



Coming around

New management fads emerge all the time, but are most of them simply reincarnations of concepts from decades gone by? **Stephanie Sparrow** steps back in time to find out.

The HR community often suffers from *déjà vu*. Many of the concepts it has grasped with enthusiasm and later rejected tend to re-surface five or 10 years later. This 'retro-HR' trend makes some professionals cautious of the countless number of HR and management fads that spring up every year.

"I first came across human capital accounting in the late 1980s when I was studying with the Institute of Personnel and Development," says Jo Robbins, group HR director at engineering giant VT Group. "I then became aware of it in 2003 when Denise Kingsmill led the DTI's Accounting for People Taskforce and was searching for agreement on common measurements."

Robbins says the concept is now doing the rounds again. "Just recently, I have been approached by a new consultancy asking me if I want to treat HR more like finance," she

says. "I'm aware that some companies are doing a lot of good things with this, but it's still difficult to prove the value of your human resource. People are not machinery."

But does re-visiting ideas point to a lack of imagination or the urge to refine the seeds of a good idea?

Many, like Ali Gill, managing director of talent management consultancy Getfeedback, argue that these recurring themes in HR can be evolutionary.

"It's easy to think HR is cyclical or slightly repetitive. It has a tendency to be guru-driven, and gurus try different ways of bringing [the same] ideas to life. But how you get the best out of people doesn't change," says Gill.

But when dealing with unknown issues, such as the knowledge economy, carbon footprints and ethical concerns, the past can sometimes provide the answers, as we show over the next two pages.



again

NOW Talent management
THEN Workforce planning or
manpower planning

The concept of workforce planning is back in vogue, as Geoff Tame, senior lecturer at Newcastle Business School, points out.

Tame last noticed it in the 1980s, as common practice among public sector employers.

"The difference now is that we are focused on talent management," he says. "But if there was a recession, the planning might shift from talent to reducing numbers."

Some see talent management, and particularly the 'talent pipeline', as a re-labelling of manpower planning, but there is also a sense that it is now 'safe' to talk about plan-

ning again, which Tame and others attribute to the impact of diversity legislation.

"Traditionally, succession planning was done in a slightly behind-closed-doors kind of way, which had the danger of being discriminatory," adds Stephen Taylor, senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. "The tendency these days is to allow people to apply, or to identify a pool of successors."

It's easy to be cynical about the new fervour surrounding talent management, says Joe Bennett, HR director of disability charity Scope, "particularly with phrases such as the 'war for talent', because what it really means is recruiting people. But employers have to look for the best and it's still a seller's market."

The pressures of operating in a knowledge economy mean that this war mentality will continue.

Gill says: "Employers can no longer sift

A-level students and graduates because there are so many high grades. They will have to upskill and develop the people they've got."

NOW Wellbeing
THEN Welfare

In the obesity-ridden and stress-conscious noughties, employers are falling over themselves to champion wellbeing. The NHS is the latest high-profile employer to pilot such initiatives, aimed at encouraging good health and productivity.

But the concept of employee welfare is nothing new, as Tame points out. Many Victorian employers had a reputation for philanthropy and, when the forerunner to

the CIPD was born in 1913, it was as the Welfare Workers Association – reflecting concerns about the working conditions of women in factories.

“Research at that time showed that better welfare increased productivity,” says Tame. “We see such concerns today in our interest in health and work-life balance.”

Binna Kandola, occupational psychologist and co-founder and partner of business psychologist Pearn Kandola, predicts an increase in wellbeing programmes, particularly if the economy worsens. “Paying attention to psychological wellbeing helps employees to be resilient enough to cope when setbacks occur,” he says. “Otherwise people who are in work and stressed are unhealthier than those out of work.”

**NOW Acting local
THEN Being local**

Until the demise of manufacturing, it was common to live and work in the same town. This trend could return, according to Tame. “If fuel prices rise, green concerns increase, and people become more concerned about the costs of commuting or moving house for work, then even global companies might see more significance in local recruitment,” he says.

One organisation which is already making a success of local recruitment is the fast-growing Skipton Building Society, which has headquarters in rural North Yorkshire but is opening branches nationwide.

Head of people support and development Chris Worts has rejected the national ‘milkround’ in favour of finding graduates with local roots. “We have recruited graduates who have family in our area,” he says. “The benefit to them is that they know us and can live at home. This approach has meant that all the graduates from our last three annual intakes are still here.”

Worts is also seeing the benefits of local



of the Future Work Forum, Peter Thomson predicts this trend will continue to gather speed. “In the 1970s there was some remote ‘teleworking’ with a telephone line.

“Now with broadband you can do everything from home. HR needs to offer more flexible working and to train managers to manage it.”

**NOW Engagement
THEN Empowerment or motivation**

Thomson says remote working emphasises the need for employee engagement, and with that we’ll see a return to empowerment (a favourite HR buzzword of about 10 or 15 years ago), but with a twist.

“Managing someone to work remotely is not about micro-management,” he says. “Empowerment is coming round again, but not in the ‘power to the people’ or union sense, Now it’s to do with delegating.”

But Thomson warns that HR can never assume that this is where staff feel most comfortable.

“The counter pressure to empowered teleworking is that if people’s jobs are less secure, they are less likely to want to be out of sight, out of mind,” he says.

“If there is a genuine threat to their jobs then employees will want to do something where they are visible.”

BACK TO THE SEVENTIES?

■ Will the current economic gloom catapult HR back to the mindset of the 1970s, with its industrial relations turmoil?

Not at all, says Paul Sparrow, director of the Centre for Performance-Led HR at Lancaster University. He says organisations are better placed than in previous decades to deal with employee concerns on inflation and job security.

“Those organisations that have previously negotiated good levels of flexibility, such as in rewards, time and skills, will have some breathing space. Compared to the 1970s they are light years ahead,” he says.

CIPD chief economist John Philpott says the one thing to take from the past decade is dialogue.

“It’s not about being uber-business types,” he says. “It’s about saying let’s see what we can do about early deployment rather than job and pay cuts. Behaving badly will reduce the bond of trust that was rebuilt in the 1990s.”

targeted advertising particularly for parents wanting part-time work.

“We use posters in our branch windows and at playgroups and in community centres. They direct people to our website where they can find out about opportunities. This has worked particularly well in employment hotspots such as Oxford,” Worts says.

**NOW Remote working
THEN Teleworking**

Following on from the desire to be local is the renewed pressure on HR to manage remote working, often from home, and flexible working.

At Henley Management College, director

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