Chapter 3
The Changing Contexts of Employment Relations in Great Britain

What the Chapter Covers
The chapter explains the contextual factors that can influence the processes and outcomes of British employment relations, and the material is presented in the following order:

- An explanatory model is given, which describes three components that help understand the nature of change to employment relations (external environmental contexts; organisational level factors; and employment relations process and outcomes)
- The extent of change to these environmental factors is reviewed for Britain.
- The chapter then charts the impact of the above contextual changes on British employment relations at the level of the organisation.
- The chapter closes by noting some of main broader outcomes in British employment relations because of contextual factor changes.

There are two broad themes to this chapter. First, organisations are not sealed entities but are in fact subject to various forces in the world around them, and the explanatory model is but one simplified way to capture the complexity of some of these forces. Second, and as a result of the first theme, both organisations and employment relations actors respond to changing environmental forces in different ways. Therefore it is always extremely difficult to chart the impact of any one environmental factor on employment relations outcomes. It is for this reason that the themes covered in Chapter 3 are integrated in the next chapter, Integration 1, both considering changing environmental contexts and the associated employment relations outcomes in three alternative countries.
**New Concepts Introduced in Chapter**

**Beneficial constraints:** Policies, laws or rules that require firms to adopt employment practices that they would otherwise avoid, but which can result in beneficial outcomes for workers and the organisation.

**Economic context:** the state of the economy in which an organisation operates, for example whether it is buoyant or recessionary.

**Employees and their associations:** the characteristics of an employee/union collective group

**Employers and managers:** the roles and techniques used to manage and control employees.

**Employment Relations Climate:** a particular ethos or atmosphere in an organisation which reflects the quality of the employment relationship.

**European Social Policy:** employment regulations that provide rights for workers which are comparable across EU Member States (e.g. rights on working hours, employee voice, redundancy, health and safety, maternity and paternity leave, among others).

**Functional flexibility:** an organisation’s capability to vary what is done and how it is done

**Globalisation:** a series of interrelated economic developments, in which organisations seek to produce goods and services for a one-world market economy.

**Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS):** the use of a range of computer packages that store, manipulate and analyse information about employees and how they are managed.

**Juridification:** the extent to which legislation influences employment relations.

**Meritocracy:** a social and economic system in which advancement is based on ability or achievement

**Multinational Organisation:** one that is managed from the firm’s country of origin, in which goods and services are produced in overseas subsidiaries to cater for the demands of overseas markets.

**Never-members:** employees who have no experience of a unionised relationship

**Numeric flexibility:** an organisation’s capability to match the size of its workforce with its required output levels
Organisational culture: a system of shared beliefs and deep-seated values which prescribe the way people feel about an organisation and how they behave.

Political-legal context: the extent to which the government plays a role in employment relations, directly and/or indirectly.

Socio-ideological context: the behavioural norms and cultural values in a society which can influence the nature of the employment relationship

Technological context: the choices and social relations arising from the uses of technology

Third Way: a political ideology in which government charts a path between state regulation and free market forces.

Transnational Organisation: one that operates simultaneously in different international markets producing similar and different goods and services through independent subsidiaries.

Union Substitution: non-union policies that seek to remove the demand for union membership among workers. Typical strategies include non-union voice and attractive remuneration packages.

Union Suppression: aggressive and hostile managerial actions designed to resist possible union membership and recognition. Typical strategies include intimidation and discrimination.

Voluntarist system: Minimal State intervention in employment relations matters, with the parties left to determine for themselves the main terms and conditions of employment
Teaching Materials in Textbook

Pause for Reflection Exercises: Hints for Completing

Exercise on page 60: PEST analysis in relation to possible employment relations at McDonalds
If you or any of your class mates have experience of working for McDonalds, then use this knowledge to list what you think are the main influences under each of the PEST factors described in Fig 3.1. Think of this as a brainstorming exercise, rather than there are definitive right or wrong answers. But do provide a justification for what you identify and why

Exercise on page 70: Identifying some of the main technological changes that affect employment relations
For this exercise, think about the way technology has changed some of the jobs with which you are familiar, ranging from production to service type jobs. Remember, technology affects not only what tasks are performed, but also how they are carried out, and unions have something to say about new technologies.

Critical Discussion Questions: Hints for Completing

Critical Discussion Question on page 65: Is globalisation a myth?
This exercise requires you to debate the statement, either arguing in support or in opposition to the proposition, that globalisation is a myth. The purpose is to develop a critical argument. Think about what globalisation means in practice and what it means to different actors. Globalisation might be real, but is its impact even or homogeneous? Check out pp 65-66 if some of the criticisms of globalisation don’t immediately spring to mind.

Critical Discussion Question on page 74: Discussing labour flexibility
This exercise asks you to provide a structured argument that critiques labour flexibility. Note it explicitly asks for a critique. If you are struggling to think of how to criticise the model of the flexible firm or whether it is good or bad, then read pp 75-78, and remember, to whom the flexible practices are applied to matters.

Exhibits
There are two exhibits for this chapter, Exhibit 3.1, on p79, provides information about how board room directors’ high salaries have actually been maintained during times of severe economic recession, unlike the wages of workers or junior managers. Exhibit 3.2, on p82, gives examples of how some wider contextual changes (i.e. legal and economic) can have an impact on organisational climates and employment relations outcomes in Britain. The examples show the negative impact of outsourcing and labour flexibility on employee moral and remuneration, and these in turn affect the prevailing organisational climate. In the examples given, therefore, employees can experience a negative (violated) psychological contract.
Supplementary Case Study 2.1: Defence Plc

**Stage 1: Background and Context**

Defence Plc is a wholly owned subsidiary of Defence Industries, a large organisation that manufactures and designs military hardware and software. Defence Plc is the largest production and research and development facility within group. It was originally set-up during the Second World War and has expanded considerably since then, with over 90 per cent of its output supplied to the British armed forces.

In the past the company has been extremely profitable, although since the end of the Cold War and the associated changes in government policy towards the British armed services, the demand for Defence Plc products has declined to an all time low. In addition to this, market competition has intensified significantly during the 21st Century as new firms have entered the market, and many of the competitor firm now offered cheaper products to those manufactured by Defence Plc. The result is that in 2002, Defence Plc was in a loss making situation.

Because of this the board of the parent company, Defence Industries, met to review the future of Defence Plc, and reached two main conclusions. First, while the market was now much smaller, there was still a potentially profitable future for the firm. Indeed, there were exciting new products under development and since the firm had a first-class reputation and was a market leader in research and development, the decision was taken that it should be retained by the group and stay in its present industry. The second decision was that Defence Plc could not be allowed to remain in its current state. Somehow the firm had to be returned to profitability, which meant that there had to be a severe cutback in the scale of its operations, together with radical changes within the company. In 2002 the firm employed in excess of 2,500 people, and the board decided that a large proportion would have to go. In addition, armament products were becoming increasingly more sophisticated and so continued research and development in technological advances for new products would have to be stepped up. Thus the firm would need to become far more flexible in how it made and designed its products.

**Stage 2: Designing a new organisational structure for Defence Plc**

When the board of the parent company met they decided there had to be a radical break with the past. The changes envisaged for Defence Plc were so extensive, that employees had never encountered such drastic changes. For almost all of the company’s history people enjoyed relatively secure employment with good pay and terms and conditions. Employment relations were highly formal, and strong adversarial relations between management and unions prevailed. For example, most employees were happy to leave the trade union to represent their interests by negotiating with management on their behalf, and there was a range of personnel policies that had been jointly agreed between management and the trade unions in a long-established Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC). Work practices tended to follow scientific management principles: workers knew what was expected, and management communicated and agreed work targets on a regular
basis. Newer management ideas such as total quality, human resource management and flexibility were very much alien concepts at Defence Plc. For most people in the company, employment relations were something that was regarded as ‘distant and formal’, and both workers and management were content with such arrangements.

In attempting to turn the company around the board appointed a new top management team, and the chief executive was given the brief of producing a long-term corporate plan for Defence Plc. The top management team gave its immediate attention to this matter and quickly came to the conclusion that a ‘clean sweep’ exercise was needed. This meant that radical ‘people management’ choices had to be made in terms of how to respond to the company’s loss making situation. The main vehicle chosen was a Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) strategy, and to evaluate this option, a group of management consultants was hired to devise and structure the BPR programme to suit the concerns of Defence Plc.

After an initial study, the consultants recommended a plan to restructure the organisation, which involved two main steps. The first was that information technology would be the driving force, so that Computer Integrated Design and Manufacturing technologies (CIDM) would give tight coordination of design, engineering and production. The second step was to restructure work practices. This involved abandoning rigid scientific management methods in favour of a team-based system designed to promote greater functional flexibility. Hitherto Defence Plc had been structured into separate divisions. Manufacturing was the largest of these functions, and its activities were of two main types: assembly of components, which was done by semi-skilled workers, and the manufacture of precision products, which was undertaken by craft workers in a large number of different trades. There was also an engineering function, which was regarded as the elite of all Defence Plc occupations, and this comprised a small group of highly skilled technicians engaged in research and development of new products.

The new organisational structure recommended by the consultants was intended to produce a more flexible and modern approach that was considered to be ‘closer to the customer’. The activities of sales, production assembly and manufacturing for a particular group of products would be located in self-contained product cells, which would consist of semi-autonomous teams. Workers in each cell would be required to be multi-skilled and would no longer work in a specific department or for a single manager. It was realised that this would require a completely new factory layout, and so the decision was taken to build a new plant adjacent to the current facility. As an interim step, a number of alterations were made to the existing factory to allow new methods to be piloted there. The aim of this was to reduce the shock to workers of having to move to a new site and embrace new working practices in one step. In addition, a considerable amount of re-training for skilled workers was undertaken to enable them to become multi-skilled, so that different staff could interact and work more closely with one another. Because some armaments technologies are by their nature secretive, a small dedicated engineering team would be retained as a discrete unit for the purpose of research and development. However, closer cooperation and interaction between the dedicated R&D unit and the new product teams was envisaged in order to help communication flows and improve
quality.

The most dramatic of all the planned changes was the decision that all assembly work would be outsourced, which meant that semi-skilled operatives would no longer be required. Clearly the new plan required significant staffing cuts, not only among semi-skilled workers, but throughout the whole company and over a three-year period it was planned to reduce the total workforce from 2,500 to approximately 750.

Finally, the consultants provided top management with additional recommendations for informing and consulting with employees and unions, and this strategy advocated a radical departure from existing employment relations traditions within the company. The two recognized trade unions – Amicus for craft and skilled workers, and the GMB for semi-skilled assembly operatives – were to be consulted because they had a legal right to be. However, it was made clear that there was no room for negotiation over the basic principles of the strategy, and so the unions would be consulted about how best to achieve management’s plans. To this end the unions were invited to join a new ‘partnership forum’, which would include both union stewards and lay employees as a replacement for the existing JNC. Its primary purpose would be to develop closer and more cooperative employment relations, rather than relying on the distant and formalised processes of the past. In addition, new quality circles and employee focus groups would work alongside production managers to help smooth the introduction of the change plan.

Stage 3: The interim steps to a new structure

During the construction of the adjacent facility, several interim changes were implemented in accordance with the consultants plan. Within twelve months of the strategy being adopted by the board, around 800 of the planned 1,750 redundancies had occurred. A second interim change involved the training of some 500 employees to work in new multi-skilled teams in anticipation of the new facility coming on-stream.

However, the impact of the planned changes did not all go as smoothly as the board had anticipated. While the first wave of redundancies – some 800 employees – was achieved by voluntary means, the outcome caused further frustrations to management’s intended plan. In practical terms, more people who management did not want to leave departed, such as craft workers, while fewer of the assembly operatives that management wanted to leave did not opt for the voluntary severance. The diversion from compulsory to voluntary redundancy can be explained by the trade union response. The trade unions soon realised the severity of the planned changes, and so reluctantly accepted management’s invitation to join the new partnership forum. However, there was a quid pro quo for this. In return for their willingness to participate in the new partnership forum, the unions were able to negotiate additional financial improvements to the redundancy package, and persuaded management that voluntary job losses would be best during the interim stages. The unions argued that anything that was regarded as arbitrary and compulsory at this stage would destroy the possibility of cooperation and acceptance to change when the new production facility was operational. Therefore, given that a large number of craft workers essentially voted with their feet by signing-up for voluntary redundancy, the unions were also able to convince management of the need to offer some
of the semi-skilled assembly operatives the opportunity to be re-trained by commencing a late apprenticeship scheme to fill the gaps left by craft workers departing the organisation.

As might be expected with such radical change, many employees started to feel that their psychological contract had been violated. Indeed, the realisation of actual job losses had a negative impact on the broader employment relations climate at Defence Plc. Apart from the devastating effect on those made redundant, additional repercussions had an adverse impact on the survivors, many of whom felt disillusioned and highly insecure about their future. While top management roles remained unaltered, supervisors and middle managers were heavily affected. Approximately 70 per cent of them were either made redundant or demoted to work as team members, and this had a significant impact on how the new arrangements were viewed by the workforce.

Successful team working usually requires a highly committed workforce, but most employees were so dispirited, apprehensive and de-motivated that commitment was rare in anybody. Moreover, breaking down the functional barriers between craft and semi-skilled workers proved to be more problematic than was envisaged by either top management or the consultants, which caused some tensions in the new union-management partnership forum. Rather than partnership acting as a conduit for greater cooperation, union-management relations deteriorated as employees started to feel that management were riding rough-shot over their concerns and feelings of insecurity.

Furthermore, the number of separate job titles had been reduced from over 200 to about 30, and since people no longer worked to strict job specifications, they often found someone else performing tasks that had traditionally been theirs, and this provoked a high level of dissatisfaction. In response, senior managers felt that if they allowed complaints to be handled formally through grievances, the unions would be capable of escalating matters into a full scale dispute. Instead, senior managers sought to empower team leaders so they could resolve matters in an informal way. For this reason top management was perceived to have a somewhat cavalier attitude toward the obvious discontent in the workforce. So far as these managers were concerned, any de-motivation was not seen as a problem that needed to be solved. Instead, they voiced their belief that if changes were not made, there would be no firm and no jobs. Indeed, on one occasion, they voiced their views by saying ‘either the organisation increased its efficiency and survived, or it ceased to exist’. As one manager put it in even starker terms in a very public forum, ‘either you buy into the new way of doing things or you get out’.

**Stage 4: Implementing the BPR strategy at the new facility**

The full scale BPR plan began in earnest when the firm moved to the new site in July 2006, by which time the vast majority of labour shedding had taken place, including the compulsory redundancy of an additional 720 assembly operatives. In short, management had reduced the headcount by 1,520, and it was expected that a further 230 employees would be lost over the next few months.
Certain features of the new working methods were intensified from the outset and there was a determined effort by management to move to a ‘right first-time’ system of control in manufacturing. This involved building quality into products as they were manufactured in order to reduce costs associated with the re-working of finished production. The responsibility for achieving this was placed firmly on the shoulders of members of the newly trained manufacturing cells, who had now moved to a multi-skilled way of working. In addition, and as a way of breaking links with the previous functional structure, the team concept was persistently re-emphasised and managers repeatedly said that if teams worked properly, they had the skills in place to solve any problems themselves.

There was also an increased emphasis on raising the productivity level of cellular teams. The introduction of computerised manufacturing technologies alongside Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) had now been fully installed in the new facility. Such technologies not only set production targets; it was also used to monitor individual effort and assess employee performance. The data that management now possessed was subsequently used to put teams in competition with each other, by publishing monthly statistics for each one and putting these on public display in the organisation. As such, teams were under strong external pressures to achieve desired results, which in turn led to equally strong pressures from within teams never to be at the bottom of the performance league table. As one employee remarked, ‘they don't need foremen around here any more, because we are all encouraged to spy on each other, and apply the whip to get greater effort’. Since severe de-layering as well as downsizing had been part of the BPR plan (the number of layers in the hierarchy had reduced from seven to four) people were expected to work much harder. Usually this was for no more money, and in the case of those who had been demoted, sometimes for less. Team leaders were particularly affected in this way, and stress levels rose considerably. Skilled craft workers now complained that despite all their apprenticeship training, they were now subject to monotonous tasks that required virtually no thought at all.

Further tensions arose from the outsourcing of assembly line jobs. As part of the BPR plan, numeric flexibility was to be achieved first by large scale job losses, but also from putting assembly line work out to a sub-contractor. The way Defence Plc went about doing this was to sell off its production operations to a local firm. The eventual outcome was that many of the production employees who were made redundant were re-employed by the agency contractor, although on lower rates of pay. They also had to work longer shift patterns, and were denied union representation because the contractor firm was non-unionised. As might be expected, this led to a great deal of resentment as many of the same people were doing the same sort of job, but for less.

As is normal in BPR strategies, the whole initiative was driven from the top and virtually all of the changes were pushed through by top management edict, with little or no consultation with the trade unions prior to management deciding what was to be done. The role of the new partnership forum was considered to be shallow and no more than a
‘talking shop’ in comparison to the previous JNC and its method of collective bargaining. Although the unions constantly raised issues and concerns in the new partnership arena, management would only discuss issues of quality and how to increase productivity and team effectiveness. Senior managers were intolerant of delay and criticism, and often replied to employee concerns with statements such as ‘without increased efficiency, the firm will cease to exist, and then where will we be?’. As a result, de-motivation, disillusionment and fear about the future were widespread in the workforce and many employees became extremely cynical about management motives. This was exacerbated when it came to light that future changes included yet another and more technically advanced system of ‘computer controlled manufacture’, which many people viewed apprehensively based on recent change management and BPR experiences. They related new technology to both further job losses and intensified managerial control and surveillance. However, management seldom relaxed its pressure for change, and continued to demand commitment to the changes from the workforce. When tackled about the future, one manager said quite baldly, ‘it might possibly be the case that there is only a future for a few of us, but if we don’t become more efficient, there will be no future for any of us’. In the face of statements such as this, many employees began to feel that if they gave commitment and tried to make the future changes work, it would be tantamount to committing themselves to becoming unemployed.

Questions

1. Using the PEST framework from Chapter 3, briefly summaries the main contextual factors that triggered the changes at Defence Plc?
2. How will the planned changes described in Stage 2 impact on organisational level employment relations processes and outcomes?
3. Given the extent of managements’ plans and changes for Defence Plc, what might the results be for the employees’ psychological contract?
4. How do you think trade unions are likely to respond to the planned changes, and why?
5. Do you think the response adopted by senior managers during the interim steps was the correct one or not, and why?
6. Explain how management responses described during the interim steps impacted on the employees’ perceptions of their psychological contract?
7. Why do you think the trade unions were able to persuade management to seek voluntary redundancies in the first instance?
8. In the Defence Plc situation, how would you distinguish between technological factors as a way of enhancing organisational efficiency, and as a strategy of management control?
9. Do the concepts of the flexible firm and inter-organisational economic networks feature to any significant extent in the changes encountered at Defence Plc?
10. Did the trade unions gain anything by accepting management’s invitation to replace the Joint Negotiating Committee with a new partnership forum?
Useful Sources of Additional Material

Books and Journal Articles


nature of employment relations, and in particular the implications for voluntarist employment relations.


**Web-based Materials**

http://www.lowpay.gov.uk/
The Low Pay Commission (LPC) has an on-going remit to monitor the impact of the national minimum wage in Britain. This is the official web site of the LPC, providing economic data and research reports pertaining to wage levels and the minimum wage in particular.

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/
A UK government web site that provides statistical data on-line, covering a wide range of matters that are relevant to the contexts that influence employment relations: Britain's economy, productivity, inflation, employment and unemployment, inflation and population data (among many other areas), at national and local levels. The web site provides both detailed and summary reports.

Access to the Social Trends report, capturing a broad picture of contemporary British society along with changes in key social and economic areas.

http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/by/themes/employment%20matters
The Employment Relations Matters section of the government’s Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). The web site provides up to date information on legislation, and also includes a number of relevant commissioned research reports.

http://www.unions21.org.uk/
A web site that provides information and discussion forums on the future of trade unions, including how trade unions have been responding to contemporary challenges in their environment.

http://www.labourstart.org/
A web site that provides information and news items relating to trade union issues around the globe.

http://www.eurofound.ie/areas/industrialrelations/dictionary/index.htm
A comprehensive collection of the most commonly used terms in employment relations, with a particular focus on the EU. It also features relevant contextual information and links to EU legislation updates and case law.

Multiple Choice Questions

Try the following multiple choice questions to test your knowledge of the information in Chapter 3. You should note that each question has only one correct answer, and this is one of the four alternatives (a), (b), (c) or (d) listed below the question. When you have answered the questions, move to the grid at the end of this chapter to see the correct answers.

This activity contains 12 questions.

1. Which of the following is NOT one of the three organisational level factors depicted in the PEST framework?
   a. Employers and managers
   b. Employment relations climate
   c. Technological factors
   d. Employees and unions

2. Which of the following is embraced by the term ‘employees and their associations’?
   a. Management as agents of owners, and members of an employer association
   b. Economic, and political influences
   c. The collectivisation of employees, and whether these are moderate/militant
   d. Technology, and how it affects what tasks employees perform.

3. Which of the following defines the employment relations climate?
   a. A particular ethos or atmosphere that exists within an organisation at a given point in time
   b. The roles and practices used by managers to influence employee behaviour
   c. A set of values that determine a person’s psychological contract
   d. None of the above

4. Voluntarism describes which of the following in employment relations?
   a. Management are free to implement whatever employment relations policies they wish
   b. Employers can decide which trade union they will negotiate with.
   c. Minimal legal intervention in setting employment relations rules and agreements
   d. All of the above.
5. Why is it difficult to predict the impact of any one of the four environmental factors on employment relations processes and outcomes?
   a. Because a change in any one context can lead to changes in another factor.
   b. Because the responses of employees, unions and managers to environmental forces can be unpredictable.
   c. Because organisational level factors can act in tandem to influence employment relations processes and outcomes
   d. All of the above

6. What is meant by the term ‘Human Resource Information Systems’?
   a. Computer packages that make manufacturing processes more productive and efficient.
   b. Computer packages that store and manipulate information used to manage employment relations
   c. International trade union campaigns that use the internet to disseminate information to members and interested parties.

7. Which of the following context changes help explain the decline in the level of trade union membership in Britain?
   a. Economic factors have meant that many manufacturing jobs have been lost, with a decline in industries which previously had higher levels of union density.
   b. Changes to individual values have been offered as a partial explanation for the decline in union membership, as some employees have lost confidence in unions.
   c. Political and legal changes since the 1980s have meant some employers can effectively by-pass trade unions.
   d. All of the above.

8. Which of the following defines the term ‘union suppression’?
   a. Sophisticated HRM policies and practices that make trade unions seem irrelevant to employees in the workplace.
   b. The use of flexible labour practices means the triggers for unionisation are less significant.
   c. Various hostile and discriminatory tactics used by management to discourage possible unionisation.
   d. All of the above.
9. Are any of the following statements legitimate critiques of the concept of globalisation, as explained in the chapter?

a. Globalisation is not really an economic factor as it relates to the cultural values of a particular country only.

b. Globalisation is problematic because workers have a greater degree of bargaining power in international markets.

c. The term globalisation is not universal, and its impact can be very different across countries, organisations and workers.

d. None of the above.

10. According to the text in this chapter, the statistics that show a growth in female labour market participation can actually disguise other issues because:

a. Women tend to occupy the lion’s share of part-time and lower-paid jobs.

b. Many jobs are segmented and women have less access to skill training through their employment.

c. The privatisation of many parts of the public sector has led to a growth in smaller outsourced firms, many of which employ women, such as catering and cleaning services.

d. All of the above.

11. Functional flexibility refers to which of the following?

a. More varied and multi-skilled employees performing an increasing number of job tasks.

b. More work tasks done by a greater number of employees, but for less pay.

c. The use of temporary contract employees to perform certain tasks at short notice.

d. To increase output by increasing the number of hours worked by part-time employees.

12. Which of the following is a potential outcome of the fragmentation of employment relationships, as suggested by the inter-firm network model described in the chapter?

a. Managers are more likely to use electronic surveillance to monitor employee tasks.

b. Agency employees are located at different firms for lengthy periods of time, which blurs the boundaries between the employer and employee.

c. Organisational hierarchies are blurred because most firms are flatter and smaller.

d. Fewer people are now active in political and civic activities, thereby affecting the socio-ideological contexts that influence employment relationships.
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