

# Exploring human resource management approaches to improve performance in the new customs agency in China from a human resources business partner perspective

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## Abstract

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As a law enforcement department which is affiliated to the state council, China Customs is playing an important role in safeguarding international trade and national security. China Customs witnessed a fundamental change in 2018, with the merging of the China Entry-Exit Inspection and Quarantine Bureau (CIQ). The restructured government agency is facing a series of challenges in human resource management due to changes in human resource policies following the merger.

This research aims at proposing an innovative approach to human resource management in a selected customs branch, based on surveys and interviews. By distributing questionnaires to nearly two hundred customs officers, analysis was conducted through both qualitative and quantitative methods.

This article discusses the possibilities of adopting a human resources business partner (HRBP) model in this government agency. The results show that this model is overwhelmingly supported by customs officers at various levels and demonstrate the added value of the HRBP. However, the author realises that there is a long way to go for the implementation of HRBP in the customs service in China for a couple of reasons, and this article further proposes an action plan in implementing an HRBP model in the service.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Organisational change

After experiencing fast development for years, China's foreign trade has entered a 'new normal' featured by single digit growth. According to the Xinhua News Agency (2014), China is now the world's largest trading country in goods and is firmly implementing its 'opening-up policy';<sup>1</sup> however, significant changes have occurred, and China is facing increasing security threats associated with entry and exit activities. Since the reform and opening-up at the end of 1970s, China has carried out seven reforms of government agencies to reduce administrative costs and improve efficiency and effectiveness. The latest reform was initiated in 2018, aimed at streamlining the central government and providing better service to the public.

The central government requires the customs authority to improve customs supervision and service. Hundreds of import and export enterprises and all sectors of society have high expectations for the fair enforcement and efficient services of Customs. Consequently, promoting the healthy and stable growth of foreign trade has become a long-term task of Customs. From a global perspective, China is engaging in the implementation of the 'Belt and Road Initiative',<sup>2</sup> promoting pragmatic cooperation with relevant countries and regions in various fields for mutual benefit between the east and the west. A new customs authority was established in April 2018, which incorporated the responsibilities and staff of CIQ. The total number of employees of the organisation increased from about 60,000 to nearly 100,000.

### **1.2. Challenges faced by the new customs authority**

Operational adjustment is one of the main challenges faced by the new service, but it is by no means the only one. Human resource management is regarded as another major concern. Before the merger, Customs and CIQ had their own responsibilities and human resource management policies and practices, wore different uniforms and had totally different cultures.

Before the new government department was established in 2018, HR policies of the former customs agency needed great improvements. Many customs officers complained about the HRM practices which indeed, from the author's perspective, were far from reasonable. The challenges faced by the new service, as identified in the study, are summarised below.

#### **1.2.1. Transformation of HR department functions**

It is generally believed that HRM should contribute to the strategy of the whole organisation, as Armstrong (2005, pp. 196) points out, 'HR is not a menu of fads, fashions, and prejudices loosely connected to the business' but one 'creating opportunities for employees to share extensive information about their organisation and to participate in decision making'. However, HR departments at different levels of Customs are still playing traditional roles, and HR staff perform like a 'mechanical operation' with standards based on the requirements of higher levels in the hierarchy rather than performing with innovation, not to mention providing strategic support to the organisation.

#### **1.2.2. Person-post matching**

Person-post matching in the new organisation needs considerable improvement because previously customs officers had been allocated positions on a random basis in many cases. It is necessary to stress that Customs is a law enforcement department, and many posts require professional knowledge, such as inspection, inbound and outbound goods declaration, and tax collection, and the CIQ work has its own technical requirements as well. After the merger, new departments were established consisting of both customs and CIQ staff with different academic backgrounds and experience, and there was a lack of a talent assessment procedure before job allocation. As a result, many employees found that the jobs they were doing did not fit them, and negative consequences appeared later in the workplace.

#### **1.2.3. Human resource development**

Many customs officers are in jobs which fail to draw upon their educational background. As a result, staff who are not interested in their positions become less motivated as time goes by. Also, job rotation policies are not sufficiently flexible which may lead to a career 'glass ceiling' for a few customs employees, resulting in a higher turnover rate in recent years.

For many regional customs authorities, there are no systematic human resource development (HRD) plans for their employees following the merger. Dozens of training programs are organised in almost every branch of Customs; however, these programs mainly focus on customs operations. The problem

lies in the absence of longer term HRD plans for customs officers. In many cases, employees are 'required' to participate in this training because customs branches must fulfil tasks coming from headquarters.

It was not possible to cover all these challenges in this study. However, this article explores possible approaches with an aim to improve overall performance from a human resource management (HRM) perspective. The study was conducted in a selected customs branch and the possibility of initiating a pilot program in certain units is discussed.

### 1.3. Context

'AA' customs, a fictitious name used for confidentiality purposes, was chosen as the research branch in this article for several reasons. This customs branch is in AA city of Guangdong Province, a region in southeast China which has witnessed a high level of development during the past few decades. AA Customs is based in an important transportation hub and is one of the busiest branches in Guangdong, covering almost every customs operation in this area. Currently there are 20 sections in AA Customs, including the general office, the HR and Training department, the financial department, and other customs operation departments. The total number of customs officers is 239 (it was 164 before the merger), including eight HR employees (for details see Table 1).

AA Customs is now experiencing a dramatic change because nearly 50 per cent of new employees were incorporated in its organisation, and it is now shouldering more responsibilities than ever before.

*Table 1: Number of customs officers before and after the merger with the local CIQ authority*

Number of staff	Before the merger	After the merger
Total	164	239
Male officers	88	132
Female officers	76	107
Section chiefs & deputies	33	57

## 2. Human resources business partner

The roles and responsibilities of HR professionals have witnessed dramatic changes in the past few decades. Besides functioning traditionally, HR professionals nowadays are required to cooperate with business units to solve human resource challenges and make strategic proposals. HRBP has become one of the main focuses of both academic research and HR practice.

### 2.1. Meanings and roles

HRBP literally defines the role of HR professionals as partners in business sectors, and dozens of research studies concentrate on the roles that HR professionals should play in the workplace (Tyson, 1985; Dyer & Holder, 1988; Ulrich & Lake, 1990; Briscoe & Schuler, 2004; Francis & Keegan, 2006; Torrington et al., 2014).

The term ‘business partner’ is evolved from the concept of ‘business manager’ in the study of Tyson (1985), who advocated that HR people should be able to identify business opportunities, see a broader view and know how to perform their roles in achieving organisational goals as ‘business managers’. Another important concept to emerge after that of business partner is ‘strategic partner’, coming from the study of Dyer and Holder (1988, pp. 31–32) who pointed out that an HR professional should be a ‘strategic partner’ in the organisation, and emphasised the strategic influence that HR practitioners at different levels should exert.

Ulrich (1998) continued the study on HR professionals and advocated that more roles should be taken by HR staff with more active involvement in the decision-making process within an organisation, as illustrated in Figure 1.

*Figure 1: Role of HR*

<b>Management of process</b>	<b>Strategic</b>		<b>Management of process</b>
	Change agent	Business partner	
	Administrative expert	Employee champion	
	Tactical		

*Source:* Ulrich (1998)

The roles envisaged by Ulrich are those of a:

- **Business partner:** HR should collaborate with line managers and top management level staff and be equipped with enough knowledge of how the business operates.
- **Administrative expert:** optimising the administrative operation and playing an important role in increasing the overall performance through appropriate HR approaches.
- **Employee champion:** motivating the employees to be more committed to the organisation. HR professionals are supposed to speak for the staff in fighting for rights and providing career opportunities and guidance.
- **Change agent:** assisting the organisation to take initiatives in reforming and addressing challenges and being capable of identifying its strengths while avoiding disadvantages when faced by pressures from external change.

Cascio and Aguinis (2004, p. 51) stressed the importance of HRBP in strategic sessions of an organisation, stating that HR professionals should become full partners with top level staff who are responsible for strategies in ‘anticipating future staffing requirements and formulating action plans to ensure that enough qualified individuals are available’. Armstrong (2005, p. 196) further gives his own views on what a HRBP should perform, pointing out that ‘HR is not a menu of fads, fashions, and prejudices loosely connected to the business’ but one ‘creating opportunities for employees to share extensive information about their organisation and to participate in decision making.’ Furthermore, Torrington et al. (2014) pointed out that in some organisations a HRBP plays a more strategic role, being able to give valuable suggestions to top managers and being actively involved in the organisational business.

The concept of HRBP connects the HR roles and responsibilities to the organisational business and emphasises a more proactive involvement in the strategy of the organisation, as Stredwick (2005, p.14) states: ‘It is interpreted in different ways but the central precept of the close relationships with business units, helping to solve practical problems and delivering real value to the organisation’.

## 2.2 Human resource business partner practice in organisations

In analysing the advantage of the HRBP approach and getting a deeper insight of how it works, it is worthy studying the practice in organisations of various industries within different contexts.

Střítěský and Quigley (2014) conducted research on the HRBP model from the perspective of Czech organisations. They reviewed a few human resource theories and made their reflections on an HRBP model put forward by Ulrich (1998), as described earlier in Figure 1. The scholars adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods in carrying out the research and nearly one hundred Czech companies were involved, focusing on HR roles and HR structures in the organisations as well as HR services provided. Specifically, they investigated companies which transformed HR organisational structures from traditional ones to HRBP models. Based on the research and a case study in the Czech context, they concluded that organisations that transformed from traditional HR structures to HRBP models are more dynamic and actively involved in decision making. HR departments with HRBP are providing better service with high efficiency and stronger support to line managers in the targeted companies.

The HRBP practice in the Chinese context has important reference value for this study, and Huawei, a Chinese Fortune 500 company has made great progress in its HRBP practice.<sup>3</sup>

In 2006, Huawei firstly adopted a HRBP model in its R&D department. The HRBP personnel are required to work in the front line, the purpose being to get a clear picture of the business needs and provide appropriate solutions to better support the business. The HRBP staff are drawn from two sources, administrative employees and those from the business units. Before adopting an HRBP, the HR department was regarded as isolated from the business and not able to solve problems from a business perspective. One HRBP is serving around 150–200 employees, and the HRBP is working with the business department staff. There are three core competency requirements for being an HRBP in the company: R&D professional ability, management ability and HR professional capability.

In reviewing Huawei's HRBP it is easy to summarise a few of its roles, which include business partner, tailored HR policy planner and executor, change agent and employee relationship manager. The HRBP in Huawei is engaging in identifying the business 'pain point' because simply applying HR knowledge itself has no value.

In summary, HR business partners are not just a title. An HRBP should be a systematic project with a top-level design and given sufficient support from different levels in the organisation. It is worth mentioning that qualified HR business partners with clear job expectations are key to achieving the organisation's strategic goals.

## 3. Methodology

This study aimed to understand the current HR policies applied in the selected customs branch through both survey and interviews. Data analysis was conducted based on the feedback from questionnaires that were distributed to the customs employees, covering the previous customs officers and the CIQ personnel at different levels. A structured question list was designed, covering several issues focusing on current human resource management and development challenges, and the survey was conducted in an anonymous manner.

Since the study was designed to propose renewed HR approaches to improve the overall performance in AA Customs based on the understanding of the current HR policies and practices, an inducted approach was adopted in this study which is necessary in a situation not previously researched. It is essential to describe, explain and understand current HR process to construct a new theory of how improvement can be made in this specific context. However, the number of respondents to the

questionnaire survey was large and involved a quantitative approach. An interview was conducted to gather in-depth information, aimed at further exploring the views on the HR practices in AA customs with customs officers.

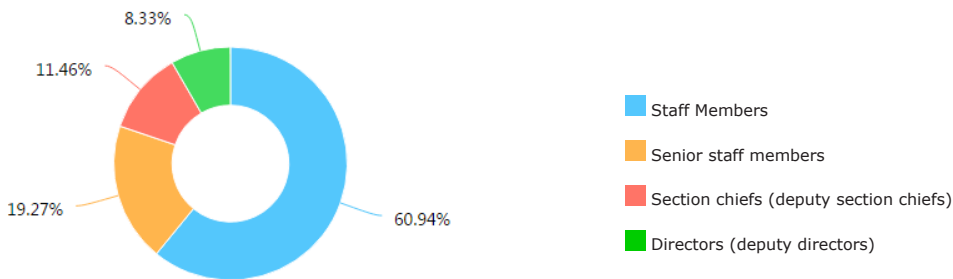
### 4. Statistical analysis

The number of customs officers that were involved in the survey and participated in the study exceeded the expectations of the author. Ultimately 192 questionnaires were collected and the results were analysed as follows.

Among the 192 respondents, 98 were male officers while the number of the female employees was 94. Staff working for less than three years accounted for 50 per cent and those who had been working for over 10 years were nearly 20 per cent (19.8%), almost the same number as customs officers who had work experience of between three to five years (18.8%).

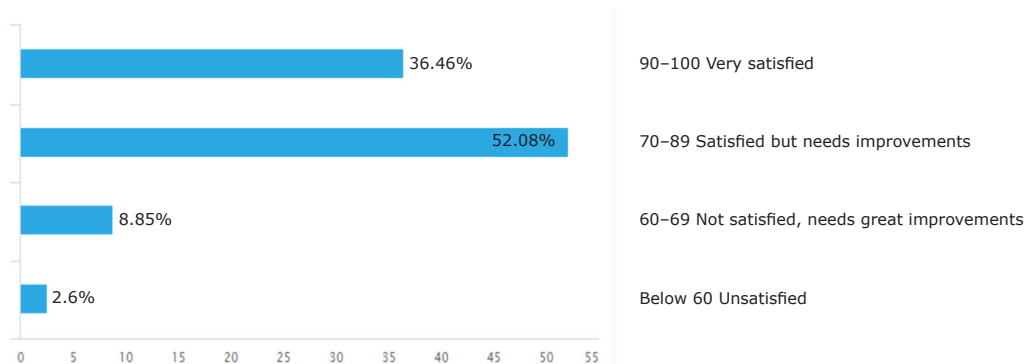
Sixteen directors (including deputy-director level officers) and twenty-two section chiefs (including deputy section chiefs) completed the questionnaire. The roles of the respondents are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Positions of respondents



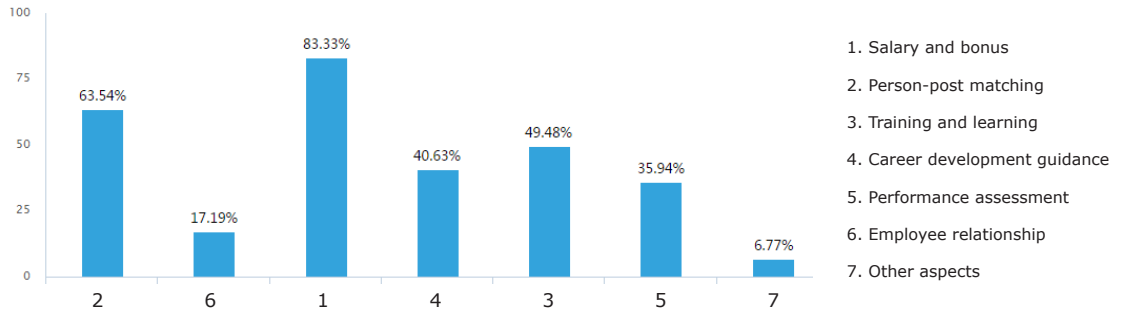
The satisfaction rate of employees’ relationships was much higher than the author’s expectations before the survey. One hundred and four respondents, or 54.2 per cent of all respondents, believed that the relationship between customs officers and previous CIQ staff is improving after the restructure. The overall score rated by employees of human resource management (Figure 3), however, indicates that some problems deserve attention.

Figure 3: Human resource management assessment



While more than half the employees showed a positive attitude toward employee relationships, only about one third (36.5%) gave high marks (90 to 100) to the current HRM practices. One hundred respondents are basically satisfied but they hope more improvements can be made, including person-post matching, performance assessment, and training and learning activities. Those who are pessimistic about the customs HRM approach account for 11.5 per cent. Participants shared their views on aspects that need improvement, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Expectation of improvements on HR issues



It is worth noting that person-post matching, training and learning, career development guidance, and performance assessment are major concerns of the respondents. In the meantime, performance assessment is expected to be optimised in the new organisation, partially because there are distinct differences between the customs work and CIQ operations.

When it comes to matters relating to an HR business partner, the result is very encouraging. 179 respondents showed their strong support to a business partner presence in their departments, believing that HRBP is helpful in identifying human resource challenges and optimising HR policies. Furthermore, the statistics show that the higher-level employees accept or are in favour of HRBPs. For instance, all 16 directors and deputy directors accepted HRBP, and 19 of the 22 section chiefs and deputies were also in its favour. A few customs officers were reluctant to accept an HR business partner, arguing that HR staff as business partners may not play their roles effectively if they know little about the customs business. This view makes sense because it echoes some points from studies reviewed in the previous section, that an HRBP should also be a business expert.

The survey collected the employees' opinions on HRBP qualifications, asking them what competencies a good HRBP should be equipped with. The responses are illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: HR business partner competence factors

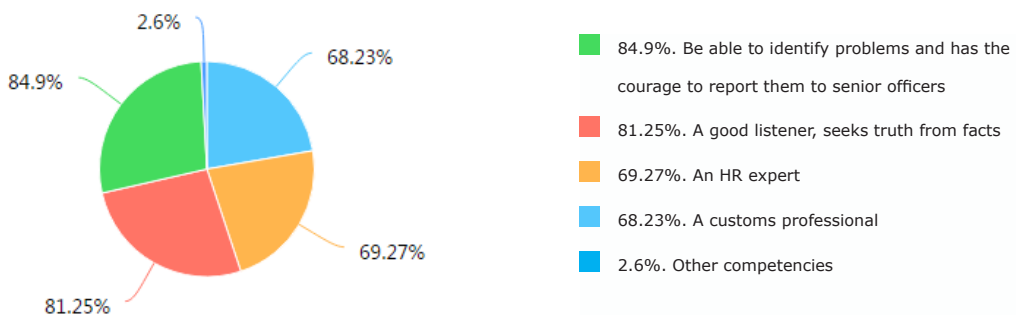




Figure 5 indicates that about 85 per cent of customs employees believe an HR business partner should be brave enough to tell the truth to the supervisors. This is understandable in the Chinese context, especially among civil servants, because China is a developing country with a high power distance culture. Officers are generally cautious when they have discussions with their supervisors; therefore, a ‘whistle blower’ who has the courage to reflect the existing HR problems is regarded by many employees as one of the roles that an HRBP should have.

In general, respondents are expecting new HR approaches to reform the current practice. One of the employees pointed out that the human resource management is lacking in innovation: ‘Many of us feel more tired than before because human resources are not in the right places.’

## 5. Findings from the interviews

One respondent, a Section Chief of the Administrative Office in AA customs, who began her career in 2000, was invited to take part in the interview. There are currently six employees in the Administrative Office, and three are previous CIQ staff. The new team members are getting on well in the workplace. In general, the section chief is satisfied with the current operation, but she also points out a few challenges.

Firstly, the previous CIQ staff are not accustomed to the paramilitary management approach of Customs, because Customs is operationally based with more disciplinary rules, with a focus on executing commands. CIQ concentrated on professional techniques, such as chemical testing, and sanitary and phytosanitary inspection. In other words, the CIQ employees were enjoying a comparatively loose working environment with a slower working pace.

Second, people-post challenges indeed exist. The Administrative Office is playing a crucial role in ensuring the smooth operation of a customs branch because the officers are dealing with hundreds of documents, reception work and important meetings. Employees are required to have good communication skills and an outgoing personality as well as good English skills. Some staff, however, cannot currently meet these standards, resulting in lower efficiency.

Third, there are less learning and training prospects for front-line officers, who are provided with limited training opportunities in customs operations. A respondent once asked them to identify their learning needs and most of the employees wished for more courses on stress management and communication techniques.

When talking about the roles of the HR section in the customs branch, she stated that HR is doing routine work with little involvement in strategy, which is a common situation in many customs branches. Although she thinks the HR department should take a more strategic role; the situation is unlikely to change soon because crucial decisions are made by members of the Board in AA Customs. When it comes to the HR business partner, a respondent indicated their full support for this model and welcomed a business partner who is specialised in human resource issues. The respondent noted that an HRBP could provide valuable advice on HR issues, including developing young officers, improving performance evaluation and organising more learning and training activities.

## 6. Discussion

Based on the questionnaires and interviews, most customs officers show great interest in an HRBP, and it appears to be fully supported by high-ranking executives in AA Customs. However, there are several issues that should be discussed because while there are many successful cases in implementing HRBP in the private sector, especially in world-renowned multinational enterprises, very few examples or pilot programs exist in the public sector in China.



## **6.1. Added value of an HR business partner**

Given the current level of satisfaction, what else does an HRBP bring to the organisation? This is a key point that needs further reflection because most customs officers are satisfied with the current HR practices. HR business partners are expected to play their roles in many aspects; however, they must always bear in mind that they should perform in a humble way. The reason lies in that once they steal the show, they might be faced with difficulties in performing their roles effectively in Customs, which is a paramilitary organisation characterised by high power distance.<sup>4</sup>

An HRBP is supposed to support the section chief instead of taking the lead in the workplace. In bridging the HR policy and customs practice, the business partner is expected to understand the customs control procedure as well as knowing the people in the section. Moreover, a qualified HR business partner should spare no efforts to smooth out amalgamation in the customs authority, working out effective approaches to integrate the teams and build a shared vision. Furthermore, as corruption risks always exist in a law enforcement agency, as a business partner in the customs control section, HRBP is expected to act as a watchdog, supervising the integrity status of the daily operations. Also, as a colleague of customs employees in the same section, an HRBP could understand their learning needs and give advice on formulating appropriate learning and development strategies, consequently increasing the effectiveness of the learning programs.

## **6.2. HR practice at AA Customs**

### **6.2.1. HR roles and responsibilities in the restructured government agency**

For an HR department in the public sector in China, its role is far from strategic compared with its counterpart in the private sector. Based on the interviews with section chiefs, the strategic role of the HR department in AA Customs is not as prominent as expected, though it is supposed to shoulder more responsibilities. Crucial decisions on human resource strategies are made by the members of the board in AA Customs, and the head of the HR section has little opportunity to be involved in this process, which is commonly seen in most Customs Houses in China. As a paramilitary team in the service, HR departments tend to complete the tasks as required but they were criticised by many respondents in the survey due to their lack of flexibility and innovation.

### **6.2.2. Promoting the engagement of the previous CIQ officers**

Currently the HR section is focusing on increasing the cohesion of the workforce, organising various activities including team building and other training programs. In the meantime, HR staff are taking time to listen to the feedback from front line officers. Notably, due to a huge salary gap between Customs and CIQ before the merger, the HR department was particularly required to focus on the engagement of previous CIQ staff because when the two organisations became one, CIQ employees suffered a decline in income. At the same time, promoting culture integration is of great importance, and HR staff as well as section chiefs are engaged in facilitating the recognition of the ‘customs culture’ by CIQ employees.

### **6.2.3. Addressing the person-post matching challenge**

This is one of the biggest challenges for almost all customs branches following the merger. For the previous CIQ employees who might be specialised in chemical analysis, most are doing the same jobs, but in different positions. However, those who were administrative staff have taken on new customs jobs because of a lack of staff in this field. To equip the previous CIQ officers who do not have customs experience, the HR section is organising on-the-job training through a traditional approach – apprenticeship. Experienced customs employees are designated as coaches of the new staff, providing daily guidance in the customs operation areas, such as inbound and outbound cargo inspection, and customs declaration form examination.

## 7. Conclusion

The results of the questionnaires showed that employees at AA Customs are basically satisfied with the current human resource policies and practices but have more expectations in the foreseeable future. A more strategic involvement by HR departments may face many difficulties in China Customs, but HR business partners might be a good alternative for improving human resource management effectiveness and efficiency, as well as overall organisational performance. Both the survey and interviews showed a positive attitude from most respondents towards the HR business partner model.

According to the interviewees, HR business partners in the public sector should have several qualities to successfully fulfil their roles. Firstly, HR business partners should be smart, meaning that this role should act as a bridge between the business section and the HR department, and they should know how to achieve cooperation with the head of the customs control department and become a member of the group rather than an outsider. Secondly, an HRBP should be clear about his or her position. The section chief is the decision maker and the HR business partner is an advisor or assistant but not the other way around. Thirdly, the HRBP should be an HR professional and customs expert, as advocated by many respondents. This view agrees with much of the literature, such as Tyson (2006) and Armstrong (2006) who advocate that HR business partners should play a strategic role and possess business knowledge at the same time. Fourthly, an HR business partner should be a person of integrity because this post is supposed to give advice from an HR perspective for promoting young officers with potential.

It is worth mentioning that an HRBP deserves more attention from the discipline inspection department to prevent possible corruption. As mentioned in the previous part, HRBP is functioning as a human resource advisor whose suggestions might influence the assessment of individuals. Presumably for a few customs officers who have high expectations for their careers may bribe the HRBP to get a better impression, which might be a shortcut to achieve a higher position.

## 8. Proposed action plan

This article aimed to propose a new perspective for improving human resource management effectiveness in a government department. It is not a purely theoretical study and ideally the suggestions and proposals will be tested in a chosen customs branch. An action plan is therefore proposed for implementing a pilot program in AA Customs.

Briefing the members of the board of AA Customs is the first step, following a top-down procedure to ensure smooth implementation in the Chinese public sector context. It will be necessary to introduce the concept of an HR business partner and illustrate a few successful cases in various companies, helping the top executives to get a general idea of what an HRBP is and how it works. The briefing should also include detailed information of how the business partner may work in AA Customs and how this pilot project will be assessed. It is equally important to understand the board's view on what they would expect the HRBP to achieve.

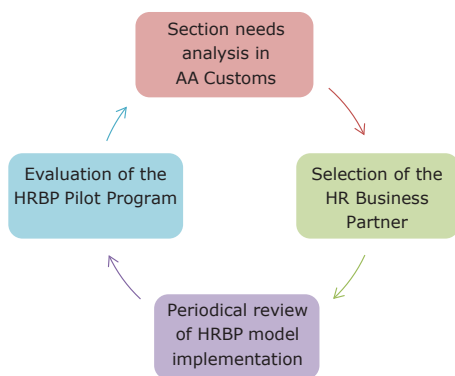
Secondly, after getting the permission of the customs leaders, the organiser should discuss with an HR Section Chief and a Deputy Director who are responsible for HR issues the question of selecting a section in which to implement an HR business partner model. The discussion should mainly focus on which section is appropriate to have a business partner, whether the section chief is willing to have an HR colleague as an advisor and whether the customs officers in this section are likely to support such a pilot program.

Thirdly, the Deputy Director should designate a candidate to take the job after discussing with the section chief of the selected department. Besides possessing the basic qualities of an HR professional, the chosen candidate should be equipped with sound stress management and interpersonal abilities because the employee relationship in the public sector is complicated in the Chinese context.

Fourthly, a periodical review should be conducted *on a regular basis*. The section chief, business partner and HR staff should attend the regular meeting, sharing their views on the process. The meeting should focus on the challenges faced by the HRBP and the cooperation between the business partner and the section chief, which may be the key factor in achieving the desired outcome.

Lastly, a final assessment should be organised. The directors of AA Customs, the section chief and HRBP, as well as representatives of the selected section should be asked to take part in the evaluation meeting. Issues to be discussed would include whether the HRBP is seen to be workable in AA Customs, whether the HRBP model should be implemented in other departments, and if the answer is yes, what implementation approach should be taken.

Figure 6: Action plan



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## Notes

- 1 China persists in opening-up to the outside world and is continuously expanding and developing its economy, trade, and technological exchanges and cooperation with other countries based on equality and mutual benefit.
- 2 China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a strategy initiated by the People's Republic of China that seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade and stimulating economic growth. The name was coined in 2013 by China's President Xi Jinping, who drew inspiration from the concept of the Silk Road established during the Han Dynasty 2,000 years ago – an ancient network of trade routes that connected China to the Mediterranean via Eurasia for centuries. The BRI has also been referred to in the past as 'One Belt One Road'. The BRI comprises a Silk Road Economic Belt – a trans-continental passage that links China with south east Asia, south Asia, Central Asia, Russia and Europe by land – and a 21st century Maritime Silk Road, a sea route connecting China's coastal regions with south east and south Asia, the South Pacific, the Middle East and Eastern Africa, all the way to Europe. The initiative defines five major priorities, including policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and connecting people. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>
- 3 [http://www.360doc.com/content/16/0829/22/30720696\\_586875535.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/16/0829/22/30720696_586875535.shtml)
- 4 'Power distance' is a term that describes how people, belonging to a specific culture, view power relationships – superior/subordinate relationships – between people, including the degree that people not in power accept that power is spread unequally.

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Mr Nan Li is a principal staff member of the Department of International Cooperation at Shanghai Customs College. He graduated from East China Normal University with a Master in Education in 2010. In 2019, he achieved his master degree with distinction in Human Resource Management at the University of Manchester as a Chevening Scholar. His major research domains include capacity building research and human resource management and development