a trade union, within the context of a partnership arrangement, affect HRM implementation?

2:      How does oppositional union interaction affect HRM practices?

Methodology

Data were collected through an embedded case design (Yin, 2009) exploring implementation of HRM in a leading UK food retailer. The case organisation, Superco, was chosen because of its relationship with the Retail and Logistics Union (RLU) involving a long established partnership agreement, combined with its documented HRM strategy. The study aimed to explore interaction between the organisation's HRM systems and union activity associated with the partnership, so a design enabling interaction with various levels of employee and union representatives was necessary. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 52 participants across 6 store sites and 2 union offices in the UK (see Appendix 1). Superco outlets reflect one of two models: Super stores which employ

between 500 and 600 staff and offer everything from clothing ranges to currency exchange; and Mini stores, which employ between 12-20 staff, selling convenience foods and supplies. Three of each store were selected to capture variation in job design with store format. Participants selected for interview were shop floor general assistants (GAs); line managers; store and personnel managers, union representatives and organisers, through a purposive and subsequent snowball sampling strategy. Such a range of participants were chosen in order to gauge perception of HRM practice delivery from those who devise, implement and experience it, through to union personnel who might affect it. Open-ended questions were posed as topics for discussion concerning the implementation and experience of a range of relevant HRM practices used by the organisation: recruitment; appraisal; training; upwards and downwards communication; promotions; pay and reward; job design and variation. Participants were also asked for their perceptions on the role of the RLU concerning each HRM practice, and on the dynamics of employment relations. The initial interview guides were informed by theoretical understanding of strategic HRM, its implementation and partnership-based union activity relating to HRM, however care was taken to limit bringing theoretically pre-defined categories to the research field, in order to maximise exploratory thematic generation. Participants were encouraged to talk freely to explore the issues in question, while reflexive probing was employed to generate further data, which resulted in the continuous analytically inductive development of interview guides (see appendix 2 for an example). Documentary data on HRM policy and union activity were also obtained, including the social partnership agreement with the RLU.

Analysis

Interviews were recorded, with informed consent, transcribed and thematically analysed with assistance from NVivo. Management interviews (17) lasted between 30 and 90 minutes; union official and representative interviews (11) lasted between 40 and 90 minutes; GA interviews (24) lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, producing over 40 hours of data (see Appendix 1). Themes in the interview data about how HRM implementation was affected by union activity were analysed in the context of supporting material from HR policy documents and the partnership agreement. Transcripts were coded using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Initial thematic concepts were identified relevant to HRM practices and implementation, before being assembled into broader categories. Categories with the highest level of generality were explored with further participants in an analytically inductive fashion until theoretical saturation was reached. The resulting superordinate themes are detailed in Table 1, and are explored in the following empirical analysis, which include quotations to illustrate the data.

Insert Table 1 here

Findings

The partnership agreement between Superco and the RLU was signed in the late-1990s following the 'cooperative third way industrial relations' agenda, and was last updated in the mid-2000s. Following a relationship between Superco and the RLU stretching back to the 1950s, the agreement was signed under the premise of 'mutual gains', despite internal opposition from union officials concerned about the dynamics of 'partnership'. The RLU are expected to contribute to management's aims in exchange for resources to train representatives, recruit members and some role in management decisions. Broad

employee-related goals are listed in the agreement, similar to the intentions of the company's HRM strategy, including upwards and downwards communication channels for employee involvement and voice.

RLU activity mitigated compromised HRM implementation in two ways. Firstly, in a cooperative fashion, the union supplemented upwards and downwards communication with its own channels: vertically connecting the RLU national officer, via area organisers, with shop floor representatives; and horizontally connecting union actors with management through engagement via joint forums. Secondly, the RLU acted in a policing role, both towards company communication systems - intervening where they were deemed unsatisfactory – and over the implementation of other HR practices. The RLU policed recruitment, training and appraisal practices, where they were implemented poorly by managers, or subjugated to immediate operational imperatives. Taken together, our findings show how the union adopted an oppositional stance to management, within the context of 'partnership', to mitigate poorly implemented HRM. The following two sections discuss these findings, which resulted from interview and documentary analysis.

Union enhancement and policing of compromised communication

HRM systems became compromised due to line manager implementation (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007), however communication and voice aspects of HRM systems were augmented by the RLU. The union structures outlined below formed a system of communication separate from company communication systems. These channels,

connected vertically by union structures and horizontally by a joint forum system, ran parallel to company management hierarchies and served to complement the organisation's communication systems, in many cases proving more effective. So the union reinforced elements of HRM systems, filling the gaps where company HRM systems were insufficient.

Despite the existence of communication mechanisms within Superco's HR strategy, the coexistence of traditional channels provided by the union proved crucial. The RLU's communication channels, detailed in the partnership agreement, were underpinned by networks of union actors operating at three levels, which engaged with management via a joint forum at each level, as illustrated in figure 1 below. The lowest level forum was the store forum, or in the case of Mini stores, a forum for a cluster of stores within a region. A forum was held three times a year, attended by RLU representatives, the store manager, personnel manager and health and safety rep. Their purpose was chiefly cooperative; '*to make improvements on behalf of staff', 'improve ways of working', 'make the job simpler' and 'improve service given to customers'*, according to documentary data, corroborated by management participants. So, rather than just being a mechanism for the articulation of grievances, management benefitted from shop floor workers' ideas. Crucially, this joint mechanism was widely regarded by shop floor workers and union respondents as the only way employees could influence management decisions, suggesting the company's voice channels alone were inadequate, as illustrated by an RLU organiser and a personnel manager:

> There are things that go through the forum process you can see staff have had –
> they've (representatives) raised it at the forum, it's gone up, they've (management)
> felt it's a good idea, and they've changed a policy and cascaded it back down.

(RLU Area Organiser 2)

> It's great for us because you don't always know the crux of what's going on. We
> encourage staff to participate to involve them in the business. When it comes to a
> forum, there may be issues that we weren't aware of, so we can help them with
> solutions and it's a benefit all around.

(Personnel Manager 3)

Issues not solved at the store forum were referred to the regional forum, which through area organisers, formed a communication link feeding information to staff in stores through union representatives, illustrated in figure 1. The national forum comprised of regional representatives, personnel and operations directors and the RLU national officer, covering strategic HRM concerns such as retaining staff, work-life balance, and annual pay negotiations, as detailed in the partnership agreement. A representative on the national forum illustrated the purpose of the communication links:

> We can talk to someone on the board who's oblivious to what's happening, going
> round the M25 (motorway) in their own bubble, and forgetting what's going on in
> Hull or wherever.

(National RLU Rep 11, Mini Store)

Insert figure 1 about here

The union's network of representatives and organisers formed a system of upwards communication, which bettered systems in place as part of the company HRM system, because it could broadcast problems at individual stores across the organisation, while the forums were used to engage horizontally with management. By contrast, the organisation's parallel communication systems were centred on annual staff surveys and 'team talk' processes, which were regarded by employees as weak systems in comparison to the union's forum channels. For example, 'team talks' rarely happened because of disconnect resulting from employees on varied shift patterns not seeing their line manager, which rendered the process difficult to implement. The union network and forums became a key compensator for the HRM system by providing a working channel for employee participation, more effective than management's own channels, as recognised by GAs:

> I think it's good to know that they will listen to you. I think it highlights problems they can have in other stores at the higher level, and it helps with communication across the business.

(General Assistant 14, Super Store)

Issues addressed through the forum system varied widely, from concerns about personal storage lockers or availability of safety equipment at the local level, to major changes to key HRM processes at the national level. For example, development of the appraisal and review format for shop floor workers resulted from the ideas of shop floor employees. Suggestions were raised at the store forum and ended up being implemented at the national level. Union organisers observed that this system brought benefits for Superco, for example:

It proves for them as a company, because what they're getting is an awful lot of good ideas come forward from their staff, about a simple change in maybe an operation about the way they do something, that actually could save the business money or improve efficiency.

(RLU Area Organiser 1)

Similarly, managerial participants were typically positive about the value of the union's contribution, and potential for productive cooperative working:

For me I think we've got quite a healthy relationship with the union. We've got some really good reps who are positive and want to work with us to create the store that we've got.

(Personnel Manager 5)

While the union's networks enhanced and complemented organisational communication, they also played an important policing role over how management used their own communication systems to disseminate and to receive information, at times enforcing adherence to both company policy and employment law. Although frequently working against the will of management, this opposition ultimately reinforced the company's HRM system. Company downward communication included wall displays and business updates through team briefings, conveying business strategy and developments. However the formal structures in place as part of the partnership agreement meant that union personnel, either representatives or organisers depending on the level of action, were briefed on business changes at the same time as managers. There were instances where managers intended to communicate process changes by team briefing, but union officials reportedly

intervened where a team briefing was deemed insufficient. For example, the introduction of equipment posing new health and safety or fire hazard risks through team briefings was deemed inadequate. Briefings required a manager and an employee to be on the same shift, so where some GAs did not physically see their manager on their shift, they reported having 'not had a team briefing in years', when they were supposed to be every week. Therefore while management preferred team briefings for simplicity, the union intervened in a policing capacity to ensure changes were communicated satisfactorily, as reported by a rep in one of the large stores:

> Whenever our PM [Personnel Manager] gets anything down like changes, she informs the union. We as representatives get together and say, 'what do you think', because if we put it out there, there might be people coming to us and complaining to us, so we as representatives recommend how management should work around changes.

<div align="right">(RLU Rep 7)</div>

So, while Superco's downward communications were policed by the union to ensure appropriate delivery, it was the union's own channels that were often more effective than those of management, and which formed a key channel for dissemination of information. Interestingly, shop floor employees frequently learned about strategic developments from head office through the union communication networks before the managers themselves were informed through company networks.

> She (my personnel manager) gets a bit mad because being on the national forum I sometimes find out things before she does!

Such communication attributes of mechanisms of joint regulation were reminiscent of industrial relations pre-dating the language of partnership, mutual gains and HRM (Freeman and Medoff, 1979). However, management claimed to 'use' the union as a channel of communication and as a consulting partner to mediate implementation of strategic change, again supplementing and substituting the HRM workings of the organisation. The majority of management participants reported that using the union as a system of message delivery was a benefit because it carried trust in delivery:

> The union are the first port of call for anything that's happening, so they get that message from the horse's mouth and understand what the company are aiming to achieve, and then they really help with delivering that message.

(Personnel Manager 2)

While this case represented a clear benefit to the organisation, again in terms of lubricating their HRM activity, the union maintained some influence over downwards communications, because it was active in implementation, and therefore maintained some control over it.

Finally, the union again played a policing role in company upwards communication systems, limiting poor implementation. According to GAs and representatives across our sample, management at the West Mega store had attempted to force positive results to the annual employee satisfaction survey by supervising its completion in small groups. In response, union representatives requested involvement in administration of the survey. The

problem was communicated through the forum network; resulting in the RLU taking responsibility for survey administration nationally, rather than just at the store concerned, to proactively avoid the same problem at other stores. This policing potentially increased the accuracy of the organisation's staff survey, thus improving the reliability of this upwards communication strategy. This shows how, through challenging management within the partnership context, the union was able to mitigate problems arising through variable implementation of HRM practices by managers. In other cases described above, the union went further in effectively providing additional communication practices. Although perhaps controversial for trade unionists that a union is correcting management failings, these findings show how it worked within the partnership context.

The union was therefore instrumental in providing upwards communication that reinforced and bettered the systems put in place by management, and brought value by capitalising on innovative ideas from employees. These formal platforms for consultation and negotiation afforded the RLU some influence over company decisions affecting the workforce, and through which it was able to mitigate the vulnerability of HRM systems to poor implementation by line management. The union carried the trust of the workforce unlike the employee survey and team talk processes, which were trusted less because of potential for manipulation by line management.

Policing further HRM practices through oppositional engagement

In addition to augmenting communications, the RLU also policed the delivery of other HRM practices. This involved continuous oppositional engagement with managers, who were typically under pressure to achieve immediate operational targets. Of course for managers, meeting key performance indicator (KPI) targets was deemed essential, but when HRM policy or employment law were breached to meet KPIs, conflict with the RLU arose. This conflict was in spite of the fact that the union's oppositional activity actually ensured compliance with employment law and effective HRM delivery, as discussed above in relation to implementation of health and safety training required by the UK government's health and safety executive. Concern was evident amongst union reps, over management frequently breaching agreed processes, requiring continuous challenges from representatives and organisers to police HRM practice:

> So some managers, all they want to do is achieve a KPI, and will do anything to achieve their KPIs.

> (RLU National Rep 10)

At the lower level, tensions around HRM delivery typically resulted from line managers, who were poorly trained in HRM and employment relations practice. Continuous policing was required in these cases. However as we now discuss, the overarching picture showed gains to both Superco and its employees from the union's oppositional activity to mitigate poor HRM implementation. Adherence to HRM policy benefited Superco's HRM systems, while the upholding of commitment-based practices limited deterioration in working conditions for employees, as illustrated by a GA:

I would dread to think what would happen without the RLU there, we wouldn't

have a leg to stand on.

<div align="right">(General Assistant 5, Super Store)</div>

Turning to how individual HRM practices were policed by the RLU, the conduct of recruitment, appraisal and training systems provided clear examples. Regarding recruitment, since early 2010 Superco stopped issuing permanent contracts to new GA staff. Temporary contracts were offered for 3 months and, subject to adequate performance, renewed for a further 3 months. This practice became widespread across retail, and other low skill sectors, and was legally allowed to continue for up to 12 months, after which the contract had to be terminated or made permanent. The terms of the partnership agreement required personnel managers to inform RLU area organisers when temporary contracts were re-issued, so the union could ensure legal compliance. The relentless pursuit of flexibilisation, driven by imperatives to meet operational performance targets, was coupled with repeated lapses in management meeting their commitment to provide this information, bringing the need for policing. During data collection, a participating store failed to inform the RLU about re-issuing temporary contracts. Having been informed by a rep, the area organiser obtained details from the personnel manager, at which point the RLU pointed to legal requirements, resulting in the issuing of permanent contracts for all qualifying staff:

They should tell us when they re-issue, but it doesn't always happen. If we find

out that someone has been there for over 12 months, we go in and make them

permanent.

<div align="right">(RLU Area Organiser 3)</div>

In this case, union resources supplemented HRM activity, ensuring management compliance with employment law. Many RLU respondents used the phrase '*management trying it on*', regardless of agreed terms of information sharing with the union, and regardless of its legality. Union representatives were trained on employment law and company policy, which gave them tools to hold management to account over issues such as temporary contract extensions. Informal resolution of these breaches in agreement was most common, rather than engaging in formal grievances, but union resources were continuously required to informally police and resolve such issues. This policing of employment law and company policy improved employee outcomes of the HRM system; however, the policing of local management activities also improved legal compliance and effective HRM outcomes, while exposing line manager pragmatism as a potential obstacle to effective HRM implementation.

The union also policed the operation of the internal labour market in terms of vacancy advertising. Company HR policy required standard vacant posts to be advertised internally before external applicants were considered; a practice not always implemented according to rule. For example, tensions were evident among GAs in a participating Mini store because positions in local Superstores were not advertised internally first:

> We know there are jobs available in the superstores but they're not coming to us to be advertised. We've said they're not giving us a chance to move on (from a Mini Store), we're stuck in here.

> (GA 22, Mini Store)

The RLU responded in two ways, again supplementing basic HR practices around internal communication. The first response was proactive, utilising their network of representatives to communicate across the business to create awareness of vacancies. The second was reactive, with union organisers informing managers of their breach in HR policy. Union participants perceived such work as a continuous battle to hold management to account over implementing formal HRM practices. However, this policing of HRM implementation crucially mitigated potential negative impacts on employees, and reduced the vulnerability of HRM systems to poor implementation. Such poor implementation of HRM typically coincided with managers being tasked with HRM delivery whilst experiencing heavily monitored short-term productivity targets.

Training systems were policed in multiple ways by the RLU. Training was extensively prescribed in HR policy documents, but according to participants across the spectrum it was rarely delivered effectively or consistently, with much conducted 'on the job'. Neglect of training by line managers was most common in the case of bulk recruitment for new store openings or the recruitment of temporary staff for busy periods. Where employees faced disciplinary action for poor performance or misconduct, the union would examine training files, and where correct training had not been delivered, a strong defence against punitive action was enabled. Protecting workers against disciplinary action resulting from management neglect of training commitments showed the union limiting the negative effects of poor HRM for employees. Such occurrences were frequent, with common reports by GAs and line managers that training was sporadically implemented:

> There can be situations where they are desperate for staff and it's just get them in and get them on the job.

<div align="right">(Line manager 14)</div>

Training records detailed the training modules delivered and signed-off for an employee, and the date they were delivered, which also enabled union personnel to reactively police the quality of training delivery. According to union representatives and colleagues involved in training, the maximum number of modules that could be delivered in a day would be 2-3, when the store was quiet, allowing sufficient time for delivery. So where many more modules were recorded as passed on the same day, questions were raised about the quality of delivery, and even whether they were covered at all, in what resembled a box ticking exercise.

> You even get instances where the training record is all signed off on the same day. How can they do 20-30 modules on the same day?

<div align="right">(RLU Area Organiser 2)</div>

It was also acknowledged, by a line manager with training responsibilities, that the union was helpful in ensuring training was carried out correctly:

> The union offers a lot. It is comforting to know that they are there if you need them. It is something to fall back on, and they make sure everything is done properly, like the training and that.

<div align="right">(Line manager 9)</div>

While reactive policing activity occurred where employees faced disciplinary action for poor performance, it helped to create a climate where poor HRM implementation was less

likely to happen. It also provided crucial protection for lower level employees from suffering disciplinary consequences of poor training they may, or may not, have received. Through policing the quality of training delivery, the union reduced the vulnerability of these HRM systems to poor implementation, and the consequent unfair negative outcomes for employees. In addition to policing training implementation, the union also played a proactive role in policing irregularity between training and job allocation, intervening where employees were deployed to jobs they had not been adequately trained for, before they were set to work untrained. This activity increased the amount of training in stores, or at least improved management compliance with the correct amount of training, through union intervention at local level. While this activity was again an immediate hindrance to line managers needing to get employees on to jobs quickly, it improved adherence to company training policy.

This policing role of the union was also evident regarding gaps in implementation of company appraisal systems. In cases where employees faced disciplinary action due to poor performance, the union would examine records of previous appraisals. In the frequent scenario where appraisals had been missed, the union argued that disciplinary action was unfair due to insufficient signalling of poor performance. Union representation would have been available prior to the partnership arrangement, however the formal procedures around communication, disciplinary and appeals facilitated the ability of the union to access and examine appraisal documentation, increasing their capacity to defend employees and mitigate poor appraisal implementation. While this and other examples of policing commonly involved oppositional engagement between the union and management, the

resulting outcomes were an HRM system that was more complete, properly implemented and which worked better for employees, whilst delivering increased levels of training and stronger compliance with employment law and regulation.

At national level the union consulted head office on developments and changes regarding training practices through the national forum. While the union's impact on training was historically more concerned with health and safety training, changes to the forum system in 2003 introduced working parties targeting general training:

> We have working parties that look at training, maybe change some wording or improve inclusion of training, so that when it goes out, we feel that every aspect we need training on is covered.

(Line Manager 10)

The joint working parties stemmed from the national forum and developed training for new Mini store recruits. For example, under the terms of the agreement, while a new East Area store was under construction, new recruits were employed in nearby stores as additional staff in order to complete the required training and 'on the job' experience before their new store opened, which was a major development given that there were around 1400 of these stores in the UK with up to 50 opening each year. This union founded initiative was in response to the inconsistent training of new recruits, and was regarded by union and management respondents as the most robust new recruit training system in the industry. More than just further evidence of the union mitigating poor HRM implementation, in this

case its resources were used to actively enhance training strategy, but again through initially engaging in oppositional industrial relations within the context of 'partnership'.

Discussion and conclusion

These findings have added new insight to the interactions between a union and HRM systems within the context of a union-management partnership arrangement. To address our first research question concerning how a union in a partnership arrangement affects HRM implementation, we have shown how the formal commitments to communication and consultation identified by Samuel and Bacon (2010) play out in practice and how union and company communication systems interact. Horizontal engagement between the union and management, and a channel for employee voice additional to organisational channels is understood to affect trust (Holland et al., 2012), however we found that it augmented company voice systems. Communication systems working through the union's channels provided more robust employee voice, and worked as a supplementary HR mechanism; findings which go some way towards addressing Guest's (2011) call for greater study of the management of HRM implementation. Contributing to literature around unions facilitating HRM (Bryson et al., 2005), we develop understanding of the processes through which the interaction works. Variability in the implementation of HRM by line managers is well documented (Nishii and Wright, 2008; Vermeeren, 2014), but our findings show that a union can help to limit this variation. By doing this, we have found a more nuanced story showing ways in which unions are good for HRM. In uncovering the detail of the communication systems and policing of HRM practices, this work deepens prior understanding (Vernon and Brewster, 2013) of how a union can play an important role in

HRM systems, limiting the weaknesses in line manager implementation and subjugation to operational demands. Despite the inevitability of an employer-dominant partnership suggested by Kelly (2004), some benefits to employees were evident through the ability of the union to mitigate vulnerabilities of strategic HRM systems to poor and variable implementation (Cook et al., 2016; Khilji and Wang, 2006; Vermeeren, 2014). This is in slight contrast to studies finding that partnership has no value for employees (Danford et al., 2014), but with the caveat that this is a case of the union either 'doing HRM' for the company to some extent, which many would argue it should not have to do, or the union making sure managers 'do HRM' properly.

To address our second research question, we demonstrated how oppositional activity rather than mutual cooperation enabled effective policing of, and reduction of variation in, HRM. While Samuel (2007) noted the micro-politics of industrial relations between managers and union reps as key to understanding partnership, we have uncovered the dynamics of such relationships. Herein lies our key contribution to understanding the complexity of partnership dynamics suggested by Kinge (2014). Existing partnership debates overlook the efficacy of the arrangements and implicitly assume the effective functioning of partnership, for good or bad. We uncovered the reality of oppositional engagement and found it to be productive. If the partnership deal between Superco and the RLU had worked as it was supposed to, then the union would not have needed to adopt oppositional stances to local management activity. While there is an inevitable power imbalance in any partnership due to opposing objectives of the actors involved, this study did not seek to address the distribution of gains (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2004), nor enter into the

debate about whether partnerships are good or bad for unions (Kelly, 2004; Taylor and Ramsay 1998; Kochan and Osterman, 1994; Ackers and Payne, 1998). Rather, building on Dundon and Dobbins' (2016) notion of cooperation alongside resistance within partnership, we have shown how oppositional processes work in practice, whereby a union engages with managers, forcing them to manage more effectively. In this way, the policing role of the union, while causing initial tension between line managers and representatives, improves the effective running of HRM practices and mechanisms, and brings some increase in positive outcomes for employees.

This in-depth study was based on a case of a single retail organisation, so there are clear limitations in that we cannot statistically generalise, nor claim our findings are representative of unionised firms. Our data was limited to the UK operations of a multinational firm, and as such needs to be viewed in that context, yet the institutions and actors we explored exist in similar forms across market-based economies. Similarly, our data was limited to the retail sector, so future research might consider similar interactions in other industries. Despite the above limitations, we can make cautious analytical generalisations in terms of the social and systemic interactions we have uncovered. Thus these findings open further areas for exploration of unionised firms and the complexities of interaction with HRM delivery.

The findings herein bring significant implications for HRM practice and employment relations, both in the retail sector and beyond. Superco relied on the RLU to reinforce communication, and gained from the union taking an oppositional stance in order to

maintain managers' compliance in implementing their HRM strategy. This need was rooted in the operational imperatives loaded on managers, which saw short-term drives for efficiency and profit threaten the effective implementation of HRM (Thompson, 2003); imperatives which are common in lesser regulated liberal-market economies. It is therefore likely that organisations with similar HRM strategies in similar contexts will benefit from an independent voice of labour, with a platform to discipline HRM practice. Thus this contribution furthers understanding of how an independent voice of workers and potential for oppositional engagement at the workplace, even within a rhetoric of mutual cooperation, works as a key contributor to an HRM system.

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Figure 1: Communication Channels
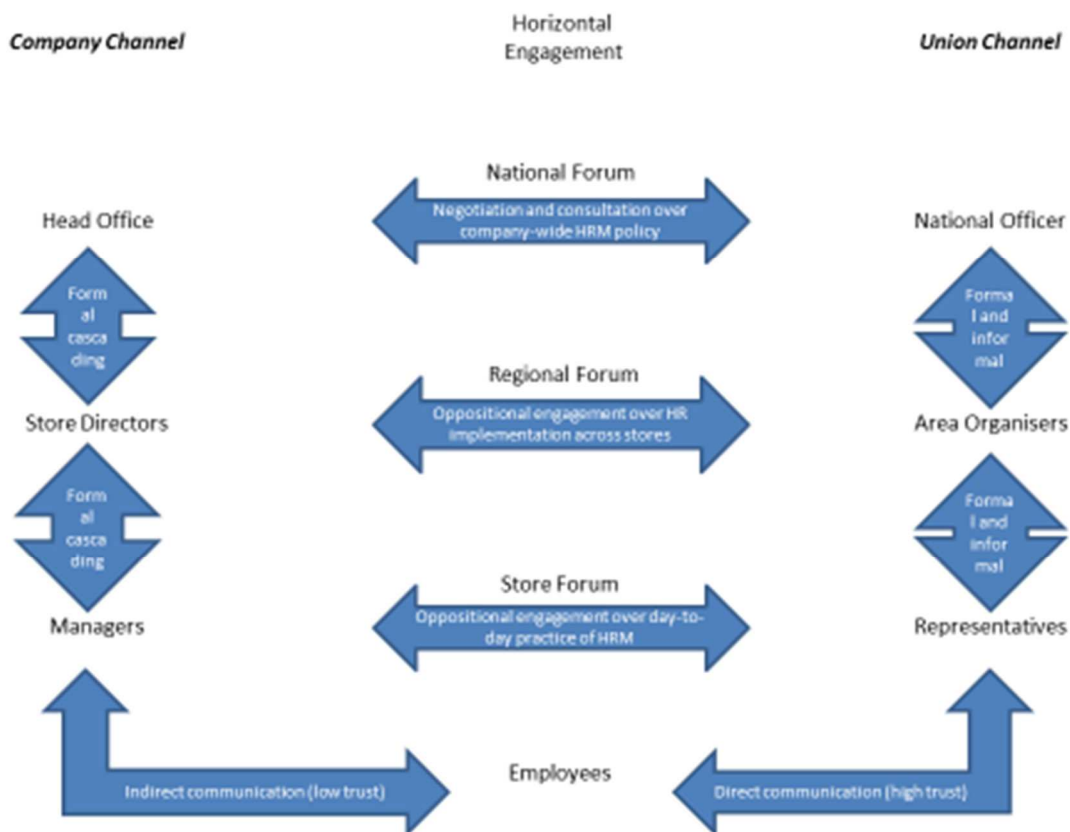
Appendix 1: List of participants

Group	No.	Position	Site	Gen.	Length (min)
Senior	1	Store Director	North Mega	M	64
Management	2	Personnel Manager	North Mega	F	90
	3	Personnel Manager	West Mega	F	85
	4	Personnel Manager	West Mega	F	48
	5	Personnel Manager	South Mega	F	53
	6	Personnel Manager	East Area	F	57
	7	Personnel Manager	River Area	F	59
	8	Personnel Manager	Coast Area	M	73
Line	9	Customer Service Manager	South Mega	M	63
Management	10	Duty Manager	Coast Speed	F	50
	11	Beers, Wines, Spirits Man.	West Mega	M	55
	12	Counters Manager	North Mega	M	58
	13	Bakery Manager	West Mega	M	72
	14	Check-Out Manager	West Mega	F	48
	15	Petrol Station Manager	South Mega	M	61
	16	Customer Service Manager	West Mega	F	39
	17	Stock Manager (Nights)	North Mega	F	30
General	1	Security	North Mega	M	23
Assistant	2	Staff Canteen	West Mega	F	41
	3	Admin Clerk	West Mega	F	36
	4	GA	West Mega	M	31
	5	GA	West Mega	F	45
	6	GA	West Mega	F	42
	7	GA	North Mega	F	22
	8	GA	North Mega	F	31
	9	GA	North Mega	M	34
	10	GA	South Mega	M	30
	11	GA	South Mega	M	28
	12	GA	South Mega	F	25
	13	GA	South Mega	F	37
	14	GA	South Mega	M	33
	15	GA	River Speed	F	20
	16	GA	River Speed	M	23
	17	GA	River Speed	F	43
	18	GA	East Speed	F	27
	19	GA	East Speed	F	28
	20	GA	East Speed	M	21
	21	GA	Coast Speed	F	29
	22	GA	Coast Speed	F	30
	23	GA	Coast Speed	F	26
	24	GA	Coast Speed	M	33
Union Full	1	Superco Head of Research	RLU Head Office	M	87
Time Officials	2	Area Organiser North	RLU North Office	F	73

	3	Area Organiser North East	RLU North Office	F	47
Union Reps	4	National Forum Rep	North Mega	M	61
	5	National Forum Rep	South Mega	F	44
	6	General Rep	West Mega	F	59
	7	General Rep	West Mega	M	57
	8	General Rep	South Mega	M	84
	9	Regional Rep	River Speed	F	66
	10	National Rep	Coast Speed	F	41
	11	National Rep	East Speed	M	58
Total / Average*	**52**	**17 Management** **24 General Assistant** **11 Union Official / Rep**		**31 F** **21 M**	**46.5***

Appendix 2: Interview Guides

(Note – This is an example of initial discussion guides. As semi-structured interviews, they were designed to initiate discussion, not to systematically compare responses. Questions were posed to different groups of participants in different ways and different orders, depending on the dynamic of the discussion. Guides were developed and re-iterated following the process of analytic induction. An example of this is included at the end of this example guide.)

Job title:

Responsibilities:

Report to:

What staff / how many staff do you manage?

Recruitment and selection:

What can you tell me about Superco's policy and practices on recruitment and selection?

What is the process you have to follow when recruiting staff?

What is your experience of being recruited for your role in Superco?

What, if any, are the behavioural characteristics that Superco looks for in potential recruits?

Has the union partnership had any impact on recruitment practices?

Performance appraisal:

What can you tell me about Superco's practices on staff appraisal?

How often are staff appraised?

Who conducts appraisal?

Are you involved in conducting staff appraisals?

What is covered during appraisal?

Do appraisals differ for different levels of staff / type of position?

What are your experiences of being appraised?

Has the union partnership had any impact on staff appraisal practices?

Training and staff development:

Can you brief me on Superco's policy and practices regarding training and development?

How many days training are staff given in a specified time?

How does this differ between different levels of staff / type of job?

Is any training provided on non-job-specific skills?

Are you responsible for organising training for staff working for you?

What are your experiences of receiving training?

Has the union partnership had any impact on training and staff development practices?

Incentive compensation:

Does Superco give performance related pay to employees?

Does Superco operate any profit sharing schemes?

In what ways does this differ for different levels of staff?

Do you feel well compensated / paid for the work you do?

Do you think staff working under you feel well compensated / paid?

Has the union partnership had any impact on compensation?

Job design:

For lower level / shop floor employees, are there any practices which encourage multi-skilling in job tasks?

If so, what are these practices, and how do they work?

Does Superco encourage internal promotion and progression?

What are your experiences of progressing to you current position?

Has the union partnership had any impact on job design at any level?

Information sharing:

To what extent does Superco share company objectives and business information?

If so, what information does Superco share with its employees?

What methods does Superco use to convey this information?

Do you feel involved in the running of Superco?

Do you think staff working under you feel involved in the running of Superco?

Has the union partnership had any impact on the level of information sharing with employees?

Participation:

To what extent does Superco's policy and practices encourage staff to participate in decision making?

How has this applied to you?

How has this applied to staff working under you, and if so, to what extent?

How do you use forums or any other methods to tap into opinions of staff regarding operational issues?

Has the partnership had any impact on employee participation?

Night shift workers:

Do you work night shifts?

Are you responsible for any night shift workers?

How do HRM practices differ from day to night shift workers?

Inter-site differences:

Do you / have you ever worked in different Superco siites?

How are things different, if at all?

How are HRM practices different, if at all?

History of the union partnership - 2003?

What does it cover?

What are the challenges?

How does Superco Management work with RLU.

Who are the key drivers of the partnership amongst the management?

About Superco

How is the general climate of industrial relations at Superco?

What have the issues of tension been?

Are there many grievances raised with RLU, and what are the most common types of grievance?

How does union membership vary between different Superco stores?

How do industrial relations differ between Superco stores?

HRM at Superco

What do you know about the style of HRM at Superco?

How has this changed during the course of the partnership?

How has the RLU partnership influenced HRM at Superco?

Probe on the employee forums?

Examples of development following analytic induction:

What qualitative shifts have occurred in terms of the relationship between unions and the HR function?

Have we seen a change in the language / currency used between unions and HR?

Has the union or management bought in to the rhetoric of HRM and performance, and what were the key moments / drivers which brought about any shift?

What are the perceptions about the role of unions and the function of HR?

What are the key HR levers that are being manipulated / changed, and what has this meant for union / management relations?

What are your perceptions about winners and losers of the process / does RLU buy into the win-win theory of HRM?

Are there any perceived benefits being returned to members from any overall improvements to Superco's performance and HR strategy?

Table 1: Superordinate Themes

Superordinate theme	Groups of participants contributing to theme	Contributed to findings section:
Horizontal (forum) consultation	All + Documentary	1
Horizontal (forum) negotiation	All + Documentary	1
Upwards communication augmentation	PM; LM; GA; AO; Rep + Documentary	1
Downwards communication augmentation	PM; LM; GA; AO; Rep + Documentary	1
Upwards communication policing	PM; LM; GA; AO; Rep	1
Downwards communication policing	SD; PM; LM; GA; AO; Rep	1
HRM practice trust perception	PM; GA; Rep	1 & 2
HRM practice efficiency	SD; LM; GA; Rep + Documentary	1 & 2
Conflict between HRM delivery and operations	LM; GA; AO; Rep	2
Local industrial tensions	SD; PM; LM; AO; Rep	2
Recruitment policing	LM; GA; AO; Rep	2
Appraisal policing;	LM; GA; AO; Rep	2
Training policing (proactive and reactive)	PM; LM; GA; AO; Rep	2
Employment law concerns	LM; GA; AO; Rep + Documentary	2

Key: SD = Store Director; PM = Personnel Manager; LM = Line Manager; GA = General Assistant; AO = Area Organiser; Rep = Union Representative