
HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGERS “BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE”

Competing expectations and their impacts

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Abstract

The evolution of Human Resources (HR) managers roles have been extensively described during the last 20 years, following the changes in the social and economic environment. However, the influence of HR managers' stakeholders both internal and external upon these roles has been mainly ignored. Indeed, the dominant debate about the Human Resources contribution to the firm draw different prescriptive roles for HR managers (See Ulrich 1998), yet tends to disregard the relational aspect of this role.

Because of this, it is the aim of this paper to shed light on the way HR managers understand others' expectations and perceptions about their role. We interviewed 8 HR managers in Southern Sweden, in diverse organizations across multiple sectors. We asked our interviewees to reflect upon the stakeholder groups of their supervisors, subordinates and external stakeholders about the HR role.

A social constructionist worldview and critical interpretative method gave us the opportunity to investigate and understand our participants' subjectivities enquiring into the different influences upon the HR role.

We uncovered that according to HR managers, their role is diverse and multiple and differently acknowledged by their stakeholders. Our results show that the HR role in organizations is source of competing views and perceptions from executive managers, employees and external stakeholders which is not without impacting the way HR managers perform their role, their professional identity as well as firm performance. Our research found that that they view the tensions they face as their personal problem rather than an organizational one.

Last, we open the path for future research, notably the need of studies with multiple groups of respondents concerning HR managers' stakeholders.

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INTRODUCTION

‘Consider me as a friendly traffic controller’ (Hannah). How is such a role assigned in an organization? How do we decide and shape our tasks and responsibilities in companies? Factors such as education, organizational regulations and policies, job descriptions, as well as socialization play an essential part in the process. However, such tangible elements are not the single influence. For instance, who never felt a job description as limited when one’s supervisor has an unexpected request? Thus, jobs do not happen in vacuum, we also look to others – and other’s expectations of how we should perform—to guide us in our daily tasks and responsibilities.

Human resources (HR) managers do not escape the influence of others upon their position in an organization. Along the continual development of their role in companies throughout history, the subjective perceptions and often high expectations of various stakeholders (such as employees or managers) upon these professionals have evolved. HR managers are often been stereotyped as caretakers to employees, yet as the human competitive advantage view was adapted within businesses, their roles as strategic partners began. This view claims that management should develop employees and “core workers” in terms of motivation, identification and training in such a way that firms could distinguish themselves from their rivals and as a result creates a competitive advantage (Boxall & Purcell, 2000). Being aware of this new view upon SHRM created new possibilities for HR practitioners. We assume also that these sometimes competing expectations and perceptions influence how HR managers shape their understanding of their roles, with the underpinning that it is impossible for an individual to carry out its position objectively but only its subjective understanding of it (Schön, 1983).

That is why this research focuses on the dynamic relationship between HR managers and their stakeholders in organizations, which therefore, does not limit our analysis to the employing organization but addresses the profession or position of a HR manager, existing across businesses. Indeed, HR managers’ position is often viewed as central in organizations. Prime examples are that, they are interacting with employees during career discussions, executive managers to give their views about the organization’s main orientation as well as with the

unions during salary negotiations. Moreover, Caldwell (2003) emphasizes the fact that compared to other managerial functions in organisations, HR managers could suffer from a lack of cachet and resonance, from their stakeholders as well as general audience. Therefore; they might experience varied and contradictory expectations from these groups both inside and outside the organisation.

With this framing, this thesis aims to investigate how HR managers make sense and navigate their roles in the presence of these multiple perceptions. For the purpose of this research, we define HR managers as staff having managerial responsibilities and planning or organizing human resources programs for the organization. During the full process, we kept the definition of HR managers' external stakeholders deliberately broad to avoid influencing our participants' recognition of and beliefs on their views. However, we paid attention to define these groups with our participants at the beginning of each interview, in order for them to share their understandings of these categories.

A great deal of research has been carried out about HR managers on unidirectional relationships, such as between HR departments and middle management (Wright, McMahan, Snell, & Gerhart, 2001; Currie & Procter, 2001), or front employees and HR managers (Foote & Robinson, 1999). While enlightening, these studies offer a limited perspective focused primarily on the performance between two parties. Therefore, although the HR field has been extensively studied from both quantitative and qualitative methods, we intend to complete the current state of research by distancing ourselves from a prescriptive view of HR managers' roles towards a more interpretative view. It means that we hope to contribute by avoiding to state how HR managers "should" perform in organizations, but to understand how they interact in workplaces and how they experience their position. We hope to gain a better understanding of the subjectivities held among the different actors. Consequently, our study noted itself from the research trajectory which takes best practices as a focus to explore experiences and relationships.

Furthermore, more general audiences that might benefit from this research include HR recruits to assist them in identifying individuals or parties that provoke context-specific behaviour or decisions within their current roles. By deepening practitioners' understanding of the relational factors which shape the role of a HR manager, our research aims to be of

guidance for practitioners and could enable a reduction of any role uncertainties, thus improving department efficiency (Collinson, 2003).

To explore how HR managers understand others' influence on their role, we conducted semi structured interviews with 8 HR managers employed within medium to large sized organisations from a variety of industries and sectors in southern Sweden. We asked participants about their superiors', employees' and external stakeholders' viewpoints and opinions about their roles. This enables us - as researchers - to understand better the subjectivities of the participants and their assigned significance of the stakeholders to their profession. In the data analysis of the empirical material we took an interpretative standpoint, complemented by a foundation of past literature. We utilised past related studies as guidance or field markers, rather than a reference tools, in that the research design of this study is relatively unique to the HR field and our constructionist perspective would be negated.

In order to understand how HR managers' perceive others' expectations upon their role we divided our thesis into five distinct chapters. First we review and offer a foundation on HR managers and their role, with a historical point of view and a focus on the existing gaps in research and texts. The second chapter explains and details the methodology we followed notably providing justifications about our choice of qualitative methods. The third and fourth chapters present our results following our respective research questions. We emphasize in the former one how HR managers' perceive their stakeholders' perceptions about their role. The later describes the impact these conflicting perceptions are viewed to have upon the HR position. Lastly, the final chapter allows us to discuss our findings and highlight our recommendations for the future.

CHAPTER 1 -Literature Review

The Strategic Human Resources Management (SHRM) field has been extensively studied by different research traditions and paradigms, both with quantitative and qualitative methods. In order to study how HR managers' perceive the influence of their stakeholders upon their roles, first an historical review of the evolution of these roles in literature is required. The shift from Personnel Management (PM) towards SHRM and the way it formulated the now diverse roles of HR practitioners, is of interest first. Secondly, we investigate the current state of research concerning stakeholders' relationships and their assumed influences, with a focus on the arising ambiguities, dilemmas and uncertainties faced by HR managers. Lastly, we shed light on identified gaps and limits of the current literature demonstrating the potential value of this thesis.

1.1 The HR Manager role in permanent evolution throughout History

Human resources management as a term has been attributed to endless ambiguous definitions through its evolution, from strategic partner to active participants or 'players' in organisations (Ulrich & Beatty, 2001). Their increasing representation in the executive boards of organisations is a clear indicator of the evolution from personnel management to human capital to competitive advantage which has taken place. It is this shift that we describe below.

Indeed, in the end of the 1980's Guest (1987) described the emergence of a new paradigm with a shift from Personnel Management (PM) towards SHRM. Guest emphasizes the fact that the evolution of the field followed the changes in the business environment saying "distinctiveness [of SHRM] lies in the integration of human resources into strategic management and the emphasis on a full and positive utilization of these resources" (Guest, 1987, p. 506). In other words companies moved the emphasis to labour, with the workforce becoming more a resource and investment, rather than a commodity (Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade & Drake, 2009). In other words, the focus of management became the enhancement and improvement of human capabilities in organisations, which consequently alter HR departments and more precisely HR managers' roles (Beer, 1997).

Thus, the potential roles and possibilities for HR managers and their position in the company keep on evolving. HR managers went from looking that one worker had the right skills for a position towards a strategic contribution to the performance of the firm (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2009). Ulrich (1998) is one of the most prominent researcher supporting this trend, providing a more detailed framework of HR's role, organizing facets along two axes: strategy versus operations and process versus people (Caldwell, 2003). In fact - as a HR practitioner himself - he felt that despite a shift in the role of HR practitioners, some doubt exists about their contribution to the performance of the firm. That is why he intended to demonstrate that HR managers can contribute to “deliver excellence” notably by evolving in their roles (Ulrich, 1998 p.125). He described the necessity for HR practitioners to move on these axes embracing the role of a business partner, in order to contribute to the organization's strategy. Secondly, he claimed also the need for them to remain administrative agents in order to perform the indispensable routine link with the smooth functioning of organizations. Thirdly, by having a change agent role, HR managers are supposed to learn and adapt quickly to changing environments, supporting the permanent evolution of the HR role. Lastly, the necessity for HR manager to become “employee champion” is the result of the ‘human’ dimension, becoming an essential root of success and performance in organizations (Ulrich, 1998).

This shift towards a more strategic positioning of HR departments has been linked with the requirement for HR managers to demonstrate their profession's contribution to the performance of the firm (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2009). A large amount of papers have indented – and currently intend - to demonstrate the contribution of Human Resources Management (HRM) in what is called the “HRM and performance debate” by Boselie, Brewster and Paauwe (2009, p. 464). Huselid, Jackson, and Schuler (1997) are of a limited collection of researchers which focus on the capabilities of HR managers as individuals to enhance the competitive advantage of a firm, instead of focusing on practices and systems, adding their contribution to the debate but more on an individual level. They claimed that too few studies concentrate on the skills and capabilities of practitioners instead of HR policies. They show that thanks to the strategic dimension - more precisely business related capabilities - HR managers can contribute to performance, therefore underlying this new dimension of the HR role.

Green, Wu, Whitten, and Medlin (2006) drew in the same direction, in an academic environment when the link between performance and HR professionals is less contested, thanks to the previous work of Huselid *et al.*(1997) notably. Nonetheless, it is argued that this HRM-performance relation should be more focused on the contribution made by individuals, more precisely HR professionals, showing that the HR position is of importance in the debate, yet often, too fixated on processes or systems. Therefore, Green *et al.* (2006) also emphasized that this link with performance has a positive impact on HR practitioners' job satisfaction. However, this debate about performance and HR is only the beginning of a multiplication of the HR roles.

1.2 HR as a Business Partner - a way towards increased complexity

Following the historical reflection on the HR role, we continue onto detail in this section the current common representation of HR managers' role.

Nowadays, the need for HR practitioners to be “business partner” and indispensable contributors to organisational performance is acknowledged (see Ulrich 1998, Ulrich & Beatty 2001; Rynes 2004; Bahuguna, Kumari & Srivastava, 2009). Even so, HR managers must still achieve other tasks and roles, sometimes described as more “traditional, “administrative” or “technical” for instance by Huselid, *et al.* (1997).The framework describing the multiples roles embedded by HR managers in organisations has become evidently wider. Additional roles reflecting current and permanent transformations in the HRM field came to deepen (and also complicate) the various HR managers' roles. Building on the existing framework, Ulrich and Beatty (2001) describe HR managers as “coach, architect, builder, facilitator, leader, and conscience of an organization”, resulting from the new changes which the environment is facing, such as the increased expectations upon HR practitioners.

Kahnweiler and Kahnweiler (2005) go even further by offering a model of 9 different roles that HR manager could choose to embrace. In a challenging environment facing globalization, changes in the legal framework and technology (see Schramm, 2006), they intend to give guidance to HR practitioners by organizing the roles towards two main different axes, “results orientation” and “relationship orientation”. This framework illustrates the sometimes opposing aspects of being a business partner and an employee champion. In fact, according to Foote and Robinson (1999) HR managers have the difficult task to position themselves along

a continuum between business needs and employees expectations which is source of dilemmas for HR practitioners.

The most recent evolution concerning the HR role, is the one described as “internal consultant” (Wright, 2008; Caldwell, 2003). These authors portray a new dimension of the role which goes further than the “business partner”, “administrative agent” or even “employee champion”, as described by Ulrich (1998). It emphasizes the fact that HR managers give up the administrative tasks in favour of a role as an adviser, sharing their knowledge of organisational processes, as well as supporting the change process (Wright, 2008). HR managers have become real experts with a deep knowledge of the culture, the know-how, policy and the atmosphere of a particular organisation. This role seems however, relatively new and yet to dominate literature.

Although being relevant and rich of information, frameworks describing HR managers’ roles could prevent us from embracing complex, relative and multiple ‘realities’ of the construction of their roles. In fact, even if these models must be used to facilitate the understanding, it understates the complexity of relationships within a work place by often focusing on “best practices”. Caldwell (2003) empirically underscores the fact that HR managers are characterized by “role ambiguity”. He seeks to study how HR managers understand and handle the fact that their role experienced multiple changes. He emphasizes the fact this role complexity arises from “tensions between expected, perceived and enacted roles and the processes of ‘role conflict’ that often emerge when a person performs more than one role” (Caldwell, 2003, p. 992). This “role ambiguity” has consequences on the maintenance of the credibility of the function, as well as its status (Caldwell, 2003).

Still, within these detailed and prescriptive frameworks describing the diverse roles one HR manager could embrace, there is a lack of focus on the reasoning, factors, and elements influencing the choice toward one role or another. Among these elements, the perception and influences of others is of significance.

1.3 HR managers - a role in direct contact with multiple stakeholders

Recent literature has emphasized the need for HR managers to acknowledge their multiple stakeholders (Boxhall & Purcell, 2008). Therefore, the HR relationship within workplaces has been studied. It is detailed in the following section.

1.3.1 Why stakeholders matter

We have just seen that HR roles have been extensively studied in the literature. However, it appears the influence of other stakeholders upon these roles has been studied only very recently (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2009; see Boxhall & Purcell, 2008). Freeman and Harrison (1999) originally developed the stakeholder theory, claiming that organisations have multiple groups, inside or outside the business which can be benefited or be harmed by companies' activities. That is why they argue, that it is essential for organisations to manage competing stakeholder's interests.

First of all, Tsui, Ashford, Clair and Xin (1995) demonstrate that there are diverse and conflicting expectations from stakeholders towards managers in organizations. They seek to show that these discrepant expectations influence negatively the effectiveness of management. In this study they present different responses from managers of these diverse, multiple and often conflicting expectations, which shows that managers are not insensitive towards others' perceptions and expectations in an organization. They also show that managers actually react with different "strategies" when they face discrepant expectations. Fraser and Zarkada-Fraser (2002) follow this path studying stakeholders by seeking to understand how internal and external groups influence the way managers are perceived, more precisely how their performance assessment varies. They argue the existence of "a link between awareness of one's superiors' expectations and perceptions of managerial effectiveness" (Fraser and Zarkada-Fraser (2002, p. 765). Despite a study about a technical area and their results difficult to generalize, these authors show the importance of acknowledging stakeholders' perceptions and expectations in organizations notably because of their impact on performance.

This importance of studying stakeholders is also valid for HR managers, as demonstrated by Graham and Tarbell (2006), in that they notice in HR departments stakeholders are not properly acknowledged by HR managers. Therefore, they are aware of this lack of focus on

stakeholders and react to that by studying employees' perceptions towards HR. They seek to demonstrate that by understanding and managing their stakeholders' expectations (in their case employees); HR managers could increase their effectiveness. For instance, they could improve their reputation (Graham & Tarbell, 2006). Similarly, Way and Johnson (2005) support this idea that stakeholders should not be ignored by HR managers. They emphasize that HR practitioners, in their daily activities, send signals to various stakeholders, who will then provide inputs in the cycle of the organization. As a result, they claim that gains can be anticipated by a better recognition of their stakeholders' expectations, such as employees, executive managers, as well as external groups. These expectations have been studied in the literature, but mainly concerning a single group's expectations or from a top managerial point of view. Such expectations are now presented in the next section.

1.3.2 HR managers and executive managers

Concerning this first group of HR executive and line managers, Wright *et al.*(2001) have initiated a great work when they describe line and HR executive managers' expectations towards the HR department, with a focus upon efficiency and performance. In and where there is a general tendency to recognize the value of HR about organisational performance - Wright *et al.* (2001) emphasize the differences of perceptions between different stakeholders in terms of HR contribution. They argue that for line managers even if the HR department is perceived as critical for operations, their direct contribution to performance is uncertain.

Moreover, concerning executive managers' perceptions, Bartram, Stanton, Leggat, Casimir and Fraser (2007) sought to understand - through a case study in the public health sector - how HRM can be linked with performance. They integrate in their study the relational dimension by having one of their research questions focused on senior executives' perceptions of HR. They claim and demonstrate that within a single group of respondents, namely executive management, the HR function can be perceived differently. As a result, by not "singing the same song" executive managers' views and perceptions impact HR departments' efficiency (Bartram *et al.*, 2007, p. 37).

The perceptions and expectations of executive managers in the organisation concerning HR are not the single stakeholders' views studied in the literature. Now we move our focus towards other two groups of stakeholders, the employees and line managers.

1.3.3 HR managers and their subordinates: lines managers and employees

Concerning HR managers' stakeholders, their subordinates have been also studied in the literature. Currie and Procter (2001) demonstrate that the delegation of activities and responsibilities from HR to the line is often difficult to implement. In fact, in a context of a significant trend towards the delegation of the HR function to the line, they claim that HR and line managers can have opposite expectations when it comes to employees. For example, line managers have short term view for management concerning productivity versus a long term view for the employees' development for HR managers. They seek to demonstrate that the role repartition, between HR managers and the line managers, is not always clearly defined, thus creating new ambiguities for HR practitioners. Moreover, the relationship between HR managers and line managers in an organization is of importance concerning the implementation of the strategy, and can influence the success of it (Currie & Procter, 2001).

Further research articles raised the concern that the ambiguous relationship between line managers and HR managers; and the latter's contribution to performance, could move aside the employees. For instance, Renwick (2002) goes against the dominant trend consisting of a separation between strategic and administrative dimension of the HR role, by adding the employee perspective in his research. The author demonstrates empirically that line managers perceive HR managers as both supporting the well-being of employees but also sometimes going against it, emphasizing the ambiguity in the HR role towards employees. More precisely, he states the difficulty to embrace the role of supporting employees' well-being. In other words, the role of "employee champion" advocated by Ulrich (1998) appears difficult to implement by HR managers (Renwick, 2002; Foote & Robinson 1999; Graham & Tarbell, 2006).

The idea that opposing expectations exist between employees and HR professionals has indeed been developed further. A study of employees and HR managers shows that there are some mutual misconceptions concerning 'what matters' in organizations and therefore, what HR should emphasize in their tasks (Clark, 2005). In this context where the voices of employees are often neglected, Edgar and Geare (2005) decide to investigate the views of employees towards HRM, predominately, their views upon the prioritisation of practices. They highlight the fact that sometimes HR practitioners could misidentify what employees expect from HRM, but without a focus especially on the relationship between HR managers and employees.

Graham & Tarbell (2006) follow the lack existing towards employees' views upon HR managers to build a study with an original starting point, the employee perspective, which distinguishes itself from the dominant managerial view upon SHRM. They seek to understand how employees perceive HR managers in organisations and it influences the performance. They claim that the awareness of employees' expectations is the most promising path for HR managers if they want to develop their competencies (for instance retention and motivation of employees). By doing so, they could bring value to the organisation, at times when the "business partner" dimension can appear to become exhausted (Graham & Tarbell, 2006, p.351).

1.3.4 HR managers' role: a new brick to the wall

We have described above the current state of the literature concerning HR managers' role and the perception of their different stakeholders. However, in this section we note the existence of some gaps in the literature that we hope this thesis will contribute to fill.

First of all, as far as SHRM is concerned, there is a domination of quantitative studies, particularly upon the debate between SHRM and its contribution to performance. This is most likely due to the necessity to demonstrate SHRM's added value, numerous studies quoted above have a quantitative approach to SHRM (see Huselid *et al.*, 1997; Tsui *et al.*, 1995; Clark, 2005, De Guzman, Neelankavilb & Sengupta, 2011) or mixed methods. We wish to contribute to the minority of studies that have a qualitative approach, arguing that we would gain a deeper understanding of relationships happening in workplaces and the way HR managers perceive and navigate different expectations. This method is appealing to bring new insight and additional knowledge, emphasizing new subjectivities and elements that the ones existing from quantitative methods.

Secondly, qualitative methods could be ones of the solutions to answer a second limit of the current literature. In fact, except the notable work of De Guzman, *et al.* (2011) the different frameworks describing HR managers' role are dominated by a prescriptive approach which seeks to depict how HR managers "should" act and which is not trying to understand the how and why they have such a role in the field (see Ulrich, 1998; Ulrich & Beatty, 2001; Kahnweiler & Kahnweiler, 2005). Accordingly, we distinguish ourselves from the current "best practices" approach present in the academic field by arguing that there is not one "ideal"

role model applicable by HR managers in any kind of organisation or context. We claim that a role is influenced by practitioners and their stakeholders' subjectivities, views or understanding of the same situation as a result the explanation or description of such a situation will vary from one person to another. That is why

“while [...] prescriptive approach has appeal (i.e., it provides practical guidelines for implementation), little is known about its effectiveness or even use in SHRM... A better understanding, through perhaps some qualitative research, of just how organizations link HR systems to strategies would be invaluable” Lengnick-Hall *et al.* (2009, p. 81)

The contact with HR managers is therefore of necessity to improve the current research of SHRM (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2009). While practitioners are at the centre of several studies, such as for instance Tsui *et al.* (1995) who examine managers' navigation of conflicting expectations, they do not present specifically HR managers. It is noteworthy inasmuch as it is fundamental to this function to handle diverse expectations, as a result of their particular position in organizations between the three identified groups. Furthermore, compared to other managerial functions in organizations, HR suffers from a lack of prestige and as well as stereotypes (Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich 1998; Foote & Robinson, 1999). Our study can consequently bring new insights into the roots and factors that lead to the existence of these conflicting expectations in companies.

Thirdly, a significant trend in the literature is to emphasize the reciprocal relationships of HR practitioners with one other party, whether it is their superiors or subordinates (see respectively Currie & Procter, 2001; Foote & Robinson 1999; Graham & Tarbell, 2006). We identified an absence of observations concerning the combination of these influences in that a macro-view of the HR position and their acknowledged stakeholders. That is why we argue that a holistic approach about the HR role could be significant to the field. This macro perspective about HR follows for that reason the stakeholders theory (Freeman & Harrison, 1984) arguing that organisations must consider a full range of stakeholders (both internal and external) such as employees, executive managers as well as other stakeholders inasmuch as these groups can gain but also be harmed from their interaction with companies and businesses.

The perceived understanding of the stakeholders' influence upon HR practitioners, are viewed as a causal link between the essential qualities of HRM and individual behaviours and attitudes (Guest, 1998). Moreover, it is denoted that no employee, regardless of their

hierarchical positioning, can undertake 'objective work', but only carry out their 'understood work' (Schön, 1983). This subjective and interpretative viewpoint, from which we conduct this research, constructed an investigation of HR managers' navigation of their role with the presence of pressure from these three categories of stakeholders. This new perspective will enable a more ample apprehension of the persuasive nature of these parties on the maintenance of the managerial positions, which has to date been relatively limited (Ostroff & Bowen, 2000).

CHAPTER 2 -Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate how HR managers understand and navigate their roles in the presence of the multiple and often competing expectations and perceptions by various stakeholders. Stakeholders such as employees and managers and external sources shape how HR managers view their role. Realizing this helps researchers understand that the title “HR” is not homogeneous at all. In fact, one’s perceptions of tasks within the role will shape the context they are in, it is fluid and flexible, rather than fixed, which can be studied empirically. As we are investigating HR managers’ perceptions of how these stakeholders view the role of HR, we first must question, whether they believe these parties have influence over their roles and what effect these beliefs have on how the HR manager works. We have two primary research questions:

- How do HR managers perceive that their superiors, subordinates and external stakeholders view the role of HR?
- What impact, if any, do their perceived views have on their HR work?

For this study, we took up a constructionist viewpoint as we report HR manager’s understanding of perceptions, inferring that there is no objective truth, but only their beliefs and subjective understandings. To be able to draw from the data we collected, we take an interpretive approach as our aim is to comprehend HR managers’ understanding from their responses, in regards to these presumably imposing perceptions on their role (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). We selected critical interpretative methods as the centre of our research paradigm because of its interpretive approach to data, while taking into consideration contextual factor and allowing us to question what is often taken for granted (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). By taking this stance, we are stating that there is no objective description of a HR manager’s position or a social-constructionist worldview, meaning that there is only the definition which we create through experience and social interaction, founding individuals’ understanding of the HR role. Furthermore, as we are investigating individuals’ perceptions at a specific point in time, making assumptions, that HR managers are conscious of these stakeholders’ impact on them, we felt that this approach was best suited. The relational elements and power perceived to be held by these parties upon HR managers, makes a critical

stance appropriate in that we hope to challenge any prior understanding of the influences by the stakeholders and their own subjectivities.

Merriam (2002, p. 4) states that the investigation of how “individuals experience and interact their social world and the meaning that it has for them is defined as an interpretive qualitative approach”. The realm of this project, studying the perception and understanding of individuals, is highly subjective and dialectic nature. The interpretative approach of the semi-structured interview is to gain knowledge on the HR managers’ experiences and opinions through thick description and examples offered by the HR managers. The analysis of the data intends to describe how these HR managers shape or reaffirm their roles in relation to the views of the stakeholder groups within their social world (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

Patton (1985) explains qualitative research as the means of investigating a specific environment and the interactions within it. As this study strives to analyse the relational factors and impact of the perceptions and influences on the way HR managers understand their function, we utilized a qualitative design. Compounded on this, the aim of this study is to build upon the limited findings in this area, with the realisation that individuals’ perceptions and understandings, are not fixed, but an on-going process (Lincoln, 1995). Therefore, a quantitative approach was again deemed too restrictive for this research design, and we conducted personal semi-structured or conversational interviews to collect data on the opinions and subjectivities of individuals currently employed in such a role.

Within qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection, in that by questioning these topics we are stimulating reflection within the interviewees (Merriam, 2002; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Our own previous understandings and subjectivities may impact upon our results as we are the ‘knowledge producers’ as the results of the empirical data are consequent to our interpretation (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Prior to commencing the data collection process, we have identified our pre-understandings of the topic and any possible prejudices, on both an individual and team basis. By completing the data collection and analysis in pairs, we believe that this enables us to monitor any such factors which may impact the results. The methodological processes and policies utilised to complete this study are further outlined within this chapter as the research tradition, the context in which it was conducted, the sampling specifications for the selected participants, as well as both the data collection and analysis methods.

2.1 Sources of Data

This study was of particular interest to us as researchers as we became aware of the limited studies conducted on the impacts of perceptions encompassing a combination of several stakeholders' impact on management's functions, and even fewer endeavoured to frame the HR field from this viewpoint. To ensure that we interviewed appropriate individuals for this study, targeted interviewees were senior HR managers in medium to large businesses (with an average of 100- 6000 employees of which, 150-300 on site). This was to warrant the presence of a hierarchical superior, subordinates (both line management to front-line staff of the organisation) and external stakeholders to our participants. Furthermore, the demographics of the potential interviewees approached to participate were selected geographically for ease of access.

The research questions frame the investigation in that the focus is upon the individual's experience within the entire HR sector and their perceptions of the views held by these three stakeholder groups, rather than within the organisation they are presently employed by. Therefore, a judgment or purposeful sample was used to eliminate unnecessary contextual factors, such as the employing organisation (Marshall, 1996), as we asked participants to reflect over their entire experience within the field, rather than just their current position. While the interviewees were requested to describe their present role, it was for framing and background purposes only. Situational or organisation-specific factors which are present within each organisation would not be of added value to research.

An ideal of 10 interviews was a goal set by us for this study as Kuzel (1992, p. 41) states that this is an optimum number for studies with a homogeneous sample which does not aim to disconfirm any evidence. As to reach a larger audience, we made contact with the HR network of the Skåne Chamber of Commerce¹. Through this contact, we were offered several referrals and received a significantly positive response to the interview requests, constituting a snowball sample (Marshall, 1996). Furthermore, we also contacted HR managers through social professional networks such as LinkedIn and Viadeo². We felt that these individuals were particularly motivated to discuss this issue as they are already visible and active members within the field. We acknowledge the fact that our participants were eager to share their experience with us, which depicted to us their passion for their profession and their

¹ See appendix 1

² See appendix 2

openness to have it deliberated on for academic purposes. This should be reflected upon as, their motivation could be interpreted as data in itself- impacting our results. We also received positive feedback several times, regarding the fact that our project contained elements which previous studies had not, such as the reflection open external parties' influence upon their position, again peaking interest in this possible problematic area for these practitioners.

Through a variety of mediums, we had directly requested interviews with 30 individuals currently employed as HR managers within an organisation. It was necessary to ensure that all candidates that partook in our study met these criteria, so that they would have the appropriate experience of the presence or lack therefore, of the relational factors we hoped to study of the three stakeholder groups, superiors, subordinates and external stakeholders to the organisation. That is why one of the main criteria for our purposeful sample was the existence of managerial responsibilities. Of this group, we received positive responses from 10 individuals, yet a total of 8 interviews were conducted. While there was the possibility to continue further, in the early stages of data collection while the interviews offered subjectivity in the use of examples, commonalities arose in the responses early on. At the time when news themes were being introduced, we considered this a form of 'saturation' and concluded the data collection period (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Once we defined our study subjects, data was collected through two methods. Firstly, our choice to conduct a qualitative study, as with the social constructivist view, made semi-structured face to face interviews relevant for our research. In fact, during our different appointments with HR managers we experienced real conversations and a certain freedom of speech which allowed us to understand better the subjective view of our interviewees (Kvale, 1996). Even if we were not equal partners because we had decided the questions in advance as well as we were "controlling" - or attempting to - the path of the conversation, we could embrace our participants' views (Kvale, 1996). Thanks to the rich stories and experience of the senior HR managers we interviewed, we are confident that we gained a real knowledge about our subject. The choice of conversational interviewing allowed us to collect data without reliance upon our interviewees' own language or rhetoric to be congruent to one another- drawing again on strengths of the interpretative approach to our data (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). With the study focused on the HR managers' perception of the views of others upon them, the data collected during interviews is a reflection of their views at that point in time, rather than static and in any way objective (Watson, 2008).

We constructed our interview protocol³ through different themes and frameworks in order to cover all the intended answers to our research questions. We limited the number of questions in order to give freedom to our participants to share their views. We did not hesitate to reformulate certain questions (see questions indicated by arrows in the appendix number 1) as well as writing down some follow up question to facilitate the flow of the interview (Kvale, 1996). Lastly, during our meetings we focused on not being scared of silence because it we felt that it helped interviewees to re-formulate their thoughts. A particular allowance was made as the interviews were conducted in English, their second language. To address this, we often added further questions or detailed definitions in order to create a common understanding and confirm that all questions were comprehensible. All the interviews were recorded in order to be transcribed for analysis.

Our data collection process lasted for approximately 5 weeks, between the end of March 2012 until the 1st week of May 2012. All 8 in-depth interviews were one hour in length and they have been conducted in the presence of the 2 researchers, in order to guarantee the maximum gain of knowledge possible acknowledging that we could have both different understandings of the same situation. This configuration allowed one of the researchers to mainly position herself as an observer, in order to capture the scene, take field notes as well as to identify any potential follow-up questions, while the second researcher was more focused on the flow of the conversation. These roles were alternated over the data collection period as to incorporate both individuals' processual strengths. All except one interview were conducted in the interviewees' workplace, mainly in conference rooms. The exception was hosted at Lund University for accessibility for all parties involved.

Concerning our secondary source of data, we decided to request from our participants their job descriptions in order to gain a different source of knowledge, as to triangulate the data and check its validity. This offered complementary insights in relation to how the roles of HR managers are viewed by the top management team, as well as the way their role could differ from the participants' description during the interview. Consequently, the document analysis procedures as described by Merriam (2002) were to identify recurring themes among

³ See appendix 3

participants' job descriptions, as well as highlighting both supportive and contradictory data to that of the interviews.

2.2 Data Analysis

The interviews have been transcribed with the specialized software Express Scribe in order to facilitate the data analysis. We read through all our data transcriptions many times to favour a continual reflection and to help the sense making process. During the multiple readings we were looking more precisely for repetitions, metaphors, contradictions and connectors that could give indications of possible themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We used different colours to highlight repetitions and frames for connectors (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Once we pre-distinguished themes, the next step has been to create cloud tags⁴ in order to reaffirm our potential themes or identifying others. Lastly, we went through an open coding process, meaning that different revealing quotations as well as topic groupings were organized following the different themes in order to support the thesis redaction.

To assess the quality of our findings, we utilised several different techniques to check the validity of our data (see Creswell, 2003). First of all, as specified above, we decided to use diverse sources of data such as documents and interviews. Then, we sent the transcriptions of the interviews to the different HR managers to gain feedback, build upon statements, clarify any potential misunderstandings and to reassure that the meaning of the conversations has not been altered through transcription. Furthermore, we argue that the rich descriptions we are to present in this paper – within the limit of the anonymity guarantee we gave to our participants - are also a way to assess that our data are not biased. By providing the reader of this thesis also with any contrasting and counteracting data to our research statement throughout the analysis, we hope to give our audience the tools to make sense of our findings and to create their own opinion and own perspective about our research (Creswell, 2003). In this process of checking the validity of our data, we also argue that our supervisor's attentive feedbacks have also given credibility to our findings. Her careful review of the full process was a means to correct or modify any possible lack of accuracy due to her external point of view and wealth of experience of field research.

Lastly, we claim that through a process of reflexivity we can avoid some misleading tracks when it comes to data analysis. Being reflexive throughout the entire research process is

⁴See appendix 4

crucial to the credibility and validity of the results in that it creates a forum of full disclosure of and biases that may be present (Creswell, 2003). As a matter of fact, as there is no universally interpretable data or single-sense data, qualitative data results are always representations of the interpreted meaning (Hanson, 1958). Therefore, in our case, the difficulty as well as paradoxically, an opportunity, is the fact that we work in pairs. While the presence of two researchers multiplies pre-understandings or biases that could come up into the frame of our research, on the other hand, being two allows us to identify better each other potential biases or assumptions. In other word, it offers us an inside “check and balances” system.

On a personal level for instance, Pauline has worked as an intern in a HR department and is currently working in the HR area. Consequently, she has her own perception of this profession; she views it as challenging, often between a rock and a hard place, between executive managers’ directions and employees’ wishes. Secondly, she has some assumptions concerning Swedish workplaces (more respectful towards employees, more “caring”) due to her international student’s status which is also an influence to take into account during the process. In contrast, Jacqueline’s previous experience and current employment offers different biases and assumptions which needed to be monitored. As an Operations Coordinator within an international, but relatively small size business, her duties include all the HR tasks other than payroll. This has offered her a significant amount of experience in the recruitment and training elements of the profession, rather than being involved as a strategic partner concerning these matters.

We intended throughout the full research process to manage our pre-understandings or biased in order to keep accuracy, validity and authenticity as well as being honest to our readers (Creswell, 2003). We regularly confronted our respecting biases and assumptions. For instance, Jacqueline’s possibly systematic and often administrative view upon human resources tasks nuances Pauline’s views and her experience within the field, in regards to the potential strategic challenges she could observe. Lastly, although we acknowledge that researchers cannot deny the presence of their own personal biases and assumptions and that their studies can only be ‘defended’ or ratified, once these ‘conditions’ are made explicit (McCoun, 1998); we focused on avoiding the damaging consequences of “finding what we are looking for”.

We have selected HR workers in managerial positions for participants, enquiring after their perceptions of such subjective dimensions of their professional life or their identity work. Therefore, there could be an element of power influences between us and the interviewees, which could result in self-censorship by the participants. In somewhat response to this possible obstacle, we consciously designed the research as to focus upon their position and profession, rather than their workplace. We predicted that by acknowledging this complication in the preparation, their statements are not directed towards their employers, therefore, participants felt freer to disclose their subjective opinions, thus enriching our results.

As to create the most appropriate research design to address the research questions, we purposefully selected a qualitative study set in the broader context of the HR management position, rather than a case study to offer increased applicability to potential readers. We highlighted areas of concern, such as the subjectivities of both the researchers as a means to ensure that the interpretive results from the semi-structured interviews could be analysed critically without prejudice. Methods of review and reflection made upon the data collection and analysis offer a sound basis by which the empirical matter can be examined. With careful consideration of the impact the involved parties, both researchers, as well as the reviewing supervisor of the study, the integrity of the results are able to be supported.

After the transcription, we organized our data analysis in two parts that represent our two research questions. In the first chapter of the data analysis presentation, we detail themes concerning the way HR managers understand and describe how other stakeholders (such as superiors, subordinates, and external stakeholders) perceive their roles. The 4th chapter will present our analysis on how HR managers are impacted by these perceptions or expectations.

CHAPTER 3

HR managers and Other's Expectations

One of our focuses in this paper is to understand HR managers' description of how others perceive their roles. Therefore, the understanding of this role by executive managers, employees and other stakeholders are successively described below as perceived by our participants. By executive managers we consider our participants' supervisors, the Corporate Executive Officer (CEO) or more generally, the top management team. By employees, we define our participants' subordinates. This definition includes the line managers as well as the front line employees. Last, we provide an overview of how HR managers believe that external stakeholders, such as the general audience, unions or HR consultants perceive their role.

3.1 HR managers' roles and Executive Managers

Our research suggests that HR managers think their supervisors or executives managers, perceive the HR role as has having evolved through time. Nowadays, HR practitioners seem to understand that top management expects mainly two distinct roles from them, the "business partner" (Ulrich, 1998) and the "expert" presented below.

3.1.1 A Constant Evolution towards a Lack of Definition

During our interviews, when we asked our participants about their role⁵, they often described to us the evolution of their tasks they experienced, as well as how they think the others in the organisation have perceived this change. Our participants realize that their stakeholders' views – and more precisely the top management ones - about them have not remained stable over time. Indeed we had the opportunity to meet experienced HR managers. Out of our 8 participants, only one has recently be appointed HR manager, all the others - mainly women around 40 to 60 years old - have worked in the HR field for a minimum of 5 years. For instance, Pernilla has been in the field for 25 years, Erika for 22 years and Maria for 9 years. Therefore, they share their perspectives upon the evolution of the HR manager role in Southern Sweden and more precisely the evolution of what they believe their supervisors (executive managers or the Chief Executive Officer "CEO") expect from them.

⁵ See appendix 2

Our participants underscore the change of executive managers' perceptions concerning HR practitioners from a managerial level. Nowadays, as stated by Klara, HR managers participate in executive board meetings, share strategic decisions or reviews with the leadership of the organization. The focus is less on the execution of administrative tasks towards more participation to construct the company's main strategy. The responses to the cause of such shifts were varied. Erika and Maria describe the arrival of a new, young leader who has decided to emphasize the Human Resource aspect in the company, transferring more responsibilities to the line managers. Two other persons describe the change as more societal, with a new focus on people as resources in companies. This progression of the role is aligned with the literature describing this shift as a result of changes in the work environment in terms of legal framework, nature of the industry (see Hiltrop, Destrop & Sparrow, 1997; Caldwell, 2003; Foote & Robinson, 1999). To illustrate, the following quotation reveals precisely this evolution in the focus from the management teams upon the HR managers' roles:

“For the last 20 years the organisation and management teams have always said that 'the most important resource that we have is the employees'. They didn't say that in the 50's or 60's because then you had all the industries and machines. Now, when it comes to people, it's a lot of knowledge inside everybody. When it comes to technology today, people can leave the companies and take their competences with them. Because of that, you need to change the way of leading people” (Matilda)

It is evident that HR managers' roles have been shaped by the different focuses decided by the top management team or a societal trend from which top executives have not been insensitive. This is supported by the following quote:

“That's the difference as today management has realized that it is people that are doing the work. It's all about the people. They are realizing that. Then they are also realizing that HR has an important function in the company, strategically. So your role is different than it used to be. Those HR people that are working more like the old one, they're going to get in trouble as they can't meet the expectations from the people really. So it's a good thing happening, but the work gets more difficult.” (Hannah)

In a way, with this extract from her interview Hannah shows that HR managers seem relatively “passive” in the process of shaping their roles, which contrasts with the description of prescriptive roles in the literature. As a matter of fact, Ulrich is claiming the need for HR professional to “respond to the window of opportunity to influence and shape business results by becoming a value-adding profession of value-adding HR professionals” (Ulrich, 1998, p.2) and offer them some ‘best practices’ to implement this shift in their roles, which contrast with our results.

Additionally, the exact period this change happened is not highlighted similarly. Whereas some of our participants describe a clear shift 10-15 years ago, Erika describes this trend as older, from the 50's-60's which support the idea of a constant evolution of the HR role. That is why it seems difficult for our participants to define a specific turning point for their roles, despite a clear shift, at least within management texts, from personal management towards strategic human resources management described by Guest (1987).

This constant development of HR managers' role could possibly explain the absence of clear and straight forward expectations initially from the management team towards HR managers. This is especially described by our participants that have previously worked in different organisations or in companies when there was no HR predecessor. Pernilla - who specializes in short term missions - describes that she uses a PowerPoint presentation on "what HR does" in order for the executive team to select and choose what is relevant for their organization. This point is slightly differently expressed by Matilda. Although not directly focused on executive directors, the following quote illustrates an evolution in the perception of the role.

"When I studied in [HR] the previous *People Organisation program* [Translated from Swedish], no one knew about the position or the function at all actually. So we had to say that 'this education is the same as business administration financing, but we are working with people- the resources. That was how we tried to explain it. I think there have been changes. I hope so.'" (Matilda)

This shows that there are often unknown aspects to the HR function, or, in other words people are not always aware of what HR is meant to do. Similarly, Maria felt in her first job that it could be useful to explain what HR could bring to the organisation, because of a certain scepticism faced from the executive team. She states that: "Today it's different. If you would have asked me 9 years ago I think that most people would have said "is it necessary to have a HR department?" (Maria).

This lack of confidence towards HR can be linked with the current debate about the HRM "black box" and the contribution to the firm's performance and more precisely, the way to measure it. Lawler, Jamrog and Boudreau (2011) demonstrate that during the recent economic crisis, despite an recent improvements, HR professionals were still described as sometimes ineffective and not adding value to the organisation. In contrast, Hope-Hailey, Farndale and Truss (2005) argue for an increasing HR contribution to performance but not without risks for the employees. From one of our participants states this aspect in a very straight forward way:

“I would say that of course HR would not directly be seen as a critical success factor for achieving, but it is there, within the framework. At the end of the day, what makes our brand and our success, is having the right people with the right competence and the right motivation, the right attitude. Now we are talking about where HR can really support, with aspects such as having the recruitment, training of managers, leadership and those types of things” (Markus)

This quotation supports the fact that HR managers perceive some scepticism from executive managers when it comes to the measurability of HR and its contribution to performance. It does not mean that HR does not bring any value, but it should be better communicated and measured (Wright, 2001). However, this debate about HR and performance has been deepened by bringing a new perspective on the HR role. In fact, there is a general agreement that an orientation towards business from HR managers would allow a better contribution to performance and therefore strengthen their legitimacy (Ulrich, 1998; Hope Hailey *et al.*, 2005, Bahuguna, Kumari & Srivastava, 2009). This agreement exists even if the questions remain on the impact it can have on employees' well-being (Rynes, 2004; Foote & Robinson, 1999; Ogilvie & Stork, 2003). Interestingly, this “business partner” dimension is emphasized by our participants as well. That is why, in the section below, we continue by describing how HR managers understand their supervisors' expectations but with a focus on the business role, often emphasized as expected by our participants.

3.1.2 HR Manager: a new business partner

In this section we accentuate the fact that HR managers perceive their superiors' expectations of them, as being in correlation to Ulrich's ‘business partner’ role (1998). This role means that HR practitioners should be more aware of the company core values, being accountable for organisational audit, identifying the changes needed in the organisations' structure as well as setting HR strategy clear priorities (Ulrich, 1998, p. 127). When we asked them “what do you feel your executive managers expect from you?”, HR managers explained that the executive team views the business orientation as paramount.

One significant dimension in HR managers' description of the expected “business oriented role” is the existence of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure the performance of the HR department as well as reporting procedures. These KPIs are decided following performance discussion between the CEO (or another executive manager) and the HR practitioner. This co-operation is recognized as essential in the process in creation of a shared understanding of this stakeholder group. For our participants, it is also the opportunity to routinely discuss their job description, to avoid the existence of discrepancies in the

representation of the role. Thus, the role of the HR manager relies to an extent on the perception of the management team inasmuch as job description and the KPIs are built in accordance with the top management's views and expectations. It is worth mentioning that only Hannah and Caroline do not iterate KPI's as a guiding factor in the indication of their executive manager's perceptions. Instead, they emphasize the necessity of a close relationship with the CEO, highlighting again the relational dimension of the HR managers' role. This extract from one of our interview underlines this well.

“The HR manager is really dependent upon what the CEO or managing director thinks, and what the strategic goal of the parties is, and what the projects are for the organization. [...] You need to work for a long period of time. And constantly keep on track "Are we going towards the right target?" so you need to work very closely with the managing director” (Caroline).

Markus supports this by emphasising several times during the conversation the importance of having such close contacts with the executive team. In particular, he underscores the issues created by the high turnover of the top managerial functions in large international organisations which is frequent within his organisation. In addition, he also highlights the importance of shared views and strategy between HR people and CEO. The business orientation of HR managers is presented as expected from executive teams. Nevertheless, another role is dominant as well in our data. The “expert” dimension of the HR position is expressed as significantly expected from executive managers.

3.1.3 HR Manager: an expert in the organisation

HR managers describe to us the expert function as perceived as important for the executive team. After we have illustrated the business partner role in the section above, we are now detailing the second role dominantly expected by the top management, the expert.

This “expert” or “specialist” role is as frequently presented for HR managers as the business role. Contrary to the latter, the expert role is more comprehensive for HR practitioners when they answer the question “Could you describe your tasks and responsibilities in your position?”⁶. Comparatively, the business orientated view, instead, referred to the question concerning the expectations of the managerial team. In our opinion, it shows the contrast between the expectation and the implementation of a role. Erika illustrates this point saying:

⁶ See appendix 3

“I am used to work in this day to day administrative way, I have not started strategic so my trip is to go to the strategic role. If you came as a new HR manager you could possibly start in the strategic role and you didn't have this day to day work because they don't expect that from you to do”

In other words, even if the business partner role is the one that appears first concerning top management expectations, it is not the predominate role which HR managers identify with, in their understanding of their function. It could, therefore, imply the presence of certain rhetoric from the HR managers towards a more business orientation. When they describe the expert role, HR managers present it as an inherent characteristic of the HR function, a role taken for granted by the executive team. However, the expert dimension of the role differs in our opinion from the administrative expert described by Ulrich (1998). In fact, it is not limited to the policy making processes and the assurance that the routines within the organisation work properly. It has more a dimension of advisor and counsellor that is not described by Ulrich.

Indeed a HR managers' expertise can be related to many different areas. For Hannah, Markus, Pernilla, Klara and Matilda the law and regulation of a country is the main domain they feel that the executive manager expects a deep, solid knowledge and immediate answers to his/her questions. It is noteworthy, that according to Markus, this prerequisite breadth of knowledge can be problematic for newly appointed or inexperienced HR managers. This quotations support the importance of being an expert for HR managers “I also have to show them that I am not equal to the previous one. I am, 'I' and if you want to test my knowledge in different fields, please do” (Pernilla). It explains therefore, their reliance upon tools, such as training or even external consultants to balance - if any - some expertise gaps. According to Maria, the expert dimension relies more on the internal policies and procedures in the organisation, supporting the definition of HR role as close to the one of an ‘internal consultant’ that has been described recently in the literature (Wright, 2008). Because of this, we argue following Caldwell (2001) that HR manager's roles are often studied with a lack of this consultant dimension. In fact, the expertise on issues such as legislation or other distinct aspects in organisations can be a new way for HR managers to demonstrate an immediate and tangible value to the organisation.

Another theme throughout the full data collection process – adding complexities to the framework of HR roles - is the expectation from CEO or executive teams that HR managers are also responsible for the general atmosphere in the organization, in terms of well-being or

social peace. This is mentioned somewhat as an afterthought when listing their responsibilities. As an example, Hannah states that: "I want all people to like their work. We are a company that has lots of strong values. When we are recruiting I am always looking for the light in the eyes and the heart". Building upon this, Maria and Markus are two participants who express this dimension of their role the strongest. The former speaks about the "good work environment" that she is in charge of protecting, whereas the latter expresses the expectation from the board of directors to develop a good company culture. Interestingly, this responsibility for a good atmosphere or company culture is observed as holding a lesser importance in our interviewees' understandings of their roles. This is correlating to the current literature concerning the risk of losing the employee champion role defined by Ulrich (1998). Maria supports this point:

"The management teams of the company are looking upon their business idea: what we are going to do and how we are going to do. Then, you need to make the staff work that way and I think it is a good thing that HR manager understand the point of view their management team have when it comes to the money and competitive decisions in the company. Sometimes it is not the same as treating the staff in the way they would like to be treated - so to speak".

It appears then that the shift towards business partner and expert could make the support of employees of less and less importance for HR managers' (see Foote & Robinson, 1999; Hope Hailey *et al.*, 2005; Rynes 2004). Compounding on this, competing expectations could cause problems such as diluting the job or creating too much work for HR managers. Therefore the employee dimension could be threatened to be left on the way. The expectations concerning the well-being of the staff allow us to shift our focus towards these employees. After we detailed the perceived expectations of executive managers concerning HR managers, the task is now to understand how these practitioners believe employees perceive the HR function in the organization.

3.2 HR Managers' roles and Employees

We have asked our participants what they believe their employees and subordinates expect from them as HR managers. We found that similarly, to the perceived expectations of Executive Managers that we have just described, HR managers seem to realize that employees are aware - to a certain extend - of the changes occurring within the HR role. We present first the fact that employees give the impression to HR practitioners that they expect mainly an administrative function and personal support in the organisation, which does not fit the

understanding HR managers have of their own roles. That is why we detail thirdly the existence of competing expectations and perceptions between employees and HR managers.

3.2.1 The role evolution perceived as well from employees?

First of all, HR managers acknowledge the shift of the HR role and its progression as far as the employees' expectations are concerned. It is however less frequently described as the shift towards a clearer business orientation, which is expected from executive managers. Markus opposes this strategic HR with what he calls the "traditional HR" described as salary, pay rolls that is the main focus of employees. Hannah is the one that describes this shift in greater detail. From her perspective, the HR functions appear more visible in organisations from the employees' point of view, more recognizable from outsiders and seen as more legitimate than in the past.

"They don't have the same relation to me yet, but all the new people I recruit, they get the relation because I present the company for them. How it works, who can you call and so on... So they feel connected from day one and they are not afraid to ring or to give me a call. But the personnel that have been there longer, many years, for them it takes more time as they haven't had a HR in that place before. They don't know what HR is really, what do they do?" (Hannah)

She describes a difference due to the recruitment process, when bonds are created with employees at an earlier stage, therefore establishing more trust and confidence in the HR function. It is noteworthy that Hannah's organisation is clearly divided between blue and white collar workers. This also demonstrates that all employees, despite the segmentation by job categories, are aware and acknowledge the evolution of the HR role. Once again, it supports the idea that the shift in the HR managers' role has been linked with the focus on people as a resource, with the recruitment of the white collars, as well as de-industrialization processes.

Erika has another feeling, as she acknowledged the fact that the role has changed, but it does not seem to her that it is very clear yet for employees.

"I think previously if you had a problem with your manager or you didn't like what she or he said then they came to me, I had to be like a diplomat going around 'ok what did he say, what did you do and so on...'. Now they can still come to me and I will try to help them to make clear that 'it is your manager that must solve the situation, this is not me'. The employees have the unions to help them if there is a problem. So why not use them as well".

However, despite the progression of employee's understanding about the role as shown by Hannah, it continues to be evident during our conversations with other HR managers that employees perceive them as administrative experts or even "assistant" in the day-to-day functioning of organizations.

3.2.2 Administrative agent and personal support

Although HR managers provide a variety of answers when asked how employees see them, one common response is that employees expect them to be administrative agents. HR managers understand that employees expect their assistance in the administrative aspect in the company. It is specifically noted by Maria, Hannah, Caroline and Eva who feel for instance, that employees expect from HR managers specifically the right salary, policies, and expense claims. This is clearly stated by Caroline when she asserts that:

"the second part [of the role] is that they actually feel like we have the structure in a way to do things. We have policies; people do know how to behave and what is expected from them within their roles".

From this we can deduce that HR managers believe employees perceive their role as the one deciding the legal framework in the organisation, in combination with offering guidance in the day-to-day tasks. In Markus' words, employees expect above all concrete and tangible services, whereas Maria answers regular questions from employees when it comes to employment, salary or even advices to start a new company. Therefore, HR managers understand that the employees perceive them as an essential support to their needs in terms of expertise and administrative tasks.

HR managers recognize their role as helpful in that they deploy tasks more supportive, similar as the ones of a "social worker". Following Matilda's expression we give this name "social worker" to this dimension of the HR role. This is a result of the variety of matters employees can discuss with HR managers, whether it be professional or personal. Within this theme, it is not an administrative support which HR managers feel employees expect, but rather a supportive and more personal focus. All our interviewees describe to us a situation when an employee enters their office and expect support, or a colloquial "shoulder" concerning problematic relations, in the majority with managers and supervisors. The discussion of personnel surveys is also an opportunity for HR managers to understand what is expected from them:

“Some employees were very unsatisfied about a decision where I was involved as a HR manager. This person also wrote in the employees comments that HR should take care of the employees and secure that all employees are feeling well. That is a quite big thing to take care about. [...] Sometimes I think that employees think that HR is more kind of a social worker than a strategic partner for people and company development. So that is quite a difference”. (Matilda)

Here it is clearly illustrated that employees understand HR managers' role as encompassing more personal and less strategic elements, which is conflicting to the expressed preference of HR managers. Employees seem to expect a support from the HR function when it comes to being listened and oriented, even if it concerns their private life. This is also supported by Markus who thinks that employees perceive HR as situated in the crossroads of the private and professional life by being “the guardian for work-life balance”. Kulik, Cregan, Metz and Brown (2009) acknowledged and describe this social worker role that they called “toxic handling” as well as the potential effects and impacts on HR managers.

Nevertheless, the problematic element which emerges from both the administrative and “social worker” roles perceived as expected by employees is the existence of conflicting perceptions or expectations. In other words, when our interviewees described the role they believe employees expect from them, it was often to highlight that it does not fit with their own understanding. We explain this particular aspect in the next section.

3.2.3 The existence of conflicting representations

HR managers suggest that employee understandings of their role often contrast with their own, leading to competing understandings. In other words, some discrepancies exist concerning the employees' views of the HR role and HR managers' understandings of their own roles that we describe below.

Beginning with the administrative role, the discrepancies materialise when it is compared with the business role expected by top managers. Thus, HR managers do not clearly contest the administrative role, they rather portray its “traditional” aspect, as a dated focus. Consequently, they often delegate this role to other personnel in the organisation, who are specialized or are limited to such duties. This situation is, for instance, described by both Erika and Hannah who rely on other people in the organisation to take care of this administrative dimension. Erika continues to explain that despite the acknowledgment of the evolution of the HR role towards more strategy by the top management team, it is often not the case in employees' views:

“If you look at our managing director I think he wants us to be a strategic partner, I think he wants us at this level. But the employee wants us to be more day to day help. That differs I think... [...] If you have worked here for 10 years, you are used to have HR working in a special kind of way and we changed our attitude. I don't think we have been very good at describing this change, maybe for the management team and for the managers, maybe not for the employees. Maybe they still have the wish that we do this day to day work.” (Erika)

This informs us of a discrepancy perceived by HR practitioners concerning the contrast between strategic tasks and administrative support. Caroline assets this last dimension:

“When I came in here, people thought an HR manager would set their salary. I tried to explain that ‘I don't have anything to do with your salary. This is your manager’. I work with the... level of salaries in general, I find out what the external market is paying for a similar kind of function. I try to find similarities between departments and groups but when it comes to individuals’ salary I do nothing”. However, it is not the only competing expectations or difference understandings underlined by our participants.

The second misconception clearly experienced by HR managers, is the fact that employees continue to expect that HR managers are solely their representatives during meetings with the board or conversation with executives. In other words, when the strategic role of HR managers is acknowledged by employees – notably through their close relationship with the CEO - it is a way for them to transfer their views and concerns to the top management. These following quotations are especially revealing of the contrast between employees’ conception and the HR managers conceptions’ of their role in such instances.

“[My subordinates] have different expectations. They expect me to support and kind of represent them into the board of executives. Which is not really... that is not my mission. But still I can feel that there is a kind of expectation. I really can't say how”. (Klara)

Or again:

“You can be very isolated because many times the staff thinks that you should be representing them, but you are actually representing the employer. That could result in a situation when the staff may think "you are not supporting me" but they have the unions to support them - so to speak”. (Maria)

This desired support is not only expressed from employees concerning the strategic decision described above. One of the most commonly shared beliefs, according to our participants, concerns the HR managers’ role being characterised as a “social worker”. This is illustrated by Monika when she claims that:

“It could be a misunderstanding. HR is working with personnel resources and to secure that we are working in accordance with the law as well as that we have a working environment that is not dangerous. We also have the management style that can be improved and developed or to have an atmosphere that can develop people. But the HR task can never be the one that is responsible for the people feeling well. That is the same thing to say that the CFO should be responsible that people have a good private economy”.

HR managers avoid taking part of the infrequent disagreements that could emerge from workplaces relationships. Of course this does not mean that HR managers do not pay attention to their employees or subordinates issues in the organization. Instead, they listen and try to facilitate the discussion between the protagonists, but do not take the defence of either party, whether it is an employee or line manager. The reduction of their involvement, offers both groups more responsibilities and different cues to solve the problem. Caroline, who works in a relatively small organisation in the services sector -making the relation between people even more central - is our participant that focuses the most on this issue of avoiding being seen as social workers by employees, as shown by the following:

“Sometimes, some people just want to go to HR saying "I have a problem please solve it" they are expecting to be on our shoulders and cry and we are taking care of them whereas we are saying "ok, how will you help yourself?" (Caroline).

Furthermore Pernilla builds upon this saying:

“From my point of view, I think they wanted someone to go in and cry at (laughter). 'He's not nice to me', 'I'm mad at him'... all those sorts of gossips and talks that are in a company. I realised at least that they thought that was HR. That's why I had to communicate them 'I have a shoulder, you may cry, but I am not here to be cried or yelled, or screamed at all the time. I have a lot of other things to fulfil during my period here”.

One of deducible causes of the existence of certain misconceptions, often argued by our interviewees, is the fact that employees' perceptions of HR role rely often upon exposure and contact of these employees with such a department.

3.2.4 A strong reliance on exposure

An enlightening result was concerning the understanding of HR managers' views of employees in the fact that they believe it relies on their individual exposure to the HR managers. Although quite logical this finding surprised us because it has been highlighted by most of your participants, irrespectively of their organisations' sizes.

This exposure dimension is presented through the fact that HR managers feel they need be visible or “out” in the organisation in order for the employees to know them as well as to understand better their roles and responsibilities. Markus emphasises this stating that “what counts is being ‘out there’ meeting people, making HR tangible for the employees, in many different ways”. From this we can imply that the visit to the field or in the different factories of a big organisation is felt to be essential to make the HR role understood by the employees. Maria experiences it as problematic in that she feels that the “social worker” role of HR is magnified within the headquarters or central locations where the HR manager is physically present. This is portrayed in the following:

“In [the headquarters] when they [the employees] are angry they enter my room and they want me to solve the problem right now. Since I am not in the office everyday they realized ‘I need to wait until she gets back’ and then they already have a different look upon the problem” (Maria).

As a result, we can see a series of contradictions or ambiguities emerging. On the one hand, HR managers expect to be close to the people in the organisation in order to make their role understood and their expertise utilised, whereas, on the other hand, they wish to avoid the “social worker” roles by creating more distance from the employees’ and their day-to-day relational issues. It creates then one more complexity in the role, as described by Caldwell (2003) who emphasizes the numerous set of demands faced by HR managers.

Secondly, by exposure we don’t limit our analysis to the physical presence, or lack thereof, of HR managers in the field. Exposure means as well that employees’ might have a more frequent contact with a specific element or limited function of HR which impacts their understanding of the HR role. In other words, it seems that HR managers understand that employees acknowledge only a single dimension of the role or that they have issues in recognizing the multiple and simultaneous roles of HR. Matilda expresses to us exactly that:

“It can be also that some of the employees will say 'our HR manager, she's just working with health questions' because this person has met me when we had rehabilitation meetings from a health company we're working with. Another one will have a picture that HR is just with training and courses. It depends on the cooperation we have had. The more you know about the work, the more you know about the ... your understanding is much better”.

This statement shows the difficulty for employees to acknowledge the diversity of the HR role, with a reliance on the nature of their contact with HR. On a different level, Hannah explains that she thinks her role is perceived differently from employees in different job

categories because she does not have the same contact with them. The blue collars would contact her for predominately administrative issues, whereas the white collars would have a better overview of her role due to the recruitment process, when they are more in contact with HR. This demonstrates that the HR role is not always understood by the employees and more precisely the existence of doubts about the HR contribution to performance. Markus discerns this last point by saying “I think they [the employees] must really perceive, touch and feel what HR is really doing”. He believes the HR tasks suffer from a lack of tangibility which once again confirms the debate about the difficulty to measure the HR function and its added value, not only from the top executive management point of view described in the former section, but also from the employees' point of view.

We presented above that HR managers' different roles are often understood as not sufficiently acknowledged by employees. Consequently our participants experience the existence of competing or conflicting perceptions that relies often on the exposure of HR practitioners to the rest of the organisation. Additionally, it appears from our data that this confusion about the HR role and its visibility is also problematic for a third group in the HR views, the external stakeholders. This group is the remaining group presented in the following section.

3.3 HR managers' roles and their stakeholders

We describe in the two first parts of this chapter how HR managers understand their supervisors' expectations as well as their employees' ones. We now intend to describe the way they think stakeholders' perceive the HR role.

As a matter of fact, following the existence of a gap in the literature concerning the link between stakeholder theory, as defined by Freeman & Harrison (1999) and strategic human resources management, it was a prime goal to question our participants' understanding of their stakeholders' perceptions and expectations. Fraser and Zarkada-Fraser (2002) also demonstrate the need for managers to take into account their stakeholders' views. Interestingly, throughout all of the interviews conducted, these HR managers confessed that they had not initially or did not previously considered external stakeholders as having a perceptions or expectations upon their job. With further questioning however, in regards to such parties, these individuals identified groups such as government bodies, local communities, education institutions, health-care professionals and most commonly, the unions. It was not that they disagree with their presence, but we felt that these HR manager

had just not previously considered there being a distinguishable link. It is noteworthy first to underline the perceived different understandings of the HR role between the unions and HR managers, in order to then describe the importance of exposure in this analysis.

3.3.1 Some misunderstanding from the unions?

The external stakeholder who arose from our interviews is clearly the different unions. In fact, they are the prominent stakeholder in HR managers' eyes even, if they were hesitant to define them as such, their expectations seems sometimes unclear to HR practitioners. Thus, they are in contact mostly during negotiation, notably in relation to salaries. We could therefore deduct that the business orientation of HR managers is acknowledged by unions - contrary to employees - in the sense that they perceive HR managers as the representatives of top management. HR managers emphasize that they think they should have the same final goal as the unions, which is the best for the company. This is asserted by Caroline saying:

“Some unions representatives actually also grab the things that they are responsible for the development of the organization. As long as we - of course - take care of their members. And some don't reflect on the fact that they actually have responsibilities to the organization, they are just taking part for the persons or the members, which in my view isn't good enough, because as a union representative you also have responsibilities”.

This quotation accentuates the fact that the relationship with unions is greatly dependent upon the individual representative assigned to the organisation. Maria builds on this, explaining that good relationships with the unions rely more on the person, than on the defined role of each group. Thus HR managers overcome the contrast between being the employees' or the managements' representatives by shifting towards a more overall responsibility for the “good atmosphere” in the company.

Interestingly, according to HR managers it does not prevent the unions from using the ambiguity of the HR role and the fact that employees would like HR to be more their representatives, as described in the section above. Maria emphasises this point by claiming that “quite often when there are conflicts or discussion they [the union's representatives] turn to the HR department and want us to assist them with the management team as the employees' representatives”. From the following, it seems that HR managers' attempt to overcome the distinction between being the employee's representatives and top management's is not clearly acknowledged by the unions. However, some political games could take place and consequently explain this view of the HR role by the unions.

In summary, the debate about the HR role between unions and HR managers does not seem to rely upon the exposure as it does for other stakeholders, due to their continual involvement within the organisation. Moving forward our focus is now to understand how the lack of exposure can lead to competing perceptions for other stakeholders than the unions.

3.3.2 A lack of exposure to external stakeholders leading to competing understandings

As far as external stakeholders and their perceptions of the HR role are concerned, the first issue HR managers need to address is to clearly identify and acknowledge these stakeholders.

Most likely in reaction to our own status, the most frequent response to the question “what do your stakeholders expect from you?” was the nomination of universities and students as stakeholders, in the sense that they expect HR managers to share their access to the organisation through recruitment, summer jobs and representation during forums. Otherwise, they emphasize the most common external stakeholders from the HR field, as management consultancy firms, recruitment consultants and HR profession networks. The expectations concerning these groups are similar to those of a client, demanding good services, accessibility and an ambassador of the organisation.

Interestingly, Maria when we asked if she felt any pressures on her role, the first one she acknowledged as significant was a pressure from an external stakeholder. She told us a story when an external lawyer defended an employee during a conflict because the employee was not part of an union. It was a pressure as she felt, in a way threatened in her “expert” role inasmuch as the lawyer was more knowledgeable about the law. This example allows us to argue that HR managers could gain confidence if the other stakeholders were increasingly acknowledged in the construction of their role.

It is evident in our data that the HR function seems to suffer from a lack of exposure to external stakeholders also. In fact, HR managers experienced some conflicting perceptions about their roles when they ask other people, external to the organisation, what they expect or perceive a HR manager “should” do. As Hannah says “many people think you are only dealing with HR when they are getting in and getting out. It's the in between as well. So it's the whole process”. Again supporting the suggestion that perception of HR is reliant on the experience they have or they had with these practitioners.

However, it also emerges from our interviewees that the HR position is often not well understood outside the organisation. Similarly to the employees' perceptions, HR practitioners seem to observe the existence of competing views from these external groups. Markus details the fact that outsiders don't picture the full complexity of the role by stating:

“Maybe I'm unfair, but I would say that HR ... either you meet people that see HR only as the function that provide the salary or the policies and they are more administrative. And then you have those who see more the strategic that is developing, you normally get either or.”

From this we can see that the perception of a role dimension, in favour of another relies on the exposure. Hannah affirms this by explaining: “I think that lots of people really don't know what the HR is really, because they think ‘she is the one making the salaries’”. This shows that the HR function is perceived only in a sectorial manner according to HR managers. Pernilla has another view on this issue of different representations of the HR role. She feels that HR is often presented in media during crisis situation, for example, when a factory is closed down and the HR manager presents and explains the situation to the media. She claims “I mean that it is HR in a nutshell really, because if you have the HR position you need to understand that sometimes it's very fun and sometimes it's very tragic to work in HR”.

Therefore, only one dimension of the HR role- and not the most positive one - is presented to the audience. This is supported by Matthews (2008) who demonstrates that HR managers' representations on TV are more dependent on personal experience, than on in-depth research concerning the HR role. It can therefore explain partly, the existence of conflicting perceptions. Maria confirms this sometimes negative view of HR saying “some people think it is just problems you deal with all day, I don't look upon like that, and sometimes it is, but not every day”. Common competing views and the lack of acknowledgement by HR managers of the existence of these stakeholders advocates our claim discussed in the next chapter that HR managers could gain from a better acknowledgment of external stakeholders.

As a conclusion, we have demonstrated in this first chapter that HR managers are facing competing expectations from their stakeholders, namely executive managers and employees which create ambiguities in the understanding of their role (Caldwell, 2003). Even if the HR function has evolved through history, notably, from an administrative role toward a more business orientation, we argue following Ogilvie and Stork (2003) that there are still tensions

upon the HR role to align the different views and perceptions which emerge from different groups and the combination of them. This was illustrated earlier by us that while executive managers are expecting them to be business partner and simultaneously experts on policies and law issues concurrently employees' expectations are being ones of a "social worker" and "administrative assistant". Therefore, HR managers identify clear mismatches between their understanding of their role and what they believe others expect from them. This is further exemplified by Markus' following statement:

"I also need to balance the company's expectations and the employees' ones. In some cases they are aligned and then it's no problem, but in some cases... [...] There are typical situations where I think you should try to have both prospective. [...] I think it is a little bit like being the UN actually. To try to be objective meaning also that you don't take a stand"

This quotation clearly stated the varied and multiple expectations and perceptions concerning the HR role, cannot co-exist without impacting the HR managers' position in organisations.

"Then you have expectations from the management team and the employees. It's like, walking the line, the thin line. You are the employer representative, but you still need to take care of the employees' wills and thoughts, ideas, and you have to transfer them into the business. Of course sometimes you feel like a wizard. You try to handle it in some ways. It's a combination of working in a circus" (Pernilla).

In other words, our practitioners are not insensible to others' influence on their function. Therefore we argue in the following chapter that the effect of these various forces must be studied in order to understand the impact these competing expectations have on HR managers.

CHAPTER 4

Competing expectations' Impact: Where do HR managers fit in?

In the last chapter we explored HR manager's perceptions of how supervisors, employees, and external stakeholders view the role of HR. We discover that HR managers believe that they are often caught in between competing demands and perceptions of their role, as shown by one of the interviewees:

“It is a challenging task of balancing expectations, but I think that is a way to success because if I haven't balance or unmatched expectations then I would be - not conflict, it could be a hard word - but then it could be we are not really able to deliver value or being seen as a good speaking partner or service provider” (Markus)

Our first research question found that the superiors chose to see a HR manager as a business partner with expert abilities in areas such as policies and law, which contrast to the subordinates' understood view, in that it was believed that they continue to view these professionals as having both administrative and relational support facets. We presented then the fact that, interestingly, the interviewees by their own statements had often not considered the perceptions of external stakeholders of their role. In the last section, we detailed the fact that after some contemplation, the generally feeling expressed by our respondents was that 'outsiders', depending upon their experience and interaction with a HR function, do not acknowledge or comprehend the complexities of the HR role and still commonly view them as administrators or even as far as 'payroll controllers'. Of course, these are our participant's perceptions of how they are viewed by others, but nonetheless, it is the HR managers who must make sense of and learn to navigate in the midst of such tensions.

Our overall goal in this chapter is to understand how the 'situated' nature of the profession - one that requires HR professionals to respond to expectations from above, below, and outside - and how this impacts HR professionals. To that end, this chapter turns to explore how HR managers believe competing expectations impact their work and how they navigate them. Overall, while in varying degrees, HR managers see stakeholder's competing perceptions as impeding upon their roles and daily functions. This chapter explores how HR managers

experience the impacts of these perceptions. To do this, we have segmented this chapter into themes of the common impacts which these competing perceptions have had upon their work. The division has been made into the following four topics: power relations, devolution of the HR role, neutrality and the resulting new founded dependence on external stakeholders.

4.1. Power or Position

While the evolution of the HR management position has seen these professionals increasingly present on the executive board, the question of their direct influence upon the organisation and its policies should be questioned. A statement made by Caroline that “I am working through the rest of the organization managers. I cannot do the work myself” displays that the HR managers still feel the limitations of their reach. This contradictory view of HR managers as equal players within executive teams rather than a support function to the business idea, highlights the power influences which the department heads must consider in their decisions (Tsui *et al.*, 1995). The ability to influence or even manipulate vertically in both directions, is still considered a challenge.

A consensus was given by interviewees, that executive boards often disregard their suggestions on the way to handle situations, again reflecting the level of acceptance of influence these practitioners have within their role. While in some interviews it was unspoken but implied, the priority of all the HR managers is stereotypically, the well-being of the company. One respondent reasoned this on a more personal level saying “if we are not doing the best for the company, we don't have any work to go to neither of us”. This somewhat level of submission by HR managers to the directives of the top management team, is a challenge that has impacted and also created the expectations of all of the aforementioned stakeholder groups. This builds upon the earlier discussion of the lack of influence these professional hold and the need to project a particular image as to manage the perceptions held concerning their role.

Control or influence within an organisation is determined by the identities and attitudes of those involved, which is evident with HR managers' being either encouraged or restricted by their superiors. Our interview results reflect an agreement that while HR managers are hierarchically high within organisations, their ability to prompt change independently is intrinsically linked to the shared understanding and perception of the tasks at hand (Caldwell, 2001). Such lack of support or alignment of motivations by the key parties within an

organisation, in particular the executive teams, is viewed as resulting in potential improvements with the HR field to be destined to fail. An illustration of this is Pernilla's assertion that "I can do the best job in the world, but without executive support and motivation, they really could have done it without a HR department". Such statement calls into question the realistic power which HR managers hold, even as department heads. As Caldwell (2004, p. 208) maintains that "representation in the boardroom may have considerable symbolic value, but it is not necessarily an assured route to real influence or power".

There is often a re-evaluation of the HR role within organisations as to adapt accordingly to the expectations and understandings by each of the stakeholder groups. Supporting this concept of role revision is the current trend of the 'devolution' of the HR role to line managers. This has been openly embraced as it is generally viewed to enable HR managers to focus their energies on strategic tasks, rather than taking up causes within the organisation, conceding these elements such as selection and evaluation of front-line employees to their direct supervisors. Also, within the idea of redefining the HR role, there is the possibility to transformation to a "coaching" function. This role dimension is emphasised by our participants in the following section.

4.2 Devolution from 'Manager' to 'Coach'

The active 'devolution' of the HR role may have a profound effect upon the work processes, parties involved and the organisational performance (Perry & Kulik, 2008). As previously discussed, as HR managers are removing themselves from the certain aspects and handing over responsibilities previously deemed within the domain of HR. A rich example of this was Hanna's attitude towards such duties:

I would never prioritize to discuss something that I can fix in 5 minutes- never. But then I need to explain that 'your' issues are not important at this time. They say 'why?' and then I explain to you 'it is because I have this work to do and this work to do and time is ticking'.

The interviewees regularly referred to themselves as coaches in reference to the redistribution of duties, further illustrating how their functions may not hold the implied power of a 'management position'. Furthermore, a common response in regards to the role characteristic currently used by HR managers, is the description of the auxiliary function to other managerial staff, comparative to the IT department, as a resource to be utilised.

The relinquishing of inter-relational issue to employees' direct supervisors could be viewed as empowering their middle management. Alternatively, it can also be that all the 'care and feeling' has been delegated away, as to prioritise their strategic tasks (Kulik, 2004). While there are several benefits for enquiries being addressed by line managers, rather than HR personnel, such as faster deliberation periods and prior understanding of the situational factors, it also has its downfalls such as the possible neglect of employee welfare and the ambiguity of the HR manager's position due to the perceived 'reduction' of their responsibilities. Perry & Kulik (2008) propose that negative effects are not only limited to the front line employees as the 'devolution' of their role can often weaken the perceived value of the HR function. Compounding upon the already present pressure on HR practitioners to quantify or consistently demonstrate their significant contribution (Huselid, 1995).

The treatment of a business' greatest asset, their employees, through this practice is often entrusted with individuals with significantly less training or experience, which could have a detrimental effect on the firm's well-being, as well as the financial performance. Currie and Proctor (2001) reiterate this by commenting that devolution is perceived as efficient on the basis that "core functions" such as training, are not devolved to the line because of their sometimes conflicting aspect with short term production views. Further practical complications were highlighted by several of the interviewees in that they state that if they are not together with the executive and line managers in their motivations and policies, the tactics and selected goals depends upon how the line manager 'looks upon employee issues'. For example, Maria and Caroline state that this approach to HR had been adapted in her experience to only result in upset from employees from "unequal treatment" from supervisors in various subsidiaries. To avoid such scenarios, practitioners cannot completely disconnect, but are to offer their advisory services. Erika describes such a shift of responsibilities by stating:

"Previously we made the salary negotiation, we made almost everything for the manager, and we were with them all the time. You should keep the tools, but you should coach them and then they should do the work. That's new and I think that is very tough trip"

While all of the interviewees felt that there were influences from each of the stakeholder groups to varying degrees, not all perceived these forces as difficult to manage because it is widely accepted that HR professionals should simply 'surrender' to such unavoidable

elements (Evans, 1999). A major theme that appears from the interview data was the common belief that a major shift had occurred within the role to one of a more neutral stance, leaning towards a 'coach' position. This coaching approach for HR managers is a way to secure that employees are treated in an equal way and to "explain" and clarify executive managers' expectations. This is stated by Erika when she says that:

"You are representative for the management, when you are an HR manager you need to keep that in mind. The management wants that it is the thing I need to implement in the organization. On the other hand, you have to have all the employees with you, to coach them, to train them 'look at this, it is good', 'why can't we do like this?', 'try!'"

Paradoxically, while these professionals aim to be viewed as involved and influential in their role, all the HR managers interviewed state the need to 'step-back' and remain neutral as key to maintaining successful relationships, not only in negotiations but daily interactions.

4.3 Neutrality: the promise-land for HR managers?

We have demonstrated above that HR managers continue to suffer from a lack of power in the organisation, prompting further direction-finding by practitioners. The dimensions prioritised or approaches implemented by HR managers shift once again in the navigation of the multiple and competing expectations, in the preference of a neutral stance.

The increasing economic focus of the HR managers interviewed was evident in the use of rhetoric of 'business and strategic partners'. However, this was counteracted with the necessity for 'objectivity' or neutrality in their reluctance to immerse themselves in internal conflict issues. Markus describes the need to balance the expectations of the parties, in the instances of misalignment, he poses the question of "who's side are you with?" The straddling of the boundaries between groups, which we observe from our interviews, seems to have created the need for this relative independence. The positioning in relations was expressed by the interviewees as both in efforts to be 'neutral' or 'objective'. Maria states that this neutrality was important "to be able to have a good relationship with the company, management team, but also the representative of the employees" and simplified by Caroline by saying in a generalisation that, "we don't take anyone's fight".

The complex relationships and power balance amongst HR managers and the stakeholders requires the HR function to enquire, facilitate discussions and advice, yet ultimately to make decisions to benefit the organisation, rather than a single group. It is debated as to whether the

avoidance of conflict is to the benefit of the company or the productivity of the negotiations (Collinson, 2003). This effort to appear neutral in the organisation can also be seen as a means to conciliate both the employees and the executives' positions. In a sense, while HR manager acknowledge the fact that they are on the business side they attempt to present themselves as objective to the employees, again managing their expectations.

The relegation of advocacy functions for the both the employees and organisation, which is viewed as synonymous with HR, can cause stakeholders to further question HR's contribution. As to offer more tangible evidence of involvement, HR managers prioritise being 'seen and heard' by all parties and in relation to performance and productivity; top management teams are demanding that HR managers quantify their results into HR KPIs.

4.3.1 HR KPIs to be "seen and heard"

HR-performance links has been greatly studied, but yet still plagued by ambiguity and subjective interpretations (Huselid *et al.*, 1997). That is why the ambiguity relative to the HR role imposes the importance of KPIs for HR practitioners. With an increasing focus on the 'professionalization' of the HR function; the pressure to offer hard facts of their value addition to business is called upon (Caldwell, 2001; Guest, 1987). One HR manager describes the present situation as "being on your toes, to prove that you are contributing; and in what ways". It is a challenge to offer this 'hard' evidence if there is no direct causal line or the inability to quantify the value added (Huselid, 1995). The job descriptions offered by our participants were limited in their detailing of any numerical or financial KPIs but primarily focused on the 'soft' elements of their function such as culture and motivation. Hannah iterates the importance of this category of markers: "if you really want to help the business processes, you need to work with the soft targets to get it done" referring to motivation in particular.

When asked to describe the KPIs by which their performance is measured, the majority of respondents detailed the process in that they are routinely set targets by executive managers. This is in combination to being asked to advise upon the management of 'hard' or financial elements aspirations of the business. By reviewing the job descriptions offered by our interviewees, only a limited few explicitly outlined any quantifiable targets, but loosely referred to their expected assistance in 'achieving organisational goals'. The possible reasoning of these not appearing on such a document, is the continual communication

between themselves and their superiors, which facilitates the setting of short term goals or targets on regular basis. Also, the reactive nature of business can debilitate the ability of having such static targets.

The communication of these targets to the HR manager and their self-professed involvement in their creation, offers them an opportunity to develop realistic and quantifiable markers, by which to be measured (Huselid, 1995). Markus summarizes this activity as “creating the perception that we are adding value to the people and to the company, which I think it is the truth, even if that cannot be measured in sort of KPIs”. Way and Johnston (2005), similar to this study, recommend that a ‘multiple stakeholder approach’ should be taken in the consideration of organisational objectives, as the parties considered and the power relationships between them shape the assessment of creation, evaluation and the measures taken to achieve any such goals. Hanna further illustrates that these KPIs and the methods by which HR managers chose to go about their tasks, is often not understood by executive managers. Hannah develops further this idea that executive managers do not always understand HR managers’ methods by saying “they don’t know my work. We all have own competences, so everyone around the table have different priorities”. Taken from this statement is that there is a level of knowledge and experience required for all parties involved in the creation of such benchmarks. Similarly, the variance of expectations from executive managers and employees also impact the timeframe in which the HR professionals are compelled to work within.

The difficulty to measure the direct contribution of the HR towards organisational performance, in combination with the ‘short term gain’ attitude of business is ill suited to the long term goals of HR (Currie & Procter, 2001). The pressure applied by executive management upon HR practitioners to display results within shorter periods is a challenge to the prior understandings of the investment focus of the HR processes, such as staff development and motivation. With the increased acknowledgement of the role HR plays in achieving organisational goals, there is increasing pressure on this department to show results within an often deemed ‘insufficient time span’. The measurability of HR initiatives is comparatively complicated as they are predominantly long term and social in nature, such as corporate culture, which are difficult, if not impossible to quantify (Ostroff & Bowen, 2000).

Inexperience of HR by executive teams in the creation of goals saw several interviewees describing scenarios or occasions when they felt they had to negotiate more realistic deadlines with executive management, on the grounds that the focus of their work is dependent upon the variable of people. Simply put by Caroline, “you can't invest in a person one day and expect to deliver something different another day. It takes time”. The time pressure upon HR managers to show results is another factor in the ‘devolution’ of the role as investment and longevity is often first lost with the sense of urgency. Top and line managers’ focus upon the present, in comparison to the consistency and stability required by employees, which can create a tumultuous relationship, with HR managers often in the middle.

HR managers’ expertise is what enables them to create realistic goals for the organisation. The opinion of one particular HR manager was that ‘experience and knowledge’ is the pivotal thing that practitioners bring to the table. “I will tell them [the executive managers] that this one is going to take time, so don't push me” (Hannah). The ability to profess such a statement requires confidence and influence within an organisation, which has previously been discussed, yet highlighted once again as vital to the creation and the achievement of organisational goals via HR. If not involved in their development, the goals may be considerably off-mark or unrealistic, setting up the HR function for failure. This, consequently, further adds to the burden of increasing their visibility and involvement at all levels of the organisation.

4.3.2 Projection and Communication

We have seen that the multiple expectations perceived by HR managers influence them towards a more neutral and “coach” role in organisations. As a consequence, they need to handle different timeframes as well as rely on KPI's to demonstrate their overall value despite multiple roles. Another facet of this campaign to illustrate their contribution is the fact that HR managers aim to secure their position in the organisation, to project a coherent image of their role (Collinson, 2003). This is through the increase and enhancement of their communication skills that they can achieve such a goal.

An example of the low recognition of the HR role, an interviewee describes that “HR is something people do not look to as long as everything works. If something doesn't work, ‘oh’ the catastrophic idea!” This statement illustrates once again that the presence of the HR function is not always felt by all stakeholders and often seen as the flaw or a scapegoat. As the

perceived representative of both the employer as well as the employees, occasions such as redundancy, negotiations and external communications bring the HR department to the foreground, often to be criticized. The ways in which the profession is presented in such instances has a profound effect on the image and understanding of the HR role by the 'receiver'.

As their tasks often include the predominant responsibility as a communicator, both internally as well as externally with stakeholders, it creates the opportunity to manage these subjective views. As a result of the continual ambiguities and previously discussed inconsistent perceptions of the HR function, it is a priority for HR managers to attempt in creating a shared understanding of their role as to reaffirm their professional 'identity' and perceived legitimacy (Wright, 2008; Alvesson, 2004; Graham & Tarbell, 2006). An example of this was the professional title of a participant as the 'Head of HR and Recruitment'. To practitioners recruitment is obvious scope of HR, therefore, the segregation of duties in this title could be viewed as unnecessary. A follow up question uncovered that the title was carried out in that it was a means of 'selling that element' of the business to external customers. By utilising the double title, it was explained that it was viewed as a more marketable way to portray this facet externally rather than, simply Head of HR, as this it does not emphasize this specific responsibility. To emphasis this function externally to customers of the organisation, it simplifies and even pigeon-holes the key functions of the practitioner for simplicity, again, managing their expectations.

Moreover, externally HR managers are positioned on occasion between the organisation and the public via corporate branding, advertising or as a corporate representative. It was expressed by one interviewee that the responsibility of communication was of particular importance due to the impact and possible ramifications that can occur both internally and externally. This is seen as due to the limited experience individuals have from HR as found by this study, these communications are the means by the HR managers are able to shape the perceptions of the 'receivers'. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) state shaping perceptions is to influence their understanding and therefore, all consequent interactions with such professionals. Thus, illustrating the impact that focused communications could have on both the present and future views of the HR role.

Internal communication is needed to both their superiors and subordinates, who are viewed to have knowledge gaps and competing representations of the HR role which can create dissonance and confusion. An example recalled by an interviewee, “questions are asked by employees as they don't know the (HR) role, or where they fit into the situation”. The impact which such confusion or lack of role definition is that stakeholders are unclear on what they can expect from HR managers, or the possession of unrealistic expectations. This is illustrated by the following interview quote:

“When we set my objectives we have a discussion. If I don't like them or if I feel I can't fulfil them, this is the moment when I need to talk to her and say "I don't think it is possible". Of course I had some objectives that I didn't really like but the thing was that there were no other department that could handle it. I will do my best, it could be average but I will try my best”. (Erika)

Without previous experience within the HR field, titles and responsibilities of the HR function are often misunderstood. While, offering rationale or explanations for actions, whether it internally or externally, does not influence others' behaviours, it is beneficial, in that it increases the understanding and potentially the acceptance of the directives (Tsui *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, to rectify such variance in opinion and the intangible nature of the tasks, our interviewees specify a need to dedicate significantly greater time, than other department heads, communicating and explaining the ‘who, what, when, where and why’ of their decisions and actions.

Tsui *et al.* (1995) state that managers who proactively address discrepancies, in expectations and perceptions, rather than being oblivious or avoiding them, are viewed as more productive. Being conscious of these subjectivities, HR managers aim to meet their expectations, as well as proactively build upon their perceived professionalism (Collinson, 2003; Wright, 2008). By assuming the role, as the hub of communication within and for the organisation, this assists HR managers in achieving this by projecting the desired or preferred image.

The evolution and reformulation of the HR role to date, has required these practitioners to adapt so that they can continue to address the multiple and varying expectations upon them. As a means of dealing with such alterations and into the future, sees a pattern of HR managers reaching out to external parties.

4.4 HR's helping hands

The weight of the increasing and competing expectations on HR managers has seen them increasingly utilising the services of external stakeholders. Firstly, the evolution of the HR function with the expansion of their responsibilities, calls for them to be 'experts' in a broad range of fields. Evans (1999) states the expectancy of HR managers to be 'mini-experts' is somewhat unrealistic in that it is more plausible to recruit and train members of the HR team to specialize, or resort to outsourcing to fill any knowledge gaps (Perry & Kulik, 2008; Kulik & Perry, 2008; Whittaker & Marchington, 2002). "I must be knowledgeable at a general level. The in-depth knowledge is either by the team or we can even buy it in, we don't need to have our own expert" (Markus).

When asked directly, the interviewees found it complicated to nominate external stakeholders that held such influence, yet throughout the conversations stakeholders were often mentioned in passing. The collective listing of these parties highlighted the increased involvement and necessity, but possibly yet not classified as a stakeholder to their role. By acknowledging the expectations of these parties, it would work towards further facilitate their coordination and mutually beneficial relationships (Kulik *et al.*, 2009). While outsourcing implies a routine uses of such services, it became apparent during the study that there is also a broader range of external stakeholders or consultants, involved in today's organisations. Healthcare and legal advisors were in particular mentioned in the interviews. These are a welcomed addition to the resources of the HR sector in as 'toxin handlers' and emotional labourers continues to a common perception amongst the stakeholder groups (Kulik, *et al.*, 2009; Foote & Robinson, 1999), with noticeable impacts upon on HR practitioners' personal well-being.

Secondly, the 'emotional maintenance' required to take part in the navigation of these expectations, for example the submission to the top management, portrayal of influence over line management to the 'care and feeling' requested by employees is a often described as simply 'exhausting' (Kulik *et al.*, 2009). Hanna describes this struggle as common, stating her advice of "don't get emotional, that is only a problem. So of course, you get tired. But it gets over quickly". Building upon this is Pernilla highlighting that "the only person who doesn't have a shoulder to cry on that's the CEO and the HR. So, if you have a good relationship with the CEO, maybe you can sit together and scream or cry or whatever". Welbourne (2009, p.1) goes as far as stating that "HR managers need their own HR function" supporting our

thoughts that the addition of a wider scope of stakeholders are being brought in to assist HR managers such elements of their positions, such as psychiatrists. Hannah discusses the new found reliance on external consultants are crucial to in assistance to all members involved in such scenarios: “When it is too deep down, I pay for this support from the crisis consultant instead, so I don’t need to go so deep in every issue”. It is a much for their benefit, as it is to the employees that it is ‘traditionally’ understood to be for. This blatant statement of relief from such emotional labour, supports once again the idea of delegating such dimensions of the HR role to others, is beneficial to that professional. Remaining still, however, is the question of whether the benefits out way the possible confusion of employees and other stakeholders if this is not a transparent and explicit transition within the organisation.

In summation, the overall discrepant expectations of the HR managers being the “devil or angel” (Hannah) from their actions, derives from presumptions by others. These judgements are often made by people who lack or do not have access to the necessary information or understanding of the context. “Sometimes they say that the company is the same as the HR manager... Then the HR person must be the evil one as they are the one closing down the business” (Pernilla). Typically, as stated by our interviewee, it is misrepresented and misconstrued that HR managers have consciously made decisions that negatively affect others, instead of realizing that they are “just fulfilling orders from their superiors”. This requirement to carry out the decisions of their superiors or to remove themselves from the situation, can take a heavy toll on these professionals.

The conflicting interests of stakeholder groups, particularly in dire times, can weigh heavily on the HR manager. To carry out the directives of the executive team, the HR manager is forced to position themselves between the parties involved, potentially sully others’ perceptions of them. HR managers’ submission to their superiors is seen to have significantly increased as they continue to decentralize their ‘social work’ dimensions in favour of a strategic outlook. To assist the devolution of the HR role, a frequent response was that the HR managers felt also ill-equipped to assist some employees and therefore, health care and crisis professionals were called upon and present on a daily basis in some organisations. By handing over these duties to line management or other external stakeholders, while strengthening allegiances to the executive team, this creates further distance between the themselves and the front-line employees again mystifying onlookers to what HR’s role really is.

CHAPTER 5 - Discussion

The major findings from our study are that HR managers are aware of the multiple and competing expectations upon their role, by their superiors, subordinates and external stakeholders, yet struggle to view the problems they face in navigating tensions as occupationally specific, but tend to accept and internalize them. As these findings are directly related, we will sequentially discuss these two-fold findings. Firstly, the fact that HR managers are openly ‘coping’ with these various expectations rather than addressing them, followed by the ramifications of their internalization.

5.1 Living with competing expectations

The ability to maintain productive relationships with all of these groups, in the face of the reprioritization of the HR role dimensions, is a significant challenge for these practitioners. Despite the evident evolution of HR practitioners sector wide, from administrative agent to business partner, this has been acknowledged by internal groups of superiors, but apparently not yet by employees or external stakeholders. Our interviewees were clearly aware of the discrepancies through their statements, not only between the stakeholder groups, but also in the views held within these parties.

It was understood by our interviewees that the top management holds the most up-to-date perception of their functions, in that it is concurrent with the industry wide progression towards a more strategic focus. While the subordinates are believed to have noticed a shift of the role, they are seen to continue focussing on the more traditional or fundamental dimensions of administrative and personal support. Within this groupings, fractions in opinions also occurred by employee demographics in job segmentations (blue and white collar, as well as generationally). Lastly, the external stakeholders, were somewhat overlooked by our interviewees in that they initially had issues nominating them as their significance had not been previously considered.

The inability to determine, in their opinion, who were external stakeholders to their role, is just one example of how there is a discrepancies in the importance that these perceptions are allocated. While the inclusion of HR managers within the executive management team has

elevated them hierarchically and in theory increased their influence, it has also strengthened the ties and perceived alliances of the HR function to executive managers. This is contradictory to the preference of the employees, as the 'relational' view of the role as an 'employee champion'. This conscious discord between expectations and actuality has a profound effect upon the employees' perceptions of the HR function. We argue that it is only through the recognition of these impacts, such as the decreased legitimacy of the role, that these can be dealt with.

These paradoxes and hindrances compelled managers to prove their contribution or value through the quantification of results, increase their communications, increasing their 'presence' and draw upon external resources as to meet these multiple and varied expectations. Consequently, the work design of a HR manager's role is changing, further distancing the 'reality' of what their function consists of the perceptions of others. Ideally, expectations can be investigated and discussed between parties as a way of working together to align them. This is often the case between the interviewees and top management, yet such efforts are not visible towards the remaining two stakeholder groups.

Despite these practitioners being aware of the changes occurring within their role, such as the increased need to communicate or the evolution of the HR position as a more neutral function, they do not clearly link them with the competing expectations they experience. This detachment has consequences on the performance of the organisation, as well as the individual professionals resulting from the lack of a common understanding of the HR role. Moreover, the subjective nature of these views of HR practitioners is compounded upon the, although incremental, continual evolution of the role. Without a static definition of their role, the ability to educate others is undermined. Because of this, we argue that while alignment of expectations between stakeholders is optimum, it is believed that the creation of an efficient method of managing the differences is a more realistic goal.

5.2 Handling competing expectations as an occupational issue

While our first findings described above illustrates that HR managers openly recognise and accept the varied and competing expectations, there are very few conscious steps taken to help them manage these tensions. Additionally, as these are not acknowledged as either an organisational or occupational issues. This results in the problematic tensions being handled

on a personal level, with impacts on their work and well-being, which will be discussed in the following section.

As displayed by our results, HR managers internalize the tensions and frustrations of managing these multiple expectations, rather than viewing it as an organizational or occupational issue. As these have not been acknowledged by our interviewees collectively as a professional dilemma, no steps have been taken to counteract the discrepancies or offset the negative impacts. Furthermore, by not approaching these as a professional concern, but as a complication of the role to be addressed personally, it has a significant impact on their role. We argue that the insecurity which HR managers often feel in their own roles impedes any efforts to improve the perceptions of their role, in combination with, the management of the emotional factors for both employees and themselves is considered ‘overwhelming’.

On the basis that individuals are the totality of their ‘identities’ of self, social and professional, the resulting insecurities and ambiguities held by both these stakeholders regards their position, can cause the interviewees to question their own perceptions and understandings of their own role. Therefore, in accordance with Collinson (2003), we agree that it is an opportunity for HR practitioners to reaffirm their professional identity, by collectively addressing such issues as multiple expectations. Only with a solid foundation of their role amongst themselves, HR professionals would be able to confidently communicate or project this image to these stakeholders, as a means of creating a shared understanding of their role (Watson, 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

An additional opportunity yet to be realised by HR managers is the benefits to their well-being through the increased involvement of external stakeholders. In contrast to their ability to name external stakeholders which are directly linked to their position, there was a variety of groups mentioned throughout our interviews. Such groups indicated as being present, from the perspective of the HR manager, were in the majority, consultants and healthcare professions, such as psychiatrists and nurses. It is our argument that by embracing the value of such groups, in alignment with the devolution of the HR role, HR managers would be able to continue being perceived as the ‘caring and feeling’ element of the organisation by offering these services, without having to be directly involved. By removing this emotional support function from the organisation, HR managers would greatly reduce the ‘emotional maintenance’ and ‘toxin handling’ required of them (Kulik *et al.*, 2009). These

responsibilities have been well documented in relation to their negative impacts upon HR workers. The delegation of these ‘draining’ tasks would be an almost instantaneous enhancement in the welfare of these HR managers, as well as freeing their time to focus on the strategic responsibilities of the department.

In summation, this study is a positive contribution to the HR sector as we believe that the inclusion of the three stakeholder groups highlights the complexity of the relationships with which HR managers must contend, in comparison to the previous unidirectional studies. Furthermore, the implications for the organisation are two-fold, as the current misunderstandings of the HR role within organisations can be a hindrance from attaining of business goals, as well as the individual impacts upon the effectiveness of the HR practitioner resulting from role ambiguity and insecurity.

In the following section, with these points in mind, we conclude by offering suggestions as how these issues could be broached.

CONCLUSION

We found in our research that despite the evolution of the HR role, some discrepancies in how stakeholders view HR Managers' roles still exist. These discrepancies have an impact on these practitioners and their role (such as consequences in terms of contribution to performance or identities struggles) so they must be further addressed. Therefore, we suggest two main directions for HR managers in order to improve the current management of these impacts upon their roles. Finally we propose as well a path for future research.

6.1 Two tracks to handle role discrepancies' impact.

First, we suggest that HR managers must address the role discrepancies existing inside the organisation in order to avoid dealing with discrepancies at a personal level. Secondly, we claim that they could gain from a wider openness to external stakeholders, therefore being aware of the different benefits offered by actors outside the organisation.

As far as the role of HR managers is concerned, we think that the definition of it should be improved. By this, we do not mean that HR managers should change the dimension in which they focus (such as the shift from administrative to business), as this is already acknowledged by executives and HR practitioners. Instead, we argue that they would gain from changing the "style" of performing their duties towards a consultant approach, as suggested by Wright (2008). This role would allow them to take into consideration, the sometimes competing expectations received by different groups in the organisation without "taking sides" or representing one group in particular. Therefore it is a way to recognize of role uncertainties as occupational issue. With this new "internal consultant" title, they could implement their organisational knowledge and expertise for the best of the company. In other words, the consultant approach would unify the different roles of business partner, expert and employee champion, while still contributing to the performance of the firm. We perceive therefore that the steps towards a more "internal consultant" approach are starting to be taken by our participants, notably by the description of a "coaching" approach to employees.

Concerning the social worker role, often expected by employees, we argue that of course it should not be erased as it is not contradictory with the internal consultant role, in reference to implementing change programs about stress or work-life balance, equality of treatment in the

organisation and so on. However, we think that the HR role should be better communicated to the employees in organisations as well as to executive managers. The term “internal consultant” makes it, therefore, easier to picture what can be expected from such a role and therefore it makes it easier to communicate it and identification for HR managers. The variety of tasks that could be performed, are also better represented with such a title. Lastly, it would be a way to reconcile the business role and the employee champion one often described as contradictory (Graham & Tarbell, 2006, Foote & Robinson, 1999).

Secondly, we argue that HR managers would gain from openness towards stakeholders outside the organisation. Our finding of the expectation of a “social worker” raises the question of the unions’ role towards HR. As a matter of fact, HR managers imply that they encroach sometimes the responsibilities of unions towards employees’ well-being. Therefore, a redefinition of their accountable obligation towards employees would be beneficial. It would coincide with the progression of the HR role towards an internal consultant.

Additionally, this relatively new role could allow HR to build a stronger professional identity (Wright, 2008). This would be an essential element to organise knowledge sharing across the profession and therefore not relying only on HR networks. This reinforcement of the HR profession could position HR managers on the front stage when it comes to external services provided by consultant firms. For example, they could have better acknowledgement of their toxic handler role, as described by Kulik *et al.* (2009) and make use of external resources and support.

6.2 Limitations

Possible limitations of the data collection could be, the conservative number of interviews conducted as well as defined demographics such as the participants ages, gender, regional location and years of experience within the field. While these variables within the sampling were acknowledged with the data collection conducted to the point of saturation, it is plausible that should a broader demographic be included in the study, that the results could vary significant.

A consideration should also be made in regards to the results’ applicability as it is assumed that the national context of Sweden with its characteristics of its legislative stance is a guiding factor of their workplace relations. The social democratic state of this nation is felt to have a

heavy impact on the relations and involvement of the unions within organisations, which may not be the case in other countries (Hiltrop *et al.*, 1997). Also by conducting the interviews in English, rather than the participant's first language there is a possibility of misinterpretation or an inability to express their views as succinctly as they would in their mother tongue.

6.3 Further Research

In sum our thesis describes the different understanding of HR managers towards multiple expectations in the organisation, thanks to our interviews with different practitioners. However, we think our research - through the inclusion of the three stakeholder groups - opens the path towards a multi-respondents approach of HR managers. In other words, further research should address the actual expectations of our stakeholders groups (executive managers, employees and stakeholders) by directly questioning them. It would allow a deepening of the influences and forces explaining HR managers' current roles as well as keeping the inter-organisational scale of study.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Example of Contact Email

Dear Ms X,

We are currently enrolled as students in the “*Managing Knowledge, People and Change*” Master Program at Lund University. During our education, the area of managerial identities, particularly in the context of the multi-faceted role of HR managers is of specific interest. Due to your position in the HR network with the Chamber of Commerce of Southern Sweden, we are hoping that we could request your assistance in extending our invitation to your constituents to partake in our thesis research.

We would like to conduct 15 interviews of approximately 45 minutes in length, to discuss aspects of role and responsibilities of HR managers and the consequences on their professional identity. As the HRM sector is facing challenges and transformations, we are interested in their experiences and perceptions of the current situation. We expect the findings of this study will be of significance to practitioners, such as yourself, to offer insight into the identity struggles that HR managers could experience and the consequent impacts.

The highest level of discretion will be maintained, with the paper being only for educational purposes. Moreover, we can offer anonymity in the sense that we are focused upon HR managers as part of a professional group, rather than their organization or employer. Lastly, on completion of the study we will certainly make our research available to all participants.

We are happy to answer your questions about this study. If given the opportunity to interview yourself and your network members, it would be a valuable resource to our study. We look forward hearing from you in regards to our request.

Sincerely,

Jacky Mead & Pauline Genty

Appendix 2 – Invitation on Social Professional Networks

This message has been posted on social networks such as LinkedIn and Viadeo in groups specialized in Human Resources.

HR managers "between a rock and a hard place" - Research Proposal Master Students Lund University

We are conducting our master thesis about 'professional identity' of HR managers and their relationships within the workplace. We would like to conduct interviews of approximately 45 minutes in length with HR managers during April, to discuss experiences and responsibilities specific to this often challenging position. The highest level of discretion will be maintained, with the paper being only for educational purposes. We are based in the Malmö-Lund region and we are happy to travel to a place at participants' convenience in order to conduct our interviews.

Please feel free to contact us on my email address if interested:
pauline.genty.732@student.lu.se

Best Regards,

Appendix 3 – Interview Guide

Interview Questions

The arrows are “follow up” questions or questions formulated differently in case of misunderstandings or requests for more explanations from the interviewees.

We will start the interviews with a quick explanation of the research project and a reassurance of what we can offer for confidentiality and anonymity.

- **Roles, duties and responsibilities**

1. Tell us about the path you followed to become a HR manager?
 - ⇒ Why did you decide to become a HR manager?
 - ⇒ How long have you been a HR manager?

- **Motivations / background**

2. Can you describe us your role as a HR Manager?
 - ⇒ Do you experience any routine in your job?
 - ⇒ What are you main responsibilities?

- **“Ideal HR manager” versus “Them”**

3. How would you as a practitioner describe an “ideal” HR manager?
 - ⇒ Roles/Personality/Relationships with colleagues-subordinates-supervisors
4. Can you describe a time when you felt helped or hindered in your job?
 - ⇒ What – who prevents you from being an “ideal” HR manager?
5. For HR managers, can you describe any tensions or definable pressures that you have experienced?
 - ⇒ What prevents you from sleeping at night (linked with your position)?
 - ⇒ What makes you the proudest about your job?

- **Power relations – expectations and perceptions**

- ***** Executive managers**

6. What do you think people above you expect from you?
7. How is it communicated to you?
8. How do you think this people perceive the HR manager role in the organization?
 - ⇒ Ulrich’s roles: strategic partner/ administrative agent/ change agent/ employee champion for example.
 - ⇒ Can you tell us an anecdote/story that could be a good example?

****** Same questions again but this time about Employees/people under you.**

9. What do you think people under you expect from you?
10. How is it communicated to you?
11. How do you think this people perceive the HR role in the organization?
 - ⇒ Ulrich's roles for example.
 - ⇒ Can you tell us an anecdote/story that could be a good example?

***** Outsiders/ stakeholders**

12. Do you believe that there are stakeholders external to the organisation, with expectations of HR managers? Government, new recruits etc.
13. How is it communicated to you?
14. How do you think HR managers are portrayed in the media?
 - ⇒ Ulrich's roles for example.
 - ⇒ Can you tell us an anecdote/story that could be a good example
15. If I ask your neighbor, friend or somebody in the street, how would they describe a HR manager in your opinion?
 - ⇒ Does this 'outsider' perception affect how you see yourself as a HR professional?
 - ⇒ In what ways? An example?
 - ⇒ For any misconceptions, why do you feel they exist?

- **Negotiation of these multiple expectations/perceptions**

Considering that we have spoken about 3 parties that have an importance in your job:

16. Do you feel that these different parties' expectations are sometimes conflicting?
 - How do you react? How do you handle it?
17. How do these various expectations affect how to do your job on a daily basis?

Appendix 4 – Cloud Tags from all our interview analysis

This tag has been created on the website <http://tagcrowd.com>. It takes only in consideration the words from our interviewees. Our questions are not included in this cloud.

able (26) administrative (23) around (27) better (23) bit (38) **business** (66) care (28) ceo (30)
change (38) comes (53) **company** (180) course (104)
decision (26) department (47) depending (22) development (29) **different** (83)
director (23) **discuss** (58) done (26) education (31) either (24)
employees (125) everything (24) example (28) **expectations** (80)
experience (26) **feel** (58) focus (22) **general** (29) **give** (54) going (48) handle (38) hard (32)
help (68) **hr** (283) idea (25) **important** (65) information (48) interested (24)
issues (60) job (42) leader (25) **lot** (74) **manager** (144) matter (30)
maybe (35) means (26) **meet** (30) money (25) negotiations (35) ok (28) **organisation** (29)
organization (89) **people** (327) perhaps (23)
person (105) perspective (27) point (22) position (47) problem (42) process (32)
questions (47) quite (46) **really** (121) recruitment (22) **responsibility** (57)
role (34) salary (38) saying (22) **situation** (103) solve (24) someone (32)
something (72) **sometimes** (88) speak (39) staff (26) started (38)
strategic (27) support (22) sweden (25) taking (26) talk (42) team (41) **things** (114)
think (256) thought (21) today (38) together (42) training (44)
understand (37) union (23) values (23) view (25) wants (27) **work** (333) wrong (23)
yeah (52) **years** (89) yes (57)