Strategic HRM and the gendered division of labour in the hotel industry
A case study

Rashmi Biswas and Catherine Cassell
Sheffield Business School, Sheffield, UK

Introduction
There exists a considerable body of literature about the sexual division of labour in Britain[1-3]. Though authors may at times differ as to the circumstances under which such a division has developed, countless studies and surveys demonstrate how work is divided, if not segregated, along gender lines. Segregation of women and men is both horizontal and vertical. Women are concentrated in service roles within organizations and in the lower levels. Women represent, for example, 80 per cent of hairdressers, cleaners, caterers and clerical workers yet only 0.8 per cent of surgeons, 12 per cent of solicitors, 16 per cent of secondary headteachers and at most 22 per cent of managers[4-7]. Additionally women typically have different patterns of work from men. They are more likely to take career breaks, to work part-time and on average are paid considerably less than men[8].

The last 20 years have seen an increased interest from academics and practitioners alike in analysing and understanding women’s participation in the labour force. In particular there has been an interest in the position of women in management[9-11] and those women in male-dominated professions[5]. The experiences of women employed in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations where women form the majority of the workforce has largely been a neglected area in terms of research[12], although there have been some significant studies considering the experiences of women working in factories[13], supermarkets[14], and a number of studies which have looked at the work of female office workers, in particular secretaries[15,16]. Given the fact that the majority of economically active women are concentrated in these areas it is interesting that the occupational lives of thousands of women are both under-investigated and under-reported.

Strategic human resource management
The 1980s saw the emergence of the concept of strategic HRM. Increased competition in both national and global arenas has forced managers to reconsider the management of all resources within the organization, paying specific attention to the effective management of the human resource, leading to declarations such

The authors would like to thank Dr Phil Johnson for his constructive feedback on an earlier version of this article.
as “people are our most valuable asset”. This reappraisal of the techniques used to manage employees within an organization has led to the development of various approaches towards human resource management: for example the instrumental approach which focuses on the so-called hard HR areas such as HR planning where human resources are viewed as “rationally” as any other economic factor; and the humanistic approach emphasizing the so-called softer aspects of HRM such as organizational culture and employee commitment[17].

The shift from traditional personnel management towards a more sophisticated human resource management has been reported extensively in recent years[18-22]. Guest[23] identifies the central levers for HRM as selection, training and rewards. It is widely accepted, however, that the main features of a human resource management network include additional features such as welfare, trade unions, assessment, employee involvement and equal opportunities[17]. A further and essential feature of the HR model, or ideology, is that it is intended to be strategic in nature. Sophisticated human resource management practice stipulates that in order to be effective the HR activities of an organization must be linked to an overall corporate strategy and that the business direction of the organization must be reflected and supported by the HRM techniques adopted. It is in this area that potential contradictions have emerged between a strategic HR approach and the potential practical implementation of an equal opportunities policy. Such contradictions, which as yet remain largely unaddressed, are the theme of this article.

Women’s work and equal opportunities

As Cockburn[24] points out, many organizations today state in their job advertisements that “we are an equal opportunities employer”. Yet in reality the practice behind such claims can be experienced by women employees as radically different[24,25]. Recent research suggests that such policies have little impact as catalysts for organizational change, largely because they still maintain a “marginal” presence within organizational life. Aitkenhead and Liff[26] report a survey of 20 representative companies from The Times Top 1,000 index that investigated how equal opportunities policies were perceived and understood by organizations. Their conclusions were, first, that the majority had a view that equal opportunities policies prevailed; second, equal opportunities were not conceived of in terms of organizational structures requiring adaptation to suit individual needs; third, distributional changes were regarded as unnecessary and, finally, the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of EO policies, where they existed, were only vaguely conceived. The authors concluded that their findings were profoundly depressing:

It seems that women and ethnic minority group members are currently required, and will be required for some time to come, to fit into organizational contexts where they are disadvantaged[26, p. 40].

In promoting equal opportunities for female staff, a number of arguments are used. Recently the “business case” for promoting women and other diverse groups has become more popular. Essentially the business case utilizes a
human resource management perspective. For an organization to be productive during times of recession and uncertainty, it is particularly important to manage and utilize effectively the diverse talents and skills of the whole workforce, including those who were traditionally “excluded” on the basis of their “difference”, be it sex, ethnicity, disability or whatever. The effective management of diversity, a notion in which the USA has had a longer history[27,28] creates a number of strong arguments for the utilization of women workers for the corporate good.

HRM strategies in the hotel industry
Before discussing human resource strategies in the hotel industry it is useful to offer an insight into the unique characteristics shared by service industries. Sasser et al.[29] describe four main characteristics which render the sector as fundamentally different from manufacturing industries, namely simultaneity; heterogeneity; intangibility; and perishability. Simultaneity refers to production and consumption of services; clearly these occur simultaneously. For example, a meal in a restaurant is consumed as part of the process of the whole event, immediately after it has been prepared and while the consumer and producer are in close proximity, unlike manufacturing where the producer may be thousands of miles from the consumer. Heterogeneity describes the way in which hotels and restaurants aim to reproduce the same quality of service each time but in actual fact this can vary substantially from establishment to establishment and from day to day because of the variables, e.g. staff attitude, mood, atmosphere, etc. Services are intangible; therefore the quality of the service is indefinable and will vary from consumer to consumer depending on their experiences, perceptions and expectations. Finally, perishability indicates that services have a definite lifespan and cannot be stored. For example, if a hotel has 100 bedrooms and on any given night sells only 90 rooms, those ten bedrooms that remain unsold are “lost sales” as they can never be sold again at a later date. Taking these four factors into consideration it becomes clear that the role of the employee in the service process is vital. The employee is the service provider; therefore the human resource strategy is clearly of great importance in terms of securing the operational success of the organization.

The labour market features of the hotel industry are also significant. Such features include a fairly large proportion of unskilled labour; the transferability of skills between broad ranges of hotel and catering establishments; high levels of labour turnover; absenteeism; and low levels of pay[30]. As Croney[31] points out, there has been only a limited amount of research carried out in personnel/human resource management in the hotel industry. Clearly any human resource management strategy must focus on the here and now because of the transient nature of the labour force and indeed the added unpredictability of business within the service sector.

Current approaches towards the management of human resources within the hotel industry are not particularly sophisticated, which may be rather alarming as
10 per cent of the working population are employed in this sector[32]. As Riley[30] identifies, the hotel industry relies on employing “types” of employees to “fit in” with the organization. He does not advocate this practice as being appropriate or desirable but instead recommends that more emphasis should be placed on actual analysis of job content. Price[32] goes on to say:

To date very little progress has been made towards the development of equal opportunities policies and programmes to tackle sex discrimination and occupational segregation within the industry[32, p. 46].

The hotel industry is a fertile environment in which to study issues surrounding women's experience of work. Traditionally the hotel industry belongs to that group of industries classically segregated by gender[33-35]. Typically large numbers of women are employed, particularly on the non-managerial side of the organization where the work is semi- or unskilled, low paid, and classically segregated by gender. Women occupy the low-status roles such as chambermaids, and men occupy the more prestigious roles such as managers and chefs. Indeed there appears to be an unspoken understanding within the industry that women are not really “cut out” for the more prestigious roles such as that of hotel manager[34,35]. The hotel industry is an area well researched and documented in many directions, e.g. pilferage and employment and HIV/AIDS[36,37]. Any real attention to gender, however, has focused on the female hotel manager “dilemma”[35], with a few notable exceptions[33,38,39]. To examine operational hotel activities from an organizational theory perspective and to locate this in the sphere of occupational gender segregation develops an area of study as yet relatively unexplored. Initial insights into the area can be provided by an examination of the literature on gender and organizational culture, and sexuality and organization. Owing to limited space these are only briefly mentioned here.

Gender and organizational cultures

Any attempt to explain or understand the complexity of women's position and experience within organizations must include an analysis of the role of organizational cultures. An examination of organizational cultures enables a focus on the hidden barriers that inhibit the achievement of women workers and impact on the gendered nature of organizational experience. Mills[40] argues that:

Sexual discrimination is not only evidenced in a number of OVERT organizational practices but, more significantly, is embedded in the cultural values that permeate both organizations and the concept of organization itself[40, p. 352].

A useful starting-point is to note how men and women experience organizational life differently. Assumptions about gender are crucial to how individuals experience and interpret organizational life. Davies stresses the importance of using “gender as a verb, rather than as a noun”, recognizing it as a “fundamental organising principle of social life, deeply embedded in both the design and functioning of organizations”[41, p. 2]. A's males dominate the positions of power
Gendered division of labour in hotel industry

Evidence suggests that, despite diverse interpretations of masculinity and femininity and the prevalence of a variety of "gender cultures"[42], organizational cultures are more likely to reflect the values and interests of men in positions of power[9,43]. The taken-for-granted assumptions about gender that are embedded deeply within established organizational discourses serve to create organizational environments where it is difficult for women to succeed.

The literature shows that the typical response from women in this situation is to adapt themselves to existing cultures by adopting the appropriate behaviours and roles[44,45]. Davidson and Cooper[10] outline the range of female stereotypical roles that women can occupy in organizational life. They identify mother earth roles where women are seen as mother figures; caretaker roles – often a role imposed on a woman rather than adopted by her; pet roles where women are seen as mascots or as decoration; seductress roles where women are viewed as sex objects; and finally deviant roles where women are referred to as man-haters, or militant feminists (because they refuse to accept any of the other roles offered). The continual strain of having to change yourself in a chameleon-like fashion – to "fit in" – can lead to anger, anxiety and a sense of powerlessness, feelings that typically underpin poor psychological health[46]. Our interest therefore stemming from this literature is about the role of organizational culture in constructing and reproducing the sex-typed nature of jobs and appropriate images of male and female behaviours.

The role of sexuality

A recent interest about the role of sexuality in organizational life has led to the emergence of a relatively new body of literature that examines the links between sexuality and organization. Displays of sexuality such as sexual innuendo in conversation, flirting and the existence of sexual relationships between individuals are regularly part of organizational life[47-49]. Research is beginning to emerge that demonstrates the persistence and privileging of men's sexuality in organizations. Males express their domination over females, and also over other males, through expressions of their sexuality[50]. Recent debate has also focused on different types of masculinity and male power in organizations[51]. The complex relationships between sexuality, gender and power are played out within organizations. In a clearly segregated yet enclosed work environment such as a hotel, one would expect definitions of sexuality and aspects of sexual behaviour to be key elements in the way that women experienced their work. Adkins[52] studied "sexual work" and women's employment in the service industry. She argues that in both the hotel and the theme park where her research was based, women were given strict instructions as to how they should look, a key requirement for all the jobs where women were clustered (e.g. waitresses, housekeepers, chambermaids) being that of physical attractiveness. Women were in fact expected to be sexually attractive to men as part of the employment contract. Clearly these expected manifestations of sexuality play a major part in women's experience of work.
The study
From the above literature review a number of research questions emerged. These were:

- What roles are women in hotel work expected to fit into?
- Do women adopt coping strategies to enable them to deal with these roles?
- What career aspirations do female hotel workers have?
- What views do hotel workers hold about gender segregation within their industry?

In order to address these questions, a case study methodology was chosen in order to gain an in-depth understanding of one particular hotel. A selection of qualitative research methods including interviewing and observation were the techniques adopted to elicit the data. The aim was to gain a proper “feel” and “understanding” of the culture of the organization. Semi-structured open response interviews were conducted to generate information around the issue of gender without explicitly inviting the interviewee to talk solely of gender. General questions were asked to all employees interviewed about their length of service, position in the organization, age, qualifications, career path to date and general information about the nature of their duties. The research took place over a period of three months. A total of 23 full-time members of staff were interviewed: 15 females and eight males. All the members of the management team were interviewed, of whom three were men and three were women. The longest interview lasted for over two hours; the shortest was 30 minutes; all interviewees were volunteers and had given up their own time for the research.

Our findings centre on one particular hotel. Northern Hotel is part of an international chain of hotels. It has 100 bedrooms and is located in the centre of a large city in the North of England. It currently employs 50 full-time staff. Owing to its location the hotel is supported mainly by business and conference trade. The organizational chart for the hotel is quite typical in terms of gender segregation with men and women occupying the traditional roles for their sex (see Figure 1). For example, at the time of research there was only one female porter and no males in the housekeeping department.

The hotel did not have a formal equal opportunities policy, either free-standing or incorporated into the human resource management strategy. The HRM strategy was focused on recruitment of a core of full-time employees supported...
by numerically flexible part-time and casual employees. This is of course fairly typical of the hotel industry. The HRM strategy therefore followed the corporate strategy in terms of providing the numbers of employees required to cope with fluctuations in the levels of business which of course vary considerably not only seasonally but weekly and even daily. One could perhaps argue that this is not “true” HRM strategy but merely a reactive approach in dealing with the varying demands of the industry.

Each of the interview transcripts was transcribed. The first stage of the analysis involved the researcher “immersing” herself in the data. An analysis guide or “codebook” was then designed consisting of a number of categories or themes relevant to the research questions and consequently the existing literature. Data from the transcripts were then assigned to the various categories within the codebook. The next stage of the process was to look for particular themes that emerged within those categories. Given the nature of the subject-matter and the generality of the research questions, a great deal of cross-referencing between categories was required in order to give a more holistic view of the research findings. Another set of data emerged from the researcher's field notes that had been kept throughout the case study. Data from these notes were also entered into the same categorization scheme in order to facilitate cross-checking of the findings that emerged from analysis of the data within the themes. This style of cross-checking and editing ties in with the notion of grounded theory where “constant comparison” of the data leads to a state where additional analysis no longer contributes any new information about a category or theme.

In outlining the findings, selected quotes from the interviewees are used to highlight particular points where appropriate.

**Research findings**

A number of themes emerged from the interview transcripts that are particularly pertinent to the focus of this article.

**Roles**

As was predicted, the gendered division of labour within the hotel was clearly evident: men occupied roles of higher status than women. Through a deeper analysis of work roles within the hotel it became clear that a series of behavioural roles existed for female workers to slot into. The most apparent of these were mothering roles and glamorous roles. Women felt that they were viewed either as maternal homemakers (i.e. chambermaids, breakfast waitresses) or as sex objects, glamorous and seductive for the benefit of the male customers (i.e. receptionists, and the sales and marketing staff). One of the housekeeping staff, for example, described their role in the following way:

> We like to look after our regular male business guests – you know, mother them a bit.

In human resource terms, women were selected for their ability to fit into the appropriate image. Older women were the preferred choice for breakfast
waitresses to promote the image of comfort and homeliness. Behind reception, however, the emphasis was on appearance:

It is very important to look good on reception because you are the first point of contact for the guests. It is actually very hard work but the managers are always happy to appoint a good-looking girl regardless of her ability.

In the sales and marketing department the requirements were similar:

Our job demands attractive and glamorous females because of the way the male customers respond to us. Clients flirt with us all the time but it is all part of it.

A nother set of behaviours adopted by the female members of staff was to appear like a little girl: both coy and helpless. At the hotel in question the “little girl” role appeared to be fairly common and was used deliberately by female subordinates to get their own way with male superiors when favours were needed. Older women at the hotel would use such behaviours in order to enlist the help of younger men in the department, e.g. in the carrying of heavy trays.

Clearly specified gender roles and prescriptions of appropriate behaviour created problems for those women in token positions within the organization. The one female porter, for example, found it difficult to be taken seriously and complained that she was always being given the easy jobs. In response to tokenism both she and the only female member of the kitchen staff stressed how they did not behave “like women” at work but instead sought to be recognized and treated as one of the boys:

If a woman does not become one of the boys then she just wouldn’t ever fit in. I find myself swearing quite a lot at work just like the men do.

It is interesting that the roles seen as appropriate for women in hotel work are similar to those in other areas of the literature on gender and work, for example the literature on female managers and female professionals[5,10].

Of particular importance to this article was the discovery that the women actively co-operated with the men in reinforcing the sex-stereotypes, which they identified as being appropriate for themselves. Examples of this abounded in all departments of the hotel. Chambermaids believed it was not “nice” for men to clean, firmly believing that housekeeping should be a female domain. Any disadvantages of taking on typically female roles such as experiencing personal comments from male clients were accepted without protest as an occupational hazard. Evidence also suggested that women co-operated with discriminatory practices at the time of recruitment in order to maintain the sexual division of labour within the hotel. In essence women were accepting the ways in which they were categorized at work, almost as part of their self-identity. Disturbing the balance, therefore, created both psychological and organizational discomfort.

Coping strategies

Much of the work performed by the female employees was extremely difficult and financially unrewarding. In order to survive in such conditions the women interviewed adopted various coping strategies. A typical device used by the
women was humour which is a common strategy in many occupational situations \[59\]. Although humour clearly is not unique to women, it was the female-dominated departments which reported the use of humour, especially in the housekeeping department, the only all-female area. Many of the women from housekeeping who talked of “having a good laugh” at work felt that men in the department would spoil their fun.

Interdepartmental rivalry also laid the basis for fighting back. Some departments, again dominated by females, gave themselves a sense of superiority against other women in the hotel. For example, receptionists were considered to think highly of themselves by many staff in other departments and indeed by themselves. They believed their department to be well respected throughout the hotel, yet in fact the housekeeping staff considered the receptionists to have decorative value only and proudly believed it was they, the chambermaids, who did the “real work”. Thus elevating one’s own status at the expense of another department becomes a coping strategy. In practice such strategies provide only temporary access to power, and succeed rather in reinforcing or colluding with women’s secondary role within the labour force \[45\].

Career aspirations
With the exception of the three members of the management team, the women interviewed had not received any formal careers guidance at school, and therefore had little idea about actual career choice. Few of the women could identify ever having held any real ambition, although most expressed the desire to become a secretary or air-stewardess at some point.

Nearly all the women were explicit about not wanting a career in management. The female kitchen porter, whose job involved cleaning enormous pans, ovens, fridges and the kitchen itself, protested that: “There is no way I would want to be management – it’s too hard”.

Many of the women interviewed were married and two were pregnant; often this was seen to exclude them from having any realistic career aspirations: “I used to be ambitious but I’m married now”. The overriding impression regarding career aspirations was that the women interviewed were actively coping with the limited options available to them. In the current economic climate, having any job was regarded as a bonus. When asked what else they would rather do, the reply was often “Well, what else is there?”

Gender perceptions
The women interviewed had very fixed views on what was suitable work for men and suitable work for women. There was initially a general acclamation that women could do whatever they wanted nowadays, but this was often followed up with a number of reservations about the inappropriateness of women in male sex-typed jobs. Women could not be managers because “They’d be a security risk at night”; could not be porters: “How would they lift heavy luggage?” In the same vein men could not be housekeepers or receptionists: “The female guests wouldn’t like it.”
Such perceptions often went unchallenged. Indeed when the general manager was asked about equal opportunities, he outlined a view shared with numerous others within the organization:

We don't have an equal opportunities policy here as such because when you do things for the minority it is often at the expense of the majority. It's okay to have the one man on reception but the only problem is that if there are too many men behind reception it may upset the male-dominated client base who like to see pretty young ladies on reception. It is good to have female sales and marketing managers because they charm the clients and generally see to the clients' needs.

Interestingly all the men interviewed stressed that they were not sexist themselves, although this question was never asked of them. On general issues men felt happier working with other men than with women; most of them accused women of being bitchy at work and said that women could not take criticism.

The role of the researcher
In this kind of in-depth qualitative work, it is important to consider the impact the researcher has on the research process. One of the authors conducted this research and it is interesting to consider how the participants responded to her as a relatively young woman. A general observation was that men treated her with contempt or caution, and that the women treated her as a soul mate. Clearly it would be interesting to speculate how the interviewees would have responded differently to a male interviewer. Beyond this one must consider the impact the researcher has on an organization during the research and after the event. By asking questions and conducting interviews, a researcher brings issues to the fore that may not otherwise have been the case. As previously acknowledged, the whole issue of gender is generally neglected; yet, when openly researching it as a topic over a period of three months in a relatively small organization, the issue inevitably becomes heightened in people’s minds. It is impossible to quantify the extent of the impact but the following scenario provides insight into the fact that some impact occurred. While waiting to interview a member of the restaurant staff the researcher was standing for a couple of minutes (unseen) just inside the entrance to the restaurant. A male restaurant supervisor was talking to a female junior restaurant supervisor; as she turned away from him he smacked her on the bottom with a menu. As he did so he looked up, saw the researcher and hastily said, "Oh dear, that was a bit sexist".

Implications of the findings
Evidence from the case study suggests that the men and women interviewed were in many ways reasonably content with the gendered notions surrounding their positions within the organization. It emerges that both groups have very fixed views as to what constitutes suitable employment for men and for women. One explanation for this is the role of socialization in creating specific career aspirations[60-63]. However a deeper level of analysis is required to understand why women do not actively engage in debate about those stereotypes, as they have done in other areas of organizational life.
What seems important here is the notion of risk. The culture of this hotel, and the hotel industry in particular, centres on trying to reproduce a sense of homeliness in what is essentially an economic transaction. Part of that culture therefore involves reproducing the ethos of the home and its division of labour as is exemplified by women making the beds and performing cleaning tasks. Women as traditional carers are automatically considered to be “qualified” for such roles. A hotel, however, also needs to be sold to its consuming public, in particular its male business travellers or conference delegates. Consequently it is assumed that some of the female employees must fulfil the glamour role, displaying their sexuality, e.g. receptionists, sales and marketing staff. The culture of the industry continually demands that women behave in what are stereotypically female roles, both as carers and as sales staff. Such roles are perceived as crucial for economic and organizational survival; for example, the selling of rooms is arguably the most profitable aspect of the business.

Within such an organizational culture where the gender expectations are very clear, the costs of not fitting in are great. As the female kitchen porter and chef described, the only way for them to survive is to be like one of the boys. A chambermaid refusing to mother clients or a receptionist refusing to flirt would be perceived as incompetent. By rebelling against the norms of gender roles not only would one feel uncomfortable, but also undoubtedly job prospects would be at risk. It appears therefore that, to be considered effective at work, efficiency and ability alone are insufficient for female employees. In addition women must adopt imposed organizational values which utilize their sexuality and make demands on their behaviour to be appropriately feminine. As Adkins argues, women have to work heterosexually. In her studies, women who refused to “exchange” sexual labour or refused to be sexually attractive were dismissed. Choosing to ignore such demands renders women incompetent if not inefficient at work. In the current economic climate challenging such a position is a risk many people cannot afford to take.

Locating such gendered requirements as criteria for employment within the arena of strategic human resource management clearly points to a contradiction. The evidence we have provided highlighting the issues surrounding the employment of women within the hotel industry indicates that, for this organization to achieve business success, it is perceived that the female staff must adopt certain behaviours in the course of their occupational life. It is accepted that women will look and behave in specific ways associated with their job and deemed as appropriate for their sex. Thus the human resource strategy, if it is to be linked to an overall corporate strategy, as both American and European academics suggest it should, may well ensure that both males and females are represented to the customers in a very “gendered” way in order to fulfil the requirements of the post and meet the expectations of the customers, e.g. chambermaids mothering male guests. In other words, the gendered nature of many of the occupations within the hotel industry is virtually a direct requirement in order to satisfy effective execution of the tasks associated with
that role. It appears that both men and women must adopt these gendered behaviours in order to be successful. This can be seen also from a male perspective in that the kitchen is considered to be a “macho” environment. However, what also seems to be clear is that the precise nature of this gendered behaviour has more serious implications for the females of the organization as they are almost required to sell their sexuality in order to perform their job successfully.

A contradiction clearly lies then in the pursuit of equal opportunities for the organization which may well directly conflict with the overriding business strategy. In simple terms the placing of women in certain departments of the hotel and encouraging specific gendered behaviours from them in the carrying out of those tasks is hardly compatible with implementing and sustaining an equal opportunities policy. As Legge points out, a human resource management strategy embraces the philosophy of “integration” or “fit” with the corporate strategy:

The problem is that while “fit” with the strategy would argue a contingent design of HRM policy, internal consistency – at least with the “soft” human resource values associated with “mutuality” – would argue an absolutist approach to the design of employment policy[19, p. 29].

Therefore, although at one level a human resource strategy may well attempt to encourage the practice of equality in employment, the needs of the organization as dictated by the business strategy may well render such good intentions impossible. If a human resource strategy is indeed there to “integrate” employees with the overall corporate strategy, it is of course the corporate strategy which must be examined in terms of its contribution to the equality of opportunity it presents for its employees.

Conclusion

In trying to understand the gendered nature of jobs we have argued that it is important to focus on the organizational cultures within which appropriate definitions of male and female behaviour are produced and reproduced. In an industry where the social relations so clearly mirror those of the home, stereotypical views of gender roles are all pervasive. It is within this context that we must consider the roles and attitudes of female workers in reproducing their own low status[13].

From a human resource management perspective the implications and consequences of sexual stereotyping are indeed serious. First, the concept of placing the right person in the right job will be severely flawed if the right person is viewed only in terms of their sex. In adopting such a limited set of recruitment and selection criteria the reliability of the decision must be in doubt. On the one hand, therefore, certain strategic HRM requisites may be achieved but possibly at the expense of others, which highlights the relevance of the second possible consequence.
As previously indicated, the linking of a human resource strategy with the overall business strategy of an organization may produce a conflict of interest between strategic HRM and the implementation of basic equal opportunities policies. For example, the placing of “attractive” young women at the reception desk has implications for the women in question. What happens when they are no longer considered to fit the appropriate stereotype? And what chances are there for those individuals who do not initially fit the appropriate stereotype? Clearly this is an important point which does not end with the subjective nature of physical attractiveness. What implications exist for an organization employing an ethnic minority or a person with a disability?

Such discriminatory and ad hoc practices suggest that the contribution to be made to an organization via the HR strategy will be greatly undermined, and furthermore that the HRM activities of the organization will be perceived to be lacking in any real credibility. This could potentially lead to the marginalization of human resource management and further render the elements of strategic HRM unrealistic and unworkable.

But such a paradox within HR strategy is surprising only if one accepts that the formation and implementation of strategy is a rational process, a proposition that has been challenged within the management literature[64,65]. An alternative or “systemic” approach[66] would argue that strategic goals and processes are more messy and less coherent, and reflect the social systems and context within which they are devised. Within this context, rather than being left with a paradox, we are left with the notion that the hotel in this case study is merely responding to the social construction of gender within the social system of which it is a part. Is it therefore unrealistic to consider the role that HRM could play in reducing such gender constructs? Or do HR practitioners and line managers have a responsibility to address these issues in a professional arena where equal opportunities for all should be a major concern?

Notes and references


46. Cassell, C.M. and Walsh, S., "Being a woman and being a professional: managing or challenging your gender at work", paper presented to the BPS Annual Occupational Psychology Conference, Cardiff, 6-8 January 1992.


