

Professionalism and professionalization in human resources (HR): HR practitioners as professionals and the organizational professional project

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This article investigates how human resources (HR) practitioners operate, and understand themselves, as professionals, and considers the implications for understanding HR professionalization. Using rich, in-depth qualitative data collected from 20 in-depth interviews with experienced UK-based HR practitioners, and based on a largely phenomenological method, the research explores the nature of: the HR professional role, HR professional knowledge, HR professional ethics, and HR professional identity. It shows how HR professionalism is grounded in, and a product of, the organizational activities and experiences of practitioners themselves. There is a particular value attached to the operational and relational aspects of HR practitioners' role, based on the importance of ensuring that their activities and interventions contribute to the functioning of their employing organizations, from which they seek to derive greater professional standing. Informed by a neo-Weberian approach, which emphasizes the dynamics of distinctive professional projects, the research draws attention to the 'organizational' dimension of HR professionalization. It offers an alternative way of understanding the professional project in HR, one that avoids viewing it either as a function of a strategic, business partnering agenda or contingent upon HR becoming less managerialist and more receptive of a wider range of stakeholders. The organizational focus of HR professionalism, and its operational character, should not simply be considered as obstacles to professionalization. Rather, they can be viewed as important features of the—'organizational'—professional project evident in HR; a project which derives legitimacy from its connection to, and alignment with, the operations of practitioners' employing organizations.

KEYWORDS: *human resource practitioners; human resource professionalization; neo-Weberian; organizational and managerial professions; organizational professionals; professional projects.*

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how human resources (HR) practitioners operate, and understand themselves, as professionals, and considers the implications for understanding the HR professional project. Professionalization in HR is advancing, with its representative bodies, such as the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), being concerned with emulating more established 'occupational' or 'collegial' professions. For [Roper and Higgins \(2020\)](#), HR is an 'organizational profession' and its practitioners are 'organizational professionals'. In contrast with more traditional 'occupational–collegial' forms of professionalism, professionalization on organizational

terms has a greater emphasis on realizing managerial and corporate objectives ([Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013](#); [Butler and Collins 2016](#)). Professionals who operate within organizations have to manage the tensions arising from two different logics—the aspiration to operate in an 'occupational–collegial' way, while also pursuing organizational objectives ([Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015: 757](#)).

There is growing academic interest in HR as a profession, the characteristics of HR professionalization and the professional identity of HR practitioners themselves ([Farndale and Brewster 2005](#); [Gilmore and Williams 2007](#); [Bolton and Muzio 2008](#); [Wright 2008](#); [Pohler and](#)

Willness 2014; Pritchard and Fear 2015; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016; Higgins and Lo 2018; Slater 2019). Yet we lack knowledge of how HR practitioners operate, and conceive of themselves, as professionals. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Wright 2008), insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding how they experience and deal with any issues and challenges arising from being in a—professionalizing—occupation while also serving the interests of their employing organizations.

In seeking to address this research gap, our largely phenomenological research draws on rich, qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews with 20 experienced HR practitioners. It was driven by a key research question: how do HR practitioners cope with the potentially conflicting expectations that arise from working in a—professionalizing—occupation and their role within employing organizations? In addressing this question, the research findings suggest that HR professionalism has a pragmatic, operational character, centred upon supporting and advancing the interests of practitioners' employing organizations. One key contribution of our research is that it offers a novel way of conceiving HR professionalism, one concerned with how practitioners understand themselves as 'organizational professionals', being engaged in professional work.

Existing studies tend to take a rather normative position on the nature of HR professionalization. Some view it as a function of the development of a strategic, business partnering approach (e.g. Ulrich and Brockbank 2005). In contrast, others argue that professionalization is contingent upon HR becoming less managerialist and more receptive of a wider range of stakeholders at societal level (e.g. Marchington 2015). Drawing on research with HR practitioners, the second contribution of this article is to offer a different way of thinking about HR professionalization, based on a neo-Weberian perspective which is concerned with understanding occupations' efforts to enhance their status and secure greater reward. It does so by highlighting the important organizational dimension of the professional project evident in HR. This project is grounded in, and a product of, the day-to-day experiences of HR practitioners in organizations themselves, and how they make sense of their role as professionals.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PROFESSIONALIZATION, ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE HR PROFESSIONAL PROJECT

Traditionally, HR's claim to professional status was considered rather weak (Watson 1977; Legge 1978). Yet there is an appreciation that HR professionalization is

advancing, based on emulating the features of established professional occupations (Pohler and Willness 2014). Among other things, HR professionalization encompasses efforts to: regulate the entry, certification, and advancement of practitioners; develop a stock of relevant occupational knowledge; uphold common ethical standards; and secure occupational closure (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Gilmore and Williams 2007; Bolton and Muzio 2008; Pohler and Willness 2014). There is a strong connection between greater juridification and HR professionalization, with the expanding quantity and complexity of employment law giving HR practitioners professional legitimacy, based on the expertise they can offer their organizations as 'quasi-legal professionals' (Kirk 2021). HR associations such as the CIPD have played a leading part in progressing the HR professional project (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Pohler and Willness 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016; Slater 2019). The CIPD has published a 'Code of Professional Conduct' (e.g. CIPD 2020), and holds that HR practitioners, concerned with the effective management of people in organizations, should be particularly sensitive to ethical considerations (CIPD 2017). By 2022 the CIPD's total membership exceeded 157,000, an increase of over 50% since 2000 (CIPD 2022).

Largely driven from above, by bodies such as the CIPD, the process of HR professionalization embodies a rather traditional mode of professionalism, based on an 'occupational-collegial' logic. The dominant assumption is that effective professionalization is best achieved when occupations can secure greater control over entry to their fields, enjoy powers to certify practitioners' competence and articulate a distinct sense of professional identity (Friedson 2001; Gilmore and Williams 2007; Evetts 2013; Butler and Collins 2016). In the case of HR, though, there are some problems evident in trying to secure professional standing based on a traditional 'occupational-collegial' approach. The absence of any obligatory requirement for practitioners to hold a relevant qualification in order to practice weakens HR's legitimacy and impedes the development of a coherent occupational and professional identity (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Pohler and Willness 2014). There is some evidence of a distinct professional identity apparent among HR practitioners, based on identifying with, and showing their attachment to, the HR field (CIPD 2017). However, the characteristics of initial HR training and development fail to instil the kind of values that could produce a robust HR professional identity (Hallier and Summers 2011).

The diverse and fragmented nature of HR roles, with much HR activity devolved to line managers, impedes the development of a coherent occupational identity. It is

difficult for HR practitioners to demonstrate the distinctive contribution they make in organizations (Caldwell 2003; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016). Despite the enthusiasm of associations such as the CIPD, the role is perceived to lack status and authority (Kochan 2007), compromising efforts to raise its professional standing. Work on corporate professionalization beyond HR settings demonstrates how practitioners' professional identity is characterized by ambiguity, complexity, and liminality (Reed and Thomas 2021). Pritchard and Symon (2011) point to the localized, contingent basis of HR professional identity in specific organizational contexts, rather than on an occupation-wide basis.

A more profound difficulty with HR professionalization concerns the extent to which its standing and legitimacy within organizations come from the efforts of practitioners to associate themselves with advancing narrow business goals. Yet, 'one of the hallmarks of a profession is having its own standards that override those of the business' (Farndale and Brewster 2005: 44). HR practitioners may have to find ways of accommodating the tension that exists between their role as 'professionals', derived from possessing expertise, and the imperative to demonstrate commitment to their organizations (Gouldner 1958). Some have argued that effective HR professionalization is contingent upon promoting higher-level social and ethical values, and being concerned with upholding the interests of a wider range of stakeholders (Friedson 2001; Kochan 2007; Marchington 2015; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016). Yet because HR often lacks social accountability, and is neglectful of wider social and ethical considerations beyond employing organizations (Marchington 2015), practitioners look to secure credibility by aligning themselves with the interests of their employing organizations (Wright 2008; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016). Working in an explicitly managerial function means that HR practitioners struggle to gain recognition as professionals. Instead they seek legitimacy internally from organizational leaders to whom they need to demonstrate their value (Wright 2008; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016).

Perhaps it is better to view HR more as an 'organizational profession', with its practitioners being 'organizational professionals' (Roper and Higgins 2020)? A key feature of the research agenda around professions concerns the nature of 'organizational professions' (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013; Hodgson Paton and Muzio 2015; Noordegraaf 2015; Butler and Collins 2016; Paton and Hodgson 2016). For managerial occupations, located mainly in organizations, conventional forms of professionalism are inappropriate because of the difficulties associated with securing the privileges enjoyed

by traditional professions, such as 'monopolistic closure', 'restricted practices', 'self-regulation', and an 'explicit and exclusive knowledge base' (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013: 227–8), with professional knowledge being contested, complex and indeterminate (Winch 2014). Instead, a type of 'corporate professionalization' has been favoured (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015; Paton and Hodgson 2016; Reed 2018), particularly among those working in areas thought of as 'expert occupations', such as 'supply chain management', 'human resource management', 'consultancy', and 'project management' (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013: 228).

According to the 'business partnering' model (Ulrich and Brockbank 2005), as 'organizational professionals' the credibility and legitimacy of HR practitioners, and thus their claim to 'professional' status, rests upon the extent to which they are viewed as making a strategic and explicitly managerial contribution to achieving their organizations' goals (Wright 2008; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016; Roper and Higgins 2020). Eschewing a traditional administrative orientation would enable HR to enhance its standing in organizations (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016), based on the belief that the increased status of HR practitioners, and thus their claim to 'professionalism', are best achieved by being closer to the business and engaged in addressing strategic business challenges (Wright 2008; Higgins and Lo 2018).

However, there are some problems with the claim that the professional standing of HR practitioners is based on how far their interventions are aligned with strategic business goals. For one thing, rather than enabling occupational closure, the 'rhetoric of business partnership and internal consultancy appears to have further diluted occupational identity, reduced entry barriers and encouraged the entry of rival functional groups' (Wright 2008: 1083). Moreover, much HR work involves 'maintenance' activities, ensuring that administrative systems operate smoothly (Glover and Butler 2012: 199). Within organizations, HR practitioners demonstrate their value by demonstrating inimitable expertise and capabilities in areas such as employment law and managing workplace conflict, neglected by advocates of HR business partnering (Roper and Higgins 2020; Kirk 2021). HR practitioners can be challenged by the delicate task of balancing the strategic and transactional dimensions of their role, in a way that can produce tensions (Pritchard 2010).

Two further considerations are important when it comes to understanding HR practitioners as 'organizational professionals'. First, the distinction between 'organizational' and 'corporate' modes of professionalization and traditional 'occupational-collegial' forms of professionalism is not necessarily clear-cut. As Hodgson,

Paton and Muzio (2015: 757) observe, ‘hybrid’ professionalization strategies can exist where practitioners pursue professional standing ‘selectively and opportunistically’, seeking to manage the tensions that arise from clashes between a traditional ‘occupational–collegial’ logic and the expectation to focus on achieving organizational objectives.

Second, while HR practitioners themselves can be described as ‘organizational professionals’, it is somewhat limiting to characterize the field of HR as an ‘organizational profession’. Such an approach assumes there are occupations that can legitimately be called ‘professions’, which are straightforwardly distinguishable from those that cannot. It is better to understand occupations such as HR as being engaged in processes of professionalization (Abbott 1988). A neo-Weberian perspective, one that puts an emphasis on the nature and dynamics of distinctive professional projects, is particularly suitable for understanding the formation and development of new and emerging professions in contemporary markets (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2011; Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping 2011; Butler and Collins 2016; Saks 2016). The neo-Weberian approach holds that professions develop through the coordinated efforts of occupational groups to effect social closure, particularly by controlling knowledge, thus enhancing their status and remuneration (Larson 1977; Saks 2016). There is growing interest in how professional projects operate in organizational settings (Brock and Saks 2016). Members of organizations use such projects to support organizational agendas, while also attempting to sustain and reinforce their claims to professionalism (Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011; Noordegraaf, Van Der Steen and Van Twist 2014; Maestripieri 2016). However, as is evident in the field of management consulting, the result can be a ‘hollowed out’ kind of professionalism (Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping 2011: 818). Lacking the features of an ‘occupational–collegial’ approach, it is used as a resource, conveying an ‘image’ of professionalism for the purpose of gaining commercial advantage (Kipping 2011).

By investigating how HR practitioners experience and make sense of their role and activities, particularly how they seek to accommodate occupational and organizational expectations, our research explores the features of HR professionalism and the HR professional project. This project is grounded in the experiences and understandings of practitioners themselves, within organizational settings. It reflects their efforts to operate as professionals, understand what professionalism means to them and their aspirations for professional status, influenced—unavoidably—by the expectations and demands of their organizations.

RESEARCH METHODS

In investigating HR practitioners’ experiences as ‘organizational professionals’, and the implications for thinking about the nature of the HR professional project, the research for this article was undertaken within a non-positivistic paradigm. It was based on a largely phenomenological approach which involved collecting qualitative data from 20 experienced UK-based HR practitioners. A key advantage of using phenomenology is that it enabled us to explore HR practitioners’ ‘lived experiences’ and how they interpret and make sense of both these experiences and their social world more generally (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009; Zahavi 2019). Phenomenology does not view people’s experiences independently of the environments in which they are situated, but as influenced by these environments (Holstein and Gubrium 1998). Experiences and behaviours are viewed as products of the way people allocate meaning and are thus subject to a process of ‘*interpretation*’ (Bogdan and Taylor 1975: 14). Consistent with an interpretive, naturalistic, qualitative approach (Holstein and Gubrium 2011; Giorgi and Giorgi 2013; Qutoshi 2018; Zahavi 2019; Bonache 2021), the research in this article focusses on how HR practitioners themselves perceive, interpret and reflect on their work experiences and aspirations.

HR practitioners operate within an institutional context. Therefore the research was also informed by a critical realist element, recognizing that there are underlying processes and causal relationships in societies existing independently of the researcher, and those they are researching. While these can influence social action, they cannot necessarily be identified (Cruickshank 2003; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009). The potentially important influence of features of the organizational and external environment, including the promotional role played by HR associations such as the CIPD, was thus recognized in the research.

For the purpose of data collection, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with experienced HR practitioners. This method facilitated an appropriate exploration of the experiences of HR practitioners, and how they reflect, interpret and make sense of these experiences. The purpose of the methodology was to enable a dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee, with the former being an ‘appreciative perceiver’ (Morgan 2011: 18). Consistent with the phenomenological emphasis on dialogue, the interview process focussed on the ‘informant’s perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words’ (Minichiello et al. 1990: 87).

The interview schedule comprised 19 main questions, covering such matters as: practitioners' experiences of HR and their careers in HR; their HR role; issues of trust, status and credibility in HR; the nature of practitioners' HR knowledge; ethical issues in HR; practitioners' identity as HR 'professionals'; and their engagement with the CIPD. The questions were designed to: be non-intrusive; encourage discussion and dialogue; allow room for clarifications around subtle notions; be discrete when needed; and be direct, but without being directive (Moustakas 1994; Spinelli 2005). As with other phenomenological studies (Davidson et al. 2001), participants had sufficient space to narrate their experiences in relation to the interview questions, particularly the meaning the experiences carried for them. Overall, the design of the investigation in general, and the interview questions in particular, encouraged the research participants to reflect on both their work as HR practitioners and their own working lives more broadly.

A non-probability sampling approach was considered suitable both in terms of enabling access to participants and for the nature of the research, particularly the aim of including experienced HR practitioners. First, access to participants was initially achieved using a network of contacts. Second, as a consequence of networking, participants themselves suggested other experienced HR practitioners, who were contacted using a snowballing technique. These sampling techniques proved very fruitful since they provided access to high calibre practitioners, all of whom had at least 5 years' experience (see Table 1). The research findings, and the contributions derived from them, point to the value of a phenomenological approach, and its concern with interpretivism, for understanding HR and developing theory (Bonache 2021). The networking and snowballing techniques used to generate the sample yielded 20 HR practitioners with such extensive experience that they clearly surpassed the initial criterion of having at least 2 years' experience. As shown in Table 1, which provides details of the participants, who have all been given pseudonyms, their experience had been gained in diverse backgrounds, at different levels and in different roles. This enabled them to 'dip' into their past and present experiences of working in the HR field during the interviews, in considerable depth. The diversity of participants' backgrounds and careers, allied with the richness of their experiences, helped to allay concerns that the sampling methods might have biased the findings in some way.

While the challenge of determining an appropriate sample size in this kind of qualitative study has been acknowledged, it should be contingent upon the nature, purpose and philosophy underpinning the research

(Fusch and Ness 2015; Saunders and Townsend 2016). With this in mind, there are three reasons why data collected from 20 experienced HR practitioners proved ample for the purpose of achieving saturation. First, the careful research design, underpinned by a largely phenomenological method, meant that the design of the interview questions, and the extensive dialogue they prompted, yielded rich and large amounts of data that enabled a thorough analysis. Second, it was clear that the data collected from 20 participants were sufficient to 'capture a range of experiences but not so large as to be repetitious' (O'Reilly and Parker 2012: 193). Third, data analysis confirmed that saturation had been achieved, given that the process of coding and re-coding enabled the derivation of key research themes.

The raw qualitative data derived from the transcribed interviews were analysed by means of the thematic analysis technique, consistent with the largely phenomenological approach. This facilitated an in-depth understanding of HR practitioners' experiences and what these experiences mean for them (Davidson et al. 2001; Franzosi 2009; Morgan 2011). Thematic analysis offers both rigour and flexibility; and is particularly suitable in phenomenological research (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012; Clarke and Braun 2016). It allows for the construction of relevant main or central themes and sub-themes (Morgan 2011; Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012). Based on the thematic analysis technique, the first cycle of coding, which took a 'holistic' approach, based on the 'totality of the data' (Holliday 2002: 103), enabled general descriptions to be assigned (Saldaña 2009: 46). A further cycle, using 'initial', 'focused', 'structural', 'in vivo', and 'simultaneous' data coding (Saldaña 2009), as appropriate, generated further codes and sub-codes, at various levels, depending upon the nature and depth of the topic. These codes were then clustered together, in a way that derived the key themes discussed in the next section. These themes, derived from research with a narrative-discursive orientation, offer important insights about the professional HR role. The research outcomes, concerning the lived experiences of HR practitioners themselves, address the lack of empirical research into the nature of HR professionalization.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The focus of this article is on how HR practitioners experience and reflect on their professional role, in the context of their everyday practice, and the implications for understanding HR professionalism and the HR professional project. The research findings are organized around four key dimensions: the nature of the HR professional role;

Table 1. Details of research participants

Name	Years of experience	Roles undertaken	Public sector experience	Private sector experience
Yasmin	20	Variety of administrative roles; managerial position; business advisor	✓	✓
Elisa	20	Training; generalist HR; business partner	✓	✓
Reed	30	Teaching and training; international HR; head of training; consultancy		✓
Darius	18	Administrative, payroll, and training; generalist HR	✓	
Lena	Over 10	Teaching and training	✓	✓
Erika	10	Administration; HR officer; business partner	✓	✓
Renato	Over 30	Generalist HR; union negotiator; head of HR	✓	✓
Ariadne	25	Personnel assistant; administration; generalist roles; training and development; head of training and development	✓	✓
Salma	15	Recruitment manager; training and development	✓	✓
Ylenia	17	Administration; benefits and pensions; general HR administration; business partner	✓	✓
Evan	Over 20	Personnel administrator; staff rep/union rep; compensation and benefits		✓
Jessie	Over 27	Personnel assistant; assistant to HR director; personnel manager	✓	✓
Teresa	25	Training		✓
Ettie	20	Business partner; head of HR; generalist HR; HR business partner		✓
Charles	Over 6	Administrative role; administration team leader; HR customer service; payroll	✓	
Elvira	26	Specialist HR; administrative role/payroll; generalist role; union negotiator HR and business change manager/employee engagement; senior HR advisor		✓
Hollie	30	Training and development; HR business partner; consultancy	✓	✓
Nerina	20	Generalist HR; HR business partner	✓	✓
Andreas	Over 17	General administration; employee engagement; head of HR and training		✓
Maria	17	Administration; payroll; generalist HR		✓

HR professional knowledge; HR professional ethics; and HR professional identity.

The HR professional role

When it comes to conducting their role, the research findings demonstrate that HR practitioners generally conceive of themselves as ‘professionals’; with being an HR ‘professional’ explained as ‘doing my job well’ and ‘being the expert in a really specific area’. For Lena, operating as an HR ‘professional’ meant being:

‘...an expert with knowledge and there is an expectation on you to pass that knowledge and interrogate

that knowledge and experience and skill to provide the right advice for the company that you work for to assist with potentially quite high-level strategic decision making that’s needed... So, you’re not, you can’t just do this job if you’re [sic] walked in off the street. To me, that embodies that whole thing about being a professional...’ [Lena]

There is a sense that being an HR professional means not only having the requisite knowledge and skills, and keeping them updated, but also ensuring they are aligned with business needs. While HR practitioners believe that being a professional means that their work is guided by certain values, particularly the desirability of operating

with integrity, there are often times when more practical considerations predominate. This relates to the notable ways in which HR practitioners work at securing trust, and building credibility, in business terms. They endeavour to do this by educating line managers about the value of HR, and what it contributes to the business, and by encouraging shared responsibility over people management activities. For Charles, it is all about the impact practitioners have in their respective roles that matters, irrespective of how those roles themselves are labelled:

'If you're not doing a good job, it doesn't matter what you call yourself, doesn't matter if you say you're a professional, it doesn't matter if you say you are this, that and the other. People would just think you're not very good. But if you are doing a good job it doesn't matter what you're called' [Charles]

However, since their interventions are largely directed at supporting managers, the contribution of HR practitioners themselves can go unacknowledged. Lacking visibility, they do not necessarily get the recognition they feel they deserve, with potentially adverse consequences for their professional standing. Elisa's experience was that:

'Well a lot of it is absorbed I think into general management practices...so kind of what we're doing is we're trying to help, facilitate the managers to manage, but the person you see up front would be the manager. So, that's where it's kind of a bit difficult.' [Elisa]

Professionalization is advancing in HR, perhaps because, as a highly feminized occupation, practitioners use it as a means of enhancing their standing in organizations and overcoming established patterns of gender segregation (Bolton and Muzio 2008). However, our research findings suggest that HR's low visibility within organizations, and the lack of recognition that results from this, means that such outcomes are not necessarily a given. Trust in HR professionalism, and the business credibility that stems from it, cannot be assumed; rather it must be actively worked upon. HR practitioners feel obliged continuously to convince others of their professionalism. The experience of Elvira was instructive:

'...but until I get some delivery for under my belt why should they respect me or think that I know what I'm doing, so, it isn't a case that it's an automatic given because I'm [sic] been here a long time and I've got a senior's role that I'm going to be given respect and authority. I have got to build relationships and establish myself....' [Elvira]

While possessing a formal HR credential can help to cultivate a sense of HR professionalism, more important is how practitioners conduct themselves, and through the nature of the relationships they develop. It is particularly about behaving as 'organizational professionals', in ways that demonstrate a responsiveness to, and alignment with, business needs—empowering others, sharing knowledge, and operating in a transparent manner.

HR professional knowledge

The presence of a body of codified, expert knowledge is central to the operation of professional projects. HR associations, such as the CIPD, operate qualification schemes designed to convey, and assess, HR professional knowledge (Gilmore and Williams 2007; Pohler and Willness 2014). But, as 'organizational professionals', what kind of knowledge do HR practitioners use? And how does this knowledge help to inform, and construct, HR professionalism? Although HR practitioners understood the important contribution made by their specialist academic studies, and the credentials gained as a result, they also acknowledged the practical value of the learning acquired from work experience and exposure to real-life organizational issues and challenges. Consistent with Hallier and Summers (2011), who point to the limitations of academic learning as a source of HR professionalism, our research demonstrates that practitioners draw for knowledge on the learning gained from their organizational experience, rather than the CIPD and its qualification scheme. Ettie emphasized how her organization's values had influenced her professional knowledge:

'Because the company has got some strong values in how it behaves and how it performs, I'm talking about...so [the organization] had a very strong corporate identity, it had a very strong...it had a set of values, a mission, a vision, values, which basically permeated all the way down the organization...everything that you did was meant to sort [of] to reflect that,...So I think that gave me more than CIPD' [Ettie]

For practitioners such as Ettie, then, HR professional development, and being an HR professional, are understood very much in corporate terms. Unlike the traditional 'occupational-collegial' mode of professionalism, there is very little sense from HR practitioners in general that the process of studying to gain professional HR qualification had instilled in them any distinct, high-level occupational value-base or sense of social purpose. The professional knowledge that contributes to their standing as HR professionals is also derived from the organizations for which they work. HR practitioners can

demonstrate intuitive and analytical skills, but only to the extent permitted by the constraints of having to abide by organizational norms and practices; leaving them insufficient scope at times for demonstrating their expertise, creativity, and capacity to operate as critical thinkers. HR professional knowledge, then, is intimately linked to the business context, as Jessie acknowledged:

‘...you can’t operate HR on its own, you have to understand the context in which you’re operating and it’s not just the context, of maybe the company or the organization, but actually the wider sector.’ [Jessie]

A traditional ‘occupational–collegial’ mode professionalism would privilege the professional knowledge that arises from credentialism—specifically the process of studying for, acquiring and holding a specialist HR qualification. Our research findings, though, convey the important sense in which HR professional knowledge is understood as related to, and additionally derived from, practitioners’ experience of organizational and workplace-based learning opportunities, whether formal or informal in nature. Since HR practice varies so much by organization, this raises the question as to what constitutes an HR body of knowledge. Possessing inimitable expertise, particularly in respect of employment law and managing workplace conflict, can enhance HR practitioners’ professional legitimacy in organizations (Roper and Higgins 2020; Kirk 2021). Having such knowledge, and holding formal credentials, are clearly important, but very much on organizational terms, as a means of signalling that a practitioner possesses relevant expertise, in a way that can improve their employability. For Yasmin, with some 20 years of HR experience, attaining a formal qualification was important for verifying her expertise, rather than for proving it.

‘No, I didn’t do it to get into the job, I got it primarily because I wanted the recognition of what I was doing and also I wanted something that was transportable in terms of a qualification because I knew that I was likely to be leaving my then employer.’ [Yasmin]

Possession of a formal HR qualification is less a licence to practice, and more a device for raising the credibility and esteem of practitioners in organizational settings. It influences the perceptions of others towards HR practitioners; providing evidence of their capability to operate in organizational HR roles and helping to raise their status.

HR professional ethics

A greater concern with social and ethical values, and engagement with a wider range of stakeholders, beyond

employing organizations, is thought to be critical to the success of the HR professional project (e.g. Kochan 2007; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016). When it comes to their ethical values and choices, what does being an ‘organizational professional’ mean for HR practitioners? There is a clear sense from the research of the importance of ethical issues and dilemmas in everyday HR practice, albeit predicated upon an organizational rationale which conceives of ethics as being intrinsically related to the business function. This operates as a prism through which HR practitioners can understand their own ethicality, particularly the importance of behaving with integrity.

How does this business prism operate? One aspect concerns risk assessment. For HR practitioners, ethical practice is about supporting managers in what they want to achieve, but also communicating to them the likely repercussions of their preferred actions and offering advice on this basis. This is marked by a pragmatic appreciation of the desirability or otherwise of complying with formal procedures, something which involves a sense of judgement, based on weighing up the merits of each specific situation. There can be a tendency to rely rather too heavily on employment law as a touchstone for ethical practice. In Jessie’s experience:

‘...there are quite a few HR professionals who tended to use the law as a crutch, so, they would say to, you know, their clients, “well you can’t do this because of legislative requirements because of the law”,... yes, there is the law and you have to have that in the back of your mind but your clients quite often want to know what you can do, not what they can’t do...’ [Jessie]

It is not at all clear that HR practitioners conceive of their role as fulfilling any higher-level social purpose or value, except in quite abstract terms. That said, however, there is an emphasis on reconciling the effective management of people in organizations, particularly through aspirations to fairness and operating with integrity, with the obligation to promote the interests of their employing organizations as businesses. Ethicality is manifest in an inward-looking, organizational focus, mainly in the sense of being concerned with how employees are treated, in terms of their well-being and fair treatment, and with maintaining business relationships. As Renato explained:

‘Well, we’ve got [an] altruistic cause as most people come into HR because they want to do something to help other people, people come in because they want help developing them or help make them happier at

work or make them healthier at work or whatever it is ... or make things fairer.' [Renato]

The business prism through which HR practitioners conceive of their own ethicality extends to a concern with ensuring that people in the organization are treated fairly. It is not about specific actions, or what ought to be done, but rather *how* things are done in organizations. It was striking just how often, during the research, the word 'integrity' was used by HR practitioners as an ethical reference point. Ethical behaviour is viewed as a prerequisite for the HR practitioner. As an ethical value, commonly held by HR practitioners, integrity is clearly a feature of their position as 'organizational professionals', rather than being derived from a higher-level social purpose. The business prism that characterizes HR practitioners' ethicality, and informs their day-to-day practice, is predicated on the belief that employees' aspirations for fair treatment can be reconciled with the business needs of the organization. According to Elvira:

'... [what] a lot of people think of HR is that it's about looking after people but you know it's not really. It's about ensuring that people are treated fairly and appropriately, and they're engaged and they're feeling involved, but, actually it's more around ensuring that the business needs are satisfied. [Elvira]

HR professional identity

As 'organizational professionals', how can HR practitioners' professional identity be characterized? Existing literature depicts HR practitioners as having a weak occupational professional identity (e.g. Caldwell 2003; Wright 2008). The research findings generally confirm this picture, while offering four additional insights. First, while a distinct occupational community exists, with a considerable amount of networking activity being undertaken by practitioners, the nature of the HR function inhibits the development of a distinctive and coherent HR professional identity. Identification with the wider occupational community tends to be defined in relation to the organization or business sector, and not the professional association, the CIPD; membership of which is not regarded as a life-long attachment. Variation of HR practice in, and between, organizations, and also the sheer diversity of activities undertaken by practitioners, pose difficulties in projecting to the outside world a coherent sense of what HR actually involves, and why it is important. As Yasmin stated:

'...the experience within various professional areas will vary quite substantially and the whole business

partnering model varies substantially across organizations as well... so I think the way you're structured and the way you're set up ... in your approach will vary quite substantially'. [Yasmin]

A second issue concerns the limited extent to which HR enjoys societal legitimacy, beyond the confines of employing organizations and the HR community itself. According to Yasmin again:

'But we never used to have an HR profession, it never existed, therefore it's not essential, it's a bunch of ideas and approaches that have being put together and labels and everybody's interpretation of that is slightly different... .., whereas, a lawyer or a barrister or an NHS practitioner they've got clearly defined remits in what they do ...'. [Yasmin]

This lack of definition is not helped by HR's lack of visibility even within organizational settings. As Charles observed, much HR work consists of generic activities which are not necessarily exclusive to HR:

'Whereas a lot of people in HR... have a fairly good understanding of procedures and... could give reasonable advice, but [it's] basically an admin role... it wouldn't probably make much difference [if they] was doing that in HR or anywhere'. [Charles]

The third insight from the research concerns the implications for HR professional identity of HR's characteristic knowledge base and the nature of practitioners' training and development. Consistent with claims that the lack of any obligatory requirement for HR practitioners to hold a qualification, or even engage in continuing professional development, in order to practice in the field works against legitimacy and the development of occupational and professional identity (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Pohler and Willness 2014), the research findings indicate that the training HR practitioners receive does not constitute a very strong foundation for developing their professional identity. A role in HR is rarely a first career choice, which means that practitioners' professional formation, and therefore their sense of professional identity, develops rather later, if it does at all, and then on largely organizational terms.

This relates to the fourth insight relating to the nature of HR professional identity, which concerns its highly organizational focus. The research findings convey how the identities of HR practitioners are rooted in the organizational relationships they form, the services they deliver and the commitment they show. When it comes to

characterizing the professional identity of HR practitioners, this raises doubts about whether or not a single HR profession exists. This is consistent with claims that while the shift towards a business partnering approach may have raised HR's profile, it has also inhibited the development of a distinct occupational HR identity (Wright 2008). The findings from this study suggest that business partnering has, to a certain extent, helped HR practitioners to build organizational relationships, thus enhancing their business credibility; but this may have come at the expense of maintaining a distinct and coherent overall professional identity.

DISCUSSION

Two key issues arise from the research findings. One concerns the implications for understanding the role of HR practitioners as 'organizational professionals' and the nature of HR professionalism. Based on the experiences and understandings of HR practitioners themselves the research characterizes them as 'organizational professionals'. The in-depth interviews with experienced HR practitioners revealed the presence of a distinct HR professionalism. But it is one which differs from that proposed by those who link the status and credibility of HR practitioners, and thus their increased professional standing, to their capacity to engage in strategic business partnering (e.g. Ulrich and Brockbank 2005). The research among practitioners demonstrates how HR professionalism is marked by a practical and pragmatic concern that their activities are aligned with the operations of their employing organizations. It is by no means clear that HR practitioners can best demonstrate professionalism by abstaining from routine 'maintenance' (Glover and Butler 2012: 199) activities and adopting a more strategic business partnering agenda (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016). Supporting the interests of their employing organizations is considered critical to advancing the standing of HR practitioners as 'organizational professionals'. Yet there is a markedly operational and even transactional dimension to this.

HR practitioners conceive of themselves as 'professionals', who are engaged in professional work. But their sense of professionalism is understood in terms of the actions necessary to ensure that HR can contribute effectively to improving practice within, and the performance of, their employing organizations, especially how these actions are undertaken. As Muzio, Brock and Suddaby (2013) observe, in managerial occupations legitimacy is acquired through professionals' capacity to demonstrate their contribution to organizational interests and meeting business goals. A striking feature of HR professionalism

though, as the findings show, concerns the importance to practitioners of demonstrating their contribution, while also aspiring to behave with integrity, ensure fairness, and uphold employee well-being. HR practitioners' concern with how things should be done and the importance they attach to relationships are consistent with the emphasis on processes and connectedness within the 'organizing professionalism' approach articulated by Noordegraaf (2015).

There is a belief that the professional standing of HR would be enhanced if practitioners were able to take on board higher-level social and ethical considerations in their work and reflect the aspirations of a wider range of stakeholders, rather than just pursue the often rather narrow interests of business organizations (Kochan 2007; Marchington 2015; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016). Our research findings highlight a difficulty with this kind of normative approach to thinking about HR professionalism. This is because they point to the important ways in which a sense of what it means to be a professional—an 'organizational professional'—and engaged in professional work are grounded in, and stem from, the day-to-day experience of HR practitioners themselves. Among other things, this encompasses the efforts practitioners make, drawing on relevant organizational and legal knowledge, to contribute effectively to how their employing organizations operate, including attempts to reduce business risk. This gives them greater business credibility and enhances their professional standing on an organizational basis (Roper and Higgins 2020; Kirk 2021). The research findings suggest that the operational character of HR, and its organizational focus, should not necessarily be conceived as problems for HR professionalization; rather, based on the experiences and understandings of practitioners, they can be considered as distinctive features of HR professionalism itself.

The second key issue arising from the research findings concerns the implications for understanding HR professionalization, particularly the organizational basis of the professional project evident in HR. A neo-Weberian perspective on professions, one concerned with efforts by members of occupations to enhance their professional standing by effecting social control (Larson 1977; Saks 2016), is thought to be a particularly appropriate approach for understanding professionalization in organizational settings (Evetts 2013; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015). The existing literature suggests that an HR professional project exists, one marked by a desire to emulate established 'occupational-collegial' professions and their characteristics. This encompasses efforts to exercise professional regulation, promote

a common body of professional knowledge, advance general ethical standards and articulate a distinct occupational identity (Friedson 2001; Gilmore and Williams 2007; Slater 2019). The purpose is to enhance the credibility, prestige, and status of HR practitioners, thus elevating the professional standing of their field (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Gilmore and Williams 2007; Bolton and Muzio 2008; Pohler and Willness 2014; Slater 2019).

Based on the experiences and understandings of practitioners, the research findings suggest an alternative, hitherto little-appreciated way in which HR professionalization can be conceived. They point to the presence of a distinctive organizational professional project in HR, one which is marked by three key features. First, the process of HR professionalization is characterized by the efforts of practitioners to build strong relationships, through which they attempt to advance their professional project, demonstrating in this way their business credibility and acumen. HR practitioners align themselves with the ideals, and support the interests, of their employing organizations, notwithstanding attempts, by institutes such as the CIPD, to instil common, occupation-wide HR professional values. HR practitioners attach great importance to demonstrating business experience and improving organizational relationships as part of their attempts to enhance their professional standing.

Related to this, a second key feature of HR professionalization on an organizational basis concerns the lack of any evident wider societal dimension. The existing literature highlights the important part played by HR associations, like the CIPD, in progressing the HR professional project (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Pohler and Willness 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016; Slater 2019). Consistent with the position taken by Wright (2008), who questions the capacity of HR to articulate a clear occupational professional identity, our findings demonstrate that HR professionalization is a project which exists on organizational rather than occupational terms, lacking a wider societal recognition. This complements work which highlights the limited relevance of conventional modes of professionalization in organizational settings (e.g. Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015; Paton and Hodgson 2016).

Third, the research findings point to the limited extent to which HR practitioners seek to exercise professional control, and secure occupational closure, through attempts to claim a monopoly of knowledge. Conventional professional projects are marked by efforts to promote the existence of a specialist body of codified and testable knowledge, the content of which is mystified for the purpose of controlling entry and increasing

status and remuneration (Larson 1977; Butler and Collins 2016; Saks 2016). While initial professional education can provide an appropriate foundation, HR professional knowledge is further honed through learning and development opportunities in workplaces and organizations, rather than through occupational-level training. Moreover, consistent with, and adding to, work on HR practitioners as 'quasi-legal professionals' (Kirk 2021), the research conveys a strong sense that it is not just HR practitioners' applied knowledge that is important in advancing their professional project, but also a capacity to use this knowledge to deal with organizational issues. HR professionalization is highly dominant on relationships, with an emphasis on putting organizational clients first. Based on research undertaken with practitioners, a distinctive kind of professional project is evident in HR. Professionalization is not so much about effecting occupational closure, but rather involves efforts by HR practitioners to demonstrate credibility within and the value that they add to their employing organizations.

CONCLUSION

This article is concerned with how HR practitioners operate, and conceive of themselves, as professionals. In so doing, it considers the implications for understanding HR professionalism and the HR professional project. There is an increasing focus on HR as an organizational profession and the challenges that HR as a field, and its practitioners, encounter in trying to demonstrate their professional standing and advance HR professionalization (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Gilmore and Williams 2007; Wright 2008; Pohler and Willness 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016; Slater 2019; Roper and Higgins 2020). Based on an 'occupational-collegial' logic, the professional project of the kind which has been promoted by institutions such as the CIPD is characterized by efforts to effect greater regulatory control, articulate shared knowledge and ethical standards and promote a sense of professional identity at an occupational level, for the purpose of achieving greater public recognition (Slater 2019). However, much of the existing work on organizational professions suggests that professionalization is marked by practitioners' efforts to demonstrate how their work contributes to achieving commercial and business goals, from which they gain increased professional standing (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015; Paton and Hodgson 2016). HR practitioners may encounter difficulties in trying to reconcile their professional, occupational aspirations with the expectations of their employing organizations. Yet relatively little attention has been paid to how they operate,

and understand themselves, as professionals in organizational settings.

Our research question was concerned with investigating how HR practitioners experience, and cope with as necessary, the potentially conflicting expectations that arise from being in a—professionalizing—occupation and their role within employing organizations. The research demonstrates how practitioners accommodate the potential tensions that arise from having to reconcile ‘occupational–collegial’ and ‘organizational’ logics within an ‘organizational profession’ by conceiving of professionalism in a largely organizational manner. Their sense of professionalism is marked by a practical and pragmatic concern with ensuring that their activities and interventions are aligned with, and support, the operations of their employing organizations. The HR practitioners in our research value the operational and relational aspects of their role, and consider them integral to how they conceive of themselves as professionals, engaged in professional work and within an—‘organizational’—profession. They seek to demonstrate their professionalism, and thus their value to employing organizations, by focussing on matters relating to organizational practice, operations, and relationships; for the purpose of advancing business goals, yes, but informed by considerations of fairness, integrity, and an appreciation of the fabric of the law.

One key contribution of the research, then, involves showing how HR practitioners conceive of themselves as professionals, engaged in professional work, but with a predominantly organizational focus. There is an emphasis on building and maintaining organizational relationships, and a focus on operating HR procedures with integrity and fairness. As ‘organizational professionals’ (Roper and Higgins 2020), HR practitioners look to secure greater status, credibility, and prestige by demonstrating the contribution they make to the operations of their employing organizations. There was some evidence among HR practitioners of the presence of, or an attachment to, an ‘occupational–collegial’ professionalism logic, of the kind found in conventional professions, and which has been promoted by institutions such as the CIPD (Slater 2019). They identify with HR as an occupational community, and do develop collegial ties accordingly, but based on their organization or business sector, rather than the professional body itself. Higher-level ethical and societal considerations, beyond those of their own organizations, exercise only a limited influence on how HR practitioners understand themselves as professionals.

Is this really professionalism then? Or at most a ‘hollowed-out’ form of professionalism, of the kind evident in occupations like management consulting where articulating a professional image is seen to have commercial

benefits (Kipping 2011; Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping 2011)? Yet the HR practitioners in our study viewed themselves as professionals, aspired to professional status and operated in ways that—to them—promote professionalization. Professionalism is not a resource, to be deployed strategically for competitive advantage, but integral to how the HR practitioners conceive of themselves and their role, albeit aligned with the interests and goals of their employing organizations.

Having established how our research question was addressed, we now consider the implications for understanding HR professionalization, based on a neo-Weberian perspective which is concerned with the dynamics of specific professional projects (Larson 1977; Saks 2016). Augmenting work on how professional projects in organizations are used to advance professionalization, while also supporting organizational interests (Noordegraaf, Van Der Steen and Van Twist 2014; Brock and Saks 2016; Maestriperieri 2016), the second contribution of the research concerns the distinctive ‘organizational professional project’ evident in HR, one derived from the organizational activities and experiences of HR practitioners themselves. Such a privileging of organizational interests could restrict the capacity of HR, as an occupation, to achieve broader societal legitimacy, undermining its claim to wider public recognition, and thus compromising its professionalization ambition (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Wright 2008; Pohler and Willness 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell 2016). For the HR practitioners in this study, though, securing organizational legitimacy is crucial to how they see themselves, and act as, professionals. The research thus provides an alternative way of conceiving HR professionalization, one that avoids assuming that a professional project necessarily means abjuring narrow business interests and engaging with a wider range of stakeholders.

It also contrasts with another normative position on HR professionalization—namely that it is associated with the adoption of a strategic business partnering approach, for the purpose of raising the status of practitioners. Yet it is not a question of how HR professionalization can be successfully achieved. Rather, the ‘organizational’ professional project is grounded in, and a product of, the activities, experiences, and aspirations of HR practitioners within organizations. It is predicated on efforts by practitioners—efforts whose outcomes will necessarily be indeterminate—to improve organizational practices and relationships, for the purposes of making the organization function better and securing greater credibility for themselves. This operational focus differs from the kind of ‘corporate professionalization’, evident in some other managerial occupations, characterized by practitioners’

efforts to secure greater ‘professional’ standing by contributing to strategic and market-oriented business activities (e.g. Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015). The organizational focus of HR professionalism, and its operational and relational character, should not necessarily be viewed as antithetical to the HR professionalization. Instead, they can be regarded as notable features of the—‘organizational’—professional project in HR. It is a project which derives legitimacy from its connection with practitioners’ employing organizations. HR practitioners view themselves as professionals, aspire to professional status and operate in ways that—to them—promote professionalization; doing so in ways that build relationships and are aligned with the interests and goals of their organizations.

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