

In Search of Identity, Mission and Meaning
A Study of HR Practitioners in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Different models concerning human resources management, often of American origin, have had a major impact on the working methods in the field of human resources (HR) and thus on how HR practitioners perceive their mission, professional role, and need for knowledge. These models have heavily emphasized that HR functions have a strategic role, a natural position in management teams, and that HR creates value for organizations. These messages have resonated well with HR practitioners, especially in private organizations. However, the business partner model has also caused tensions and ambiguities in relation to HR functions and practitioners in a Swedish context.

The overall aim of this thesis is to identify tensions and strategies among HR practitioners in the introduction of the HRT model and to critically discuss how HR practitioners assert their professional field, roles, and expertise during a period characterized by changes in working methods and organization.

The main findings show that the business partner model had a negative impact on developing and sharing knowledge within HR functions due to the division and specialization in the model. The business partner model also complicated cooperation between HR functions and line managers due to how the model fragmented HR work and outsourced certain HR processes, such as recruitment, but also the use of external consultant services. Line managers were hesitant regarding the strategic mission of HR and wanted closer support that was more adapted to local conditions, such as local agreements. The HR occupation in Sweden, on the other hand, proved to be surprisingly well-established, with a cohesive professional group and a uniform educational structure dominated by the social sciences. There was also a clear historical continuity through a social perspective having shaped a professional identity centered on the human perspective in organizations.

An overall implication is that a greater sensitivity to cultural conditions is required when introducing new HRM management models into organizations.

The possibilities and limitations of the current professionalization situation are the subject of an in-depth discussion. The strong focus on traditional HR activities from a behavioral and social science perspective has resulted in a strong professional identity and a core competence in operational and administrative work. However, the possibilities to work in areas such as innovation, digitalization, and board issues are more limited. It is argued that the HR function may need to engage in closer collaborations with other

functions. HRM is not an area that lends itself to professional dominance. On the contrary, it could be an area for cross-professional collaboration as no single function can master the full complexity of integrating people into productive and development-oriented organizational affairs.

Keywords: contextualization, HRBP role, HRM, HRT, paradox theory, professionalism, qualitative, thematic analysis, tension theory

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SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the tensions related to the attempts of HR practitioners to strengthen their professional field in Sweden in the wake of the human resource transformation (HRT) model and the introduction of the strategic human resource business partner (HRBP) role (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), the outsourcing of HR administration, and the growth of the HR consulting industry.

Based on previous research and new empirical data, this thesis highlights the tensions between, on the one hand, normative American models concerning HR work and professional roles and, on the other hand, actual HR work in Sweden. It also addresses the tensions between the vision of HR work in senior HR management, the recommendations of educators, and the expectations concerning HR support among line managers. Finally, by means of a qualitative interview data collection with representatives from different backgrounds in the HR field, it seeks to highlight the efforts aimed at professionalism.

The main findings in the thesis and its contribution to previous research show that the HR business partner model has a negative impact on developing and sharing knowledge within HR functions. The model also makes it more difficult for HR and line managers to cooperate due to its division of HR work into three aspects. The objective of strengthening the role and status of HR by introducing the HRT management model for HR work, and, in particular, the HR business partner role, turns out to have a limited impact, which is also supported by other studies.

The results of the thesis indicate that Swedish organizations may also have underestimated the importance of their national work culture context when introducing this management model, which was developed based on American research. Furthermore, a discrepancy emerged between the model's requirements concerning competency areas and the actual competencies of Swedish HR practitioners, as well as between the model's prescribed HRM work and the practical HRM work carried out.

However, despite the influence of HR business models developed in the US, the HR occupation in Sweden proved to be surprisingly well-established, with a cohesive professional group and a consistent educational structure dominated by the behavioral and social sciences. There is also a clear historical continuity with a social perspective through the female professional inspector corps. This

historical pattern has shaped a professional identity centered on people in organizations.

The strength of professional expertise among HR practitioners is evident in career paths with a considerable measure of mobility between different types of organizations. Finally, the professional identity of HR practitioners is developed in an organizational context and depends on and develops in collaboration with the work of line managers, while also being based on individual abilities and skills. However, HR practitioners work in diverse businesses and organizations of various sizes, which makes the conditions even more complex. The implementation of the HRM and HRT concepts also means that the HR occupational practice must adapt to organizational conditions and the work of line managers, which dilutes the professionalism of HR when the goals of the organization and demands of the line managers are prioritized over HR standards. Professionalization in the HR field is difficult due to the strong influence of line managers and the large number of requirements an HR function has to deal with. New concepts such as sustainability, digitalization, and innovation add to the complexity.

Summary of studies and papers

1. How hard can it be? A qualitative study following an HRT implementation in a global industrial corporate group. The study contributes to the field by examining the tensions between HRT, as a normative and standardized model, and business settings accustomed to variety and decentralized decision-making. The paper shows the need for contextualization when implementing management models. The lack of such contextualization leads to severe tensions, and the intentions of an efficient and respected HR function are not achieved. Furthermore, the paper claims that the Ulrich model's division of HR functions into service centers, competence centers, and the HR business partner role hinders the development of knowledge exchange and collaboration within the HR function as well as HRM services/work aimed at the line managers. The studied line managers were also skeptical of HR's strategic ambitions since HR had not previously participated in management work to any great extent, except at the highest management level. In addition, line managers believed that HR lacked adequate knowledge for this work.

2. Lost in translation – The HR business partner in a Scandinavian context. This is a qualitative case study, advancing knowledge on the tensions experienced by HR practitioners working as HRBPs in relation to line managers and the assignment of the HRBP role. The main conclusions and contributions of the study are that the introduction of the HRBP role in the case organization involved tensions and paradoxes for HR practitioners in the creation of the professional HRBP identity, while also hindering collaboration with line managers. Furthermore, the

study also shows the crucial importance of contextualization to, in this case, the Scandinavian democratic way of working and the responsibility for HRM work being delegated to line managers. The focus and competence claim of the HRBP role did not align with practical HRM work and the HRBPs' actual experience and educational background. The study also shows that the HRBP role led to ambiguity and disappointment for HRBPs due to the actual work content, and also that they became intermediaries between line managers and the shared service center and e-HR tools.

3. Bidde det bara en tummetott? En studie om HR-yrkets professionalism. [A study on the professionalism of the HR profession]. This paper examines the pursuit of professionalism in HR and describes how a range of HR practitioners perceive the HR occupation today. The results show a fragmented professional practice that makes it difficult for HR practitioners to live up to the aspirations of a unified profession. Yet, the results also show that strategies for professionalism have quietly proceeded in Sweden thanks to a reasonably uniform professional training background, which is characterized by a knowledge base in the behavioral and social sciences, a shared professional identity focused on people in organizations, and clear career paths as well as a general professional practice rather than organization-specific practices. The HRM and HRT concepts applied by the HR occupation mean that the HR professional practice must adapt to organizational conditions and the work of line managers. In this way, a hybrid professionalism has thus developed. However, there is a gap between what the senior HR managers have pursued in the form of the business partner model, on the one hand, and the focus and content of the training, on the other. [This paper is a work in progress.]

4. Personalvetarrollen efter 100 år – reflektion kring personalvetares professionalisering. [The HR role after 100 years – reflecting on the professionalization of HR professionals]. The aim of this chapter is to describe and analyze the development of the HR occupation from a professionalism perspective. It presents outlooks for the Nordic countries and other regions based on data from the Cranet survey 2021–2022. Findings show that the HR occupation in Sweden is dominated by behavioral and social science education. The HR functions are represented in top management teams and constitute a separate organizational unit. Nevertheless, there are several fragmenting elements, such as the lack of legitimation and professional associations organizing most HR practitioners. One conclusion is that it may be difficult to work toward a higher level of professionalism, but, on the other hand, it may open up the way to another form of professionalism, such as “connective” professionalism with an open attitude toward other professional fields. In addition, the professional training could emphasize its interdisciplinary orientation and seek to align more with actual HRM practices and competence needs.

SAMMANFATTNING PÅ SVENSKA

Hur har egentligen HR-yrket i Sverige utvecklats i spåren av de ledningsmodeller för HR-arbete som har svept in över organisationsvärlden under de senaste decennierna? Detta är en av de centrala frågorna som denna avhandling försöker besvara.

Avhandlingen undersöker hur personer som arbetar inom HR försöker stärka sitt yrkesområde i Sverige mot bakgrund av introduktionen av HRM- och HRT-ledningsmodeller, den strategiska HR business partner-rollen (HRBP) samt HR-konsultbranschens tillväxt. Genom tidigare forskning samt tre empiriska datainsamlingar belyser jag de spänningar som uppstår när normativa, amerikanska ledningsmodeller möter det faktiska HR-arbetet i en svensk kontext.

En återkommande fråga är varför det så ofta uppstår glapp mellan HR-ledningens vision och hur arbetet faktiskt bedrivs samt mellan vad utbildare rekommenderar och vad linjechefer faktiskt efterfrågar. Avhandlingen visar att dessa spänningar inte är slumpmässiga utan strukturella samt att de har djupa rötter i hur HR-rollen har formats över tid.

Ett av de tydligaste resultaten är att HR-affärspartnermodellen, trots sina ambitioner, har haft en negativ inverkan på kunskapsutveckling och kunskapsdelning inom HR-funktioner. Modellens uppdelning i tre distinkta funktioner har dessutom försvårat samarbetet mellan HR och linjechefer. Ambitionen att höja HR:s status och strategiska tyngd genom HRBP-rollen har visat sig ha en begränsad effekt, och en viktig förklaring är att organisationer har underskattat behovet av att anpassa modellen till svensk arbetskultur och dess tradition av långtgående delegerat personalansvar. Avhandlingen påvisar även en diskrepans mellan de kompetenskrav som modellen ställer på de som arbetar inom HR och deras faktiska kompetenser, liksom mellan föreskrivet och faktiskt HRM-arbete.

Avhandlingen lyfter emellertid också fram styrkor som är värda att uppmärksamma. HR i Sverige är en väletablerad och sammanhållen yrkesgrupp med en gemensam utbildningsbas inom beteende- och samhällsvetenskap. Det finns en tydlig historiska kontinuitet från Kerstin Hesselgrens kvinnliga yrkesinspektörskår i början av 1900-talet fram till dagens HR-yrke: en yrkesidentitet som är centrerad kring människan i organisationen. Det är också talande att HR-kompetensen i sig värderas högt,

vilket syns i karriärvägar där det är möjligt att röra sig mellan vitt skilda typer av organisationer och branscher.

Samtidigt är HR-rollen inte statisk. Den formas löpande i samspel med linjechefer, organisatoriska krav och individuella färdigheter. Avhandlingen beskriver hur HR-yrket har rört sig mot en hybridprofessionalism där generell HR-kunskap kombineras med förmågan att anpassa sig till olika organisatoriska sammanhang. Framgent pekar resultaten mot behovet av en ännu mer samarbetsorienterad/konnektiv yrkesroll där HR aktivt samskapar med andra kompetensområden.

LIST OF PAPERS

This thesis is based on the following papers, referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

- I. Häll, A., Tengblad, S., Oudhuis, M., & Dellve, L. (2023). How hard can it be? A qualitative study following an HRT implementation in a global industrial corporate group. *Personnel Review* 52(5). pp. 1632–1646. DOI10.1108/PR-05-2020-0377.
- II. Häll, A. (2025). Lost in translation – The HR business partner in a Scandinavian context: A qualitative case study in a global industrial company group’s HR function. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 15(1). pp 49–66. Doi.org/10.18291/njwls.148116.
- III. Häll, A., Hällsten, F., & Tengblad, S. Bidde det bara en tummetott? En studie om HR-yrkets professionalism. *Planned submission*.
- IV. Häll, A., & Tengblad, S. Personalvetarrollen efter 100 år – en reflektion kring personalvetares professionalisering. In *Med empati och strategi. En antologi om HR och framtiden*. Flavad, M. (ed.), Premiss förlag, 2024, pp. 11–26.

LIST OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Case organization: The global industrial company group's HR organization in the automotive industry that is the empirical case in papers I and II

CoE: center of expertise. Centralized function for HR specialists in, for example, labor relations, labor law, compensation and benefits, leadership development, employee development, etc. A center of expertise (CoE), or sometimes center of excellence, is a focused organizational unit that concentrates specialized knowledge, skills, and resources to drive best practices, innovation, and improvement in specific areas.

E-HR IT tools: IT self-service tools for employees, line managers, and HR practitioners for performing HRM administrative tasks. These IT systems, also known as HRM or HCM systems, are used to manage everything from recruitment and onboarding to payroll, skills development, and processing administrative tasks.

ESS: employee's self-service. An online portal enabling employees to manage their personal and HR-related data, such as transactions related to time and attendance reporting, performance and goals evaluation, curriculum vitae, expense reporting, company HRM policies, etc.

HR: human resources. Staff function of an organization's human resources management. HR covers a range of responsibilities that include recruitment, work environment, organizational development, and employee engagement.

HRBP: human resource business partner. An expanded role for HR managers according to the management model of human resource transformation related to HRM work (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005).

HR business partnering: The term "business partner" is used by management consultants to cover both tasks and roles related to strategically oriented tasks, administration, and consulting efforts. Business partnering includes the restructuring of the HR/personnel function into three sub-functions: a joint service center, a center of expertise, and the strategic business partners. Business partnership according to the Ulrich model (Ulrich, 1997) refers to a reconsideration of what HRM work is and how it should be evaluated. This means that the HR department's competence and working methods undergo a thorough change. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), "business partnering is how HR delivers its capability in an organizational context. Business partners work with leaders to help build

organizational and people's capabilities. They help to shape and implement effective HR strategies and programs, drawing on their unique knowledge as people professionals" (CIPD 2022).

HRM: human resource management – a management model for HR work practices. HRM practices affect all management decisions in the relationship between the organization and its employees (Storey, 1989).

HR practitioner: The roles of HR practitioners may vary widely according to the extent to which they are a generalist (e.g., HR director, HR manager, business partner) or a specialist (e.g., head of learning and development, head of talent management, head of compensation and benefits), the level at which they work (strategic, executive, or administrative), the needs of the organization, the context in which they work, and their own capabilities.

HRT: human resource transformation – a management model for HRM work used for transforming how HR functions organize and perform HRM work, which is also referred to as the "three-legged stool" (Boglund et al., 2013). The HR function is thus divided into three parts: a service center for HRM administration, a center of expertise for policy development and HRM knowledge center, and the strategic HRBP assigned to the line organization and its management team (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005).

LM: line manager. A line manager is the head of a specific functional part of an organization, also typically responsible for employees. Being a line manager means having direct decision-making powers and direct influence in your area of responsibility.

MSS: manager's self-service. Online portal for the HRM administration carried out by line manager, as well as follow-up tools on HR metrics, company HRM policies, and guidelines.

People and culture manager: The role of an HR manager focuses on a holistic approach to managing an organization's workforce; in other words, shaping the organization's culture, managing HR teams, and influencing decisions with a significant impact on the workforce

SDM: service delivery model – the case organization's translation of the HRT-inspired organizational model for HRM work.

SSC: shared service center for HRM administration. The SSC is responsible for the execution and handling of specific operational HRM tasks insourced or outsourced.

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PREFACE – IN SWEDISH

För en flicka född på femtitalet har en universitetsutbildning inte varit en självklarhet. Det som var normen då var kortare yrkesutbildningar men också ganska begränsade yrkesval. Efter flickskola och latinlinjen utbildade jag mig till sekreterare, en karriär som blev ganska kortvarig. Personalyrket blev ett modeyrke på 70-talet och verkade i mitt tycke vara ett spännande yrkesområde utan att jag egentligen hade någon direkt kunskap om vad det innebar. Min väg in i personalyrket gick via studieledighetslagen (1974:981) och genom en förvaltningsexamen kompletterat med arbetsrätt och företagsekonomi. Jag har i nästan fyra decennier arbetat både som specialist, generalist, konsult och chef inom detta yrkesområde.

Under huvuddelen av mitt yrkesliv, totalt 30 år, har jag arbetat i en och samma globala industrikoncern, men i flera av koncernens bolag. Dessa bolag har haft olika operativa inriktningar och är stora organisationer med flera tusen anställda i respektive bolag. Under några perioder har jag även arbetat i koncernövergripande i specialiststaber.

I samband med en stor omstrukturering av personalfunktionen 2005 sade jag upp mig och lämnade företagsgruppen. Detta gjorde att jag inledde en lång och slingrande resa mot en doktorandutbildning, en resa som inte på något sätt har varit given. Friheten att fundera på vad som skulle bli nästa steg ledde till att jag startade ett konsultföretag och sökte till ett magisterprogram. Både mina studier och verksamhet tog fart och ledde till nya kunskaper och erfarenheter. Magisterprogrammet gav mersmak, och tankarna på att jag kanske skulle kunna doktorera började så sakta att mogna, men först fick jag komplettera med en masterexamen. Kontakter togs sedan med professor Stefan Tengblad och jag fick hoppa in som föreläsare på personal- och ledarskapsprogrammet på Högskolan i Skövde. Institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap och CGHRM på Göteborgs universitet blev därefter min hemvist som doktorand.

Personalfunktionen i min fallorganisation (samma globala industrikoncern som jag har arbetat inom) har genom åren implementerat flera managementmodeller för HR arbete, vilket har medfört mer eller mindre övergripande förändringar gällande sättet att arbeta inom HR-funktionen. Jag har därför länge fascinerats av dessa "resande idéer" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), exempelvis LEAN (Liker, 2004) eller inom mitt yrkesområde HRT (Ulrich, 1997) och deras betydelse för hur man väljer att organisera och styra upp verksamheter, men också allt arbete och alla investeringar för att implementera dem. Det uppstår naturligtvis alltid reaktioner och ganska ofta motstånd mot dessa, och ibland blir resultatet en "tummetott".

En annan omständighet som har löpt som en röd tråd genom mitt yrkesliv är att HR-funktionen och HR-kunskap inte har värdesatts av omgivande funktioner, utan HR har snarare setts som en lite “fluffig” och “världsfrånvärd” administrativ funktion. Johan Berglund (2002) lyfte detta återkommande fenomen i sin doktorsavhandling “De otillräckliga”, vilket var spännande läsning med hög igenkänningsfaktor. Under 1980- och 1990-talen pågick även en debatt om att personalyrket var moget att bli en profession, en debatt som drevs av Sveriges Personaladministrativa Förening (SPF), men som sedan tappade kraft. Samtidigt pågick det sedan länge diskussioner om att höja statusen på yrkesområdet och att lyfta fram HR:s strategiska uppdrag, att få till stånd effektivare processer och en tydligare koppling till verksamheten och dess resultat. På min tidigare arbetsplats kritiserades också HR-funktionen för en del brister, bland annat i rapporteringar men också otydligheter i HR:s uppdrag och även att dess bidrag ifrågasattes. Nya lösningar för HR-arbete behövdes, och amerikanska managementmodeller för HR-arbete såsom HRM (Storey, 1992) och senare Human Resources Transformation (HRT) (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) introducerades. Dessa modeller kom i slutet av 1900-talet och fick en stor spridning i svenska privata organisationer i början av 2000-talet.

Den fallorganisation som beskrivs i min avhandling påbörjade sitt HRT-transformationsprojekt år 2001 och det intensifierades från och med 2007. År 2004 deltog jag i ett delprojekt i fallorganisationens HRT-projekt, vilket gav mig en närmare inblick i projektet och blev oavsiktligt ingången till min avhandling.

Mina handledare Stefan Tengblad, Margareta Oudhuis och Lotta Dellve har varit ovärderliga och betytt mycket för mig och mitt arbete. De har haft stort tålamod med sorteringen av uppslag, empiri, teorival och skrivarbetet. De har också varit medförfattare av min första artikel. Därefter har Stefan och jag tillsammans skrivit ett bokkapitel i en HR-antologi och slutligen har Freddy Hällsten tillsammans med Stefan Tengblad varit medförfattare gällande ytterligare en artikel. Stort och varmt tack för allt stöd och roliga samarbeten, diskussioner, utmaningar och handledning i det vetenskapliga skrivandets konst.

Bertil Rolandsson har varit intern granskare och har gett mig värdefulla och konkreta återkopplingar som varit betydelsefulla för utvecklingen av kappan och den tredje artikeln. Robin Jonsson och Ylva Ulfsson-Eriksson bidrog med tips och konstruktiv kritik på det första PM-seminariet. Helena Håkansson och Karin Allard gav kloka råd vid mittseminariet. I slutseminariet skapade Johan Berglund och Bertil Rolandsson en konstruktiv dialog med värdefulla synpunkter kring hur kappan skulle kunna utvecklas.

Doktorandgruppen har varit en stor tillgång och bollplank, speciellt Johanna Finnholm, Göteborgs universitet, och Victoria Rubin, Stockholms universitet. Vi bildade en digital grupp tillsammans med ytterligare doktorander runt om i Sverige och träffades regelbundet under pandemiåren. Samarbetet med Johanna och Viktoria har fortsatt även efteråt. De har visat stor generositet i form av tips, inspiration och synpunkter.

Familjen med sonen Carl och hans sambo Jenny, samt min livskamrat William, har varit stora supportrar, som har trott på mig och hejat på mig när det har varit motigt. William dog efter en lång tids sjukdom, och då blev doktorandarbetet och skrivandet en livlina samtidigt som jag fick fint stöd av familjen och mina handledare. Det kan inte nog understrykas hur viktigt detta har varit och hur mycket det har hjälpt mig under denna tuffa period i livet.

Denna avhandling är inte självbiografisk, men min tidigare yrkeserfarenhet har naturligtvis varit en tillgång men även något som jag måste skapa distans till. Jag har både organisatorisk kunskap från fallorganisationen och faktisk kunskap om HR-arbete, vilket har varit användbart i intervjuer och skuggningssituationer. Min senioritet inom yrkesområdet och det faktum att jag har arbetat som linjechef har också spelat en roll, särskilt i relation till de respondenter som är linjechefer. Min yrkeserfarenhet har hjälpt mig att få närmare kontakt och dialog. Mina respondenter har också gett mig många värdefulla inblickar in i olika praktiker och i hög grad medverkat till denna avhandlings tillkomst, ett stort tack till dem alla, ingen nämnd och ingen glömd.

Ett avhandlingsprojekt kräver sina praktiska och materiella förutsättningar. Här vill jag tacka administrationen, och särskilt framhålla Anna-Karin Wiberg, Pia Jacobsen och Iréne Carlensberg.

Sist, men inte minst, ett stort tack till Svenska Handelsbanken Jan Wallander's and Tom Hedelius's Foundation, grant P2016-0141:1, som har bidragit till att finansiera avhandlingen.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Human resources (HR) is a professional field that was developed in the 20th century while simultaneously shaping its professional field in the US and the Western world. The HR role has changed over time and has also been subject to questioning. To begin with, I would like to describe this development in broad terms. The first personnel work was established to structure recruitment, training, and performance monitoring, influenced by scientific management ideas (Taylor, 1911) in the early decades of the 20th century. During the interwar period, HR work was also influenced by the human relations movement, primarily by Elton Mayo's Hawthorne studies (1924–1932), whereas Drucker (1954), in turn, inspired an era of personnel administration. In the 1980s, two models of HRM emerged, the Harvard model (Beer, 1984), which saw HRM as a responsibility for line managers, as they are in a better position to integrate HRM with the business, and the Michigan model (Fombrun, 1984), which argued that the HR function must be based on the organization's strategy in order to achieve greater efficiency. In the 1990s, globalization and corporate restructuring shifted the focus of HR work toward a strategic and process-oriented approach (Boglund et al., 2021).

A unique form of HR work had emerged in Sweden, rooted in a socio-political perspective and with a legacy from the female labor inspectorate, established in the early 1900s by Kerstin Hesselgren (1872–1962), with the aim of improving and safeguarding working conditions for female workers (Boglund et al., 2021; Damm, 1993). In the post-war period, the HR occupation was influenced by how the parties in the labor market negotiated wages and working conditions, which has come to be known as the Swedish Model. As a result of industrialization and unionization, employers and workers began to negotiate terms more formally, leading to a more modern kind of personnel management later in the century (Boglund et al., 2021).

In the 1970s, with the democratization of working life, the new labor legislation being drafted at that time had a significant impact on the working methods of the HR function (Boglund et al., 2013; Damm, 1993), and labor relations became an important field for HR practitioners. Despite this change, the HR occupation retained its strong social and people-oriented profile. The pursuit of professionalism was accentuated in the 1980s by a debate in the HR industry journal, which was run by the Swedish Personnel Association (SPF). SPF sought a professionalization of the HR occupation, believing that this field was sufficiently mature to become a classic profession (Berglund, 2002). This debate subsided in the 1990s when leading senior HR managers, mainly in the

private sector, were concerned that such a professionalization would turn the HR occupation into a closed guild (Berglund, 2002).

Several researchers have discussed the criticism aimed at HR practitioners in their professional practice and the difficulties they have perceived when asserting themselves (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2014; Berglund, 2002; Caldwell, 2003; Storey, 1992). As an answer (to the early critique), HRM researchers at Harvard Business School and the University of Michigan, among others, developed solutions in the form of management concepts such as HRM (Storey, 1992) and later human resource transformation (HRT) (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), also known as the business partner model. These management concepts, originating in an American business environment, were introduced in Swedish HR functions, starting with private organizations in the 1990s. They were seen as solutions for developing and improving the work of HR functions (Boglund et al., 2011). They were also attractive to HR practitioners, mainly as the business partner model offered clearer professional roles in order to raise the professional level of HR practitioners, but also to increase the status of HR. For the company management, these models offered promises of efficient HR processes and standardized working methods that would streamline the HR function (Boglund et al., 2011; Ulrich, 1997). The business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) was thus introduced to solve a number of problems considered to exist in work processes and with regard to the efficiency of HR work, but also to address how HR functions and HR practitioners could influence organizations through their specific knowledge of the people in the organizations (Boglund et al., 2011). The HRBP role was key in the organizational structure of the HRT model and entailed a major change in terms of job duties and skill requirements for HR practitioners (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005).

A decade into the 21st century, discussions in forums for HR practitioners and in the literature (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2014; Boglund et al., 2021) showed that the HRBP role and its strategic orientation still encountered difficulties establishing itself and that the HR occupation continued to struggle to justify its domain and prove its contribution (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2014; Boglund et al., 2021; Wallo & Coetzer, 2024). This was not a uniquely Swedish phenomenon but was also described in the international literature (Gerpott, 2015; Keegan & Francis, 2019; Link & Mueller, 2015) using paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) to discuss the paradoxes and tensions characterizing the work practices of HR practitioners.

In Sweden, the business partner model has dominated HR work for more than 20 years, which raises the question: Why does the business partner model still

encounter obstacles in a Swedish context? When working on this thesis, however, using the concept of tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011), I have identified several tensions, not addressed in previous research, between the normative solutions of the business partner model and the Swedish HRM context. These tensions constitute the focus of this thesis and are addressed in the following sections.

HR practitioners have experienced continued difficulties in assuming the role of HRBP, primarily in terms of creating a new professional identity by leaving operational work and the employee perspective behind and establishing a strategic and business focus, which has been discussed in several international papers. Heizman and Fox (2019) have questioned the individual competence-based approach, adding that what restricts the ability of HR practitioners to create a new identity as HRBPs and legitimize this endeavor among line managers is complex power relations. Pritchard (2010) focuses on the social construction and identity work involved in changing one's professional identity and taking on the HRBP role. In a Swedish context, Wallo and Coetzer (2023) argue that HR practitioners are dependent on the work of line managers and that HR practitioners mainly work operationally and find it difficult to define their strategic work, whereas Boglind et al. (2021) point out that the HRBP role has been devalued and taken on a more operational character.

As a result of HRM and the business partner model, line managers have gained greater influence over how HR work is carried out by taking over the responsibility for certain HR work delegated to them. The aim of devolving HR work to line managers was to free up time for strategic HR work, but it also had consequences for HR's relationship with line managers (McCracken et al., 2017). Link and Mueller (2015) have highlighted the tensions facing HR practitioners when delegating HR tasks to line managers, which, in their view, entails risks of de-professionalizing the HR field.

Based on a bounded professionalism perspective (Vrielink & van Brockel, 2013), meaning that professional autonomy is highly restricted by occupational and organizational tensions, Nadiv and Kuna (2024) have concluded that "HR professionals have attempted to improve their professional positioning by establishing it on hybrid professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2007, 2015; Syrigou & Williams, 2023)" p. 520. They have also claimed that HR professionalism is being diluted as HR tasks are taken over by line managers and HR adapts its work to overall management rules and requirements, but also in the work with outsourced HR services. Syrigou and Williams (2023) have argued that the role of the HR function is strengthened when HR staff adapt to the organization's requirements by having a closer relationship with line managers and the

demands of the business. On the other hand, Syrigou and Williams (2023) have also found that the professionalism of the HR function is weakened for the same reason. I return to this aspect at the end of the thesis.

Management concepts such as HRM and HRT, originating in an American business culture, are not directly transferable to other national business cultures such as the Swedish one. The need to contextualize management concepts such as HRT and quality management, which are used to change the ways of working in a Swedish context, has been discussed by Skålén et al. (2005). Their results show that implementing HRM/HRT requires that the ones affected by the change both understand and accept it, but also that management understands the differences between national business cultures and adapts the new concept to their own context. According to Skålén et al. (2005), this adaptation is often overlooked or downplayed.

RESEARCH PROBLEM BACKGROUND

The HRT model has encountered difficulties in practice both internationally (Gerpott, 2015; Keegan et al., 2009) and in Sweden (Boglind et al., 2011, 2017, 2021). The success promised in this management model has not been realized, neither in terms of its impact on the organization's performance nor the contextual adaptation of the model (Gerpott, 2015; Skålén et al., 2005). Swedish private organizations have wholeheartedly adopted the HRT model as a solution to obtain clearer HR processes and a more efficient handling of HR issues, but also to raise the status of the HR field and the HR manager role through the strategic HRBP role. However, the HRBP role has proven difficult to implement in Sweden and, according to Boglind et al. (2021), it has been devalued, differentiated, and given a more operational character in Sweden. Other factors, such as devolved personnel responsibility to line managers and HR practitioners working in management teams, have become significant and influence the work of HR practitioners.

In order to frame the research area for this thesis, I have used research on the organization of HR work according to HRT and the strategic HRBP role (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), particularly its implementation in Swedish organizations. This thesis attempts to gain a deeper understanding of the encounter between the business partner model, the Swedish culture of collaboration, and the pursuit of professionalism among Swedish HR practitioners. Furthermore, it seeks to increase our knowledge of tensions related to shaping work identity and professionalism among HR practitioners

during a period characterized by working methods and organization influenced by the business partner model and the strategic HRBP role.

An interpretive critical perspective (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008) was chosen to question normative solutions, given power structures, and how managers interpret HR's mission and knowledge. In addition, it was also chosen in order to relate to my own understanding of the professional field and knowledge of the case organization. The empirical material revealed ambiguities, contradictions, and inherent tensions in the messages concerning goals, tasks, and working methods. Smith and Lewis's (2011) paradoxical tension theory was thus chosen as the theoretical framework for interpreting and discussing the tensions surrounding the introduction of the business partner model and the HRBP role for HR practitioners. In order to interpret the strategies for professionalism that have quietly developed since the SPF discussion on the professionalization of the HR profession in the 1980s and 1990s, I have used theories of professionalism (Evetts, 2007; Noordegraaf, 2015) to discuss the continued pursuit of professionalism of Swedish HR practitioners.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To achieve my objectives and answer my research questions, I have collected my empirical material from the HR function in a global industrial group, starting when it underwent a restructuring process inspired by the HRT management concept.

The overall aim of this thesis is to identify tensions and strategies among HR practitioners in relation to the introduction of HRT and to critically discuss how HR practitioners assert their professional field, roles, and expertise during a period characterized by changes in working methods and organization.

The following questions were examined:

Which tensions arose in the introduction of HRT for HR work in a Swedish context?

Which professionalization strategies can be observed within the Swedish HR community?

These questions were investigated in three data collections (three papers and one book chapter). The first data collection (paper I) in the thesis discusses the thorough change in HRM work during the 21st century in the HR organization of a global industrial company group (the case organization) through the

introduction of human resource transformation (HRT) in its Swedish HR organization.

The second data collection (paper II) focuses on the problematic HRBP role replacing the HR manager role in the same case organization, ten years later.

The third data collection (paper III and book chapter IV) concludes this thesis and examines the strategies for HR's professionalism.

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is organized as follows.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Positioning research within the field of HRM and introducing the aim and research questions.

Chapter 2 – Previous research

This chapter summarizes previous research in the field of HRM, taking into account the HR management models introduced in a Swedish context, their impact on HR practitioners' working methods, competence requirements, and professionalism, as well as literature on contextualizing management models with regard to national business cultures.

Chapter 3 – Theoretical perspectives

This chapter presents the theoretical foundations guiding the analysis. The point of departure has been to problematize the implementation of a widespread management model for HRM work (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), to highlight the tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011) in the encounter with Swedish HRM practices, and to examine the role of tensions as hidden sources of conflicting messages for HR practitioners. The section concludes with reflections on the chosen theoretical framework.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

Describing the research design and methodological choices, while emphasizing the qualitative approach and interpretive orientation, this chapter details how materials were gathered and analyzed, in addition to reflecting on ethical and quality considerations integrated throughout the research process.

To further broaden the information on Swedish HRM, results from a quantitative study with statistics and analyses from the Cranet survey (2021–2022) (Tengblad, 2023b) have been included to supplement the interviews in the third data collection.

Chapter 5 – Results

This chapter presents an overview of the three data collections and summarizes the insights gained from these.

Chapter 6 – Discussion

This chapter interprets the results in relation to previous research and theoretical perspectives. The discussion weaves together insights from the various data collections and reflects on conceptual mechanisms, contextual dynamics, and implications for understanding the pursuit of professionalism among HR practitioners.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

The final chapter summarizes the contributions of the thesis and highlights theoretical insights and implications for HRM research and practice. The thesis is concluded with some final reflections.

WHAT IS HR WORK?

How many people work in the HR field in Sweden? The HR field covers a wide range of skills, work areas, and job titles, which has complicated the task of determining the total number of individuals working with HR-related tasks, mainly due to the wide variation in job titles and HR consulting fields. According to Statistics Sweden (SCB) in 2023, there were 17,823 individuals working as HR/Personalchefer (8,400 in the private sector and 9,423 in the public sector), of which 14,623 are women and 3,200 are men.

According to Berglund (2002) and Alvesson and Lundholm (2014), HR practitioners have been very sensitive to trends and open to new influences to develop their field. Business partnering, the latest management model for HR work, has been developed by scholars such as Dave Ulrich at the University of Michigan and has been widely adopted in Swedish organizations during the first decades of the 21st century (Boglund et al., 2011). According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2011), business

partnering refers to the restructuring of the HR/personnel function into three sub-functions: a joint service center, a center of expertise, and the strategic business partners. Business partnering according to the Ulrich model (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) means that the nature of HR work has been re-evaluated, as well as how it should be assessed. This has led to an aim of radically changing the HR function's scope of work, competency requirements, and working methods, as well as how HR should provide its services in an organizational context.

The HR function is a staff function, meaning that it provides advice, support, and data to line management to help them make decisions. HR is not directly involved in core operational activities or has any hierarchical responsibilities, but rather focuses on planning, coordination, analysis, communication, policy development, and administration. Staff functions are vital components of well-functioning organizations that help ensure that decisions are well-informed and based on sound expertise (Johansson et al., 2011). HR activities are carried out in relation to eight core functions: (1) HR strategy development; (2) recruitment and selection; (3) training and development; (4) performance management; (5) employee relations, labor law, and compliance; (6) compensation and benefits; (7) HR administration; and (8) payroll and HR IT systems (CIPD, 2012). However, they also involve sustainable working conditions, redundancy, redeployment, and occupational rehabilitation.

The fact box below is an example of how the mission of the HR function can be described in two different types of organizations. The Swedish Work Environment Authority describes the traditional HR mission, while the case organization reports its target areas for HR work, which show additional areas for HR but do not exclude the traditional HR competence areas.

Fact box HR work

Examples of how a public organization and a private organization describe the missions and work tasks of their HR function.

The first example comes from the Swedish Work Environment Authority:

The HR department supports the operations in relation to administrative, operational, and strategic HR issues. The HR department's main tasks are to:

- Formulate employer policy
- Formulate strategic management and development within HR
- Support the operations in HR and payroll administrative issues

Provide advice and support to managers on issues such as

- Recruitment and employer branding
- Skills development and learning
- Leadership and employeeeship
- Salary formation and salary setting
- Work environment, accessibility, and equal treatment
- Rehabilitation and work adaptation
- Laws and agreements in the field of labor law as well as collaboration
- Working methods

Website: www.av.se (Swedish Work Environment Authority)

The case organization's description of main areas for the function "People and Culture":

Attractive employer: The case organization wants to be known as one of the most attractive employers in the industry, which includes a good salary system and benefits, as well as a positive work environment.

Gender equality and diversity: A key goal is to increase gender equality and diversity in the organization, with the ambition to have 35% female leaders by 2030.

Employee development: The case organization offers various programs to support employees in their development, including training, coaching, and networking.

Work environment: A positive and inclusive workplace culture is an important factor in creating a good work environment, both physically and psychosocially.

Corporate culture: The case organization's HR department seeks to create a culture that promotes change and engagement, which contributes to the company's performance.

Skills provisioning: Long-term skills provisioning is an important part of HR work, and the case organization focuses on attracting and retaining talent by creating a strong employer branding.

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This chapter reviews previous research on HR management models such as HRM (Storey, 1992), while this thesis primarily discusses human resource management (HRT), also called the business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Management models or “traveling ideas” (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005) such as HRT (Ulrich, 1997) have had a major impact on how senior HR managers choose to organize and manage their operations, and they require significant efforts and investment to implement. Regardless of whether one chooses to view them as objects of hatred or as “salvation for the business,” they play a major role in how management wants the work to be done. These management models for HRM work originate in American business culture, which is important to bear in mind when introducing them into the Swedish business culture. The differences between American and Swedish business culture are highlighted using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004), but also the need for adaptation, which is why a contextualization perspective has been included (Filatotchev et al., 2022; Skålén et al., 2005). Together, they form the theoretical foundation of this thesis.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HR WORK IN SWEDEN

A starting point in this review is to present a short summary of previous research about HR work in Sweden. A recurring theme in previous research is that HR practitioners have sought to have greater influence and higher status, a topic discussed in several Swedish studies (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2014; Berglund, 2002; Boglind et al., 2011, 2013, 2021; Damm, 1993). In addition, it has also been noted that sensitivity to fashion trends and new management concepts have been part of the image of HR practitioners, combined with a need to highlight their area of expertise in private and public organizations (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2014).

HR is an established field in Sweden, with roots in a social policy perspective in the early 20th century (Berglund, 2002; Damm, 1993). The early personnel work attempted to foster the human perspective within the manufacturing industry, which was characterized by Fredrick Taylor’s management model *Principles of Scientific Management* (Taylor, 1911). The social worker perspective originated from the special female occupational inspection corps, where the leading figure, Kerstin Hesselgren, became the first female occupational inspector in 1913. Kerstin Hesselgren played a significant role for working women through her political commitment, but also by being one

of the founders of Fogelstad's women's civic school and her international assignments, including the ILO (International Labor Organization) in the UN. She was also involved in creating SAIA (Social Workers in Industry and Business) in 1921. At the time, the social workers in SAIA mainly worked with workplaces with female employees, but would later come to dominate personnel work during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s (Berglund 2002; Boglind et al., 2013). The Saltsjöbaden Agreements of 1938 and 1948 also influenced HR work in Sweden with their explicit cooperation between employers' and employees' organizations at a national and local level. During the 1950s and 1960s, central personnel departments expanded in public and private organizations (Tengblad & Andersson, 2024).

The democratic wave in the 1970s led to the HR function becoming a coordinator of the laws governing the relationship between employers and employees, a consequence of the democratization of working life. Union relations and negotiations thus became a common feature of HR work (Berglund, 2002; Damm, 1993). More specifically, it was about the introduction of more structured relations in accordance with the legislation in the Employment Protection Act, 1974, 1982 (LAS), the Law on Co-Determination in Working Life, 1976 (MBL), and the Work Environment Act, 1977 (AML), to name a few of the most important laws in this field. The emphasis on labor law and labor relations also increased the importance and status of HR departments (Damm, 1993).

During the 1980s, and with the introduction of human resource management (HRM) (Storey, 1992), HR work shifted its focus from an employee perspective to becoming an extension of the employer and support for line managers. In Sweden, personnel departments were renamed HR departments, and personnel/HR managers were included in line management teams. The professional training "P-line" was established as a university program, and HRM gained academic status with the ambition of achieving professional status in the 1980s (Berglund, 2002). HRM, and later HRT, management models also influenced how HR practitioners were expected to model/shape their professional identity through the HRT model's prescriptions for different roles for HR practitioners, primarily the role of HRBP.

With HRM, HR functions in Sweden shifted their focus to a strategic, employer-centered perspective (Berglund, 2002; Damm, 1993; Tengblad, 1999), and line managers were given responsibility for their employees through devolved personnel responsibility. This also meant that HR administrative tasks were transferred to line managers using various e-HR tools for reporting and follow-up (Häll et al., 2023).

A VIEW ON HRM IN SCANDINAVIA

According to Sapir (2006), the Nordic economic and social model combines collective risk-sharing with an openness to globalization. The Nordic model is characterized by labor market institutions that include strong trade unions and employers' organizations, wage coordination, relatively generous unemployment benefits, and active labor market policies. The legal framework established in the late 1970s was also one of the foundations of HR work in the Nordic countries. Nordic HRM was also characterized by a soft collaborative approach, which regarded employees as active partners in a long-term relationship built on investing in development activities (Bevort & Einarsdottir, 2021). According to international comparative statistics in the Cranet study (2021–2022) (Tengblad, 2023b), a clear Swedish HRM model emerges, characterized by the HR field as a separate and distinct domain with its own organizational unit, and HR managers are often part of management teams and involved in the development of overall strategies and the formulation of specific HR strategies. Furthermore, the Cranet results indicated that Swedish HR functions have lower staffing levels compared to most other countries, while HR processes are to a greater extent outsourced to external providers.

Swedish HRM is also characterized by a high degree of devolved HR responsibilities to line managers. Line managers, on the other hand, want more support from the HR function (Finnholm et al., 2024). This circumstance particularly affects the role of the HR business partner (Tengblad, 2023b). In their study of HR practitioners' work in Swedish HR functions, Wallo and Coetzer (2023) describe it as varied, fragmented, and reactive, as well as highly related to the line managers' work and demands in line with the devolved personnel responsibility. They also point to the gap between the targeted job content of HR practitioners and the job content required by line managers. In their study of the identity of Swedish HR practitioners in public and private organizations, Ferm et al. (2023) conclude that the identity of HR practitioners is fragmented, dispersed, and open to interpretation.

A CONTESTED FUNCTION

For decades, there has been a debate concerning the arena of the HR occupation and sometimes about its *raison d'être* (Berglund, 2002; Damm, 1993). Damm (1993) and Berglund (2002) have examined how Swedish HR practitioners have argued for the importance of HR knowledge in organizations, especially relevant in the era of the knowledge society, which was also accompanied by

a long struggle for professionalization during the 1980s and 1990s driven by the Swedish Personnel Association (SPF) (Berglund, 2002).

According to Berglund (2002), it is not HR practitioners themselves setting the agenda for their professional field, but rather other professional groups, such as business administrators and engineers, who interpret the HR field and enable and allow a space/arena for HR within organizations. A recurring argument, according to Berglund (2002), was that HR practitioners are always described as lacking something (experience, knowledge, power, etc.) to become conceivable for the strategic work in high positions in organizations. Other researchers (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2014; Brandle et al., 2007; Heizmann & Fox, 2019) also confirm that HR practitioners want to advance their position, while other professional groups, in an organizational-political interplay between legitimacy and power, have repeatedly emphasized that HR practitioners lack business experience, a strategic perspective, and deeper organizational knowledge, in addition to the belief that the soft and feminine label of the profession and the fact that its practitioners are predominantly women affect the status of the occupation. From this perspective, it seems unlikely that HR practitioners, especially those with a background in behavioral science, are able to develop a strong role in management teams (as later advocated in the HRT model) (Berglund, 2002). In addition, management team work requires different kinds of knowledge than what HR practitioners usually have. Another assumption, according to Berglund (2002), was that the HR occupation is numerically dominated by women, who also represent a “female”-labeled function (and staff function), seeking influence in areas primarily reserved for men, such as strategic work in management teams, and that these men often are business administrators or engineers. Gender, power asymmetries, and dominant relationships often characterize the interaction between people in organizations (Hirdman, 1988).

Another aspect of HR professional knowledge is that this is perceived as general knowledge, “something that all managers can do” (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2014), which is also reinforced by the devolved personnel responsibility (Tengblad & Andersson, 2024) and that the handling of personnel issues also becomes unclear between HR practitioners and line managers (Link & Mueller, 2015).

Alvesson and Lundholm (2014) have discussed the work of HR managers more than a decade after the Ulrich-inspired management model was introduced in Swedish organizations. They show that not much has changed in the practical work of HR managers and that it has been difficult to realize the transition to a more strategic, professional role. The ideal work and practical work differ from one another, while the idea of the content of the new HR manager role

has retained its magic for the HR managers in their study. A sensitivity to fashion trends and new management models, as well as the desire for more “glamorous” work content, are shared with other managers, but HR managers exhibit a greater vulnerability due to their dependence on the other occupations accepting them and giving them room for maneuver. Not having any direct influence but working through others distinguishes the work of HR managers from, for example, line managers, as the HR manager’s work is largely linked to the line manager’s work and needs (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2014). The lack of, for example, technical knowledge also distinguishes HRM knowledge from the knowledge in the rest of the organization and may thus be perceived as irrelevant and that HR practitioners lack the right prerequisites to understand the business or the operation (Berglund, 2002).

THE BUSINESS PARTNER MODEL IN INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

The business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) has been discussed extensively over the years in the international literature. Keegan (2018) and Gerpott (2015) have emphasized the shortcomings of the business partner model and highlighted the tensions created by the model between strategic work and operational work, and which, according to Keegan and Francis (2019), were the most salient tensions for HR practitioners working as HRBPs. They have also highlighted the difficulties for HR practitioners in terms of distancing themselves from the employee perspective and concentrating on the needs of line managers. According to Gerpott (2015), the business partner model was also poorly suited to actual HRM work and became more of a wish list and suggestions for new fields of work. Ulrich et al. (2008) have found that the greatest difficulty with the HRBP role is that HRBPs are often drawn into “wrong activities” of a more operational nature. This could be attributed to power structures and, primarily, to the line managers’ expectations concerning HR work (Heizmann & Fox, 2019). Finnholm et al. (2024) have demonstrated the gap in understanding the competencies needed for HR practitioners to take on the role of change agents (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) in organizational change settings. They conclude that analytical and social skills are important areas for HR practitioners, as well as an understanding of human behavior, labor law, and operational efficiency. Another finding in Finnholm et al. (2024) is that line managers valued HR expertise more than HR strategic work.

HR PROFESSIONALISM

Syrigou and Williams (2023) have studied how HR practitioners in the UK perceive and understand their own professionalization. They argue that the work of HR professionals is pragmatic and operational in nature, primarily focusing on supporting the interests of the organizations where HR practitioners work. Their findings show that HR practitioners also identify with a professional community and develop collegial bonds based on their organization or industry rather than professional expertise. HR practitioners, in their view, are “organizational professionals.” The introduction of business partnering has to a certain extent also helped HR practitioners to enhance their status by building organizational relationships. Syrigou (2018) finds that HR practitioners primarily identify with the organization in which they work and, secondarily, with a wider HR community. The hesitation to identify with an HR community, according to Syrigou, was about HR practitioners finding it difficult to explain to outsiders what the HR field stands for and a fear of encountering possible negative feelings toward the HR function. Business partnering has strengthened the connection to one’s organization while, on the other hand, diluting HR professionalism. Syrigou (2018) argues that the difficulty of claiming a professional status is due to the short history of the occupation, the fragmented occupational field, and the fact that HR practitioners are expected to work through line managers, thereby becoming invisible as a professional group. The promises of professional status, according to Syrigou (2018), are the strong elements of organizational professionalism (similar to the managerial profession) and that the HR occupation could be regarded as an aspirant profession: “[HR] practitioners might identify as professionals within an occupational distinct professionalization process but without the assumption that their occupation will ever be successfully professionalized” (p. 218). This is a development that can also be discerned in this thesis and from a Swedish perspective. Nadiv and Kuna (2024) have studied bounded professionalism, which implies that the professionalism of HR practitioners is highly restricted by occupational and organizational tensions (Vrielink & van Brockel, 2013) but also HR practitioner’s attempt to improve their professional positioning based on hybrid professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2007, 2015; Syrigou & Williams, 2023). Nadiv and Kuna (2024) demonstrate how HR practitioners navigate and manage tensions between different environments, which exacerbates the challenges to their professionalism through the concept of the “bounded professionalism nexus,” in order to shed light on and deepen understanding of HR practitioners’ work in complex organizational landscapes and across organizational boundaries.

They claim as well that HR practitioners navigate between professional and organizational tensions, such as between strategic and operational work (Keegan & Francis, 2019), but also that the demands of line managers concerning adjustments affect HR professionalism and professional autonomy. Nadiv and Kuna (2024) also note that HR professionalism is “diluted” when HR work involves the use of external consultants in various HR processes, a challenge often overlooked in a highly networked world. Furthermore, they also argue that adapting to the organization’s demands weakens HR professionalism when organizational demands are prioritized over professional standards.

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND NATIONAL WORK CULTURE

In Sweden, a unique version of HRM has been developed with roots in a sociopolitical perspective (Damm & Tengblad, 2004) and in a cultural context characterized by collaboration, flat hierarchies, and a consensus culture (Bevort & Einarsdottir, 2021). The business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), a normative model for HRM work, has its origins in the American business culture and was introduced in Swedish organizations in the late 1900s and early 2000s. As a result, differences between these business cultures need to be highlighted, using theories on national business cultures and contextualization.

In order to discuss HR management models developed in one cultural context but implemented in another, one may use Hofstede’s six dimensions of national cultures (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004). This model aims to raise awareness of the differences between national business cultures. Hofstede’s model has in this thesis been used to visualize differences between the Swedish and American business cultures. The Hofstede model for comparing values and attitudes in 50 countries was developed in the late 1960s using extensive material from IBM. This first study from IBM has been developed further and used for various purposes. One of these is to create a better understanding of national cultural conditions for global leaders with global management teams. The Hofstede cultural dimension model consists of six dimensions: (1) power distance index; (2) individualism vs collectivism; (3) uncertainty avoidance; (4) motivation toward achievement and success (formerly masculinity vs femininity); (5) long-term vs short-term orientation; and (6) indulgence vs restraint.

The need for contextualizing management models has been discussed by Filatotchev et al. (2022) and Skålen et al. (2005). Filatotchev et al. (2022) advocate an open systems perspective that includes the many factors

influencing the business environment, as well as contextual factors that define the nature of governance problems and their solutions. They argue that business groups are embedded in the relational and cultural environments in which they operate and point to the need for a more contextually sensitive approach in management and organizational studies in order to examine the complex relationships within which organizations operate. Skålén et al. (2005) show in their study that contextualization is an important prerequisite for the implementation of HRM and quality management concepts in Swedish organizations. They also show that contextualization has often been overlooked or downplayed by organizations and that this has led to less successful implementations and organizational changes.

This chapter highlights that Swedish HRM practices have developed their own unique characteristics, according to Bevort and Einarsdottir (2021) and Tengblad (2023b), despite the strong influence of the business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Several researchers, including Berglund (2002) and Damm (1997), have addressed the vulnerability of the HR practitioners and the desire for a clearer professional identity and higher status, which is also shared by HR practitioners in other Western countries (Brandle et al., 2007; Heizmann & Fox, 2019). From a professionalism perspective, Syrigou (2018) and Syrigou and Williams (2023) have found that HR practitioners primarily identify with the organization in which they work and, secondarily, with a broader HR community. Their results, focusing on how the tension between Swedish HRM and American HRM models interacts with tensions between classical professionalism and organizational/hybrid professionalism, are discussed in the following sections.

3 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This chapter presents the theoretical foundations framing the analysis in this thesis. The point of departure has been to identify tensions and strategies in the implementation of a widespread management model for HRM work (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) and to investigate tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011) in its encounter with Swedish HRM practices. The paradox perspective thus offers a lens for examining the role of tensions as hidden sources of conflicting messages within organizations and is here used concerning the role and work of HR functions and HR practitioners, in papers I and II. Furthermore, a professionalism perspective is introduced in paper III to discuss which strategies HR practitioners have used to assert their professional knowledge/professional field through four types of professionalism. Finally, how the individual HR practitioner creates his/her professional identity and platform is important. The HR business partner model (Ulrich, 1997) can also be viewed as a discursive legitimation project in the struggle of HR practitioners to be legitimized and recognized in their organizations (Heizmann & Fox, 2019) or from a social constructivist perspective, in which rhetorical resources are used in competition with other professional groups in argumentative contexts (Berglund, 2002).

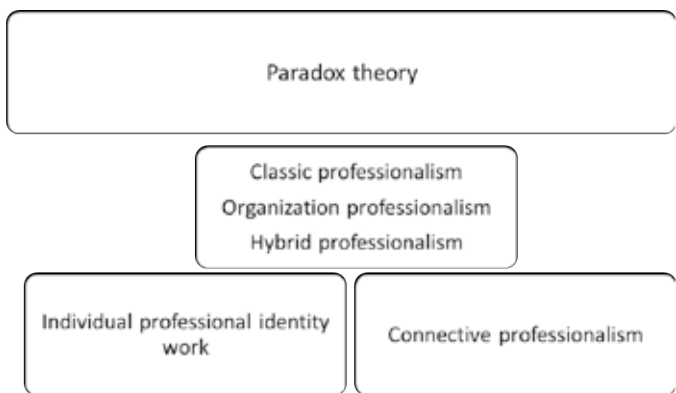


Figure 3.1. Theoretical perspective

PARADOX THEORY

In this thesis, paradox theory has been used in two of the papers when analyzing the tensions experienced by HR practitioners when working according to the business partner model in a Swedish context (Häll, 2024; Häll et al., 2023). Smith and Lewis (2011) define paradox as “contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time: such elements seem logical when considered in isolation, but irrational, inconsistent when juxtaposed” (p. 387). Smith and Lewis (2011) classify organizational tensions and paradoxes into four main categories as representing the core organizational activities of *learning*, *belonging*, *organizing*, and *performing*. These paradoxes and tensions can arise in conflicts concerning roles, unclear missions, and values, but also in relation to power structures and, sometimes, competing goals. Tensions with regard to *learning* mean that the desire to adapt, renew, change, and innovate creates tensions between building on but also destroying the past to create a new future (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Tensions concerning *belonging* refer to “identity creates tensions between the individual and the collective and between competing values, roles and memberships” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383). Tensions related to *organizing* mean that “Structuring and management promote cooperation and competition, empowerment and governance, and control and flexibility” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383). Finally, tensions concerning *performing* refer to “Plurality promotes multiple and competing goals as stakeholders seek different organizational successes” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383).

Several researchers have used Smith and Lewis (2011) in research on HR functions and HR practitioners to analyze the tensions and paradoxes that are always present as inherent elements in the work of HR functions and HR practitioners. Learning tensions arise when HR practitioners try to “break new ground” and expand their scope and influence according to the business partner model (Ulrich, 1997). However, according to Legge (2005) and Gerpott (2015), this has been difficult, as HR practitioners have often proven to be conformists feeling secure in their established knowledge areas and not frequently engaging in exploration activities. The business partner model challenges both HR and line managers by suggesting that HR can play a different role. The business partner model seeks to change the nature of HRM to work toward a more innovative, future-oriented, and value-oriented content. According to Gerpott (2015), HR practitioners are torn between being advocates for the employee’s interests and being the extended arm of the employer, and that the value of HR strategy work is overemphasized in this model. Tensions related to belonging also occur when HR functions and HR practitioners struggle with their roles and the attributes that define them.

According to Link and Mueller (2015), organizing tensions arise in particular when HR departments decide to delegate tasks to line managers or to outsource HRM administration, as well as by the spatial separation of HRM tasks into the “three-legged stool,” which implies splitting the HR function into three different parts (Boglind et al., 2013). There were also tensions between operational and strategic HRM (Keegan et al., 2018), where strategic work has been overemphasized at the expense of operational work, which creates tension in relationships with line managers, but also for HR practitioners finding it difficult to formulate strategic HR work.

PROFESSIONS, PROFESSIONALIZATION, AND PROFESSIONALISM

The professionalization of an occupational field is a complex process, and few practitioners have the power to define their own professional role (Evetts, 2009). Professional groups are subject to pressures, demands, and expectations that they must respond to, such as leadership/management or governing regimes challenging the autonomy within a profession. The HR occupation has a special status as a staff function and has, through HRM/HRT, changed its work from an employee-centered perspective to working on behalf of the employer and through line managers. The HR field has many areas of expertise with both generalists, such as HRBP, and specialists, such as labor law and various consulting fields (e.g., recruitment and management consultants). In this thesis, the concept of professionalism focusing on classic professionalism, organizational professionalism, hybrid professionalism, and connective professionalism is used to explore the pursuit of HR practitioners to strengthen their occupational field.

Research on professionalism has often been based on the study of classic professions, such as doctors and lawyers working in public organizations. These professions have a large measure of autonomy and freedom of action in their professional practice. According to Evetts (2013), the field of professionalism research has been affected by classic professions now also working in private organizations. The boundaries between public and private organizations have been blurred by new forms of cooperation and acquisitions, not least by the concept of new public management (NPM), which, at least in part, sought to make professions more accountable and controllable. A reconceptualization of classic professions has thus been necessary to adapt to new conditions, and the need for a hard boundary between profession and occupation is no longer as important (Evetts, 2013). According to Noordegraaf (2007), the classic professions are under attack and are not only influenced by

NPM, but also by measurement methods and client surveys, as well as by management practices, social change, and consumerism.

For occupational fields considered classic professions, according to scholars such as Evetts (2009) and Svensson (2002), there are clear criteria with regard to what they are supposed to fulfill. A classic profession has at least three dimensions: (1) control of a field of knowledge that is well-defined, delimited, and cohesive; (2) that the positions in working life are controlled and delimited in relation to other occupational groups with a link to scientific, theoretical, and abstract knowledge; and (3) knowledge development linked to professional practice. According to Svensson (2002) and Evetts (2013), degrees, legitimation, and trust are important for representatives of a classic profession to have legitimacy in the eyes of other actors and to be able to create and maintain trust from clients and other important stakeholders. According to Evetts (2009) and Svensson (2002), professionalization is a process seeking to make an occupational field regarded as a classic profession.

THEORIES OF PROFESSIONALISM

Classic/occupational professionalism

Occupational professionalism can be understood as a discourse constructed within professional groups. It is based on collegial authority rather than hierarchical control and is characterized by the practitioners' scope for action and the profession's control over the content and execution of its own work. Another key aspect is mutual trust in practitioners, both from clients and employers. Controlling the work is largely exercised by the practitioners themselves through self-regulation and peer review, and professionalism is maintained through professional ethical principles monitored by professional institutions and associations (Evetts, 2013). Furthermore, according to Friedson (2001), professionalism is based on theoretical and scientifically grounded knowledge.

Organizational professionalism

According to Evetts (2013) and Svensson (2011), there has been a shift from classic professionalism to organizational professionalism, mainly in the public sector due to a shift toward a higher degree of market orientation in these organizations. This has led to an increasing influence of other groups, not least managers, where competence with regard to the specific work is emphasized and where the relationships with others in the organization and bureaucratic rules become more important than the norms and knowledge of the

professional collective, as well as cooperation with other professional groups (Noordegraaf, 2007). In terms of relationships with others, an organizational professionalism focus may be important when different specialists work together to solve shared problems. Other groups affected when organizational professionalism gains influence are customers, users, and patients. Such organizational professionalism may provide greater trust, satisfaction, and security for these groups as well as for employees and organizations (Evetts, 2011)

Hybrid professionalism

Noordegraaf (2007) describes yet another form of professionalism as hybrid professionalism, which arises when profession and management principles are brought together and where professionals know how to work in organized cross-functional environments and make meaningful connections between assignments and organized activities, such as the occupational fields of communication, auditing, and similar occupations such as HR. Hybridized professionalism not only emphasizes professional control (classic professionalism) or organizational control (situated professionalism) but also reflexive control (i.e., reflexive searches for a professional use of professionalism) to create meaningful connections between clients, work, and organized activities.

Connective professionalism

Nordegraaf (2020) has also introduced the element of connective professionalism, as opposed to classic professionalism, as a way of reframing what professionalism might entail while still retaining knowledge claims, authority, and autonomy. One step in the direction of connected professionalism is the hybridization of professionalism, which “means that organizational and managerial logics are combined with professional logics, even in professional work, although ‘combined’ sounds too simple – it implies difficult combinations” (p. 209). Professionalism is not only related to a professional field, but also to how people work and collaborate. Hence, connected professionalism considers the complex interrelationships in organizations, knowledge sharing/development, and decision-making processes, as well as clients and stakeholders, as opposed to more fixed processes in traditional professional organizations.

The individual professional identity work of HR practitioners

The discourse claims of HR practitioners are embedded in broader power and knowledge relations (Foucault, 1980) and affect their ability to pursue their

claims in an organizational context and in relation to other professional groups (Heizmann & Fox, 2019). The professional identity of individual HR practitioners is shaped and regulated in organizations where education, experience, and skills, as well as professional affiliation and hierarchical position, are important, but also how the individual is defined in relation to his/her context and relations (Heizmann & Fox, 2019). In the literature, Heizmann and Fox (2019) use a critical discursive perspective and view HR business partnership as a discursive legitimation project in the struggle of HR practitioners to be legitimized and recognized in their organizations and how HR managers experience positioning themselves as HRBPs. Heizmann and Fox (2019) conclude that the business partner model's recipe for a high-performance HR practice promises more than what HR practitioners can deliver and that "Legitimization, however, was a complex process achieved not only through linguistic choices, but also through the establishment of new HR systems and processes linked to the discourse of 'high-performing organizations'" (p. 2040). Moreover, according to Heizmann and Fox (2019), the interplay between technology and human resource management complicates this struggle for legitimacy, thus requiring continuous adaptation and management by HR practitioners. In addition, HR practitioners navigate between competing discourses on traditional administrative roles and the ambition to enter a strategic partnership. This tension has also created ambiguity and challenged their legitimacy. Finally, the professional identity and space of an occupational group are constructed within power structures and in relation to other occupational groups in an organizational context (Heizmann & Fox, 2019). The positioning work of the HR practitioners with regard to working according to the HRBP role is one example occurring in relation to mainly the line managers and their perceptions of who HR practitioners are, which knowledge they possess, and which role they should play in the organization. This research has been important for my discussion and conclusions on the limitations of HR practitioners in my empirical data.

From another angle, Berglund (2002) has studied the professional identity of HR practitioners from a social constructivist perspective as an ongoing (re)creation process where language and context are central. It is a social process in which rhetorical resources are used. According to Berglund (2002), this identity construction occurs in competition with other professional groups in argumentative contexts and is expressed linguistically by means of reasoning, reflecting, and arguing about the professional role, but also that the social practice affects the possibility of implementing the HR practitioners' claims. Berglund (2002) emphasizes that HR practitioners want to advance their positions and increase their status and influence, while also claiming that HR practitioners in their positioning work encounter resistance from other occupations. For HR practitioners, this has meant a constant positioning effort

with regard to their professional claims, and their collective identity was created based on how they collectively and individually argued for and were able to assert their competence and mission. An occupational group's arena is also shaped and permitted by other occupational groups. In this asymmetric power relationship, there is a struggle for interpretive precedence, organizational status, influence, and power (Berglund, 2002). The pursuit of professionalism among HR practitioners is one of the focus areas in this dissertation.

REFLECTIONS ON THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature shows that HR practitioners have struggled to establish a clear professional identity and direction, a challenge further complicated by the introduction of management models that have not fully gained traction in practice. Paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) has informed my interpretation of interview accounts highlighting the multidimensional tensions between the Swedish HR tradition and the management model implemented in the HR function. The business partner model (Ulrich, 1997) – and particularly the HRBP role – has generated substantial tensions, both in relation to role expectations and the organization of HR work. These tensions have constituted a central analytical focus in this thesis.

However, applying paradox theory entails certain methodological risks. The framework may risk oversimplifying complex organizational processes, which in this study requires careful navigation given the inherent intricacy of HR practices. Moreover, paradox theory often presupposes that paradoxes should ultimately be resolved, rather than understood as dynamic and potentially productive sources of change and development (Keegan, 2018). A further limitation is that the theory may obscure the underlying structures generating tension, such as power asymmetries or gendered expectations, by primarily focusing on surface-level contradictions. To address this, I have incorporated an interpretation-critical perspective (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008), ensuring that these foundational structures remain visible and analytically accounted for.

In order to connect historical and contemporary efforts to professionalize HR, I have drawn on theories of professionalism. This theoretical lens has enabled me to link the professionalization initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s with the introduction of the business partner model in the early 2000s (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), when renewed ambitions emerged to transform

the HR occupation, redefine its professional roles, and address the tensions generated by this shift. In previous research on professional status, these concepts are often used as mutually exclusive categories. In this thesis, however, I have treated them as overlapping concepts and opportunities based on the fact that the professional field has developed a combination of a traditional competence base and included aspects such as management and organizational control methods. By applying the combined perspectives of paradox theory and professionalism, it becomes evident that HR practitioners operate within a field marked by enduring and intersecting tensions, and that the implementation of the business partner model itself introduced new forms of professional tension.

4 METHODS

This chapter presents the overall methodology, sampling strategies, and analytical tools used in this thesis. Various qualitative methods were employed, including qualitative interviews, observations, shadowing, and document analysis. To further broaden the information on Swedish HRM, I have included results from a quantitative study with statistics and analyses from the Cranet survey (2021–2022) (Tengblad, 2023b) in order to supplement the interviews in the third data collection. A critical interpretative approach (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008) has been added to highlight the dominance and power relations inherent in organizations and to address my own preconceptions in the analysis of my empirical material. The latter has been particularly important due to my extensive professional experience in the occupational field and my previous involvement in HR transformation activities in several organizations. An interpretive critical approach reduces the risk of the paradox theory potentially oversimplifying the underlying causes of the tensions I have identified.

INTERPRETIVE CRITICAL APPROACH

In this dissertation, an interpretive critical approach inspired by Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2008) reflexive methodology. This approach has enabled me to focus on questioning and analyzing, rather than confirming established truths, by critically examining them. It combines an interpretive understanding of social meaning (hermeneutics/interpretivism) with an analysis of power relations, ideology, and social change (critical theory). A critical perspective has also been important in questioning and maintaining a distance from my own preconceptions regarding the professional field and case organization.

There are some possible research foci that lend themselves to a critical perspective, such as asymmetrical power relations, male dominance, and hidden conflicts of interest, to mention a few according to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008), all of which are present in the work situation of HR practitioners. Critical theory is also characterized by an interpretive approach combined with a strong interest in questioning the realized social reality. It is also important to develop a specific form of critical thinking by identifying and questioning the assumptions that highlight given patterns of action and thought, as well as recognizing the influence of culture and social position on beliefs and actions. Furthermore, one should also pay attention to different forms of social domination and be skeptical of any knowledge or solution claiming to be the only or best solution or truth. A critical perspective is

necessary as this thesis aims to investigate how HR practitioners assert their professional knowledge and professional field in the era of the HR business partner model. This model for HRM work has had a strong impact on HRM practices in Swedish organizations over the past 25 years. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the asymmetrical relationship between the HR function and line managers, as well as their perception of the HR function's mission and position, and the difference between educators' view of the HR occupation and actual HRM practices. In this context, a critical perspective also means highlighting and balancing claims concerning the alleged functionality of the business partner model and its actual impact in a Swedish context. This area is obviously important given my previous experience with this model, as I have had both positive and negative experiences with the HRT model. As stated by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2008, p. 519), "Researchers need to reflect on their work in relation to the reproduction/questioning of social institutions and ideologies."

Abductive approach

With an inductive research approach, the research starts with fairly unbiased observations without a direct grounding in any particular theory. Categories and concepts are then gradually developed from the collected data. The deductive approach, on the other hand, is based on theory where hypotheses are tested against empirical data. In this thesis, however, I have not relied on inductive reasoning but rather on an abductive research approach, which enables an interplay between theory, empirical data, and my prior understanding, both from the case organization but also from the field in general. By focusing on underlying patterns, abduction differs from induction and deduction in that it creates an understanding and adds new and unique elements to the process. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2008) argue that abduction can be seen as a kind of hermeneutic spiral, which means that data, of which the researcher has a certain prior understanding, are checked against each other. Theoretical and empirical data are thus gradually reinterpreted during the research process, which also includes my prior understanding.

STUDY DESIGN

I have carried out three data collections: two data collections in the same global industrial organization in the automotive industry and one qualitative interview data collection that involved respondents from both the private and public sectors. The data collections were performed on three occasions during a period spanning 17 years. Using different materials and methods enables a multidimensional analysis of the HR occupation and how it is perceived by HR

practitioners and line managers. These studies were carried out during a period of radical change in HR work when HRT was introduced in many private and public organizations in Sweden during the first two decades of the 21st century.

Table 4.1. A methodology overview.

Paper	Design	Data collection	Organization/s	Respondents	Analysis
I	Qualitative case study	Participating observations	Swedish HR function in a global industrial automotive company	HR managers, Senior HR managers	Thematic analysis
II	Qualitative case study	Semi-structured interviews, shadowing	Swedish HR function in a business unit, same as in study I.	HRBP managers, HRBPs, Senior managers, line managers	Thematic analysis
III, IV	Qualitative interview study	Semi-structured interviews	Private and public organizations, consulting firms, non-profit organizations, and universities	HR managers, HR consultants, HR advocacy organizations, university program managers	Thematic analysis

A case study design

A qualitative case study is typically characterized by an inductive and exploratory research logic, in which conclusions are drawn from empirical observations rather than predetermined hypotheses. As noted by Yin (2006, p. 17), case studies are particularly appropriate when the study aims to answer *how* or *why* questions, when the researcher has limited control over the phenomenon being studied, and when the focus is on contemporary events situated within a real-life social context.

Given that data collections I and II were conducted ten years apart, a case study design was especially suitable. It enabled the study to span a longer period and thereby capture the events, developments, and contextual shifts having shaped the current situation, as well as to illuminate why certain actions have succeeded while others have failed.

Furthermore, the case study approach allows the researcher to preserve the complexity and meaningfulness of real-world processes. As Yin (2006, p. 18)

emphasizes, the method supports an understanding of the “wholeness and meaningfulness of real events, such as (...) organizational and management processes.” Unlike research designs that isolate a limited number of variables, case studies make it possible to examine a broad set of interrelated factors linked to the studied phenomenon. This is particularly valuable when the situation is multifaceted and shaped by several interacting influences, as in this study.

Case studies also tend to have heuristic qualities, helping to explain why a problem emerged or why a particular change initiative succeeds or fails (Merriam, 1994). However, this methodology is not without risks. Case studies may become overly detailed and unwieldy or, conversely, oversimplified in ways that obscure important nuances. Such shortcomings may lead readers to draw inaccurate conclusions. In addition, the method places considerable demands on the researcher, who serves as the primary instrument for data collection, interpretation, and analysis. This means that the quality of the study is dependent on the researcher’s sensitivity, reflexivity, and integrity (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

Case organization

The case organization in papers I and II is a large industrial group in the automotive industry. A major organizational change took place in the early 2000s to a global company structure, which affected the HR function in a radical and profound way and led to the restructuring of the entire HR function globally. The HR management team then chose to implement an HRT inspired management model (Ulrich, 1997). The case organization was chosen as it exemplifies how HRT implementation was carried out. Furthermore, this group of companies is well-rooted in the Scandinavian work culture and the “Swedish model” and represents how large private organizations organized their HR functions in the early 2000s. The case organization has undergone several reorganizations during this period of study and had a completely different organizational structure in 2007 compared to in 2017–2018.

DATA COLLECTION

The first data collection

The first data collection was carried out in 2007, concurrently with the implementation of the HRT-inspired management model in the case organization. The primary source of information consisted of participatory observations (Czarniawska, 2007) conducted during five two-day training

programs for future HRBPs and HR practitioners (a total of ten training days). In total, 15 workshops involving 76 participants from 13 subsidiaries and six locations in Sweden were observed, of whom 56 were women and 20 men. There was no deliberate selection of participants, as the sample consisted of the individuals attending the training sessions.

The training programs were part of the rollout of the HRBP role in the Swedish HR organization but also focused on reorganizing the HR function, redefining work practices, and introducing new professional roles. During group exercises on various themes, I took detailed notes on how participants reflected on the extensive changes to their roles, the restructuring of the HR function, and the implementation of new working methods. No audio recordings were made in order to avoid influencing the discussions or increasing the participants' sense of vulnerability during a period of significant organizational uncertainty. Many participants expressed concerns about the new organizational structure, revised work practices, and increased competency requirements, and recordings might have further inhibited an open dialogue.

To complement the observational data, additional background information was gathered from the case organization's Annual Report 2006, internal PowerPoint presentations explaining the HRT change process, and training materials used in the sessions.

Table 4.2. The respondents in the first data collection in training programs in the case organization, February–July 2007.

Number of subsidiaries	Number of workshops	Participants
13 subsidiaries in 6 locations in Sweden	3 workshops per training program. 15 workshops in total	56 women and 20 men A total of 76 participants

The second data collection

For the second data collection, I returned to the same global company group as for the first data collection. The company in the second data collection was chosen for the possibility to conduct interviews at different organizational levels in the HR function and the corresponding line organization. The second data collection was conducted in 2017–2018, focusing on the HRBP role, which had proved to be difficult to establish. In the second data collection, the main source of information was semi-structured interviews and shadowing. It involved a purposive selection of respondents (in total 20, 10 women and 10

men) from HRBPs on different levels (n=10) as well as shadowing HRBPs (n=2). It also included interviews with their clients, the line managers (n=8).

The respondents in the HR function and the line function were chosen from the overall organizational levels to the first line level (i.e., as parallel “funnels” in the respective function) in cooperation with the HR function. The shadowed HRBPs were selected through voluntary participation. Three of the respondents were personal contacts of mine. To obtain background information and company data, additional documents were included, such as the case organization’s Annual Reports 2016 and 2017, leader monitoring tools, and PowerPoint presentations of HR concepts.

Table 4.3. The respondents and their organizational affiliation/level in the second data collection.

HR organization	Line organization
Senior center of expertise managers at the corporate group level – three (3 women)	
Senior HR managers at the group operational level – three (2 women, 1 man)	2nd line managers in central functions at the group operational level – five (4 men, 1 woman)
Senior HRBP managers at a production plant – three (3 women)	2nd line managers at production plants – two (2 men)
HRBPs at production plants – three (2 men, 1 woman), two of whom were shadowed.	1st line managers at production plants – one (1 man)
Total: 12 (9 women, 3 men)	Total: 8 (1 woman, 7 men)

I have been the sole data collector in the first and second data collections. The period 2007–2017 was covered in interviews with three senior HR managers in the second data collection. These senior HR managers have also been involved in the entire HRT implementation process.

The third data collection

The third data collection was completed in 2023–2024 by three researchers. It focused on six main areas and captured the perspectives of HR managers, stakeholder organizations, HR consultants, and program managers for academic HR programs. The focus was to explore which strategies have characterized the professional field of HR practitioners and to shed light on the growing field of HR consulting.

The main source of information was qualitative semi-structured interviews carried out with HR managers in the Center for Global HRM network, consultant managers, program managers for university personnel programs, and advocacy organizations for the HRM field (n=15). The interviews were

carried out on Zoom and Teams to facilitate participation and to use the recording options in the applications.

Table 4.4. The respondents in the third data collection.

HR managers	Consultant HR	Advocacy organizations	University programs, leader development
5 (2 women, 3 men)	3 (1 woman, 2 men)	3 (3 women)	4 (2 women, 2 men)
2 public sector, 3 private sector	3 private sector	Akavia, SSR, HR associations	3 public sector, 1 formerly employed in a public organization, but now in the private sector

In total, the empirical data have been collected from 111 individuals ($n=76+20+15$) over a period of 17 years. The data of HR practitioners is mainly collected from Swedish private sector organizations. In the third data collection, there were five respondents from public organizations.

Reflections on the choice of case organization

There were two reasons for choosing this global industrial organization as a case organization. First, it was chosen as it exemplifies how an HRT implementation was carried out. Second, unless you have knowledge of structures in large organizations and their representatives, it is often difficult to find the right contacts to get access to individuals in an organization. I am familiar with this organization and have contacts in the HR function, which has made it easier for me to get access to people working there. The case organization, the global industrial organization in papers I and II, is large and complex, which means that only selected parts of the HR organization have been included. Furthermore, the change of the HR function in the case organization involves the entire HR organization, its working methods, and its professional roles, which requires that the change/transformation studied is described on a more overall level in this thesis. The analysis and discussion nevertheless offer an insight into how HR practitioners in a large private organization dealt with a complex change in their work organization, work practices, and job roles, and it is still possible to make concrete conclusions. One objection may be that the data collections in papers I and II contained empirical data from one group of companies, which may limit their generalizability. However, I would argue that the results provide an understanding of the complexity of implementing this widespread

management approach to HRM work in Swedish organizations. Furthermore, the results in this thesis can also be recognized in similar organizations, and they have been reconciled with current research.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analyses of the empirical data were inspired by thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clark, 2006) and were carried out after each collection. For papers I and II, however, the final processing was done after the second collection. TA was chosen to identify, analyze, and report patterns in this rich, yet scattered, data set. This kind of analysis presents the researcher with a tool for identifying, coding, and searching for themes and patterns, which allows the researcher to define and decide on the main themes capturing what is important in relation to the overall research question, independent of theory and epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this respect, it differs from other qualitative analytical methods, which seek to describe patterns in qualitative data. In the present dataset, TA allowed for a broad search of dominant themes, and the research questions evolved during the study, especially in relation to the first data collection, which was done by means of participatory observations.

A six-step design process was applied (Braun & Clark, 2006), in which the initial coding extracted the themes in each data collection and produced the next step in order to identify the main themes. The six steps of TA involve familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and, finally, analyzing and reporting the results. Paradox theory (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Keegan et al., 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011) was then used in papers I and II to extract the final themes as a total of five main tensions. The analysis of the main tensions was discussed from an interpretive critical perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008) regarding the presented predominant management model and its application. The data analysis for paper III also drew inspiration from thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), from which the research team identified five trends/themes that formed the basis for the analysis and discussion.

According to Bryman and Nilsson (2018), there are some limitations one needs to be aware of when using TA. The subjectivity in thematic analysis is a potential limitation as it relies heavily on the researcher's interpretations, which can be influenced by his/her biases, preconceptions, and perspectives. These influences can affect the reliability and validity of the results, which is why the researcher needs to recognize and address potential biases in the analysis. Furthermore, a lack of transparency in TA can be a drawback since

researchers may not provide clear, detailed explanations of how themes were identified. This may limit the ability of others to replicate the study or assess the credibility of the findings. The reductionist nature of thematic analysis can be disadvantageous as it oversimplifies data, thus leading to a loss of important nuances and complexity. However, despite these risks, an analytical method was needed that does not delve too deeply into details in order to maintain the holistic nature of the analysis.

Preunderstanding

Qualitative research seeks a deeper understanding of phenomena and events rather than generalizability. Hence, it is important that the researcher is aware of her own preconceptions and prior knowledge and how these may affect interpretations and analyses, while checking with other sources. My previous work experience has given me deep insights into different ways of working, mainly in the private sector and the HR professional field, as well as working as an HR manager at different levels and with the studied companies. I also have experience of working as a line manager in other company groups. These experiences have enabled me to discuss HR practices from an insider's perspective, ask more precise and meaningful questions, and gain a nuanced understanding of their intricate nature. This understanding is particularly useful for interpreting complex phenomena, cultural dynamics, and questioning unspoken norms.

These experiences may have influenced my analysis and contributed to a deeper understanding of contextual conditions and the field. There is a risk of unconsciously interpreting data to fit expectations or preconceptions, which can lead to alternative explanations or results being overlooked. This, in turn, can lead to confirmation bias, where evidence supporting preconceptions is favored, which may distort study results (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2008). In addition, loyalties to former colleagues and the field at large may also arise. An important aspect and challenge of interpreting and analyzing the collected data has been to examine the professional field from an outside perspective despite my insider knowledge. To minimize the impact of potential biases, the research team critically discussed the results and conclusions in each step of the analysis at regular meetings where these issues were raised. Furthermore, two of the papers in the thesis have so far been published and peer-reviewed.

Validity and reliability

By collecting data from different sources, such as interviews, observations, shadowing, and documents, I have gained more nuanced pictures of the phenomena studied. Research triangulation involves examining a research

topic or phenomenon from several different angles, data sources, or methods. Hence, to improve the rigor of research findings, multiple methods and sources of information are combined, while to ensure that the results are realistic (so-called internal validity), methodological triangulation is used (Yin, 2006), which in this research was carried out by the research team, more recent research, and the Cranet survey 2021–2022 (Tengblad, 2023b).

REFLECTIONS ON METHOD AND ETHICS

Participatory observations

Participatory observations mean that the researcher assumes the role of a member in the organization when conducting data collection (Czarniawska, 2007). The choice of this ethnological method came naturally to me as I participated in the HR business partner training courses (two days each on five training occasions) as an observer in February–June 2007. During these training sessions, observations were made of views and comments in dialogue with the participants. The purpose has been to observe how the participants reasoned regarding their changed professional roles, working methods, and organization of the HR function, as well as their need for additional training to take on the new role of HRBP. In this context, I have been an independent but passive actor in the HRBP training courses, which enabled me to follow the course participants and listen to their discussions. At the start of the training sessions, I presented the purpose of my participation and how the findings would be reported, as well as how I would handle the anonymity of the participants. Notes were taken continuously and openly with the consent of the participants. The participants were able to ask questions during the training days as well as afterwards. I have had the opportunity to participate with the same level of knowledge and with the same background and experience as the other participants, which has given me an opportunity to blend into the group. The conditions for this data collection were governed by my form of participation, which emphasized the importance of capturing how the participants experienced this change with as little influence from me as possible. This meant that carrying out interviews was not a choice.

There are risks with this type of participation, as mentioned above, such as my ability to distance myself from my insider knowledge and let my empirical data guide the process. Despite these risks, personal participation through an ethnographic method in a work and group context means an interactive and communicative presence with a strong focus on what is happening in real time, thus offering unique opportunities to obtain richer information: “Participatory

presence means being interactive and communicative with all senses open and alert” (Svensson & Starrin, 1996, p. 14).

Qualitative interviews and documents

Semi-structured interviews were used in the second and third data collection. This decision was made to open up a dialogue with the respondents in an open and trusting way and thereby get information about their work and related challenges. Question themes and advisory interview guides were developed that allowed for greater flexibility in following interesting lines of inquiry and gaining a deeper understanding, but also a more comprehensive material. The interviews lasted for 1.5 to 2 hours per interview and were recorded with the previous consent of the respondent. The interviews in the second and third data collections were conducted as a dialogue with a mutual exchange of experience; information and knowledge were created together with the informants. I have thus benefited from my knowledge of HR practice, the HR professional field, and my experience in leadership. This interview methodology means that knowledge concerning the studied practice is constructed and exchanged in an interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. It is a conversation with structure and purpose and, in this case, with a mutual knowledge of the HR field (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews were transcribed verbatim after each interview, and ad hoc interview analysis techniques were applied to identify patterns and themes.

In the third data collection, we were consistently two interviewers from the research group in each interview, and I participated in all interviews. The presence of two interviewers broadened the dialogue with respondents, and we supported each other in the interview process. These interviews were conducted and recorded via Teams and Zoom, and they were transcribed using transcription tools in Teams and Zoom during the recordings. The decision to conduct interviews via Teams and Zoom enabled interviewees and interviewers to be in different geographical locations. In addition, being able to use audio and video recording offers more possibilities than audio recording alone.

The Teams and Zoom platforms have become increasingly common for interviews due to their time-saving and easy-sharing capabilities. However, there were some drawbacks. We experienced technical glitches during the interviews and in the transcription tool. This meant that the recording itself was important for reference, which ended up being an advantage, as the recordings provide more information and observations than just the dialogue in text form.

To obtain background information on the group of companies in papers I and II, I reviewed company annual reports and presentations on the HRM work governance model that was implemented.

Shadowing

In order to learn more about the daily work of HRBPs, I shadowed two HRBPs for a day each during the second data collection period. I observed the HRBPs during their various meetings and meetings with line managers. I also participated in an employee induction program, one of the tasks of HRBPs. In addition, I also observed a daily meeting with production managers that included a review of the LEAN visual scoreboard and progress reporting. No recordings were made during the shadowing, but notes were taken. Consent was obtained in all meetings. Shadowing offered an opportunity to observe how the HRBPs interacted with managers and the types of issues discussed, which can be difficult to capture in interviews. Shadowing also gives a sense of what a workday can look like. Being out in the field and shadowing people at work (in this case, two HRBPs) offers opportunities to observe what really happens (Czarniawska, 2007). The notes from the shadowing were later transcribed.

Ethical considerations

The data collections in this thesis have not been deemed to require ethical review in line with the Swedish Research Council's guidelines for good research ethics (2017). Participants in all collections have been guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. The usual information concerning purpose, confidentiality, and voluntariness has been given verbally before and in connection with all data collection. Furthermore, I have only worked with anonymized versions of collected data material. There is, however, a link between the respondents and their work organization, and in some cases, there is a risk that someone else in the same organization can figure out who has been interviewed based on the quotes reproduced in the thesis. Only researchers affiliated with the research project in the third data collection have been granted access to the data. However, I am the only one with access to the first and second data collections.

There are inherent risks associated with studying the development of a professional field in which I am personally embedded, both through my previous roles as employee and manager and through my current engagement with respondents who themselves work with strategic issues and professional development in the HR domain. Such proximity may limit the breadth of

external perspectives and increase the risk of reproducing established assumptions, practices, and interpretations of the field.

Although my professional background is primarily situated within HR, I have also had line management positions in other occupational contexts, while also having worked in roles outside the HR occupation. These experiences provide additional vantage points that help counterbalance the risks of professional bias. Moreover, the line manager perspective has been incorporated into the study through interviews with line managers and other relevant stakeholders, including university program managers. The analysis and results have also been discussed on an ongoing basis by the supervisory group.

This triangulation of perspectives contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon and mitigates some of the limitations associated with insider research.

THE CRANET SURVEY

I have used several qualitative methods to collect empirical data. To broaden the picture of Swedish HRM practices, I have also used the results of the quantitative Cranet survey conducted in 2021–2022 (Tengblad, 2023b). The qualitative data from the Cranet survey have presented a fuller picture and a complement to the interview data in the third data collection in this thesis.

The Cranet survey, which began in 1989, is a 38-country survey. It is the most comprehensive survey of HR practices in different countries. The latest survey, conducted in 2021–2022, covered 5,899 organizations, 544 of which were Swedish. Responses came from organizations with 100 or more employees. The proportion of public organizations is slightly higher in Sweden (34%) compared to the other Nordic countries. The Swedish results are compared with those of the Nordic countries and the United States. The US is included due to the fact that models for HR work are often developed influenced by American research and consulting organizations. This thesis mainly references the report “In the Best of Worlds?” on the organization of HR/HRM in Sweden (Tengblad, 2023b).

The Swedish survey was conducted by Kantar SIFO on behalf of the Center for Global HRM, with 544 valid responses from over 2,000 questionnaires sent out, which is an increase of 48% compared to 2015. The response rate in Sweden was approximately 26%, and the responses are considered representative of Swedish working life, with a relatively large proportion of public sector employers and fewer private sector employers, particularly in

industry. The responses from Sweden account for just over 9% of the total number of responses and are in the analysis compared with the Nordic countries, the US, and global data, where most responses come from wealthy countries (Tengblad, 2023a).

5 RESULTS

In the first two data collections, a number of conflicting messages emerged that influenced the work practices of HR practitioners. These messages have been examined using paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) as tensions between the introduced HR business partner model and actual HR work. The first paper focused on the organization of HR work in the case organization, where tensions arose between the HR function's new focus on standardized processes, the tripartite HR organization (Figure 5.1), HR's orientation toward being a strategic and value-creating unit, and the expectations of line managers regarding the HR function and HR work. According to the results, the desire of line managers to have close cooperation with the HR function was overlooked, and their understanding of this new way of conducting HR work was underestimated. Furthermore, the study showed that the tripartite HR function counteracted both the need for knowledge sharing/development and the need for close collaboration with other HR competencies in the HR function.

The second paper highlighted the difficulties and ambiguities related to the strategic HRBP role in the business partner model as it was introduced in the Swedish context. Paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) was used in this paper as well to highlight tensions in this central and important role in the Ulrich model. The result in this paper focuses on the tensions between ideal and real HRM work, as well as ideal competence requirements for HR practitioners and their real competence in a Swedish context. Once again, a collision between Swedish/Scandinavian HRM work and the American origin of the model emerged.

The third paper and the book chapter conclude and focus on the pursuit of professionalism, which was driven by HR interest groups in the 1980s and the 1990s. Five main trends emerged in this data collection. The findings showed that there was a surprisingly strong professional identity based on a people-oriented and social perspective maintained through education and a historical Swedish tradition in human resource management. There was also established research in the HR field and coherent career paths. Other factors influencing the pursuit of HR professionalism and status included decentralized personnel responsibility to line managers and female dominance in the profession, while being included in the organizations' management teams increased the opportunities of HR practitioners to exert influence.

PAPER I

The case organization’s HRT-inspired model for HRM work was process-oriented and based on three organizational units and the support of e-HR. When introducing the tripartite HR organization in 2006–2007, the HR management team chose not to outsource the HR administration to an external party, even though this had been the initial plan. Instead, the service centers were organized within the company group. Figure 5.1 shows the division into three units supporting HRM work while being physically and organizationally separated. The introduction needed support from e-HR. The figure also shows how employees and line managers, as well as HR practitioners, should interact in the model.

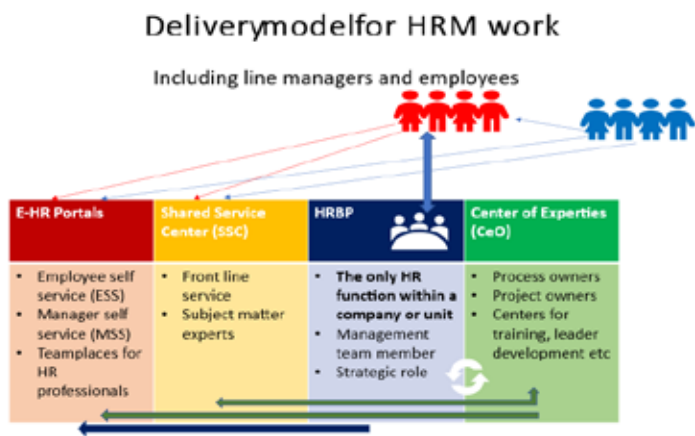


Figure 5.1. The introduced HRT-inspired (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) management model for HRM work in the case organization. Line managers in red and employees in blue.

Most of the HRM administrative work was directed to the service centers and the e-HR tools, such as self-service for managers and employees. The line managers were expected to have direct contact with the service centers and to use e-HR tools to solve their HRM administration, as well as keeping up with updates on HRM policies and guidelines. Employees were expected to use employee self-service and to interact with their line manager to solve their issues.

The center of expertise (CoE) is a global and/or national function working behind the “scenes” and not in direct contact with line managers or employees. The CoE contains HR specialists in, for example, labor relations, labor law, compensation and benefits, and leadership development, to mention a few of the areas of expertise. The CoE develops common policies and guidelines to support the HRM work of line managers and HRBPs, including different training modules and development programs to be introduced in the case organization’s companies and units by the HRBPs through the line management teams.

The third function, the strategic HRBP, is the HR practitioner allocated to a certain unit or company in the case organization and is supposed to work through the line management teams and the line managers, not directly with employees, in accordance with devolved personnel responsibility to line managers (HRBP Target Role, the case organization, 2006).

HRT from the line manager perspective

The transfer of HRM administration to line managers was a controversial solution. The key results from the second data collection showed that the line manager’s workload had increased through the growing need for follow-ups, reporting, and routine HRM administration. The line managers wanted more personal and close contact with their HRBP and to get direct support in HR-related matters, administration, and working with fewer e-HR tools. As line managers found it difficult to get the right administrative support from the service center, it was “bypassed” through local arrangements for training, leadership development, and HRM administration. Line managers would still turn to their HRBP for daily support and assistance, rather than using the service center or the manager’s self-service portal. Another important finding was that the line managers had only been marginally involved, which meant that the altered working methods and roles of HR had not gained acceptance among those affected the most by the change, second only to the HR function. Finally, an important result related to HR’s strategic mission was met with skepticism by the line managers as they believed that the HR practitioners lacked knowledge of the business, but also that they viewed HR competence in general as being more administratively oriented.

Fragmentation of HRM work

The Ulrich model’s division of HRM work into three subunits and e-HR tools (Figure 5.1) did not work smoothly in practical HRM work. An important finding concerning the model’s physical and functional division of HRM work

was that knowledge development, knowledge transfer, and learning had become more difficult within the HR function. The HRBPs also needed closer collaboration with other HR experts in the CoE and service center, while there was an ongoing dismantling of the model to tie the necessary HR expertise and HR administration closer to the HRBPs and the line managers in the studied organization.

Other key findings related to the fragmentation of HRM in the model included that line managers considered the service center to be too remote and standardized, and since e-HR system solutions and platforms were not always synchronized, line managers felt there were too many e-HR tools to manage. Furthermore, the fact that the service center did not have a great deal of knowledge concerning local conditions and practices meant that the service center's services and standard practices did not work all that well for line managers.

PAPER II

The difficult HRBP role

In 2007, the case organization conducted a series of training sessions for prospective HRBPs. The aim of the case organization's HRBP training was to strengthen the HR practitioners as HRBPs, as the HRBP role was an entirely new role for HR practitioners. The HR management team wanted to support the HR practitioners to become a natural, active, and respected member of line management teams. The training for this role should clarify the meaning of the HR business partnering and instill courage and a desire in HRBPs to fully take on the new role and help the future HRBPs to identify skills they may be lacking at present but must acquire to fully shoulder the HRBP role (HRT BP Training Intro, 2007).

After the introduction of the HRBP role in 2007, the focus for HR practitioners changed to HR strategy, finance, coaching, leadership, HR statistics, and following up on HR metrics. According to the case organization's role description (HRBP target role core competencies, 2006), the HRBP role, based on the HRT-inspired model, puts high demands on the HRBP. It required both life and leadership experience, considerable business acumen, strategic thinking, knowledge of all HRM areas, and value creation, as described in the Ulrich model. This change was aimed at raising the status and legitimacy of HR work in relation to line managers. This desire, based on the business partner model, to achieve greater organizational legitimacy has also had negative consequences, as the employee perspective was downgraded for

HRBP. Another important aspect was that the HRBP role has become more oriented toward financial and technical matters, moving away from the more social and employee-oriented issues. HRBPs should primarily coach line managers in leadership issues and be able to translate business and operational decisions into HRM measures, often without having the necessary knowledge of leadership, operations, or business.

The contradictory HRBP role

The introduction of the business partner model led to the development of new core competencies for HR practitioners to match the implementation of the strategic HRBP role in 2007. All 14 core competencies (HRBP target role core competencies, 2006) were identified with a focus on business knowledge, strategic skills, analytical and diagnostic skills, leadership, and communication skills.

According to the objective of the strategic HRBP role, the HRBP should not work on HRM administration, which should be carried out by line managers via e-HR tools and the service center. In practice, the situation looked quite different, and the empirical results presented a very different picture compared to the ideal. Line managers bypassed the service center and went directly to the HRBP when they needed support, rather than calling someone in the center. The HRBP had to balance the situation, and it took good judgment to say no or redirect the task. Nor should the HRBP work directly with employees in accordance with the devolved personnel responsibility. In this regard, HR efforts mainly involve coaching line managers and developing management tools and processes for monitoring and developing employees.

The skill requirements for the ideal HRBP role presented additional challenges. Figure 5.2 below visualizes the traditional HRM knowledge domains in relation to the line managers' knowledge domains. According to the division of HRM work in the business partner model, traditional HRM knowledge and "know-how" were found in the competence center (CeO) and service center, which were separated from the HRBPs. Hence, there were tensions in the competency requirements for the HRBP role through its focus on business knowledge, operational knowledge, and leadership expertise, which in practice belonged to the line managers' domain, both practically and functionally. This was also an area where the HR practitioners had limited experience.

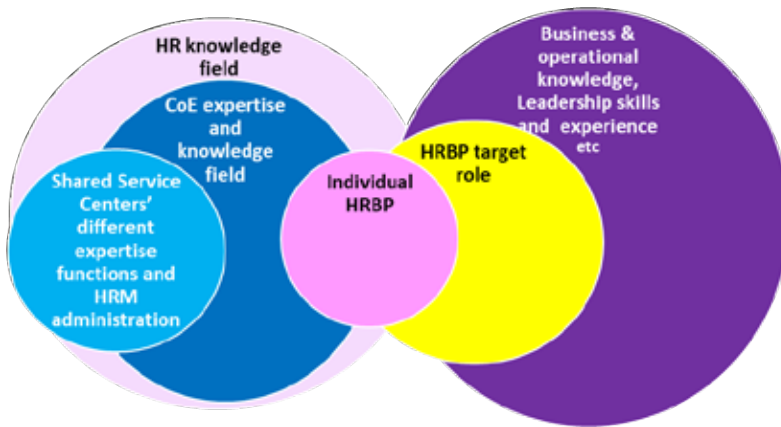


Figure 5.2. a) Actual HR knowledge in relation to leadership skills and operational and business knowledge. b) HR's total knowledge field in relation to the HRBP target role, the individual HRBP, CoE, and SSC. The competence of the individual HRBP may vary widely, which also affects the matching with the competence requirements for the HRBP role.

Another important finding was that the educational background and practical experience of Swedish HR practitioners did not match the HRBP competency requirements in terms of financial, operational, and business knowledge and practical leadership. This lack of competence limited their ability to coach line managers on leadership issues and to participate in the work of the management teams.

PAPER III AND BOOK CHAPTER (IV)

The data collection analyzed in studies III and IV (book chapter) revealed a complex picture in which strategies identified as indicative of seeking professionalism move in different directions. The field of HR has also become increasingly multifaceted, with blurred boundaries between other professional fields or areas of expertise. The analysis is based on four different types of professionalism: classic, organizational, hybrid, and connective.

The empirical results revealed at least five primary trends affecting the professionalism of HR practitioners in Swedish organizations. These trends were identified as themes: (1) uniform training with an emphasis on social sciences; (2) professional identity; (3) involvement in management teams and strategy work; (4) devolved personnel responsibility – the importance of line managers; and (5) size of HR function, career paths, and consulting.

The results show that the efforts to strengthen the HR occupation have contributed to a more homogeneous professional identity. The HR occupation in Sweden has quietly continued to move toward various forms of professionalism through a fairly uniform professional education background, characterized by a knowledge base in behavioral and social sciences, a common professional identity focused on people in organizations, and clear career paths, including a general professional practice rather than organization-specific practices. HR practitioners can move between organizations with relative ease, and their general professional experience often outweighs their organization-specific knowledge. Swedish HR practitioners also mainly pursue careers in the field of human resources, even though a background in human resources is not in all cases an absolute requirement when recruiting HR managers higher up in organizations. We also identified an active strategy driven by individual senior HR managers in their organizations to transform HRM work and the occupational roles of HR practitioners, inspired by the business partner model. The scope for placing an even greater emphasis on classic professionalism than what is already the case appears to be limited. The results also show that HR practitioners need to be active at the individual level in terms of creating acceptance for their professional competence.

Areas that weaken and have a negative impact on the pursuit of professionalism include devolved personnel responsibility, the staff role, and HR's female label. Decentralized personnel responsibility means that most activities developed by the HR function are carried out by line managers, but also how they implement various HR policies and activities. The line managers thus have a relatively large influence and significance. The staff role also means that HR does not have any direct responsibility for implementing various decisions and measures but is primarily a support function. In practice, the focus on people-related issues in organizations involves working with line managers to influence their attitudes and understanding of their employees. A concluding theme mentioned by several respondents was that the HR function has a female label and predominantly female employees, which is perceived as having a negative effect on the status of the HR function and HR practitioners.

Sweden has a high proportion of HR managers belonging to management teams (Tengblad, 2023b). Working in management teams involves opportunities and difficulties, as revealed in the results. The challenge facing many HR practitioners in management team settings concerns raising "people issues," which often requires the ability to relate these to financial matters and operations. Many HR practitioners lack the sufficient knowledge (or interest) to analyze and argue using statistics and financial reasoning. There is also a need to be confident in the individual HR practitioner's area of expertise. This

requires individual professional development of HR practitioners to actively seek to strengthen their skills and secure their place “at the table” in the management teams.

In Sweden, HR departments are usually separate organizational units with a low staffing ratio compared to the other Nordic countries and the United States (Tengblad, 2023b). The increased use of e-HR, outsourcing, and devolved personnel responsibility has had an impact on this development. As a result, an increasing portion of HR professionals work as consultants for external clients. The growth of outsourced HR work and HR consulting has meant that HR practitioners are increasingly working in specialized services.

The research team saw an emphasis on hybrid/organizational-oriented professionalism, given that HR practitioners must respond to the requests of other functions and the needs of line managers concerning tailored support. Individual HR managers also sought to change their organization, inspired by the business partner model. In addition, individual HR practitioners often needed to supplement their skills, as there was also criticism regarding the gap between education and practical work. HR professional organizations have expressed that HR as a knowledge field is unclear to line managers and other stakeholders. HR practitioners thus want support from their unions to increase people’s understanding of the HR knowledge field by informing stakeholders concerning their competence area.

TENSIONS IN THE INTRODUCTION OF HRT FOR SWEDISH HR PRACTITIONERS

The business partner model (Ulrich, 1997) was introduced in Sweden as a “best practice” solution, but its American origins meant that it was poorly adapted to the Nordic work culture, which emphasizes equality, collaboration, and low power distances (Bevort & Einarsdottir, 2021; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004). Research shows that American management theories are based on more hierarchical assumptions, thereby creating a cultural mismatch when transferred to Scandinavian contexts (Brewster et al., 1993; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004). This highlights the importance of considering organizational and national culture when implementing management models developed elsewhere (Filatotchev et al., 2022; Skålen et al., 2005). In this context, four key tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011) have been identified shaping the ability of HR practitioners to assert their expertise and professional domain in Sweden.

T1. Tensions related to tripartite organization and standardization in the business partner model versus the need for local adaptations and close support.

The business partner model separates HRM work into three sub-units supported by standardized e-HR processes (Figure 5.1). This structural fragmentation has created challenges for HR practitioners, as it limits opportunities for internal learning, knowledge sharing, and collaboration. It may also weaken their professional status and legitimacy, but also affect the cooperation with line managers (Häll et al., 2023). At the same time, the model has enabled increased specialization and opened up for external HR consulting, which may strengthen certain HR competencies over time, while there is also a risk of weakening HR professionalism (Link & Mueller, 2015; Nadiv & Kuna, 2024). The service center, designed to handle standardized HR cases, has proven to be too distant from line managers' everyday needs. Its standardized solutions made it difficult to address local variations – such as differing collective agreements – thus resulting in insufficient support for line managers requiring HR expertise familiar with local conditions (Häll et al., 2023).

T2. Tensions related to HR's strategic mission versus line managers' preconceived notions regarding HR's mission and work.

The expectations among line managers regarding the HR function often conflicted with the intentions behind the HR business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). When the model was introduced in Swedish organizations, it shaped ambitions regarding HR's roles, organization, and services (Boglund et al., 2011) and emphasized HR's strategic contribution to organizational value creation (Ulrich, 1997). This shift meant that administrative HR tasks were transferred to line managers and employees through self-service systems and service centers. However, the empirical findings show that line managers questioned HR's strategic aspirations, arguing that HR practitioners lacked sufficient business insight, operational understanding, and leadership experience – competencies that the line managers viewed as essential for supporting managerial work (Häll et al., 2023). Recent research further indicates that line managers tend to value HR expertise and practical support more highly than HR's strategic work (Finnholm et al., 2025).

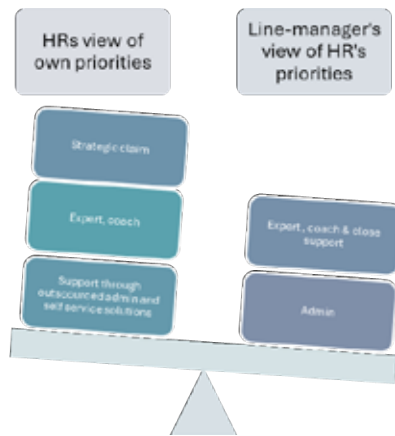


Figure 5.3. Different views of HR's priorities.

The results show that many HR practitioners have had difficulties defining what HR strategic work entails and that they often lack confidence when it comes to using statistics and financial analysis. This, in turn, has limited their opportunities to act as equal partners to line managers and in management teams. The study also showed that HR practitioners need to strengthen their knowledge and more clearly articulate how HR can contribute to the business. This has revealed clear differences in the view of HR's mission, priorities, and the ability of HR practitioners to meet the demands of the HRBP role (Häll et al., 2023; Häll, 2024).

T3. Tensions related to actual HRM work versus ideal HRM work according to the business partner model.

The Ulrich model created opportunities for HR practitioners to engage in new forms of work, while also generating uncertainty concerning the purpose of HR and the competencies required in a Swedish context (Häll, 2024). The introduction of the HRBP role led to a “tug of war” between HR practitioners and line managers regarding who was responsible for HRM administration (Häll et al., 2023). Line managers are expected to have the primary responsibility for all employee-related issues (Tengblad, 2023b), which has created tensions for HR practitioners who must navigate conflicting expectations and a legacy of historically administrative work (Heizmann & Fox, 2019). Additional tensions arise as employees, unions, line managers, and HR practitioners themselves often have traditional views of HR as a function caring for employees and handling administrative matters (Damm, 1993). In contrast, the devolved personnel responsibility means that HR is less directly involved with employees. Instead, HR develops tools and programs to support line managers in carrying out this responsibility.

Working “through others,” in this case through line managers, poses challenges for HR practitioners as they cannot fully control how HR concepts and tools are interpreted or implemented, which affects HR professionalism and legitimacy (Nadiv & Kuna, 2024). At the same time, line managers reported feeling burdened by an increasing number of administrative and follow-up tools (Häll et al., 2023).

T4. Tensions related to HR practitioners’ actual competence versus ideal competence according to the business partner model.

The HRBP role was intended to transform the work of HR managers, yet research shows that it has had a limited impact on the everyday practices of Swedish HR practitioners (Boglind et al., 2011). One important change, however, is that HR practitioners have become more established members of management teams (Tengblad, 2023b). This position remains fragile, as many HR practitioners lack sufficient knowledge of leadership, business operations, and finance, which limits their ability to coach line managers and fully participate in strategic discussions (Häll, 2024). As a result, HR practitioners need to strengthen their capabilities in finance, strategic work, leadership, operational understanding, and business knowledge.

Further tensions arise as the professional expertise of HR practitioners becomes subordinated to organizational demands within the business partner model, which may undermine HR professionalism when organizational priorities override professional judgment (Nadiv & Kuna, 2024; Syrigou, 2018).

6 DISCUSSION

Based on the findings in the studies, I now describe and discuss the general implications and contributions of my thesis from both a theoretical and practical perspective, while suggesting themes for further research.

This dissertation highlights the tensions created by the business partner model with regard to HR practitioners, the HR occupation, and its impact on HR practitioners' pursuit of professionalism and their difficulties in creating a coherent professional identity. The general discussion focuses on possible strategies that HR can use to influence and mitigate the identified tensions.

The overall aim of this thesis is to identify tensions and strategies among HR practitioners in relation to the introduction of HRT and to critically discuss how HR practitioners assert their professional field, roles, and expertise during a period characterized by changes in working methods and organization:

Which tensions arose in the introduction of HRT for HR practitioners in a Swedish context?

Which strategies for professionalism can be observed within the Swedish HR community?

The following is an account of the tensions between the HRT management model and Swedish HRM practice, as well as the strategies for professionalism based on the results of the included studies.

TENSIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORK ROLES FOR HR

The development of the roles of HR practitioners has generated several tensions between the introduction of HRT (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), the decentralized ways of leading and organizing in the Swedish work life, and the professional identity and knowledge base of the practitioners, as discussed below. Why have attempts to professionalize the HR occupation only resulted in limited and uneven outcomes? Why have normative ideas formulated by external actors and promoted to the HR community gained prominence, rather than practices emerging from the HR practitioners' own learning processes and interactions with other organizational actors? These questions have received relatively limited systematic scholarly attention. Instead, prior research has tended to characterize HR practitioners as trend-sensitive (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2014), as experiencing feelings of professional insufficiency (Berglund, 2002), or as in their everyday practices and roles being largely

unaffected by the introduction of the business partner model in the Swedish context (Boglind et al., 2021).

In the international literature, Heizmann and Fox (2019) have analyzed how HR practitioners attempt to discursively shape and legitimize their occupational position within organizations. In a Swedish context, Berglund (2002) has similarly argued that the identity construction of HR practitioners unfolds in competitive and argumentative arenas vis-à-vis other professional groups. Taken together, this body of research portrays a professional field strongly influenced by externally developed, consultant-driven models, while exhibiting a limited collective reflexivity from within the HR occupation itself regarding its desired trajectory and positioning in relation to other occupational groups and organizational functions.

With the introduction of HRM and HRT, driven by senior HR managers, a more strategic and resource-oriented understanding of the objectives of HR work emerged. This shift influenced both the roles and content of HR practitioners' work in many organizations (Boglind et al., 2011) and led to a more calculative orientation.

This thesis shows that the professional identity of HR practitioners is strongly rooted in the behavioral and social sciences and is characterized by a desire to work developmentally with people in organizations. This orientation contrasts with a primary reliance on financial and analytical methods aimed at influencing line managers and comfortably participating in management team work. This professional identity, together with the dominant educational background of HR practitioners, has encountered tensions with the business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) introduced by senior HR managers to transform the HR occupation approximately 25 years ago. The intended shift in professional orientation has only been partially reflected in HR education and training programs. Consequently, the educational background of Swedish HR practitioners differs from that of their counterparts in many other countries, as shown by the Cranet survey (Tengblad, 2023b).

Despite the long-standing presence of the business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) in Swedish organizations, it has not fundamentally altered the professional focus or educational background of HR practitioners, nor how line managers view HR. Instead, it has contributed to persistent tensions in HR practitioners' working methods and uncertainty regarding the content of HR work and the competencies required for the occupation.

THE NEED TO DEVELOP HR PROFESSIONAL ROLES ADAPTED TO THE SWEDISH CONTEXT

The findings from the data collections suggest that there is a need to reconsider how HR professional roles are conceptualized and organized in Swedish organizations. In particular, the results highlight tensions related to the introduction of HR transformation (HRT) models (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), the gap between ideals and practice in the HR business partner (HRBP) role (Häll, 2024), and the competence expectations associated with this role. Taken together, these tensions point toward the need to develop HR professional roles better aligned with the characteristics of HR work and the institutional context of the Swedish labor market. However, the thesis cannot offer any answers as to which professional strategies are the best, but the results indicate that there is a need for more developed strategies capable of reducing tensions between professional roles, the professional competence base, and organizational needs, which can only be achieved through continued professional development work and dialogues with key organizational stakeholders. The goal should be to improve professionalism, develop needed competencies, and avoid the trap of glorifying strategic HR work, instead ensuring that the quest for competent contributions to operational HRM work should be prioritized to a greater extent than what is observed in my empirical material.

HR transformation models and contextual misalignment

The adoption of HR transformation models inspired by the framework proposed by Ulrich (1997) has become widespread across many organizations. These models typically involve a centralized HR structure where HR services are separated into specialized units, such as shared service centers, centers of expertise, and HR business partners (Figure 5.1). While such models have been widely promoted as a way to increase efficiency and strategic impact, the findings indicate that they may not always align all that well with the Swedish organizational context (Skåln et al., 2015).

Swedish organizations are often characterized by devolved responsibility for personnel issues (Tengblad & Andersson, 2024; Tengblad, 2023b) and a strong tradition of local autonomy and collaboration between managers, employees, and unions (Bevort & Einarsdottir, 2021). In such settings, the centralization inherent in the business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) can lead to unintended consequences. The analysis indicates that the need for contextual adaptation has sometimes been neglected, thereby resulting in an overly fragmented HR function. Rather than strengthening the strategic role of HR, this fragmentation may reduce HR's effectiveness in terms of supporting line managers and employees (Häll et al., 2023).

This finding resonates with previous research suggesting that HR models developed in one institutional context may not easily translate to others (Brewster, 2007). In the Swedish context, close proximity between HR practitioners and line managers has traditionally been an important factor in effective HR work (Tengblad & Andersson, 2024). Consequently, HR roles and organizational structures need to be synchronized with the broader leadership and governance philosophy of the organization. In practice, this may imply that providing close operational support to managers should sometimes be prioritized over maintaining a strict adherence to centralized HR models.

The gap between ideals and practice in the HRBP role

Another tension concerns the discrepancy between the idealized description of the HRBP role and the realities of everyday HR work. In the business partner model (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), HR business partners are expected to primarily operate at a strategic level, contributing to organizational development, strategic workforce planning, and change management. However, the empirical material indicates that HRBP work in practice is largely operational (Gerpott, 2015; Häll et al., 2023; Keegan, 2018), but also that HR work is carried out at different organizational levels that are more operational, which affects HR's work as well as line manager's work.

HR practitioners working as HRBPs frequently handle a wide range of tasks, including labor law issues, recruitment processes, organizational changes, and support for managers in everyday personnel matters. As a result, the role often becomes both demanding and difficult to manage, given the breadth of competencies required and the high workload associated with supporting multiple managers (Häll, 2024; Tengblad, 2023b).

This finding reflects a broader critique in the HRM literature. Several studies have shown that the strategic aspirations of HR roles often coexist with the substantial volume of operational HR and HR-related work (Caldwell, 2008; Wright & Ulrich, 2017). In practice, organizations continue to rely heavily on HR practitioners for hands-on support in complex employment-related situations. Consequently, the expectation that HR practitioners should primarily operate as strategic partners may be unrealistic.

From this perspective, the strong emphasis on strategic HR roles may have overshadowed the importance of operational HR expertise. Rather than viewing operational work as a lower-status activity, it may be more productive to recognize it as a central component of HR work. This implies a need for HR roles that more clearly reflect the operational nature of HR work, and that one

may assume that skilled operational HR work is very important for an HR function that can also create value.

Competence requirements and professional development

A third tension concerns the competence requirements associated with the HRBP role. The analysis suggests that many HRBPs lack experience from managerial positions or in-depth knowledge of the organization's financial and strategic processes (Häll, 2024). This can make it difficult for HR practitioners to gain credibility in strategic discussions with senior managers.

At the same time, the organizational conditions for developing such strategic competence are often limited. When HR practitioners are heavily involved in operational support activities, they have limited time or opportunities to engage in strategic work. As a result, dissatisfaction may emerge both within the HR function (Häll, 2024) and among organizational stakeholders who expect HR to contribute more strategically.

This situation raises questions regarding how competence requirements for HR professionals are formulated. If HR work is mainly operational in nature, but also requires HR expertise, it may be more appropriate to emphasize the development of highly qualified HR practitioners with a strong expertise in industrial relations, organizational processes, and management support, and that HR practitioners work at multiple levels. In other words, organizations may benefit more from investing in competent "HR experts" rather than primarily seeking strategic HR architects or advisors.

Implications for the development of HR roles

Taken together, these tensions suggest that HR roles need to evolve in ways that better reflect both the realities of HR work and the institutional characteristics of the Swedish labor market. Instead of implementing standardized HR transformation models, organizations may need to design HR roles that are more contextually grounded, while also considering the organizational level and focus.

Several implications follow from this argument. First, HR structures should enable a close collaboration between HR practitioners and line managers with a focus on solving operational HR issues. Second, operational HR expertise should be recognized as a core professional competency rather than a residual activity. Third, HR career paths may need to recognize different types of expertise, including both operational and strategic roles.

To sum up, the results support the argument that HR professionalism needs to be reconsidered in light of the actual conditions in which HR work is

performed, especially within a Swedish context with relatively decentralized structures. Developing HR roles that are better adapted to the organizational context, but which also elevate HR expertise and the operational nature of HR work, may increase both the effectiveness of HR functions and the sustainability of HR professional careers.

Professionalization strategies for HR practitioners in the future: is it possible to balance classic/occupational, organizational, and connective professionalism?

The analysis suggests that HR practitioners often demonstrate strong elements of classic/occupational professionalism characterized by a shared knowledge base, relatively homogeneous educational backgrounds, and a clearly defined professional identity (Häll et al., work in progress paper). At the same time, the results indicate that HR experts have found it difficult to establish organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2013) based on the ambition to develop closer collaboration with line managers and to work inclusively with other professional groups, which creates a connecting professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2020). These orientations relate to the ability to adapt HR work to organizational contexts, on the one hand, and to collaborate across professional boundaries (Nadiv & Kuna, 2024), on the other. This raises the question of which strategic choices HR practitioners should consider in order to strengthen their professional legitimacy and effectiveness.

A stronger organizational professionalism?

One potential development path concerns strengthening organizational professionalism. In this perspective, HR practitioners need to move beyond a purely profession-centered understanding of their role and instead position themselves as contributors to organizational value creation (Ulrich, 1997). This requires a stronger emphasis on understanding organizational strategy, business processes, and operational realities (Häll, 2024; Häll et al., work in progress paper).

An important implication concerns training and skills development. While HR training has traditionally focused on the social sciences and core areas such as labor law, recruitment, and organizational development, there may be a need to put more emphasis on contextual knowledge. This includes familiarity with the organization's value creation processes, financial conditions, and industry dynamics. Such knowledge enables HR practitioners to better translate HR expertise into solutions that resonate with organizational priorities.

Another aspect concerns career development. Traditional HR career paths often remain largely confined within the HR function (Tengblad, 2023b).

However, strengthening organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2013) may require more intra-organizational mobility. Temporary assignments in operational roles, project leader positions, or managerial roles outside HR may help HR practitioners develop a deeper understanding of organizational realities. This type of mobility may also enhance the credibility of HR professionals when interacting with line managers and senior leaders.

At the same time, organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2013) comes with its own challenges. HR practitioners must maintain a balance between adapting to organizational priorities and preserving the integrity of professional standards (Evetts, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2007). Excessive adaptation may risk undermining HR's independent professional perspective (Syrigou & Williams, 2023). Consequently, strengthening organizational professionalism requires that HR practitioners develop their ability to integrate both organizational and professional forms of knowledge. In my opinion, good contextual knowledge is very important to do a good job, but HR practitioners' unique knowledge base should revolve around more classic HR professional tasks that they are better at than any other organizational function.

Awareness and implications of connective professionalism: the possibilities for strengthening a connective approach

A second development path involves strengthening connective professionalism. Contemporary organizations are increasingly characterized by cross-functional collaboration, complex problem-solving, and distributed forms of expertise. In such contexts, HR practitioners rarely operate in isolation but instead need to work closely with other professional groups, such as finance specialists, IT professionals, line managers, and external consultants. They also need to work more seamlessly with other HR competencies within the HR function to mitigate the effects of the tripartite HRT model (Häll et al., 2023).

Connective professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2020) emphasizes collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and the co-creation of solutions across professional boundaries. This orientation implies a shift from clearly defined professional roles toward more fluid and hybrid forms of work. In such settings, the ability to collaborate, facilitate dialogue, and integrate different types of expertise may become as important as formal HR knowledge.

Educational backgrounds may thereby become more diverse. Rather than expecting HR practitioners to share a uniform educational profile, organizations may benefit from recruiting individuals with different disciplinary backgrounds who may contribute to complementary perspectives. For example, an expertise in psychology, strategy development, organizational

sociology, finance, data analytics, or digital technologies can enrich the HR function's ability to address complex organizational challenges.

However, connective professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2020) also introduces new challenges. Collaborative work across professional boundaries requires time, coordination, and mutual understanding. In practice, organizational time pressure and hierarchical structures may limit opportunities for genuine collaboration. Moreover, HR practitioners may risk losing influence if other professional groups dominate cross-functional initiatives (Nadiv & Kuna, 2024). Consequently, HR practitioners need to develop strong facilitation and boundary-spanning skills to maintain their relevance in collaborative settings.

Preserving the strengths of occupational professionalism

While strengthening organizational and connective professionalism is important, it is equally important not to neglect the strengths associated with occupational professionalism. A shared professional identity, a coherent knowledge base, and common professional norms represent an important foundation for professional legitimacy (Evetts, 2007). Without such a foundation, HR practitioners risk becoming general organizational actors without a clearly defined area of expertise. Hence, the challenge is not to replace classic/occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2007) but to complement it with stronger organizational and connective capabilities. Classic/occupational professionalism is also very important for developing and maintaining expertise in operational HR work, which is based more on "HR craftsmanship" than the more strategic focus of the business partner model. It may also be a better match between HR's professionalism and the preferences of line management, as shown in paper II in this thesis.

One way to achieve this balance is to conceptualize HR professionalism as consisting of three interrelated competence domains:

1. **Classic/occupational expertise**, grounded in HR-specific knowledge such as labor relations, labor law, sustainable work conditions, compensation and benefits, organizational development, and people management.
2. **Organizational understanding**, including knowledge of operations, organizational needs, and how HR may create value.
3. **Collaborative capability**, referring to the ability to work effectively across professional boundaries and solve complex tasks such as strategic integration, digitalization, and organizational change and development.

Developing all three domains may enable HR practitioners to navigate the increasingly complex expectations placed upon them.

Possible strategic choices for HR practitioners

Based on the analysis in this thesis, I now suggest some strategic choices that HR practitioners and HR functions may need to consider:

1. **Broadening competence profiles** to include both HR expertise (HR's core competence) and organizational understanding.
2. **Encouraging intra-organizational mobility** to strengthen HR practitioners' insight into operational realities, such as enabling HR practitioners to work in line functions.
3. **Developing collaborative and facilitative capabilities** that enable HR practitioners to work effectively across professional boundaries.
4. **Maintaining a clear professional core**, ensuring that HR retains a distinctive and expertise-based contribution to organizational performance and employee well-being.

Rather than viewing the three forms of professionalism as mutually exclusive, HR practitioners may benefit from adopting a hybrid approach (Noordegraaf, 2007) that integrates elements from HR expert knowledge with organizational, contextual knowledge. Such an approach acknowledges that effective HR work requires professional expertise, organizational sensitivity, and collaborative capability.

Concluding reflection

The development of HR professionalism thus involves navigating tensions between professional autonomy, organizational alignment, and cross-professional collaboration. I here argue that the challenge for HR practitioners is not to choose one of these orientations but to develop the capacity to combine them in ways that support both organizational performance and the long-term legitimacy of the HR occupation, based on good occupational skills, an operational and organizational understanding, and good collaboration skills with an open and learning mindset.

TENSIONS BETWEEN ROLES, EXPECTATIONS, AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing discussion in the HRM literature regarding the evolving role of HR practitioners and the persistent tensions between strategic ambitions and the operational realities of HR work. While previous research has often highlighted the increasing strategic importance of HR functions (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), the

present analysis suggests that such ambitions may coexist with organizational and occupational tensions limiting the realization of this strategic role in practice.

Revisiting the strategic HR business partner role

A key contribution of the study concerns its empirical illustration of the gap between the idealized business partner model, the HR business partner (HRBP) role, and the everyday work performed by HR practitioners. Previous research has repeatedly pointed to the aspirational nature of the strategic partner role, arguing that HR functions should seek more influence with regard to organizational strategy and value creation (Ulrich, 1997). However, several studies have also noted that HR practitioners continue to spend a significant portion of their time on operational and administrative tasks (Caldwell, 2008; Gerpott, 2015; Keegan & Francis, 2019).

The findings in this thesis reinforce this critique by demonstrating how the expectation of a strategic HR role may be difficult to realize in organizational contexts characterized by a strong demand for operational support from line managers (Häll et al., 2023). Rather than replacing operational HR work, the strategic role appears to be layered on top of existing responsibilities, thereby creating role strain and ambiguity for HR practitioners (Häll, 2024; Tengblad, 2023b). In this sense, the findings support earlier arguments that the business partner model may represent more of a normative aspiration than a reflection of organizational realities.

Contextualizing HR transformation in institutional settings

A second contribution relates to the contextualization of HR transformation models (Skålén et al., 2015). Much of the literature on HR transformation and HRBP roles has been developed in Anglo-American contexts where organizational structures and managerial practices (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004) may differ from those found in Nordic labor markets. By highlighting the tensions arising from the implementation of centralized HR structures in a decentralized Swedish organizational context, the findings contribute to the growing body of research emphasizing the importance of the institutional and cultural context in HRM design (Brewster, 2007).

In particular, the Swedish tradition of devolved personnel responsibility and a strong collaboration between managers, employees, and unions creates conditions where a close HR support to line managers remains essential (Bevort & Einarsdottir, 2021). In such contexts, highly centralized HR structures may undermine the relational and context-sensitive aspects of HR work. The findings thus suggest that HR organizational models need to be

adapted to local governance traditions rather than being adopted as some kind of universal best practices.

Reframing HR professionalism

A third contribution concerns the professionalization of HR work. The analysis indicates that HR practitioners often operate in a field characterized by competing expectations: they are expected to simultaneously serve as strategic advisors, operational problem solvers, organizational facilitators, and professional experts in employment-related matters. This multiplicity of expectations creates tensions that shape how HR professionalism is enacted in practice.

The thesis contributes to the literature by suggesting that HR professionalism may need to be understood as a hybrid form combining elements of classic/occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2013) and organizational professionalism, supplemented by connective professionalism. While previous research has often focused on the strategic positioning of HR functions, the findings here highlight the importance of recognizing operational HR expertise as a core component of professional competence. In doing so, the thesis echoes recent calls to reconsider the value of “HR craftsmanship” and practical expertise in managing employment relations and organizational processes.

Implications for designing HR roles

Finally, the findings contribute to ongoing debates on the future design of HR roles. Rather than assuming a linear transition from operational to strategic HR roles, the results suggest that HR functions may need to embrace more pluralistic role configurations. This may involve recognizing that different types of HR expertise – strategic, operational, and relational – are all necessary for effective HR work.

In this sense, the thesis challenges overly simplified narratives of HR transformation, instead highlighting the importance of aligning HR roles with the organizational context, managerial expectations, and the practical realities of HR work.

THEMES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the themes addressed in this thesis, it is possible to identify several avenues for future research. These suggested directions aim to deepen our understanding of the HR occupation and its conditions with regard to

professionalism, influence, and legitimacy, particularly in a Scandinavian and Swedish context.

The gendered label of the HR occupation

The HR occupation has for a long time been associated with a feminine label, and the field is predominantly staffed by women. Previous research has suggested that this gendered positioning may have an impact on HR's opportunities to gain status, legitimacy, and influence within organizations. While this assumption is frequently mentioned in the literature, empirical investigations remain limited. Future research could further explore how gendered perceptions of HR shape its professional status and influence in contemporary Swedish organizations, taking into account the distinctive features of the Swedish HRM model and broader social norms regarding gender equality.

HR practitioners' work in management teams

Participating in management teams at different organizational levels constitutes a key arena for HR practitioners' work and influence. At the same time, this arena has been identified as a potential Achilles heel in terms of perceived competence, experience, and role clarity. Future studies could investigate the types of issues HR practitioners actively pursue in management team settings and examine whether their contributions tend to remain within established and "safe" HRM domains or whether they extend to challenging broader managerial decisions and strategic priorities. These kinds of studies would offer valuable insights into the boundaries and possibilities of HR having influence in organizational governance.

The value and legitimacy of HR

A recurring challenge for researchers and practitioners alike concerns the difficulty of articulating the contribution of HR to organizational performance beyond its administrative and specialist functions. While HR's value creation is widely assumed to exist, it often remains difficult to demonstrate empirically, particularly in terms of direct and quantifiable effects on organizational outcomes. HR practitioners are deeply involved in a range of complex and consequential processes, such as industrial relations and union negotiations, sustainable working conditions, organizational restructuring by means of downsizing and upsizing, dismissal and performance management processes, rehabilitation cases, leadership development, people and competence management, crisis management, and business transfers. These activities require substantial professional judgment, contextual knowledge, and relational competence, yet their outcomes are rarely reflected directly in traditional performance indicators or "bottom-line" measures.

HR practices in private and public organizations

Comparatively little is known when it comes to how HR work differs between private and public sector organizations. Future research could examine similarities and differences in HR practices, roles, and professional challenges across these sectors. Analyzing how institutional conditions, governance structures, and organizational missions shape HR work in private versus public organizations would enhance our understanding of contextual variations in HR professionalism.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the studies included in this dissertation—the published papers I and II (Häll et al., 2023; Häll, 2024), book chapter IV, and the as-yet-unpublished paper III—the following conclusions are drawn:

Taken together, the thesis contributes to the HRM literature in three principal ways. First, it provides empirical insight into the persistent gap between strategic HR ideals and operational practice. Second, it highlights the importance of contextualizing HR organizational models in specific institutional settings. Third, it advances the discussion on HR professionalism by emphasizing the need to integrate professional expertise, organizational understanding, and collaborative capabilities in the design of HR roles.

By bringing these perspectives together, the thesis offers a more nuanced understanding of the tensions shaping contemporary HR work, while also suggesting that the future development of HR roles requires paying greater attention to both the organizational context and the operational foundations of HR practice.

By applying a professionalism perspective, this thesis shifts the perspective from individual HR roles to the underlying strategies through which HR practitioners seek legitimacy, authority, and relevance within organizations. The analysis suggests that HR professionalism can be understood as involving different professional orientations, including occupational professionalism (grounded in a shared professional knowledge base), organizational professionalism (emphasizing alignment with organizational priorities), and connective professionalism (focusing on collaboration across professional boundaries).

An important contribution of the thesis involves demonstrating that these different strategies are not easily reconciled. Instead, they often generate tensions shaping both the organization of HR work and the expectations placed on HR practitioners. To capture these dynamics, the thesis draws on paradox and tension theory, which emphasizes how organizations frequently face competing but interdependent demands that cannot be permanently resolved.

Applying this theoretical lens reveals that HR practitioners operate in a field characterized by several persistent tensions. For example, classic/occupational professionalism emphasizes the development of a shared professional identity and knowledge base, yet such an orientation may risk distancing HR practitioners from the organizational contexts in which they operate. Conversely, organizational professionalism strongly encourages adapting to

organizational priorities, whereas excessive alignment may weaken the distinctiveness of HR expertise and undermine professional autonomy. Similarly, connective professionalism emphasizes collaboration and boundary-spanning work, yet such openness may blur professional roles and reduce the influence of HR practitioners in cross-functional settings.

Hence, the study contributes by conceptualizing HR professionalism as a field characterized by multiple and sometimes competing professionalism strategies. Importantly, these tensions are not merely theoretical constructs but have practical implications for how HR roles are enacted in organizations. When organizations or HR functions emphasize one professionalization strategy without recognizing the resulting tensions, implementation challenges may arise. For instance, attempts to strengthen strategic HR roles may fail if HR practitioners remain heavily involved in operational work, while initiatives aimed at strengthening cross-functional collaboration may be undermined by unclear professional boundaries or competing professional interests.

In this sense, the thesis highlights how tensions between different strategies may lead to implementation problems that may ultimately prevent such strategies from achieving their intended outcomes. Rather than viewing these tensions as temporary obstacles, the results suggest that they are structural features of modern HR work but also opportunities for change and development. Consequently, the challenge for HR practitioners is not to eliminate such tensions but to recognize and manage them.

By integrating a perspective of professionalism with paradox and tension theory, this thesis thus contributes to the HRM literature in two ways. First, it introduces a more explicit analytical framework for understanding HR professionalism as a multi-dimensional and contested process. Second, it demonstrates how tensions between different professionalism strategies may shape both the possibilities and limitations of HR role development in contemporary organizations.

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9 APPENDIX

The HRBP general role description the case organization (HRBP target role core competencies, 2006).

HRBP general job description	HRBP general skill requirements
○ The HRBP should be a business partner for line managers and a member of the line management teams. ○ The HRBP should develop HR actions to meet business challenges, be proactive in HR strategy development, and monitor and follow up HR metrics. ○ The HRBP should support the line managers, operations, and business in HRM work. ○ The HRBP should act as a coach for the line managers in personnel and leadership matters.	○ Have analytical and diagnostic skills ○ Be business-focused ○ Have operational knowledge ○ Have a capacity for strategic thinking ○ Be a coach and facilitator to line managers ○ Have good communication abilities ○ Be skilled in conflict resolution ○ Have leadership and influencing skills ○ Be able to foster teamwork ○ Be service-oriented ○ Be knowledgeable in HRM work

Interview guides for the second and third data collections. In Swedish.

INTERVJUGUIDER

Intervjuguide, andra datainsamlingen 2017/2018

Presentation av forskningsprojektet

Informera om; Anonymitet (inget skall kunna kopplas till intervjupersonen, arbetsplatsen, orter osv) Sammanställning av intervjun till intervjupersonen? Är det ok att spela in intervjun? Informanten får hoppa över frågor eller avsluta intervjun när denne så önskar. Materialet kommer att anonymiseras och varje deltagande chef kommer att få en pseudonym i materialet.

Bakgrund och organisatorisk kontext

- Kan du kort beskriva organisationen och din roll i den?

- Hur är HR-funktionen organiserad i din verksamhet?
- Vem rapporterar HR-chefen till?
- Hur ser relationen mellan HR och ledningen ut?

HR-funktionens uppdrag och roller

- Vilka är HR-funktionens respektive HR-chefens viktigaste uppgifter?
- Vilka HR-roller finns i organisationen idag?
- Vad utmärker idag:
 - HR-chefsrollen?
 - Personalchefsrollen?
 - HRBP-rollen?
- Har HR-rollerna blivit mer specialiserade över tid?
- Har HRBP-rollen tagit över personalchefs-/HR manager-rollen?
Varför/varför inte?

Arbetsuppgifter

- Vilka är dina viktigaste arbetsuppgifter?
- På vilket sätt arbetar du med linjecheferna?
- Sitter du i en ledningsgrupp?
- Hur arbetar du i så fall i ledningsgruppen? Vilka frågeställningar driver du/HR?

Yrkesidentitet

- Skulle du säga att HR medarbetarna har en tydlig identitet i er organisation?
- Har denna identitet stärkts eller förändrats över tid?
- Har HRBP rollen ändrat denna identitet?

Kunskap, utbildning och legitimitet

- Vilken typ av kunskap uppfattas som central för HR-arbetet?
- Är personalvetarutbildning ett krav och/eller en kvalitetsmarkör?

- Vilka andra utbildningsbakgrunder accepteras?
- Finns ett tydligt avgränsat kunskapsområde för HR?
- Upplever HR att deras kompetens respekteras utanför HR-funktionen?

Karriärvägar och status

- Vilka karriärvägar finns för HR-medarbetare hos er?
- Är HR en slutstation eller språngbräda till andra roller?
- Hur uppfattas HR-yrkets status i relation till andra yrken?
- Har statusen förändrats över tid?
- Finns föreställningar om HR som ett "feminint" yrke? Vad har i så fall påverkat detta?

Svårigheter i HRs roll

- Vilka områden upplever du som komplexa eller problematiska i din vardag? Hur hanterar du detta?

Intervjufrågor HR chefer, tredje datainsamling 2023/2024

1. Bakgrund och organisatorisk kontext

Huvudfrågor

- Kan du kort beskriva organisationen och din roll i den?
- Hur är HR-funktionen organiserad i er verksamhet?

Följdfrågor

- Vem rapporterar HR-chefen till?
- Hur ser relationen mellan HR och ledningen ut?

2. HR-funktionens uppdrag och roller

Huvudfrågor

- Vilka är HR-funktionens respektive HR-chefens viktigaste uppgifter?
- Vilka HR-roller finns i organisationen idag?

Följdfrågor

- Vad utmärker idag:
 - HR-chefsrollen?
 - Personalchefsrollen?
 - HRBP-rollen?
- Har HR-rollerna blivit mer specialiserade över tid?
- Har HRBP-rollen tagit över personalchefs-/HR manager-rollen?
Varför/varför inte?

3. HR:s yrkesidentitet och professionalisering

Yrkesidentitet

Huvudfrågor

- Skulle du säga att HR-yrkena har en tydlig identitet i er organisation?

Följdfrågor

- Har denna identitet stärkts eller förändrats över tid?
- Finns det en upplevd yrkesstolthet bland HR-medarbetare?

Professionalisering

Huvudfrågor

- Finns det ett intresse hos dig/er av att HR-yrken ska betraktas som professioner?

Följdfrågor

- Vad skulle HR vinna på att få status som profession?
- Arbetar man aktivt för professionalisering – i så fall hur?

- Finns det en ”kåranda” eller lojalitet inom HR-yrket?

4. Kunskap, utbildning och legitimitet

Huvudfrågor

- Vilken typ av kunskap uppfattas som central för HR-arbete?

Följdfrågor

- Är personalvetarutbildning ett krav eller en kvalitetsmarkör?
- Vilka andra utbildningsbakgrunder accepteras?
- Finns ett tydligt avgränsat kunskapsområde för HR?
- Upplever HR att deras kompetens respekteras utanför HR-funktionen?

5. Karriärvägar och status

Huvudfrågor

- Vilka karriärvägar finns för HR-medarbetare hos er?

Följdfrågor

- Är HR en slutstation eller språngbräda till andra roller?
- Hur uppfattas HR-yrkets status i relation till andra yrken?
- Har statusen förändrats över tid?
- Finns föreställningar om HR som ett ”feminint” yrke? Vad har i så fall påverkat detta?

6. Konsultifiering och digitalisering

Huvudfrågor

- I vilken utsträckning använder ni externa HR-konsulter eller outsourcar HR-processer?

Följdfrågor

- Vilka processer outsourcas – helt eller delvis?

- Vilka HR-processer kan inte outsourcas?
- Hur påverkar konsultanvändning HR-rollerna?
- Hur ser du på digitaliseringen av HR-tjänster?
- Hur förändrar digitalisering HR-yrkets innehåll och kompetenskrav?

7. Nationella och institutionella influenser

Huvudfrågor

- Vad har påverkat utvecklingen av HR-yrken i Sverige?

Följdfrågor

- Finns det tongivande HR-förebilder eller modeller?
- Skulle du säga att det finns en svensk/nordisk HR-identitet?
- Vilken betydelse har managementkoncept och HRM-modeller haft?

8. Framtiden

Huvudfråga

- Hur tror du att HR-yrket och HR-funktionen kommer att utvecklas de kommande åren?

Avslutning

- Finns det något viktigt kring HR-yrket som vi inte har berört?

Intervjufrågor Intresseorganisationer, tredje datainsamling 2023/2024

1. Inledning och kontext

Organisation och roll

- Kan du kort beskriva organisationen och din roll i den?
- Vilka HR-yrkesområden eller yrkesgrupper organiserar ni?
- Är ni en medlemsorganisation – och i så fall, för vilka?
- Hur många medlemmar/anslutna har ni ungefär?

2. HR-yrkenas roller och identiteter

Yrkesroller

- Hur skulle du beskriva de centrala HR-rollerna idag, exempelvis:
 - HR-chef
 - Personalchef
 - HR Business Partner
- Vilka andra HR-roller är vanliga idag?

Utveckling och differentiering

- Upplever ni att HR-rollerna har blivit mer specialiserade över tid?
- Har HRBP-rollen delvis tagit över personalchefs-/HR manager-rollen?
 - Vad har i så fall drivit den utvecklingen?

3. Professionalisering av HR-yrken

- Hur skulle du beskriva HR-yrkenas professionaliseringsprocess under 2000-talet?
- Hur ser professionaliseringssträvandena ut idag?
- Vilka aktörer driver dessa strävanden?
- Finns det uttalade professionaliseringsstrategier?
 - Vilka har fungerat väl?
 - Vilka har varit mindre framgångsrika?

4. Kunskap, utbildning och kompetens

Utbildning

- Är Personalvetarlinjen ett krav eller en kvalitetsmarkör för HR-arbete?
- Om inte – vilka andra utbildningsbakgrunder ses som relevanta?

Kunskapsområde

- Finns det enligt er ett tydligt ”inmutat” kunskapsområde för HR?
- Upplever HR-praktiker att deras kompetens respekteras även utanför HR-funktionen?

Kunskapsutveckling

- Har HR-yrkena blivit mer kunskapsintensiva under 2000-talet?
- Vilken betydelse har HRM-forskning för praktik och kunskapsutveckling?
- I vilken riktning utvecklas HR-kunskapen?

5. Gränser, identitet och kåranda

- Upplever du att HR-yrket har en tydlig yrkesidentitet?
- Har denna identitet stärkts över tid?
- Finns det en känsla av yrkesstolthet bland HR-praktiker?
- Finns det lojalitet eller ”kåranda” inom HR-yrket?

6. Status och karriär

Hur uppfattas HR-yrkets status idag?

- Har HR-yrkets status förändrats över tid?
 - Vad har i så fall påverkat detta?
- Hur ser karriärvägarna inom HR ut?
 - Finns det reglerade karriärvägar, certifieringar eller professionella förbund?
- Uppfattas HR fortfarande som ett feminint kodat yrke?

7. Konsultifiering och marknadsiering

- I vilken omfattning används externa HR-konsulter?
- Finns det en trend att outsourca hela eller delar av HR-processer?

- Vilka HR-roller påverkas mest av outsourcing eller konsultanvändning?
- Hur stor andel av era medlemmar arbetar som HR-konsulter?
- Ser ni att konsultanvändning förändrar HR-yrkenas innehåll eller identitet?
 - Kan du ge exempel?

8. Nationella och institutionella influenser

- Vad har främst påverkat utvecklingen av HR-yrken i Sverige?
- Finns det tongivande HR-förebilder eller institutioner?
- Upplever du att det finns en särskild svensk eller nordisk HR-identitet?
- Vilken roll spelar managementkoncept och modeller inom HRM?
 - Finns det särskilt vägledande modeller?

9. Framtiden

- Hur tror du att HR-yrkena kommer att utvecklas under de kommande åren?
- Vilka förändringar ser du som mest avgörande framåt?

Intervjuguide Konsultbolag, tredje datainsamling 2023/2024

1. Inledning och bakgrund

Organisation och roll

- Kan du kort beskriva ert konsultbolag?
- Vilken roll har du i organisationen?
- Hur länge har du arbetat inom HR/konsultverksamhet?

2. HR-konsulttjänsternas innehåll och omfattning

Typ av tjänster

- Vilka typer av HR-konsulttjänster erbjuder ni idag?
- Arbetar ni med outsourcade HR-processer?
- Erbjuder ni även strategiska, digitala eller analytiska HR-tjänster (t.ex. HR analytics, AI, self-service)?

Fördjupning

- Tar ni över hela HR-processer eller delar av dem?
- Hur ser gränssnittet ut mellan er och uppdragsorganisationen?

3. HR-roller, yrkesidentitet och specialisering

HR-roller i praktiken

- Vilka HR-roller möter ni oftast hos uppdragsföretagen?
 - HR-chef
 - Personalchef
 - HR Business Partner
 - Andra HR-specialistroller

Förändring och specialisering

- Har HR-rollerna blivit mer specialiserade över tid?
- Har HRBP-rollen tagit över tidigare HR-chef/personalchefsroller?
- Vad har i så fall drivit denna utveckling?

Yrkesidentitet

- Upplever du att HR-yrken har en tydlig yrkesidentitet?
- Har denna identitet stärkts eller försvagats över tid?

4. Professionalisering och kunskapsbas

HR som profession

- Är HR-chefer och HR-konsulter intresserade av att HR ska betraktas som en profession?
- Vad skulle HR vinna på att ha professionell status?
- Finns det motstånd mot professionalisering? Varför?

Kunskap och utbildning

- Är Personalvetarlinjen ett krav eller en kvalitetsmarkör?
- Vilka andra utbildningsbakgrunder är relevanta inom HR?

Kunskapskontroll och legitimitet

- Finns det ett tydligt avgränsat kunskapsområde för HR?
- Upplever HR-specialister respekt för sin kompetens även utanför HR-funktionen?

Kunskapsutveckling

- Har HR-yrken blivit mer kunskapsintensiva sedan 2000-talet?
- Vilken betydelse har HRM-forskning för praktiken?
- I vilken riktning utvecklas HR-kunskapen?

5. Status, karriär och könspräglighet

Karriärvägar

- Vilka karriärvägar finns inom HR?
- Är HR en slutstation eller en språngbräda till andra roller?

Status

- Hur uppfattas HR-yrkets status idag?
- Har statusen förändrats över tid?
- Kan HR sägas ha en feminin stämpel?
- Vad har påverkat detta?

Yrkesstolthet och kåranda

- Hur upplever HR-medarbetare sin yrkesstolthet?
- Finns det en lojalitet eller kåranda inom HR-yrkena?

6. HR-yrkenas konsultifiering

Outsourcing och externa tjänster

- I vilken omfattning köper organisationer externa HR-konsulttjänster?
- Vilka HR-processer outsourcas oftast?
- Är det hela eller delar av processerna?

Konsekvenser

- Ser ni att konsultanvändning förändrar HR-rollerna internt?
- Hur påverkas HR-yrkets innehåll och legitimitet?

Relation kund–konsult

- Hur fungerar samarbetet mellan er och uppdragsföretagen?

7. Nationella och externa influenser

Svensk/nordisk HR-modell

- Vad har drivit utvecklingen av HR-yrken i Sverige?
- Finns det tongivande svenska HR-förebilder?
- Finns en tydlig nationell HR-identitet?

Managementidéer

- Vilken betydelse har managementkoncept inom HRM?
- Finns det särskilda modeller eller trender som påverkat utvecklingen?

8. Framtiden

- Hur tror du att HR-yrken och HR-konsultrollen kommer att utvecklas de kommande åren?
- Vilka kompetenser blir mest centrala framåt?

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