

## Revisiting Human Resource Roles in Malaysian Public Hospitals

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### ABSTRACT

*Line managers play a significant role in the development of their subordinates. In regard to this matter, it is essential for nursing line managers (NLMs) to play pertinent roles as human resource (HR) in Malaysian healthcare services due to the critical nursing shortage. Therefore, this study aims to identify the level of HR roles namely strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert, and employee champion among NLMs. Data for this study was collected using a self-administered questionnaire involving 225 NLMs at six public hospitals located in the Klang Valley. Later, descriptive analysis performed to analyse the data obtained from the questionnaire. The results of this study revealed that there is a high level of HR roles within NLMs. On a more important note, the findings revealed a significant empirical evidence on the importance of HR roles among NLMs. Therefore, future paper on HR roles of line managers needs to be carried out further in the future, especially through different perspectives.*

**Keywords:** Human Resource Roles, Nursing Line Managers, Malaysian Public Hospitals

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Skilled workers are widely known as the foundation of a high income and advance nation. As proof, all high-income countries such as Singapore and Finland tend to have higher skilled workforce. Hence, it is undeniable that skilled workers will be able to guarantee industrial efficiency in the effort of improving the productivity as well as industrial competitiveness in future. Therefore, bearing this in mind, it is very important for Malaysia to improve its workforce skill in order to be prepared for a rapidly changing world considering that it is also one of the main agendas for Malaysia over the past years. In regard to this matter, continuous effort has been formulated by the Malaysian government which include the Government Transformation Programme and Twelfth Malaysia Plan 2021-2025 whereby significant emphasis is given to the development of the highly skilled manpower. More importantly, these initiatives are intended to propel Malaysia towards becoming a country with high-income economy by strengthening the lifelong learning for skills enhancement.

Therefore, HR roles can play an important part in developing highly skilled manpower thus preparing Malaysia towards a country with a high-income economy. Typically, the functions of HR roles fall under responsibility of HR practitioners. Interestingly, there has been a growing literature claimed that the functions of HR roles had been devolve to line managers (LMs) (Kehoe & Han, 2020; Riemsdijk et al., 2020; Hassan, 2016; Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Choi et al., 2011; Ramachandra et al., 2011; Hunter & Renwick, 2009; Lemmergaard, 2009; Yusoff, Ramayah, & Ibrahim, 2010; Šiugždinienė, 2008; Bhatnagar & Sharma, 2005).

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According to Chase (2010), the responsibility of LMs is to directly manage employees or in other words refers to their direct subordinates. The purpose is to allow the LMs to report to a higher level of management regarding the performance and well-being of their managed employees who are directly under them. However, it is unfortunate that the devolvement of HR roles to LMs has made it a challenge for organisation (Terhalle, 2009). Most LMs fail to practice and provide adequate effort in executing their HR roles due to their belief that these roles are the sole responsibility of HR personnel (Saleh et al., 2015). In this case, most studies revealed that the problems are commonly associated with role overload, particularly when managers who have over-burdened work commitments found that they are assigned with additional HR responsibilities (Rizal et al., 2015).

Therefore, this issue might be a long-term strategic disadvantage especially when LMs are expected to take all the responsibilities without considering their over-burdened workload. On another note, a study by Walsh (2010) on the roles of LMs to devolved HR roles in public services revealed that it can lead to a distinct and unique form of workload tension among LMs. Contrastingly, the results of the study showed that the LMs are willing to be proactive by taking ownership of the HR roles.

In addition, Cania (2014) postulated that, the line-personal relationship has changed due to the emergence of strategic HR. McMullen and Stark (2008) suggested that LMs tend to spend more of their time on HR. Hence, it is crucial to note that the relationship between the HR roles and LMs has been subjected to number of tensions in previous years. Moreover, this situation has taken place in various sectors including the healthcare sector whereby NLMs are responsible in handling HR roles. In this case, it is important to note that most NLMs are already burdened with their clinical roles; hence, they become unprepared, unsupported, and overworked to take on the LMs roles (Townsend et al., 2013; Hewison et al., 2013; Hutchinson & Purcell, 2010).

Although the devolvement of HR roles to line managers frequently debated in recent years, the empirical results have been inconsistent (Harris and Harris, 2007). As a result, a proper understanding about the level of HR roles among line managers is desirable. Based on such concern, this paper employs to identify the level of HR roles within NLMs in Malaysia. Although numerous studies have been conducted to examine HR roles, this paper is significant as the level of HR roles within NLMs in Malaysian public hospitals, which, to the best of the authors knowledge, has not been explored in the previous literature.

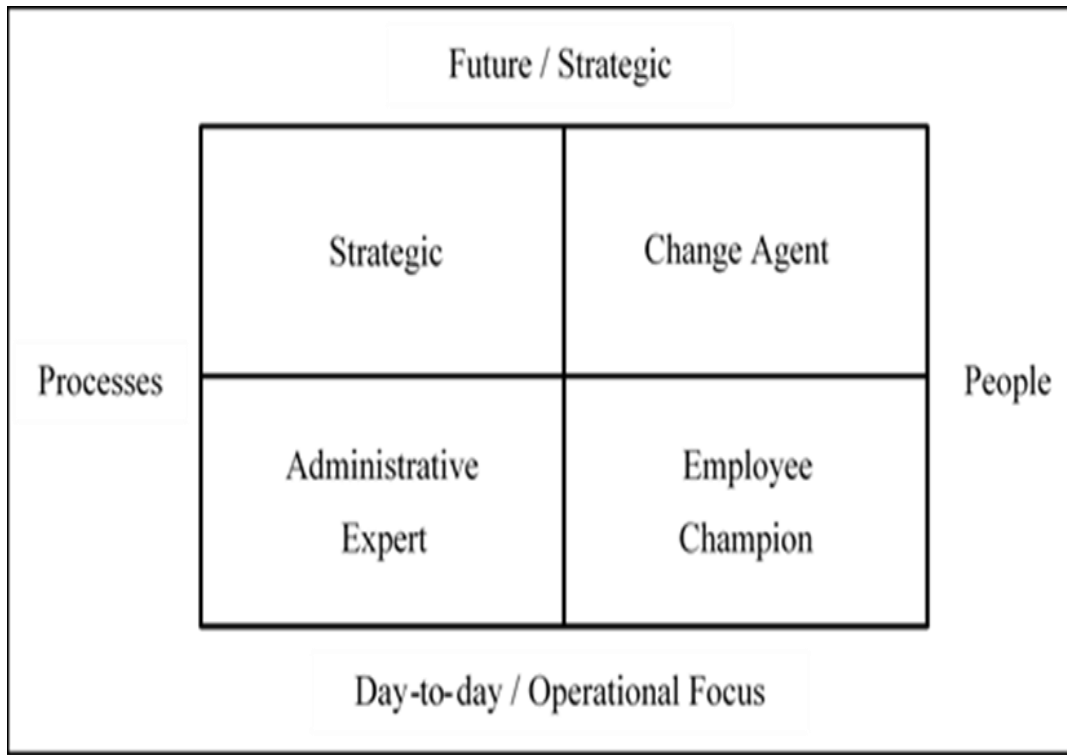
In addition to the significance of examining the devolvement of HR to line managers, this study, which focuses on identifying level of HR roles within NLMs, could contribute by giving more insights to relevant authorities to implement policies that can help Malaysia to develop highly skilled manpower especially in public healthcare sector.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this paper, the HR role refers to the function played by NLMs in providing the opportunity to learn the necessary skills with the purpose of fulfilling the current and future job demand. It is important to note that HR management is usually executed by the HR department, HR manager, and HR officer. Unfortunately, modern technologies and competitive workplace have caused the HR roles to devolve into line manager. Recently, it has been observed that HR roles have gained popularity since the devolvement of the HR roles to LMs. Moreover, a delegation of HR roles has shifted to these LMs.

Therefore, Ulrich (1997) proposed a framework that is comprised of four roles and stated that HR roles was a business partner in the organisation. Ulrich claimed that this model would add value to the organisation in coping with the competitive business environment (Lemmergaard,

2009). In particular, the framework consists of two axes and four key roles as shown in Figure 1. The four key roles of HR are a strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert, and employee champion. Meanwhile, the axes are described as 'from processes to people' and 'from operational to strategic focus'.



**Figure 1.** Multiple-Roles Model for Human Resource Management (Ulrich, 1997)

Change agent role aims to deal with change and transformation faced by the organisation (Sakka et al., 2022). A study by Walker et al. (2011) suggested that learning and behaviour change seem to be a social phenomenon that greatly influenced by strong leadership, interaction, and support. Moreover, the findings of this study indicated that the change agent role of HR practitioners is the most important contribution of HR practitioners towards organisational performance. In addition, the findings provided by Choi and Wan Ismail (2008) supported the notion that business-related competencies have a significant relationship with change agent role among the HR managers. Hence, it can be clearly seen in this study that business-related competency (strategic contribution and business knowledge) are significantly related to a strategic partner and change agent role. Apart from that, this study also showed that HR related competencies (personal credibility and HR delivery) are significantly related to administrative expert and employee champion role.

Another evidence that proved the importance of change agent in HR roles is a study carried out by Muchira and Kiambati (2015) which stated change agent as the core of HR roles that can enable an organisation to move forward progressively and gain competitive advantage. Moreover, this statement was also supported by Hassan (2016) who found that change agent is the most dominant HR roles among LMs in public universities around Johor. Unfortunately, another research by Choi et al. (2011) which investigated the relationship between the role of internal consultant and the role of the HR practitioners revealed that change agent has the lowest mean among other HR roles. Henderson (2011) stated that ward managers and shift team leaders are credited as being the gatekeepers in the development of a positive learning environment. Hence,

this indicates that LMs serve as a change agent that guides the employees to adapt to the new situation. Leadership behaviours include open communication as well as sharing knowledge and ideas can help to create a chain of positive influence from senior nursing leaders to novice nurses. Meanwhile, Wright (2008) argued that HR practitioners should focus more on their role as change agent, considering the need for organisations needs to change.

In summary, the literature above suggests that the level of HR roles in Malaysia has been inconclusive. Moreover, the HR roles commonly discussed in the literature are unable to examine the impact of HR roles devolvement to NLMs. Hence, there is a need to identify the level of HR roles within NLMs in Malaysian public healthcare sector which already known to face a never-ending nursing shortage.

### 3. METHODS

This study adopted a quantitative research. Additionally, the survey was conducted in the form of face-to-face surveys, through the questionnaires that required feedback to be analysed statistically (Chua, 2016). Hair et al. (2017) also explained that among the quantitative approaches, the most often used by researchers are research based on questionnaires. The unit of analysis involved in this study is an individual, which is a NLM.

The targeted population size of this study involved all NLMs (grade U32 and above) who is working in Malaysian public hospitals in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The NLM is a unit-based nursing leader who is responsible for overall day-to-day hospital operations in designated areas and in charge of monitoring and evaluating performances of nurses under them where they need to direct report with (Chase, 2010).

In this study, the NLM is a unit-based nursing leader who is accountable for the overall day-to-day hospital operations in designated areas. The nurses will give a direct report to their NLMs who responsible to evaluate their learning performances. NLMs include chief matrons, matrons, and ward sisters, who are working in Malaysian public hospitals. Most of them are in the grade range from U32 until U44. The selected population included all five Malaysian public hospitals in Selangor and one Malaysian public hospital in Kuala Lumpur. The data regarding the population of NLMs were collected using various sources such as telephone phone calls with matrons from each hospital, Malaysian public hospitals official website, and Malaysian public hospitals official reports. Hence, it is assumed that the list of NLMs provided at that time are the latest and reliable when the survey was conducted.

This paper adopted a probability sampling technique. By using this sampling technique, it enables each element of the population to have an equal chance of being selected. Proportionate stratified random sampling is seen as the best option since its availability of sampling frame (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) and argued to be expected to give more precise population mean estimation than simple random (Elsayir, 2014). The proportionate stratified random sampling begins by listing the population subjects using numbers randomly. Thus, the total targeted population for this study would be 847 as it is expressed as (N) from selected public hospitals. Then, the sample size (n) of 260 was selected according to Krejcie and Morgan table (1970). The author proceeds by listing a population of NLMs randomly in the form of numerical of 1 to 847 as the total population of NLMs. Then, followed by selected random number from the list of populations by using random number generator (RNG). Finally, 260 NLMs were invited to participate in this study.

Meanwhile, the development of research instrument included Section A for participants' demographic items and Section B for HR roles of NLMs' items. Section A has seven total numbers of items associated with participants' demographic which include age, position as NLMs, professional education, years of practice, years of practice as NLMs, and area of practice. In addition, HR Role-Assessment Survey (HRRAS) developed by Conner and Ulrich (1996) is

adapted in this study with the purpose of explaining the HR roles of NLMs in Section B. The dimensions included strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert and employee champion. All 40 items were adapted to explore different HR roles which may be played by NLMs. The instrument involved 40 questions regarding HR roles of NLMs' and divided into four dimensions namely Strategic Partner (10 items), Administrative Expert (10 items), Employee Champion (10 items), and Change Agent (10 items).

A five-point Likert scale was used to measure feedback from respondents. This paper adopted inter-item reliability because it measures the degree which different items measuring the same construct attain consistent results and Cronbach's Alpha test is the most frequently used estimator of internal consistency. According to Hair et al. (2017), Cronbach's Alpha above 0.70 is deemed acceptable and the closer Cronbach's Alpha is to 1.0, the higher the internal consistency reliability. Based on Table 1, all studied variables showed Cronbach's Alpha values more than 0.7 thus accepted as reliable as per suggested by Hair et al. (2017).

**Table 1.** Cronbach's Alpha Value

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha Values
HR Roles	0.947
Dimension 1: Strategic Partner	0.889
Dimension 2: Administrative Expert	0.861
Dimension 3: Employee Champion	0.887
Dimension 4: Change Agent	0.870

The mean scores were used to determine the level of HR roles (strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert, and employee champion role) among NLMs in Malaysian public hospitals. The mean score is the average obtained when the amount of data is divided by the number of data. In addition, the mean score is divided into three levels, namely low, medium, and high levels. The division of this min score is determined based on the following formula:

$$(\text{Maximum value} - \text{minimum value}) / 3 = (5-1) / 3 = 1.33$$

Based on the mean score calculation, the mean range is 1.33. Therefore, the indicator for mean range in this paper are low (value 1 to 2.33), medium (value 2.34 to 3.67), and high (value 3.68 to 5.01) as suggested by Sekaran dan Bougie (2016).

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main aim of this paper was to conduct a descriptive analysis by incorporating the general data obtained from the respondents which were then tested in order to yield the mean and standard deviation for the collected data. Meanwhile, dimension of HR roles was tested individually.

The demographic findings indicate that more than eighty percent of respondents are Malay and married. Majority of those surveyed are NLMs who aged between 37 years old to 46 years old (58.7%). Almost 70% of the respondents are those who have a Diploma in Nursing. Among 225 respondents, 156 of them are ward sisters. More than 60% of the respondents have between one to fifty employees to supervise. The group with working experience within 15 to 24 years dominates the number of respondents of the study. Most of the respondents practiced between one to five years as a NLM in the hospital meanwhile, medical care has the largest group of respondents in the study.

The current research aimed to explore the level of NLMs involvement in HR as well as its relation to strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert, and employee champion roles. The result highlighted that the respondents' rate for HR roles managed to reach the medium level even though it was not as high as expected, which further proved that NLMs do practice HR roles. A possible explanation for this might be due to certain factors such as workload and time-consuming.

Specifically, Table 2 showed detailed information on the mean score and standard deviation of HR roles dimension. Strategic partner has an average score of 4.225 (SD=0.448), meanwhile administrative expert has an average score of 4.123 (SD=0.594). Employee champion has an average score of 4.209 (SD=0.560), and lastly, change agent has an average score of 4.144 (SD=0.511). It is noted that the respondents' rate on HR roles hits high level since its overall mean is 4.175, which indicated that respondents "strongly agree" with this variable. Hence, this further indicates that most NLMs within public hospitals agreed that they also play their HR roles at their respective hospitals and it can be assumed that NLMs in these hospitals are practicing HR roles in their daily works. In other words, NLMs are aware of the importance of HR roles.

**Table 2.** Findings on All Dimensions

Dimensions	Mean Score	Standard Deviation (SD)
HR Roles	4.175	0.453
Latent Variable 1: Strategic Partner	4.225	0.448
Latent Variable 2: Administrative Expert	4.123	0.594
Latent Variable 3: Employee Champion	4.209	0.560
Latent Variable 4: Change Agent	4.144	0.511

As can be observed, the highest mean score of 4.225 recorded for strategic partner, followed by employee champion, change agent, and the lowest belongs to administrative expert with the mean score of 4.123. These results are in line with the explanation provided by Hunter and Saunders (2006) on strategic partner which states that LMs must provide the highest contribution to strategic partner compared to the other three roles.

Findings from the study revealed that NLMs in public hospitals executed strategic partner roles more than other roles. NLMs help the hospital to accomplish hospitals goals. Particularly in hospitals, matrons and sisters are active participant in the hospital planning and participate in the process of defining hospital strategies. In addition, NLMs develop processes and programs to link HR strategies to accomplish the hospital strategy. This can be proved as NLMs agreed that they spend time on strategic issues such as planning on nurses' yearly learning such as post-basic courses and distance learning courses.

Interestingly, the result shown low mean score of change agent and higher mean score for employee champion. As the justification, NLMs agreed that they have to help the hospital to adapt to changes; unfortunately, they did not give full authority to lead changes. On another note, employee champion role of a manager is supposed to be necessary to help employees to be aware and have a better understanding on their issues. Therefore, high mean score in employee champion showed that the NLMs are close to their nurses, listen and respond to their's voice and issues on a day-to-day basis.

Unfortunately, these findings are inconsistent with the data from previous studies conducted by (Hassan et al., 2015; Ramachandra et al., 2011; Choi et al., 2011). In this case, Hassan et al. (2015) indicated that change agent has the highest mean score, whereas Ramachandra et al. (2011) stated employee champion to have the highest score. Meanwhile, Choi et al. (2011) showed that the highest mean score belongs to the administrative expert by further arguing that HR roles are stronger on a day-to-day basis and tend to be more focused on operational.

Notably, NLMs find it difficult to do more on administrative expert role. In contrast from previous studies, administrative expert has the smallest scale of contribution in this study. The results also revealed that the NLMs in the present study work less in monitoring administrative processes. This can be true as NLMs felt overwhelmed and demotivated by over workload. Under those circumstances, NLMs cannot execute their administrative expert roles effectively and efficiently.

Meanwhile, Ulrich (2013) also claimed that the main aim of the HR function is to deliver the “best fit” that focuses more on customising HR strategies to organisational goals instead of adopting the “best practice”. Hence, this clearly indicates that NLMs in public take an active part in strategic decision-making process, thus further assisting the hospitals to realise its purpose and direction. Apart from that, the strategies are mostly executed which allows the hospitals to achieve its goals. Concerning to this matter, Rasmussen et al. (2010) argued that the devolution of HR roles to LMs is able to produce a more strategic people management.

Nevertheless, these roles were not usually taken into consideration compared to strategic partner and change agent that focused more on strategic planning. Moreover, their findings are also supported by other researchers such as Conner and Ulrich (1996) and Raub et al. (2006) which found that managers tend to spend less working time in executing their strategic partner role. A possible explanation of this inconsistency might be due to the HR roles investigated in different fields, which involved education, instruments business, and manufacturing.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The focus of this paper was to figure out the level of HR roles of nursing LMs in Malaysian public hospitals. The findings revealed that it was on the high level. Hence, this further confirms that NLMs of Malaysian public hospitals do practice HR roles in their daily activities, especially about strategic partner role. In other words, nursing LMs are fully aware of the importance of HR roles as well as their responsibility to execute the HR roles. The implications of this study through its empirical evidence will make a notable contribution to the public hospitals. Practically, it is hoped to encourage NLMs to be more involved in HR roles. Hence, this study will encourage LMs to execute their HR roles specifically as a strategic partner, administrative expert, change agent, and employees’ champion within Malaysian public healthcare sector.

Theoretically, strategic partners, administrative experts, employee champions, and change agents proved to be practice by NLMs. Furthermore, previous literature found that strategic partner, employee champion, change agent, and administrative expert significantly contribute to organisation (Hassan, 2016; Ramachandran, 2011). Hence, this finding seemed to support Ulrich's (1997) study which stated that line managers can improve their capability by acting as strategic partners, administrative experts, employee champions, and change agents. Therefore, this enables LMs to become more comprehensive and integrated for the purpose of managing the workforce effectively.

Practically, the current research managed to prove the importance of HR roles, especially in a nursing sector that is usually neglected. Furthermore, it is hoped to encourage NLMs to be more involved in HR roles. The current research found that the top management can always find the ways to increase the level of motivation by providing sufficient time and environment to execute their HR roles knowing that they are bounded by endless routine. Moreover, a phenomenon of the devolvement of HR roles to line manager showed the importance of HR roles. However, the limited attention given to investigate HR roles seems to suggest that little is known about their HR roles despite the fact that involvement of line managers is crucial. Hence, this study hopes to encourage line managers to execute their HR roles specifically as a strategic partner, administrative expert, change agent, and employees’ champion through the enhanced understanding of the HR roles of NLMs. Therefore, the results of this paper can also be used by public hospitals in Malaysia to further strengthen the HR roles of NLMs.

Unfortunately, this paper was limited to the NLMs in the Malaysian public sector, which minimises the generalisability for the results of this study on the private healthcare sector. Therefore, as recommendation for future investigations, it might be possible to extend the study by investigating private healthcare sectors such as KPJ, Pantai, and Penawar which will definitely allow the findings to be compared with a similar research model. Moreover, this would be interesting to observe the diverse HR roles among nurses between private and public hospitals. Apart from that, it is also recommended for future research to expand the population of the study to a wider group of sample size among other sectors such as education and manufacturing for the purpose of examining and confirming the final outcomes. As a conclusion, the findings of this paper revealed significant empirical evidence on the importance of HR roles within Malaysian public hospitals.

These evidences are important considering that Malaysia is moving forward to build diversified competency in future workforce. According to the latest 12th Malaysian Plan (2021-2025), Malaysia is committed to transform public service for productivity, produce talents that are more skilled, and right size the public service for better productivity and capabilities. Therefore, the government initiatives are presently well supported by the empirical evidence provided by the current research. Finally, it is hoped that more research can be carried out in the future on the influence of HR roles of NLMs in other perspective.

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