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The Voldemort Effect: Unspoken Fears in HR Leadership

A qualitative study on the roles and identities of HR during
organizational change

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Preface

It has been a great joy to learn and go into depth on the intricacies that are the HR profession. We have learned a lot, and hopefully we have also been able to provide some valuable insights in the field of HR during organizational change.

We would like to start off by thanking our supervisor Emilie Hesselbo for being a great source of feedback and clarity when our writing met crossroads. She not only provided us with invaluable insights into how to go about writing a thesis, but was also a source of positivity and encouragement when it was needed the most. Without Emilie's help, our thesis would not be what it is today, and for that we are incredibly grateful.

Secondly we want to extend our gratitude toward the multinational industrial conglomerate that from the very beginning was incredible to work with. We would also like to specifically thank the HR professionals who agreed to be interviewed and shared their thoughts with us in an unhindered way.

Lastly, thank you to our peers who read our paper on multiple occasions and provided valuable insights that made great improvements to our study.

Thank you, and we hope you enjoy your reading!

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Abstract

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Authors:	June Bergland, Erik Påander, Emilia Svartz
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Keywords:	Human Resources, Identity, Leadership, Organizational Change, Human Resource Leadership
Research Question:	How do human resources (HR) professionals perceive their role in relation to initiating ‘Skills-First’ in a multinational industrial conglomerate?
Purpose of study:	To expand the current literature of HR by contributing toward a greater understanding of the tensions inherent in the role and to engage in a deeper formulation of the roles HR professionals could occupy during change that HR themselves initiated.
Theoretical perspectives:	The study used theoretical frameworks to assert the identities, roles and leadership of HR professionals.
Methodology:	A qualitative study using semi-structured interviews has been conducted from a social constructionist perspective. A combination of an interpretive and abduction approach was applied.
Results:	The empirical analysis displays the roles of driver, visionary, supporter, communicator and moderator. The underlying complications in forming identities for HR are also shown.
Conclusions:	In the conclusion, the theoretical frameworks are extended through the identified roles from the empirical material. Additionally, HRs role is nuanced by placing an emphasis on leadership, suggesting a development of Human Resource Leadership (HRL). The practical implications add to the discussion of HR roles in the workfield.

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1. Introduction

This study will focus on the profession of human resources (HR) and more specifically HR in the context of initiating change. We draw on the historical development of human resource management (HRM) in order to better understand the role of HR during change initiatives and the ways in which the profession views itself. Using qualitative interviews, we get a closer look at not only HRs self-image, but also its extensive knowledge and awareness of what might be expected from a leader during change. We use this context to question the position of HR and pose questions whether the profession may in some cases be ready to take on new challenges.

1.1 Background

In recent decades, the development of the HR profession has been subject to much debate. While HR is seeking to transition toward a more strategic role in organizations, this process is described as both complex and contested (Kieran et. al., 2022). Historically being seen as strictly an administrative role, the ghosts of the role's past still lingers, plaguing the profession with self-doubt as the role is being reevaluated (Ulrich et. al., 2013; Kieran et. al., 2022). In addition to its past and current development, the HR profession is situated in a position between management and advocating for employees, which oftentimes is not an easy landscape to navigate (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). The position of HR described by Cayrat & Boxall (2023) may play to its advantage in times of change. And the impact HR could have during change may, as Kieran et. al., (2022) point out, be undervalued.

Even though the literature shows tensions and troubles HR face in developing its role, there are also clear signs that there is considerable potential if HR professionals get to use their role in an active way. HRs knowledge about people including retention, motivation and skills are often crucial for business competitive advantage (Aldrich et. al., 2015). During change initiatives, HR can also make use of its position by improving perceptions and reducing resistance (Maheshwari & Vohra, 2015; Hon et. al., 2014; Kieran et. al., 2022). Given its knowledge and potentially important impact on change, the role of HR in general and in a change context is described in multiple ways. Although this unclarity in the role of HR may result in HR struggling with legitimacy (Aldrich et. al., 2015; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Kochan, 2004), independence (Aldrich et. al., 2015; Heizmann & Fox, 2019) and ambiguity (Guest & King, 2004) when trying to make sense of its role.

1.2 Case description and Skills-First approach

We are examining a multinational industrial conglomerate (MIC) in an early phase of planning an organizational change into what is called “Skills-First” which is aiming to be implemented in the entire company, from the top management to entry-level workers.

The Skills-First approach aims to improve several parts of the organization, for instance, recruitment, retainment and internal mobility according to interviews with senior HR. During our interviews, senior HR defined what a Skills-First approach could contribute with, and also how it could impact the organization. Skills differ from formal qualifications because skills highlight practical abilities, expertise learned through past experience or training, and therefore focus more on the individual's competencies that could be relevant for a specific role within a company. By shifting from focusing on formal qualifications (for example certificates, education or former employment positions) to focusing on skills instead, the company believes they can better attract and retain employees, foster long-term careers and personal development within the organization. The Skills-First approach also challenges the traditional way of structuring work, moving away from specific departments and working together with employees holding similar skills, to a more project base structure. The aim with the Skills-First approach is to create mobility within the organization, ensuring employees with suitable skills are deployed to projects where they can make the greatest contributions.

This organizational change entails shifting to a Skills-First approach, with primarily two driving forces behind this initiative. Firstly, the pay transparency directive from the EU, and secondly, the advantages associated with Skills-First. The directive (EU) 2023/970 emphasizes the principle of equal pay, which entails both equal pay for equal work and equal value between men and women. The directive also states the employer's responsibility to ensure pay structures follow the principle of equal pay. These pay structures need to include factors such as skills, working conditions and responsibility. The second driving force is seen through interviews with HR-representatives at the company clearly envisioning how the Skills-First approach can improve recruitment, retainment and internal mobility of their global workforce.

The change in the case of MIC, is driven by HR top managers, along with selected HR nominees, in order to represent the change in the different divisions. This has been done, so in a later stage of the change, they can act as ambassadors and pass on the message downwards in the decentralized organization. This organizational change is in its early stages, and the HR department is the only part of the company that is engaged in how this change is going to evolve.

1.3 Problematization

As early as in 1978, Legge (1978, cited from Cayrat & Boxall, 2023) discussed the ambiguities personnel management (later renamed HR) suffer due to a lack of power and authority linked to the difficulties of balancing the needs of personnel and organizational outcomes. Incredibly, the situation facing HR today can be argued as not much different to the struggles described more than 40 years ago and researchers today are still calling for further work to be done trying to better understand 1) the historic tensions and HR identities and 2) the connection between organizational change and the role of HR.

Firstly, in a literature review by Cayrat & Boxall (2023) assessing the roles and tensions existing within the role of HR, it is concluded that future research could focus on understanding “HR roles and their tensions in theories of identity” (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023;p15). Evaluations of HR and its role is further contextualized by a belief that the future of HR will include a redefinition of the HR role and professional identity in order to better fit the need for the organization. Emphasizing HRs potential if it is met with greater status, influence, and achievement (Kochan, 2004). Moreover the HR role comes with its challenges, including a lack of legitimacy and trust from multiple stakeholders (Kochan, 2004; Heizmann & Fox, 2019). Struggling to establish themselves as contributors to the organizational strategy and competitive advantage (Kochan, 2004), more research needs to be put toward understanding how HR practitioners’ experience their role as strategic business partners and the struggles that come with a new role (Heizmann & Fox, 2019).

There have been multiple studies done using interviews and surveys to try to understand the ways in which HR view themselves and their roles in organizations (Ulrich et. al., 2013; Francis & Keegan, 2006; Boldizzoni & Quarantino, 2011; Aldrich et. al., 2015; Guest & King 2004; Heizmann & Fox, 2019). We argue this study is well positioned to further the literature in this area and to bring new perspectives. The importance of this study is further motivated by recommendations for further research given by Cayrat & Boxall (2023, p.15) in their extensive review of the literature surrounding the role and tensions in HR, stating that “*We need to better anchor the study of HR roles and their tensions in theories of identity [...]*”. By using theories such as Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015) transformational waves, Ulrich’s (1998) four-field model of personnel managers, HR identities framework by Ferm et. al., (2023), and studies in leadership, we argue that this study is well positioned to utilize past research in order to develop and make relevant contributions in our understanding of how HR view their role during change.

Further, by conducting semi-structured interviews with HR professionals in a context of organizational change, we see this study as being able to contribute toward greater understanding of the second point; HR and its role within change, which is described in multiple ways and from various points of view. Baran et. al. (2019) argue that not only is it relevant for future research to understand change and what role HR may play in different types of organizational change, but also that “*few studies have explored human resources*

professionals' views of organizational change and their roles in it." (Baran et. al., 2019, p.201). We have identified studies looking into the role of HR within the context of change (Baran et. al., 2019; Kieran et. al., 2022; Brown et. al., 2017; Hon et. al., 2011; Maheshwari & Vohra, 2015; Alfes et. a., 2019). What gives this study strength in comparison to other studies on HR in change, is given the case description, we have studied HR in a change context where they are a key initiator and driver. Instead of studying HR as a third party to a change initiative being driven by another business area, the case of MIC and the Skills-First approach is clearly initiated by HR professionals, giving us a unique perspective that could make a positive contribution to the literature of the field.

1.4 Research question and purpose

Given the background, case description and the problematization, the purpose of our study is to expand the current literature of HR by contributing toward a greater understanding of the tensions inherent in the role. The purpose of the study is also to contribute toward a better understanding what role HR professionals could occupy during change by analyzing HR during a change they themselves have initiated.

Our research questions is therefore the following:

- How do human resources (HR) professionals perceive their role in relation to initiating 'Skills-First' in a multinational industrial conglomerate?

1.5 Disposition

Introduction	In this chapter the background for the study is presented, highlighting both the <i>relevance</i> for the study such as the lack of HRs role as initiator of change as well as <i>positioning</i> of the study, aiming at analyzing HRs role in a context of an initial change project. Moreover a description of the case study was provided along with the problematization and research question.
Literature review	In the literature review the evolution of HR role is presented drawing on historical context such as having only an administrative role to more recent being a change agent. Next, the changing roles of HR are discussed, highlighting still existing tensions. From there HR in a change context is brought up with emphasis on leadership.
Methodology	In this chapter, we outlined our working process and how we motivated our methodological choices, and discussed how the choices impacted the quality of the study.
Empirical findings	In this chapter, empirical findings are presented in relation to our research question. Starting off by analyzing five different roles during an organizational change that our interviewees have identified themselves with. The challenges HR face during an organizational change are further analyzed in regard to how other parts of the organization perceive their role.
Discussion	In the discussion, our empirical findings from the interviews are discussed from a theoretical perspective, with the aim to nuance and add on to current literature.
Conclusion	In this chapter, the thesis final conclusions are summarized. Presenting limitations of the study, theoretical and practical implications and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

In this chapter, we begin with introducing HR in a broader context, describing the ways in which the role has changed over time. Thereafter we describe how the development of the HR-role is not without issues, showcasing tensions in the role with respect to its historic roots and its current struggles. The chapter continues by narrowing the context of HR into its specific role during change and transformations, showing the opportunities and difficulties that are represented in the literature. Lastly we present leadership and specifically HR leadership, gaining clarity in what it means to be a leader.

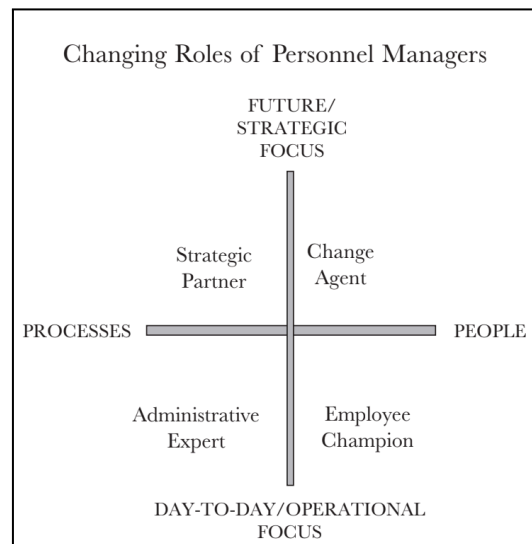
2.1 The evolution of the HR-Role

As a profession within organizations, HR has seen distinct changes during the past century and more specifically the past three decades (Baran et al., 2019). Initially being primarily seen as an administrative role, the evolution and development of the role of HR and its contributions to organizations is part of much debate (Baran et al., 2019, Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). This development, visualized by Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015) in three main phases, called HR's transformational waves, aims to showcase the evolution the role has gone through. In the initial phase, which the authors argue started in the 1980s, HR was positioned as a lower prioritized administrative and maintenance oriented role. During this period Karen Legge published their book *Power, Innovation and Problem-Solving in Personnel Management*, which at the time provided a shift in the ways in which personnel management was seen (Guest & King, 2004). In their book, Legge (1978, cited from Guest & King, 2004) describes how there are several ambiguities within the role of personnel management, and that the role lacked the power to implement many of its initiatives, something there are signs of still today.

The initial role or phase of HR, as previously described, is associated with administrative tasks, maintenance, regulatory compliance, and the transition from personnel management to strategic human resource management. As the profession developed a deeper importance in training, recruiting, compensations, it reached what Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015) describe as wave two. The third phase, or wave, is closely linked to the incorporation of HR into business and the broader strategy of an organization. Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015) position HR as part of solving business problems during this wave of development, which is where the current development of HR is situated according to the authors. In reaching a final and future potential fourth wave, HR can attempt to further align the profession with the broader business context, as well as moving from the inside/outside approach it historically had, to outside/inside approach. This shift is described as letting the external environment and stakeholders have a greater impact on HR and its role within an organization. This can be achieved by emphasizing the needs of employees but also looking beyond its traditional borders within and outside the organization, thus finding new ways to add value to the organization (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

2.1.1 Changing Roles of Personnel Management

A prominently cited social scientist within the field of HR development is David Ulrich (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023), in 1998 they developed a four-field approach regarding the changing roles of HR-managers. The model is divided between strategic and operational focus, and process or people focus. The four roles therefore approaching are the following: (1) Strategic Partner, (2) Change Agent, (3) Administrative Expert and (4) Employee Champion according to Ulrich (1998, cited from Caldwell, 2003, p.987).



Source: Ulrich (1998, cited from Caldwell, 2003, p.987)

The HR role as a *strategic partner* means being involved in the development of business strategy. Ulrich (1998) emphasizes the importance HR plays in defining what the business needs in order to implement a certain strategy (Caldwell, 2003, p.987 & Kuimet, 2019, p.67). The role as a *change agent* focuses on delivering and supporting organizational changes, such as culture change for example (Ibid.) The role of the *administrative expert* is to maintain efficiency in the organization by continuously evaluating work routines throughout the organization (Caldwell, 2003, p.987). The *employee champion's* main focus is on the employees, to make certain they have access to training and development (Caldwell, 2003, p.987 & Kuimet, 2019, p.67). Ulrich wanted to shift from the static and negative picture of HR roles by developing this framework and highlighting the diversity of roles that HR professionals can possess (Caldwell, 2003, p.987).

2.1.2 Tensions in the HR-role

In more recent times, scholars have aimed to evaluate the findings of early personnel management research, finding that HR today can struggle with legitimacy (Aldrich et. al., 2015; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Kochan, 2004), independence (Aldrich et. al., 2015; Heizmann & Fox, 2019) and ambiguity (Guest & King, 2004; Baran et. al., 2019; Ulrich et. al., 2013; Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). In a recent literature review by Cayrat & Boxall (2023), over 50 years of research into the HR field was comprehensively studied

looking further into the tensions and struggles seen in the profession. In their review, the authors suggest an underlying complication that literature oftentimes refer to as one of the reasons behind some of the tension in the HR-role, the fact that the role sit “in an uncomfortable mediating role between management and labour” (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023, p.4). The tensions created by being situated between management and advocator for employees is developed further explaining how the role of HR is often ambiguous in its position relative to multiple stakeholders (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023), and that HR oftentimes still suffer from “the old ambiguities and negative counter-images of the past.” (Caldwell, 2003, p.987). As the role of HR is changing toward a strategic- or business partner, it may risk losing trust from one of its main stakeholders- the employees (Francis & Keegan, 2006), while at the same time gaining an increase of trust with managers if the role of business partner is successful (McCracken & Heaton, 2012), showing the difficulties in balancing its role with expectations.

Due to the multiple expectations of the HR practitioners, their professional identity often has overflowing tensions and contradictions. The HR practitioners work life is therefore characterized by navigating contradictory expectations and which may lead to different perceptions of their role within the company. The identity of the HR worker can therefore be viewed as a social construction; since it's shaped through the relationships with the business, stakeholders and organizational belonging (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2015, p. 27). According to Alvesson and Lundholm (2015) the tensions HR professionals face in their work life, can also emerge due to the issue of lack of knowledge and the dilemma surrounding status. The authors stress how the lack of knowledge is emphasizing that the organization as a whole might struggle to understand what the HR department is actually working with on a daily basis. The status issue is regarding the fact that the HR department simply does not have the same status as other departments within an organization. The insufficient knowledge and the status problem can both be caused by poor communication about how the HR contributes to the organization (Alvesson & Lundholm, 2015, p.74-78).

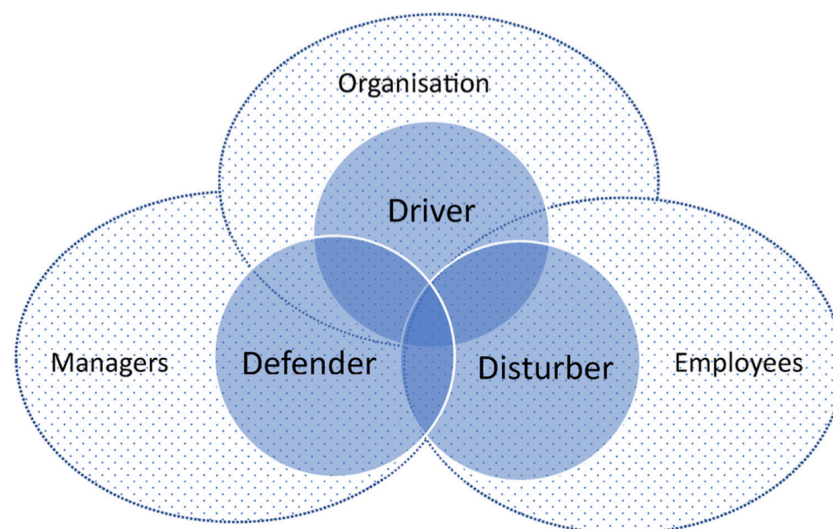
A recent study by Ferm et. al., (2023) highlighted the HR professionals' complex work dynamics of stakeholders and their expectations. Ferm et. al., (2023) based the findings of this study on 34 interviews with Swedish HR professionals who worked in both public and private companies. This study focused on typical professional identities of HR practitioners and their relation to their stakeholders, and provided a framework as a new way of understanding the identity of HR professionals. Ferm et. al., (2023) defined three different identities the HR practitioners possess: (1) Defender, (2) Disturber and (3) Driver.

The *defender* is described as a supportive and administrative role, where HR professionals' main task is to offer support and guidance to the managers within the company. The defender is prioritizing the needs of the managers, and not the needs of the employees. Ferm et. al., also states that the HR practitioner as a defender can emerge due to the hierarchical structure within many companies, where managers usually hold higher positions in the organization compared to the HR professionals. To summarize, the manager has more mandate, which the defender should align themselves with.

The *disturber* is characterized by being the opposite of how Ferm et. al., (2023) describes the defender. Instead of being an important supporter and guide of the manager, the disturber's role is to challenge and critique the manager's initiatives. The disturber wants to stand up for the HR community's competence, instead of being an administrative aid. The disturber put the employees needs in focus, rather than the managers needs.

The *driver* is emphasizing how HR can add value to productivity and economic profit within the organization. The drivers tasks usually involve supporting the company's growth, helping managers with the business plan and putting employer branding strategies in place. The driver believes HR contributes to the entire organization. Hence, they should work close to the business part of the organization, which also is their main stakeholder. The driver and disturber both have in common that they want to be seen as more than a support function for the managers.

The defender, the disturber and the driver all together form this model that Ferm et. al., (2023) concluded in their study. This framework can be used to explore how the HR practitioners' identities are formed and affected by their primary stakeholders.



(Source: Ferm et. al., 2023)

To clarify, this model is not stating an image of what HR practitioners ideally should perform their work, this model aims to illustrate the complexity of the HR roles within an organization (Weber 1949, cited in Ferm et. al., 2023). The model highlights the different stakeholders with influence on the HR employee, which is creating an environment hard for the HR practitioner to navigate in. It's also challenging for the HR employee to make all the stakeholders satisfied all at once; the managers, employees and the organization. Another important aspect of Ferm et. al.,'s (2023) framework is that it emphasizes the multiple expectations of the HR practitioner, and how they find their professional identity by adapting to their external stakeholders.

2.2 HR in change and transformations

In describing HR in the context of change, Baran (2019) states how the ways in which HR professionals view their role makes a big difference as it acts as the foundation on which the limitations of the role is put. As the profession in general can be described as holding multiple roles, during change HR is more specifically described as “change agent” or “consultant” by Baran (2019), and “leading, creating, co-ordinating and enabling strategic change” by Kieran et. al. (2022, p.300). Baran (2019) also made an interesting insight from their survey of 547 professionals, with participants often viewing their impact in change as limited or not very important. Even though HR professionals may view themselves and their role during change as limited or less important than others, the following literature points toward the contrary.

During change or transformations, organizations oftentimes find themselves in situations facing resistance and hesitation toward the intended change. From the literature, it is clear there is consensus surrounding the possibilities of HR as a mitigator of resistance during change. Maheshwari & Vohra (2015) support that if HR implement practices including leadership, training and communication, it can lead to a positive influence on the perceptions and resistance being shown from employees toward change initiatives. Bodla & Ningyu (2017) further show through their findings how HR practices during change can have a positive impact on adaptability and task performance, while HR professionals also can be a part of improving the relationship and view of HR during change. Drawing on sensemaking theory, it is suggested that HR can help with employee understandings (Kieran et. al., 2022) and help in making improvements to creativity and employee relations toward change (Hon et. al., 2014). Kieran et. al., (2022) further describe how because of its position, HR could be situated to have great influence over implementation of change.

In their survey of more than 1900 employees in the police force in the United Kingdom, Alfes et. al., (2019) argue that except from literature previously connecting HRs role to sensemaking and understanding to mitigate resistance, HR can leverage their position as change agents through communication. It is reasoned that HR should be aware of the ways in which communication is used, making sure they adapt to the situational and individual needs such as resistance but also in phases of acceptance (Elrod & Tippett, 2002; cited in Alfes et. al., 2019). When using communication as a tool in their role during change and transformations, it is important to give background information and to be clear in the implications of the change initiative, explaining how the individual employee's role and responsibilities may shift as a consequence of the change or transformation. Communication could be carried out in multiple ways, and the effects of which could be similar to the effects shown previously, to increase employees perceived support and lowering resistance during change (Alfes et. al., 2019).

2.3 Leadership and leadership within HR

What defines leadership can be separated into different scholars and continuously be discussed. According to Alvesson et al. (2016) leadership includes *influencing ideas and meanings* onto others and being a *visionary*, providing a vision of the overall direction. Traditionally, leadership was established through supervision of the subordinates but more recently, leadership is about changing culture and framing identity (Alvesson et al. 2016). Moreover, leadership can also be expressed through listening, being supportive and coaching others - which sometimes is referred as post-heroism.

Besides describing what a leader is, the literature also highlights followers' perspective. Followers often associate leaders with positive things such as self-confidence and having good judgment (Alvesson et al. 2016). These positive attributes are often linked to the leader having higher status than the followers in terms of position or social status (Alvesson et al. 2016). There are numerous ways to describe leadership however to lead and influence others receptiveness is needed from the followers. They must accept the meaning and influence given by the leader (Alvesson et al. 2016). Thus, leadership is not without context and is socially created (Alvesson et al. 2016).

Leadership within HR is a relatively new concept, where HR must show proficiency in a multitude of areas including; strategy, execution, knowledge of culture, partnership and understanding leadership (Sparrow et. al., 2010). According to Adams (2011) HR needs to take action and take accountability for evaluating projects, incorporating findings into the designs as well as having knowledge of the business context and stakeholders. They also need to build adaptable structures, motivate new behaviors, engage employees in the change and infuse meaning into the project (Sparrow et. al., 2010). Strategic human resource management, HRM, is “*putting people at the heart of the business*” and emphasizes developing the human capital in order to gain a competitive advantage (Adams, 2011, p.31). Therefore HR needs to work both vertically and horizontally in order to lead the organization forward. It is also worth pointing out that leadership is not restricted to top level HR roles since leadership can occur at all levels (Sparrow et. al., 2010).

This however does not come without trouble as some argue that HR has positional power as a strategy forming department but they lack “*the power to make initiatives appear legitimate, desirable, rational and inevitable*” (e.g Sheehan et al., 2014, p.116). Additionally, the literature points out how HRs lack of business understanding results in strategies not being aligned with the business objectives, creating problems when motivating others to change (Sparrow et. al., 2010). Moreover as Brown et al. (2017) point out, HR managers are seen as more credible if they are regarded as having high status and are knowledgeable about the relevant subject at hand, which can be difficult in practice. Since leadership is socially created (Alvesson et al. 2016), how others view HR is also crucial for the success according to Buyens & De Vos (2001). They mention that other departments' perception of HR will determine the place of HR in the organization.

When it comes to HR and leadership, the literature guides HR to leading through being a strategic partner with business (Heizmann & Fox, 2019). Since working with top management and on long term strategy is a way of responding to personnel management having problems with credibility and low status in the organization (Buyens & De Vos, 2001). That successful change is best achieved through creating an alliance with other organizational parts (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2013). The literature assumes the value of strategic HR as a business partner has no restriction to strategy formulation and implementation (Buyens & De Vos, 2001). This can be problematic since context matters in terms of what role HR has. In practice, HR as a strategic business partner can vary depending on its status in the organization, spanning from executive team player to full partnership (Gerpott, 2015). Lastly, Sparrow et al., (2010) mentions the next stage of the development of HR lies in the capability of carrying out this new role as leaders and business partner.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, we will introduce the working process underlying this thesis, by explaining the methodology behind the decision-making process throughout the project. We will explain our thoughts before the interviews and how we later performed the interviews. We also explain how we worked with the analysis. Throughout this chapter, we will further evaluate how those choices have impacted the credibility and authenticity of our thesis.

3.1 Methodological Background

In order to answer our research question, we designed and carried out our field work in a way we deemed suitable for the particular phenomenon at hand. We determined that a qualitative interview study is best suited to meet the purpose of our thesis, which as previously mentioned is to contribute to a greater understanding of the tensions and different expectations from stakeholders within the HR role. Our objective is therefore not simply to apply the already established theoretical frameworks, but to nuance and expand existing literature. We want our findings to contribute to existing literature by addressing aspects that are unexplored in existing research. Given this focus, we therefore applied an *abductive approach* in our study, which is characterized by addressing complex phenomena with the aim to create insights about the situation (Bell et al, 2019, p.25).

More specifically, our study is focused on how the interviewees *view* their role in the initial stage in an organizational change. Therefore we were examining their interpretations of their own role, and what expectations were placed upon them. We interpreted and analyzed their answers as well. As a result, our study adopted an *interpretative approach*, since we were studying how the HR-community viewed their roles within the social context of organizational change (Bell et al, 2019, p.31). This thesis therefore studied the social context of the HR professionals, since we examined how the HR professionals felt, but also how they expressed themselves. Another key point that we are assuming during this thesis is the notion that HR professionals' self-perceptions are *socially constructed* (Bell et al, 2019, p.28). We considered this perspective necessary to adopt since we aim to understand the HR professionals' views and interpretations.

3.2 Method of Sampling

As previously mentioned, our study is based on how the HR professionals view their role during an organizational change at the multinational industrial conglomerate. Therefore, we had to get in touch with individuals who work within the HR community at the specific company. Since the company is international as well, it was significant for us to get in contact with people from different countries and divisions in order to get a broader perspective. As this organizational change targets the entire company, rather than a single division or office, it also motivated us to talk to employees from various parts of the organization. Another factor that affected our sampling was that the organizational change towards a Skills-First approach

was, at the time of our interviews, in its initial stages. So our sampling narrowed down to the senior HR executives within the company, since they were the only members within HR that knew about the upcoming change at the time. Given the specificity of our research, we conducted *purposive sampling* when collecting interviewees to make sure we came in contact with the participants with the knowledge we were looking for (Bell et al, 2019, p.390).

Our initial contact with the company was through a senior member within the HR team at the company, who was a part of our networks of contacts. Our contact person assisted us in identifying employees that met our criteria and assigned those individuals and their available time slots to us, resulting in 13 candidates. This can also be regarded as *convenience sampling* since we chose to interview candidates based on accessibility through our contact person within the company (Bell et al, 2019, p.200). A *snowball sampling* can also describe our sampling method, since our contact person established contact with other employees at the company (Bell et al, 2019, p.394). Some implications regarding our method of sampling is that we personally did not select the individuals we interviewed, we only discussed the criteria for the selection. However, since this thesis is also expected to contribute to the company, it's important that both the company and ourselves are satisfied with our approach. So in this way, we interviewed candidates who met our criteria and were possessing the requested knowledge, while the company assigned employees because they know their personnel better than we do. Moreover, since our field work occurred early on in the organizational change, the company had a better understanding of who was involved at this stage.

To summarize, we searched for interviewees with senior HR professionals in different divisions with different nationalities, with knowledge about the Skills-First organizational change in order to fulfill our purpose. Since we had a contact person who introduced us to the remaining interviewees and ensured they met our criteria, we used a combination between *purposive, convenience and snowball sampling methods*.

3.2.1 Background Information about the Participants

Our interviewees were all a part of the HR community within the MIC, and worked in different sites in Europe. Nine of our participants have the professional role of *Vice President Human Resources* (VP HR in table 1.) within different divisions in the company. The other five interviewees had various roles connected to learning and development (HR in table 1). The seniority level among the interviewees within the company ranges from 16 months to 40 years. The interviewees are situated in Sweden, Spain, Belgium, England and France. In total we conducted 13 digital interviews via Teams, each between 35 and 56 minutes long. The vast majority of our interviews were conducted in English, apart from three which we conducted in Swedish. We decided to have the interviews in the language that felt natural for us and the interviewees, rather than insisting on speaking English to the Swedish interviewees. Our aim was to take the pressure off and conduct the interviews as naturally as possible.

We have chosen not to specify how long each individual has worked in MIC, their precise professional title, nor the country of their employment in order to prevent associating the quotes with a specific participant. We have also given them pseudonyms as common surnames throughout the world, in order to make sure the participants and their gender is anonymous. In Table 1 we have presented our candidates to provide the readers with a clear overview. The table is meant to enable the reader to recognize what quotes are from the same individual, and what title they have in the company.

Table 1.

Surname	Professional role	Interview time (minutes)
Smith	VP HR	56
Johnsson	HR	40
Karlsson	VP HR	46
Muller	VP HR	45
Murphy	HR	50
Rossi	HR	50
Andersson	HR	35
Taylor	VP HR	54
Brown	HR	46
Williams	VP HR	49
Hernández	VP HR	52
Silva	VP HR	28
Martin	VP HR	49

3.4 Collecting Empirical Data

3.4.1 Interview Preparation

We prepared ourselves before our interviews by identifying key themes which could contribute to answering our research questions. For example, what awareness the interviewees had so far of the Skills-First approach, what they thought were the main advantages and concerns about the change, and their personal experience with working with organizational change. We compiled these themes in an interview guide we could use during the interviews. We wanted to make sure to only write down open questions the participant can interpret themselves, since the aim of our interviews was to target their personal opinions and thoughts. The following are two examples of questions we had in our interview guide:

- *How do you see your role in the change to come?*
- *What is the main change that you think Skills-First may provide?*

We wanted the interviewees themselves to define what they thought were relevant answers for our questions. Therefore, we did not write down any too specific questions so we were prevented from leading them into a specific answer they thought we wanted. Instead, we aimed to have flexible interviews so we could ask follow up questions personalized for the interviewees responses. We also made sure there was no particular right or wrong order to ask the questions so we would avoid getting too stuck in our interview guide. The aim was for us to have more of a conversation with the participants rather than a formal interview with rigid questions and answers. Therefore, our interviews became *semi-structured interviews* since we wanted to maintain flexibility but still make sure we covered all the topics we identified as important for our project (Bell et al, 2019, p.428).

During the process of preparing for our interviews, it was important to acknowledge the implications of the *interpretative approach*. Since we are interpreting the respondents answers, thoughts and opinions, there is a risk of misinterpretation. Our own personal values may also affect the interpretative process (Bell et al, 2019, p.39). To address this issue, we consistently made sure to clarify any points we did not fully understand by asking follow-up questions, so we would avoid misinterpreting them later on in the thesis. These are examples of questions we asked in order to minimize this problem:

- *"Have I understood you correctly when you mention this..."*
- *"May I double check to ensure that I've understood you correctly?"*

When the interviews were taking place, we had one team-member who was responsible for the main questions during the interview, and also a short introduction about ourselves and the research project. The other team-members were still active and listening, and asked follow-up questions they thought were relevant. We also agreed on always being at least two out of three team-members during the interviews, to reduce the risk of misinterpreting the answers. Being more than one person per interview also made us discover different perspectives and aspects.

We also made sure to prepare our participants before the scheduled interview meeting, so they had some background information about us. Our contact personal sent an email internally to all the participants providing information about our thesis project, accompanied with our interview guide regarding the topics we wanted to discuss during the meeting. The email also reassured that they will be anonymous, as well as the company.

The aim with this pre-interview communication was that the participants got some information about us before we started. We also wanted the participants to start reflecting on our key topics in advance. Given the initial stage of the organization's change process, the participants have had limited discussions or information meetings about how the Skills-First

approach will look like in the company. By giving them our topics beforehand, we wanted the interviewees to be able to prepare an individual reflection before our interview if they felt the need to. By giving them our interview themes, we also aimed to maximize the 45 minutes we had scheduled for the interviews, and prevent the participants from feeling overwhelmed with our questions.

3.4.2 Following the Interviews

With our emphasis on studying the opinions and personal thoughts of the participants, we wanted to be able to analyze their expressions and choice of words in detail. In order to quote the employees accurately in this thesis, we agreed with both the company and each interviewee to record for transcription purposes. During the interview process we divided up the transcriptions and did them promptly after each interview session. Recording and transcribing the interviews made it possible for us to review the interviews multiple times. This was a necessity since it's challenging to remember exactly what 13 interviewees have said during approximately 45 minutes each. The transcriptions were valuable for us and enabled us to examine what words they use and the context they use them. It also made sure we quoted their words without using our own interpretations of the quotes (Bell et al, 2019, p.436). The transcription was conducted with a programme called Klang AI which is GDPR safe. As a result, the transcription process turned out to be far less time consuming, allowing us to spend time on other aspects of our thesis instead. Klang AI was approved by both Lund University and our supervisor as well.

One implication of recording interviews is that respondents may become self-aware of their answers (Bell et al, 2019, p.436). In order to make the participants comfortable with the recording we ensured their anonymity and also pointed out that there are no right or wrong answers (as discussed in the 3.4.2 *Interview Preparations*). We also weighed the many benefits with recording the interviews and concluded that it was essential in order to fulfill our purpose in the project; to examine how the interviewees view their role in an organizational change.

Since three of our interviews were conducted in Swedish, we needed to translate the quotes from those interviews. Translating quotes while keeping their initial meaning can be challenging (Bell et al, 2019, p.439). We used ChatGPT to translate the quote and adjusted certain words to maintain the meaning within the context the interviewees expressed it. Furthermore, all the team-members reviewed the translated quote to ensure we had the same understanding of it.

3.3 Analysis Process

3.3.1 Organizing the Empirical Data

Since we performed multiple interviews, we wanted to facilitate the analysis process as much as we could. Therefore, before the initial interview, we created a shared document where we wrote down interesting topics or insights that each interviewee mentioned. This made us start reflecting and enabled us to identify recurring themes across the interviews. This initial reflection was performed alongside conducting the 13 interviews and transcribing them.

Once all the interviews were finalized, we made sure each team member reviewed all the interview transcriptions to get an overview of the responses. We decided to begin the analysis by performing it individually. It was decided that each team member did an initial analysis on the interviews they were responsible for asking the questions. We intentionally avoided deciding on any specific format for the analysis, instead we left this task to the individual team member. We simply decided to find interesting areas for discussion or offer insightful comments on the material. We wanted to do this individual analysis to prevent being influenced by another team member. Therefore, we could gather our individual thoughts and then present them to each other. Some examples of themes we initially analyzed included the possibilities and concerns regarding the Skills-First change, as well as the underlying cause of this shift. This aspect of our work process can be characterized as *open coding*, since we aimed to identify a wide range of themes with no limitations (Charmaz, 2002; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011, p.224).

The following phase was to delve deeper into the empirical data, all three of us together. We started by examining more closely on how the participants expressed themselves during the interviews. We marked certain quotes and clustered quotes with similar themes from all the participants. We wanted to identify similar thoughts between the interviewees, but also distinguished statements that were contradictory. We aimed to analyze and answer questions such as "*What can we see here?*" and "*How can we interpret this quotation?*". This iterative process involved revisiting the quotes and analysis multiple times, to refine our understanding or find a new approach. In the beginning of this process, our findings were diverse and lacked clarity. However, with repeating the same steps multiple times we started to identify different themes that could be used to explain our interpretations. We could therefore narrow the quotes and themes down into a theme that was nuanced and cohesive, instead of having different fragments. For example, we analyzed and discussed the varying perspectives on their role during an organizational change, their opinions on how they can make the change meaningful for both employees and managers. This step is called *focused coding* since our objective was to develop a refined narrative and themes that provided meaningful insights (Charmaz, 2002; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011, p.224).

We also believe it is important that all our participants are represented in our final findings. Limiting the representation to only a few interviewees would not capture the perspective of all the 13 people we interviewed. While reducing our quotes we made sure that all

interviewees were represented. This is a crucial factor when arguing for our findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011, p.228).

3.3.2 Matching Theoretical Perspective with Empirical Data

Throughout the organization of the empirical data, we kept different theoretical perspectives in mind to support our interpretations. A key mindset we adopted was to not simply find the perfect theory that could describe our findings, because that would not add any new valuable information to the research area. By striving for a theoretical perspective that *almost* fits our interpretations, we could identify under explored themes within the theory in the research literature. So this mindset guided the process of matching the theoretical perspective with our empirical data.

In line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011, p. 228) it is important to apply theory when arguing for findings and enhance the clarity of the empirical data. Throughout this process, we noticed that previous studies in leadership and change management strongly influenced our theoretical interpretations. Since each team member naturally brings their own knowledge from previous courses there is a potential bias in this process. It's important to note that previous knowledge does not necessarily need to be negative for the project, as long as it is suitable for the thesis. In fact, it can actually offer valuable contributions and insights (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011, p. 228). To make sure the theory and definitions were significant, we engaged in discussions about theory options both within our team and with our supervisor as well as other groups through peer reviews. This collaborative approach enabled us to get diverse perspectives from not only our own past knowledge.

After finding a relevant theoretical perspective with different definitions and theories, we aimed to contribute new perspectives to the field of research, as previously mentioned. Rennstam and Wästerfors inspired us with an approach in order to nuance definitions and theories, consisting of four different steps called *define*, *combine*, *relate* and *nuance* (2011, p.234). We started off by defining the theory in the broader context and how previous research has been discussing it. The next phase was to apply the theory to our specific study, which can differ from other past research. The aim was to specify how this theoretical perspective takes place in this particular company we study, and the participating employees as well.

4. Analysis of Empirical Data

In this section we analyzed the empirical findings related to how HR perceive their role during organizational change. Firstly, we discuss how HR's role in general is shifting from an administrative role to a strategic role, then moving into categorizing the empirical findings in terms of different roles corresponding to what they can contribute with. Lastly, presenting the challenges HR face when gaining trust in an organization.

4.1 HR's role during change

HR is undergoing a role change as they are taking on a project that is unlike any previous changes they have had in the company. The initiative of Skills-First is meant to be implemented in the whole organization and aims to change the recruitment process as well as the structure of the company, basing it on skills rather than titles. This change is according to Silva, grander and more all-encompassing than previous change initiatives.

“Yeah, we have experience of changes before, but never quite on this scale and never quite across the whole spectrum of what we do.” - Silva

With the change initiative comes a possibility for HR to embrace a more strategic and leading role than the one currently assumed. Furthermore, it signifies a shift for HRs role, moving away from a purely administrative role as described by Williams.

“I think when we would move more to that Skills-First organization, it's again, and we see that already with several initiatives, let's say that we took last recent years, HR is no longer an admin role.” - Williams

Williams is referring to a shift HR is facing. The shift includes HR going from primarily having administrative tasks and being there to support the business, to taking on a more active role, contributing to the strategic part of the organization and helping with change management. With HR not solely being an administrative role anymore, the responsibilities and tasks have developed too.

“I think that the role as HR also have changed in recent years to to place even greater emphasis on supporting transformation, change management, and mindset.” - Karlsson

Karlsson continues by describing the newer roles for HR include being knowledgeable in change management, making them have more responsibility and influence. HR is described as a supporting role but this time in terms of being a facilitator in change, not administrative tasks. Karlsson emphasized that the evolution of the HR role these past years has not always been easy; there is still an ongoing process of adaptation.

“And that is a challenge for some HR managers where you traditionally have had more of an admin or operational HR roles, especially in our smaller countries. And now we want them to

be change agents and drive major transformations. It's not so easy. So, we must respect that it's not so easy.” - Karlsson

Change is a process and it seems like this new role asks for more change management skills than what the HR role previously had. It asks for more knowledge of change management, people taking charge and supporting employees. This change of the HR role can be overwhelming for some employees as Karlsson described. Therefore HR needs to support itself in order to support others, building a consensus on what the role does inherit. Besides HR's shift in tasks and responsibility, strategic involvement also comes with a possibility of higher status within the organization, as Williams points out.

“And I think that's very important. And I think, again, if we would implement that Skills-First organization, that will make us a bit more, again, of a business partner. Which is crucial, I think, for organizational developments.” -Williams

According to Williams, if HR drives this change, they will be defined as a business partner. Williams further describes that HRs role as a business partner would not only impact HR but the whole organizational function. HR would gain status being a partner with business instead of a supporting role. How they carry out their role in this change is therefore crucial for the development of their HR role.

When describing their role in the change process, the degree of confidence in what the role should look like varied. Some employees had a vague sense of what this change meant for them but unsure of exactly how it would affect their responsibilities. Because of the lack of clarity there were a multitude of roles that were created through the interviews. In the chapters below we have identified roles that emerged from the empirical evidence.

4.1.1 Driver

When discussing the roles for this change during interviews, multiple individuals mentioned viewing themselves as being a driving force. It is important to note that established roles and instructions have not been decided in this transition towards a Skills-First approach, allowing for varying interpretations; some respondents emphasize how they see themselves as “educators” (Rossi), “drivers”/“the driving force” (Martin; Karlsson), while others describe their role as a “change agent” (Rossi; Karlsson) and “communicators” (Smith). However the theme remains the same, the responsibility lies on HR to drive this change forward.

“... since this is largely about skills, competence, recruitment, retention, and so on, it will be HR who I think will drive it.” - Karlsson

“Well, I think that I am a driving force for this, you know, at the end. This is something that I believe.” - Martin

“I definitely see my role as being an agent of that change.” - Rossi

The quotes above show a feeling of accountability of the change and responsibility over driving this change forward. Karlsson mentions that HR will have the main responsibility over this change since it is their area of expertise. Rossi describes their role as being a “*change agent*”, a term that can be interpreted as HR representing the change in the organization. Similarly Martin expresses the identification with being a driver for this change. Both these quotes insinuate a sense of ownership of this change and responsibility and power to implement the change. This new role forms a new identity outside the existing HR identity as expressed by Hernández and Karlsson.

I think when I look at HR, it's my role, [...]. We need to find a way to organize this and to make it happen in our organization. And I think my role is to be a facilitator, but also a transforming agent. - Hernández

"But I don't know, HR is an important change agent, or whatever you want to call it. To create an understanding of the change and perhaps help to facilitate and drive it." - Karlsson

Their role therefore expands from the original every-day activities to a new role, with new responsibilities. That includes bringing this change into action and combining resources and to be responsible for driving it forward. Karlsson is describing these new tasks as a driver, to facilitate and help bring understanding to others. These are tasks with people in mind and require different skills than the previous HR role. As Karlsson described, the change agent role is taking on a mission and goal of helping others understand why this change is necessary. Indicating that if the usage is not clearly explained to other stakeholders then the change is not going to be successful. Even though they consider themselves as drivers of this organizational change, Johnsson was hesitant on being the face of the change.

'But, but I don't think I would want to put us on the frontline. Instead, I believe the frontline should consist of the managers who lead, distribute work, and drive the business forward. However, there is a main partnership with HR, I think." - Johnsson

Even when they identify as change agents and drivers some Johnsson feel like HR should not be on the frontline. Johnsson rather believes the business part of the organization should have that role instead. This quote can be interpreted as being a driver of change, however it does not necessarily mean that HR professionals have to be the front figure in this change. They can still be a driver of the organizational change, but work more ‘behind the scenes’ and set things in motion.

4.1.2 Visionary

In this chapter, we develop and analyze the ways in which HR identify themselves as a visionary in their role during change. Even if the change is in an early stage and the implementation is not clearly defined, respondents were predominantly convinced that ultimately it would yield positive results. Furthermore, interviewees emphasized the need to explain its benefits to other departments to “get everyone on board” (Johnsson). Their role can be described as a *visionary* trying to convey people from other departments of their idea.

“I firmly believe in this in the way I explain all these skills. So my role will also be to try to influence my college, not only HR...” - Andersson

“Once we've had these managers who have seen the impact of putting Skills-First, they become our strong voices in the organization to gather even more people who are willing to try and promote this mindset. So, we see this as a long-term journey with many different activities connected to communication, linked to storytelling.” - Johnsson

“It becomes very much HR's role,[...]showcasing the possibilities” - Smith

Smith argues that HR's role needs to include being pervasive and “*showcasing the possibilities*”. Both Andersson and Johnsson expressed that they need to convey this change initiative to others. Johnsson mentioned storytelling as a tool to get people to understand and be a part of the change, making it successful if multiple people promote the idea. HR is trying to change the mindset of managers who still put emphasis on titles. Several interviewees described that it is difficult to change from a title based to a Skills-First mindset since managers and employees hang onto the titles and degrees instead of looking at the impact the person has. They have to become visionaries, showing the vision to other departments.

A common theme during our interviews was that they felt the need to make the organization understand why an organizational change is taking place. This can be tied to the role of being a visionary since in order to successfully establish the need for change, having a vision that is clear and can be effectively communicated across the organization is essential.

“We might not know how, but we have an idea of the vision and it's how we can translate that vision into something really concrete for everyone in the organization. Because if you don't give people a vision and you expect them to change, then they're not going to follow quite understandably as well.” - Silva

Silva says that without providing the organization with a clear vision, the organization will not understand the rationale behind the change and therefore not commit to the change process. We also interpret this statement as showing that organizational change is nothing without its support from the employees. HR therefore needs to be convincing and trustworthy as well as communicate clearly. Andersson and Hernández explains it the following way:

“So is selling it and what's in it for us, how we maintain our competitiveness.” - Andersson

“Yeah, I think showing, explaining the why. Why do we need a skill-first approach? Why is it important for our organization?” - Hernández

According to Andersson and Hernández it's all about communicating the why and making it clear how this organizational change can benefit the organization. Therefore, HR feels like they need to pitch this into the organization, in order for them to understand the benefits, the added value, in order for the organization to accept the change. A key aspect of their role therefore includes communicating the vision of the change to explain the necessity of the change.

“... at the moment we haven't done sufficient storytelling yet because we're so early on in the process. I think there's almost a, dare I say, a PR job to help people understand what it is, but actually where the benefit will come from.” - Taylor

This quotation implies that simply informing employees about a project is not enough to raise awareness. Instead, the HR role should be showing the positive outcomes and establishing a need and desire to change among other stakeholders. Using the knowledge of storytelling and crafting messages explaining the benefit of this change specifically to the stakeholder is something the HR professionals described in the interviews. Taylor specifically described it as a PR job, to create awareness of this change.

However, merely changing people's minds is not enough. Karlsson further develops the importance of the employees during an organizational change.

“... this is a transformation project. Then you must have people's mindset and behaviors with you.” - Karlsson

Karlsson explains that in order for an organizational change to be meaningful, both the mindset and behaviors of the employees need to be influenced. It is not simply about the employees agreeing to the change; they must also believe in it and fully embody the change, integrating it into their daily work. This task is not easy for HR. Johnsson and other employees described the change as a “long term change” and as a “*journey*”. Implying that driving this vision forward is a process and does not “*happen overnight*”, rather it is a continuous work of convincing others. Therefore this change will be a long term change of the responsibilities of HR and their role.

4.1.3 Supporter

During the interviews, the HR professionals showed the importance of having a supportive role of the employees during an organizational change. More specifically our interviewees highlighted the importance of supporting the individuals since without the change being understandable, there will be no change. There are multiple ways the HR can use their role to provide support for the employees, which will be analyzed further in this chapter.

One of the recurring themes, regarding the HR role as supporting the employees, was how communication can be framed so the individual employee can understand the organizational change from their perspective. Karlsson described it the following way:

"I mean to sketch out a hypothetical scenario with a person, how it could look for someone in their everyday life when using this, and what they get out of it. Like creating a story to tell." - Karlsson

"I believe what one would need to do, based on what I've seen work best in sales or elsewhere, is to create very specific scenarios and examples. My name is Lisa and I work for a company and this is my journey. This is a clear example of how great it can be. [...] But as a manager within the organization, I think one needs to have very concrete specifics on how to use it and why it's beneficial for me." - Karlsson

Karlsson emphasizes the importance of relatable scenarios while communicating an organizational change. When the employee can picture how the future within the company and their professional role look like, it will become more clear to them why this change can be beneficial for them personally. By using a simple story, a complex organizational change can make much more sense to the individual employee. The role of the HR professional can therefore be viewed as a supporter for the employees to understand the change. These quotes also highlight that the HR role has a duty to explain the organizational change not only to the managers, it's equally important to aid the employees. This aspect appears to be an important part of the HR role during an organizational change, since a majority of our interviewees mentioned supporting others. Karlsson, Silva and Taylor further develops this:

"An employee, a manager; what's in it for me? How can it precisely look in everyday life when I use this?" - Karlsson

"But it's all about how we can adapt to that change and how we can communicate and how we can explain, and this is absolutely key, the what's in it for me." - Silva

But I think the more we can visualize and bring things to life to help people understand the better. - Taylor

The employee must understand how their daily work will benefit and improve, because otherwise there is no point in changing the current ways of working. It's all about being concrete, specific and giving relatable and easy scenarios that the employee can connect to their personal development within the company. Taylor, Karlsson and Silva all emphasized the importance of supporting the employees during the uncertainties an organizational change can bring. Thus, The HR's role as supporting the employees during change requires the ability to understand the situation from multiple perspectives and empathize with employee's feelings in order to address their needs. Karlsson also highlighted the multiple responsibilities the HR role has during an organizational change. By stating *"An employee, a manager; what's in it for me?"* Karlsson highlights that HR needs to support both the individual employees and the managers.

Hernández also talked about how the individual needs to get a clear explanation of the change, as failing to do so can lead to obstacles or fears for the individual employee.

“I think if people don't understand why this is important [...] Because they see also, they struggle as well. [...] they think, oh, my job will be redundant over a couple of years. How do I need to work on this? [...] And I think if people find it more transparent, they will also find their place a bit better and see how valuable they are in the organization.” - Hernández

Hernández believes that if scenarios are not explained properly, the individual can begin to worry how their role will be different or if they will retain their job. Additionally, well explained scenarios will also enhance the individual's position and make them understand how they are valuable to the organization. With no clear story of the organizational change and how it will affect them personally will lead to more questions than answers, leaving the employee with a feeling of doubt. Therefore, HR views their supportive role as providing comfort and assistance to the employees in order to prevent feelings of doubt regarding the change. Thus, the interviewees describe their role during change as supporting, aiding and comforting when it comes to the individual employee which is crucial for the organizational change to be successful.

A factor that can help the employee understand why the change is happening, and solve some of their unanswered questions, is having a person who can support them through the change process:

“So talking a little bit about changes individual and then as a manager, a leader, you lead others through their individual change. Right. So this is kind of how you get them through that change curve. So you're going to value and acceptance.” - Andersson

“Well I think my role probably first and foremost is as educator and informer right I think a lot of people will be looking to me to go what does this mean? What is it?” - Rossi

As a manager or a leader, as Andersson states, you need to help individual employees to go through their own personal change. Rossi also describes that HR can become someone to turn to, and comforting others in times of change. The HR professionals can possess this role by supporting the employees to identify how this change will look like from their personal point of view. The HR professionals supporting the employees can emphasize different positive aspects of the change in order for the employee to accept it and fully understand it. The HR professional can aid in making the change seem easier, and support the individuals.

4.1.4 Communicator

During all our interviews, communication was a recurring topic. The importance of communication and how the communication was performed were mentioned by multiple respondents since HR is responsible for the change and the transformation needs to be communicated thoroughly. This new task has become a new identity for HR, to be communicators during the organizational change as Smith and Johnsson points out.

"I believe, in this transformation. It is to be messengers and communicators " - Smith

"Sometimes one might wonder if this is HR work I'm doing or if it's communication?" -
Johnsson

They are not only identifying with being a communicator, they are also highly skilled in communication theory. This is shown by the knowledge they shared during the interviews including; identifying the separate stakeholders' needs for different information and adapting the message accordingly. Karlsson and Murphy point this out.

"To communicate frequently and through various channels. Everyone takes in information differently." - Karlsson

"I suppose it's just about communicating to people within the project, but also to the business, what the plan is, what the requirements are at each stage, what the expected outcomes are at each stage. So that everybody understands." - Murphy

The two quotes above showcase HR's role as communicators is to provide sufficient and substantial information. HRs communicating role includes providing sufficient information to accommodate individuals as well as update and provide substantial information to the business stakeholder. HR needs to face the questions raised by business and communicate what is required by different stakeholders to actualize the change. Murphy acknowledges that a change does not happen in a vacuum, it is a social construction where the need for clear expectations are important. Karlsson further develops this by recognizing that communication needs to be two-folded, not only HR communicating outwards, they also need to listen and welcome criticism.

"It's about being as open as possible, I think, about challenges, about things that go wrong, and not trying to hide anything. Maybe even involving the critics in the process and trying to get them to participate in the development." - Karlsson

Multiple of our interviewees further mentioned how employees can feel negative towards change initially, since change generally evokes feelings of uncertainty. Communication with the employee is therefore also about choice of words and how you use them. Some words can be regarded as negative, while others can be considered as positive. Martin described it the following way:

“When you say change, you know, the reaction of the people is defense. What is going to change? So, you know, so you need to explain very well. This is because in my internal communications, I try to avoid the word change. It's a new evolution, it's a new way of doing things, you know? It's a new approach.” - Martin

Words like change can carry a negative connotation and sound somewhat interrogating. Phrases such as "a new evolution" or "a new approach" often evoke positive associations, and have the image of containing benefits for the individual. Change can sound like something that will impact a person's professional life negatively. Martin therefore emphasizes that you should choose your words wisely, since many words carry pre-determined meanings they can affect how the message is received. Besides word usage, knowing when to inform others is also important for the HR role. Taylor also describes the dilemma that communication itself is not enough. The HR professionals have to do it the right way and adjust it to the employees in order for it to be effective. HR possesses and occupies the knowledge about Skills-First and they need to pace the information in a way that suits the receiver.

“... not just employees might struggle with that transition of understanding what it is. So how we set it up, how we break it down into pieces, you should eat an elephant bit by bit. Okay, so to think about how we maybe stage things in a digestible way as well.” - Taylor

Furthermore, Smith emphasized the importance of repetition and humbleness, when it comes to communication with the employees.

"One probably has to preach the same message seven hundred times and say seven hundred times that I don't have all the answers [...] not just by leaders, but by all of us if we are to be on this journey." - Smith

Whether the message contains concrete details regarding the organizational change, or if the message is simply that you do not have all the answers yet, repetition and consistency is still key in communication in order to make the recipients fully understand the message. Emphasizing that "I don't have all the answers" also shows a humble attitude to change, where honesty and transparency is important. Smith also amplifies that an important part of communication is that it should be used by "all of us" which is implying that the organization are in this together, not only the top management alone. This can create a sense of community. Therefore we interpret that the reasoning why this change is occurring and how this can benefit the employee probably needs to be communicated many times by the HR professionals in order for others to see its benefits.

4.1.5 Moderator

During our interviews, many of the interviewees discussed how you can prepare an organization for a change process. We discovered that many interviewees possess a role as a moderator, with the purpose of creating a supporting environment to facilitate the change process during organizational change. The term ‘psychological safety’ was brought up several times as a way for the organizations to prepare for this change journey ahead.

"So, creating a sense of safety to speak up [...]. And we talk a lot about growth mindset, rolling out different ways of thinking and approaching it. So, it becomes top of mind that this is a part of it, this is something I need to care about. As a manager or not just a manager but as an employee in general." - Karlsson

Karlsson emphasizes the importance of the HR professionals to create a safe environment for employees to raise concerns regarding the change. This safe space is not only for employees, it is also for managers all throughout the organization so they can express their thoughts and feelings regarding the change. From this quotation Karlsson is stating how important it is to be honest and humble in a change process. Since a change process can create emotions of uncertainty, it's crucial not to deny these feelings, but embrace and use them for improvement. As Karlsson states "*creating a sense of safety to speak up and fail*" is showing that failing is not regarded as something negative, and seems to be viewed as an opportunity of growth and learning instead. To ensure the change initiative to be successful, the HR role as a moderator is important. HR can provide a platform between the employees and the managers to provide a space for the both parties to express their concerns or identify opportunities for this change, so they can be addressed before the implementation.

Another aspect of creating a safe environment for change, as a moderator, is promoting a growth mindset. The growth mindset that Karlsson is discussing, is also something Andersson mentioned during the interview.

"[...] and also some things that we promote internally, such as this idea of psychological safety, of having a growth mindset, having psychologically safe teams. - Andersson

Both Andersson and Karlsson state that it is not only one singular correct way to think, and they actively encourage different viewpoints from anyone within the organization. The growth mindset therefore seems to be about continuously growing and learning from different people and perspectives. This further emphasizes the role of HR as a moderator during this change, providing spaces for the growth mindset to take place. Having a growth mindset within the organizations also seems to be a crucial part in order to foster psychological safe spaces for employees. Martin and Silva further develop crucial parts in order for the psychological safe environment to function.

"So you need to be a little bit of empathetic with them because it's [change processes] so hard. So time, empathetic, and listen to them is important. They need to feel that you are listening to them, that you are not imposing and forcing them". - Martin

"So we need to have that environment where there is no fear of judgment, where there's no fear of retaliation, where there is no negative feedback if someone dares to suggest how to do things differently." - Silva

To create a psychological safe environment it's important to embrace empathy and give everyone time to understand the change. It's also important not to judge anyone, or give negative feedback while they express their views. Martin and Silva therefore highlight the importance of the emotional aspects and recognize the human side of change. Change processes can be challenging for the individual since it can bring uncertainties and fears for how the future will look like. From Martin and Silva's view you therefore need to have an open communication and actively listen to the employees so they feel heard. The HR professionals therefore need to be emphatic and good listeners during change to create an environment effective and adoptive for organizational change.

Brown is highlighting another perspective where the psychological safe space discussed above is not always functioning properly.

"Yeah. I think from my experience, it's very, very important to have a very open communication and to make people also comfortable on giving and receiving feedback and being open to that. What I still see happening a lot of the times, and I also challenge our management a bit when it comes to that, they only communicate about changes. When they fully decided, okay, this is what we will do. While people, yeah, they're not stupid. They're also here. They sense that changes in the air, something is happening. What is happening? That uncertainty is really demotivating for people." - Brown

Brown also claims that open communication and honesty is important in organizational change. But Brown elaborates that, from past experiences, the management is not always communicating in a psychological safe way when informing about an organizational change. Brown argues that they only communicate when the change is fully decided, and implies they should be involved earlier in the change process. The employees can clearly sense that a change is coming their way, and by withholding information about the change the employees are going to be less motivated. The employees are not always given the opportunity to voice their concerns regarding an organizational change, until the change is actually done and decided. This is a bit contradictory to what the psychological safe space in the company stands for. To address this situation, once again the HR professionals can embrace the role as a moderator to make sure both sides have the opportunity to voice their opinions early on in the process. So the HR role during change is not only to act like a moderator, but also to make sure the discussions happen at the right time, preventing employees' concerns from being raised too late. In this way, HR can manage to address both the employees and managers needs.

4.2 Validation and Legitimacy

Despite all the roles, knowledge and awareness the HR professionals have, they are still looking for validation. Several respondents describe an uncertainty or fear toward the change initiative being seen as a “HR-initiative”. Being seen in that way had clear connections to the perceptions of ‘the business side’ of the organization. In this part of the analysis, we show how underlying struggles faced by HR are undermining their identity and formation of their roles in the organization. Throughout interviews with HR representatives, interviewees gave descriptions of what may be essential to its success. During the initial planning and strategizing of a change initiative, HR needs support from other parts of the organization to ensure success. The insights provided and the descriptions of this early phase of change shine a light on the struggles of HR to gain credibility and validation during change, the origins of which stem from interviewees oftentimes explaining that HR cannot initiate and drive change on its own. When talking about what makes change successful, it was common for interviewees to talk about HRs dependence on “the business side of the organization”. This dependence was described in a few different ways, one of which was motivated by a fear that the Skills-First change would become a “HR-initiative”.

‘And if it's just something which is deemed to be a HR-initiative, that's going to be problematic.’ - Taylor

"But, you know, how do we make sure that this is business led and not another HR, “Oh, look, here we go. Another HR -thing.” - Rossi

“Partly because it takes too much time from our local HR and organizations, so it just becomes badwill, that you feel like this doesn't feel fun and inspiring but just feels like another big admin-thing.” - Karlsson

During their interview, it was a recurring fear that the Skills-First change would be seen as Rossi describe: *“Another HR-thing.”*, which had clear negative connotations and associations. Even though different individuals may put different names on this phenomenon, we believe to see a definitive fear being shown from HR of being seen in a bad light. Adding the negative consequences this could have on how successful the initiative is, this gave us an insight into the importance of how change that is initiated by HR is perceived. It also shows the anxiety that HR may feel toward thoughts of “what are people going to think about this”. Of course there may be multiple different ways in which HR could work to mitigate their change initiatives becoming *“another HR-thing”*, which was something commonly discussed and thought of. Throughout the interviews there was a clear way in which HR could look for help within the organization to make help give the change higher chances of success, to make it a *“business-initiative”*.

“So, I think we need to make sure that whatever we do, it isn't seen as a HR initiative. It needs to be a business initiative and it needs to be of benefit to the business. And we need to find a way to help to make that be the reality. If it's perceived as something that HR wants to

do and there's not that commercial aspect to it, we will really struggle to land the change effectively.” - Taylor

“And of course, the learning is well that you need involvement, you can't just go on an HR-track with changes without involving the business a lot in things. So, you need to bring in managers, bring in users, those who will actually do this later in the development of things. Sometimes you might think that we [HR] are doing this, we're developing, and then it just lands with them, and we think they should think it's fantastic. But involving all the way, both the business and different functions like finance or whatever it may be, I think that's very important.” - Karlsson

From our understanding based on the talks with interviewees, the involvement of “*the business*” was partly two-fold, although with the same larger goal in mind, to give the change initiative a higher degree of legitimacy and thereby giving it a higher chance of success in the organization. As discussed earlier, one of the reasons behind involving the business side of the organization into this change was to avoid it being seen as “*another HR-thing*”, which does appear to be a source of insecurity for several of the interviewees. Another reason that we could see for involving the business in change is that it had a clear link to the rest of the organization, and to being able to make sure that this Skills-First change permeates the organization. The permeability of the change initiative was spoken about on multiple occasions during the interviews, giving us the impression that this was something deemed as integral to the broader success of the change. A lack of permeability or if the change is not being used in everyday lives in the organization was from our understanding a clear indicator or failure, which needed to be avoided if possible, the solution to which seemed to be the involvement of business to then reach the rest of the organization easier.

“How do you make people feel involved and they've got a say VS us going to them, right? HR are doing this, you need to get on board but actually bringing them in and going “look help us here, this is why i think this will really benefit you”, tell us what you think is going to be great for your business. You tell us what you think you would need from us in order to kind of make this work and then you let you sort of become it sort of become a co-creation approach vs command and control we're going to tell you this is kind of how it goes.” - Rossi

As Rossi is stating in the initial quote, there are two ways of doing the change: “*co-creation approach vs command and control*”. During our interviews, it became clear that the descriptions given by Rossi in an explicit way were also understood by multiple interviewees. Rossi is further explaining the general involvement that seems important, although it is often on the business's terms; “*tell us what you think is going to be great for your business.*”. The aspect of making sure that people in a change initiative understand the reasoning behind it and the positive effect it can have on their daily work is a recurring theme throughout the interviews, which is analyzed in greater depth later in the analysis. Müller shines further light on the ways in which HR should think in order to get the business side to understand the change and by understanding also getting involved, and making the initiative a success. In the quote below, Müller reflects back on what makes changes successful and tries to apply them to the case of Skills-First. During this discussion in the interview, Müller further developed

their thoughts and concluded with “OK, what's in it for me? That's the only way we can sell things from HR to the business”, showing that it is integral to the success of a change initiative to have business alongside or even actively involved.

“We are really concerned and a little bit afraid also that we should avoid that [making it too complicated], because people in the business want to have something that that they pick up and they understand, that they can work with and and then we can justify the whole change and that is what's what I believe will be essential in this project.” - Müller

“We just need to make sure that whatever we come up with isn't too complicated for the business to be able to digest. [...] I think we need to make sure that we do that correctly and not underinvest in that because having that knowledge and awareness is going to be pivotal to its success moving forward.” - Taylor

“And there I think, yeah, we need to find a way to make it simple because we have a tendency to make it a very complex structure and that, of course, will not support the business.” - Hernández

Based on these accounts it is clear that the interviewees ascribe great significance to getting the ‘business’ on board. More specifically, the interviewees emphasize the importance of making the change initiative as easy as possible to understand from a pragmatic point of view, that the benefits of the change have to be clear. Müller, Taylor and Hernández were some of the interviewees that went into further detail surrounding how to go about getting business and the organization involved in the change initiative. The commonality in their quotes could be seen as making the change simple and clear in order for business to help justify it.

“[...] so then we need to make use of our ambassadors so that it's not just HR singing this song about how great skills are, but that it comes from the business itself.” - Johnsson

“That's why I say like, yeah, we need to really have the organization on board. But of course, with representatives from the different BA:s [business areas] and not only HR:s, but indeed, like I said, also stakeholders from within the organization.” - Williams

“I think the opportunities are huge I would say, but the risk is that we do something big that we throw without the organization and that we are not able to turn it alive.” - Müller

The quotes above are part of the reflections given during interviews on the importance of making sure the organization is thought of and involved during change. As briefly stated earlier, a sign of failure in change is a lack of organizational use and application after the change has been implemented. To prevent this, it became clear that HR in the MIC had a strong belief in the benefit of early involvement. Similar to how individuals describe that the change initiative needs to be approachable and easy to understand from a business perspective, Müller describes how early involvement with different aspects of the

organization can help in acceptance, as compared to only getting other areas of the organization involved in a later stage.

“Yes, and- and a good question, I think, and it's, it's for sure not an HR thing- um, the, the success of this will be, um, or will come from the organization itself.” - Williams

“I think for me, having people from other functions or other areas of leadership other than HR or training is important. In the same way that we took that approach with diversity, I think we need to do this because if it seems to be something which is just pushed by HR, it will not land, right.” - Taylor

Furthermore, Taylor and Williams draw on the connection between change being seen as “HR-initiative” and its success rate by saying that it is of utmost importance to make sure to involve other areas and that the initiative should not be seen as solely coming from HR. We argue that the need for HR to involve the business and other areas of the organization in the change initiative is derived from best-practice-experience, but also an underlying need for HR to be validated and given legitimacy through involvement of for example the business side. From the interviews it became apparent that HR is not always seen as an area with sufficient authority, and the need for external acceptance during decision making and change initiatives.

“We are coming up, let's say, with these kinds of ideas, and we should check with the business. Is this valuable, do you think this might be a solution for your problems that you are currently facing?” - Williams

“Obviously we will need validation from the business. I don't want to launch anything that was not validated and or evaluated by the business people.” - Müller

There seems to be an intimate relationship between HR and business, as if HR are completely dependent on the acceptance from other areas of the organization, with a special emphasis on the business area. Ofcourse, as Williams explains, HR needs to look out for the needs of the business and make sure that changes initiated by HR are also helpful to the business of the organization, but we argue that this relationship is deeper than that in many aspects. Throughout the interviews it became apparent that HR are not seen as equal in the relationship to business, and like a child looking for affirmation from its parents, HR is oftentimes left wandering, trying to fit into the organization and to be seen as legitimate. This legitimacy-issue is argued to stem from the realization that HR on its own is not accepted, because then it is seen as “another HR-thing”, which has both negative connotations and consequences. The solution and main way in which to avoid standing alone in this change is to make sure that others are part of it, although the role of which may not be clear at this early stage.

5. Discussion

In the following chapter the empirical findings are put in relation to theory and the topic on HR roll is discussed even further. We are starting off by discussing the evolution of the HR role specifically in MIC and how that has affected the HR professionals role. Then we are moving on to how the interviewees view their own role during this organizational change, and how that can be explained by current research. We also challenge the current research by showing a possible extension to the existing literature. Lastly, we examine the possibility if the HR role could be expanded even further, possessing a more extensive role during an organizational change.

5.1 Tensions and Challenges for HR

In accordance with the literature, our research indicates that the HR role has shifted away from its traditional administrative role to being more of a strategic type. HR professionals, according to our analysis and quotes, are taking responsibility for driving organizational change, shaping strategic vision, and contributing to the overall organizational strategy. These findings are in line with Ulrich's model (1998), which explain that the HR role consists of strategic processes. HR professionals label their role as change agents which correspond with the model by Ulrich (1998).

With the Skills-First change, HR can prove themselves to be something more than administrative. Contrary to Barans (2019) research, the respondents view themselves as having an impact on the organization. The impact on the organization can be seen in the empirical material by HRs belief that their work is important and that they need to influence other departments by selling their ideas and finding ambassadors. This new role can be seen in the model of Ferm et. al., (2023) as a driver or disturber, emphasizing HR possibility to add value to in terms of productivity and challenge the current organizational way of working. Both the role of driver and disturber look to be more than a support function, and in our case that seems to be in agreement with our findings.

Cayrat & Boxall (2023) show the challenges of the current HR profession by describing that HR sit in between managers and employees. Additionally, our empirical data indicate that the past still lingers, which is another challenge in asserting HR's identity and role during change. Furthermore, since they have multiple stakeholders, increasing trust with one of them can lead to mistrust in another (Francis & Keegan, 2006). This dual focus on supporting the organization as well as the people is prominent in the empirical material since HR professionals want to prove themselves as a business partner as well as make the change understandable for employees.

How HR view their own role is crucial for the foundation of the possibilities and limitations of the role as Baran (2019) states. We see how it is possible to further challenge the literature by looking into the ways in which some HR professionals stressed the importance of having approval from the business to gain validation and legitimization. Although, to partner up and create an alliance with business complement the literature, which indicate Heizmann & Fox,

(2019) are integral for HR to lead in change. Even though HR have positional power since they are included by the business area, they seem to have uncertainties in making the initiative appear desirable and legitimate. These challenges complement Sheehan et al., (2014). The expressions of uncertainty and a need to look toward ‘the business’ in order to gain confidence in their role can be tied to the historical preconception of HR as an administrative role from other stakeholders. According to the interviews and analysis, HR is afraid of being seen as “HR-initiative” since it is viewed negatively with the presumption of only adding more administrative work without reason, leading to an uninspiring change and high resistance among the employees. The fears of the change initiative being seen as “HR-initiative” can be put into context using Alvesson & Lundholm (2015, p. 27) who connect the identity of HR to its social construct, shaped through the relationships with different stakeholders and organizational belonging. These limitations that HR put on itself seem to stem from the past assumption that they are only an administrative role and that they do not have the legitimization they need in order to bring this change forward.

5.2 HR during Change

Our analysis of the empirical data highlighted a significant problem for the HR professionals; the balance of the different stakeholders during organizational change processes. They must meet and address the employee’s, employers and organizations needs and goals as the organizational change aims to infuse the entire organization. Since the HR professionals need to target many different areas within the organization, their role involves many tasks and challenges. The existing literature could be seen as underdeveloped regarding this dilemma that we identified during our interviews and HR professionals face during an organizational change.

Both Ulrich (1998) and Ferm et. al., (2023) present models with clear distinctions between different roles the HR professionals may possess, including what primary stakeholders they are addressing. Even though those models do not discuss the HR role during the context of organizational change, the different roles can be used to identify important aspects of the HR role and how they can be applied to an organizational change.

For example, the HR professionals we interviewed underscored the importance of aligning the managers with this change, ensuring that they are both understanding and supportive of the change. The interviewees also emphasized that in order to create a successful organizational change, managers and HR professionals need to work together to identify a suitable strategy for organizational change. The *defender* in Ferm et. al’s., (2023) model corresponds to this concept, about the importance of supporting the manager through the process and helping with their knowledge. The *defender* shares many similarities to Ulrich’s (1998) *strategic partner* as well, since their main priority is to help identify what requirements the business part of the organization needs in order to create an organizational change. The interviewees did not use exactly the term *strategic partner* or *defender*, they used the word *change agent* instead, as they meant as someone who’s making the business side also see all the benefits of this change. Therefore, one important responsibility for the HR role during organizational change is to focus on the managerial side of the organization,

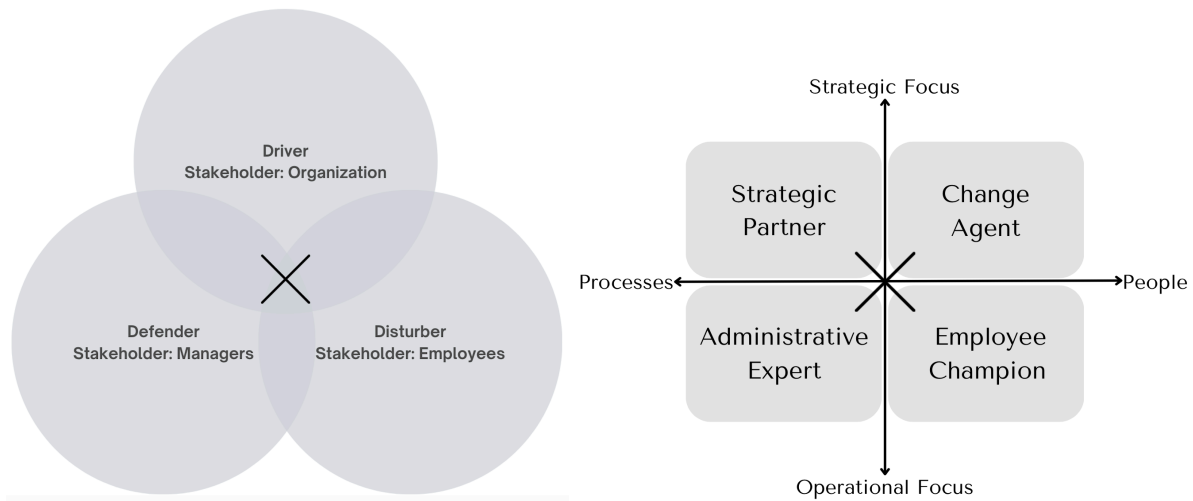
and consider the managers views and perspectives. Whether it's called *defender*, *strategic partner* or *change agents* all of our interviewees (alongside HR role theories) emphasized the importance of aligning the managers to the organizational change, or the change may not be successful.

Our empirical findings also show that the HR professional needs to have an employee perspective as well as a manager perspective. Our interviewees described the importance of giving individual meaning of the change to the employees, and also to aid and guide employees through the process. Our participants believe it is crucial for the individual employee to understand how the change can benefit their every day work, or the change initiative will not be adopted. This role that our interviewees described corresponds to Ulrich's (1998) *employee champion* and Firms et. al's., (2023) *disturber*. Therefore our empirical material shows that an important aspect of the HR role during change is to understand the employee's perspective, by adopting the role as an *employee champion* or *disturber*.

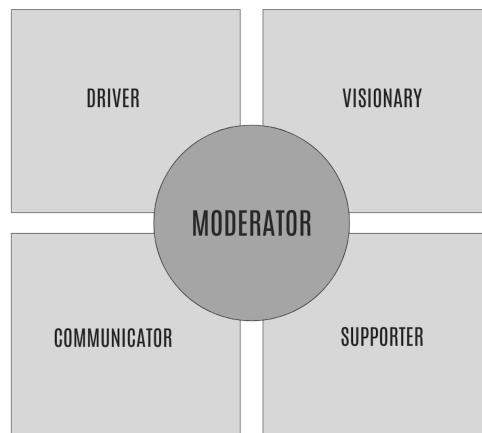
Finally, the HR role during an organizational change is about targeting the needs of the organization as a whole. The HR community needs to be able to see the full picture during the change process and manage both sides, the managers and the employees. The HR professionals therefore have an unique placement within the company, since they are both the employees and the business advocate. They have the position to make sure the two sides are on the same page during an organizational change. This is an important job because if the employee and manager do not agree with each other, the organizational change may be less successful. Another important part of HR and their role during change is therefore to be Ulrich's *administrative expert* and Ferm et. al's., *driver*, as they should work to aid with processes to make the cooperation between the two parts work more efficiently.

We believe our findings can provide valuable additions for Ulrich's (1998) model for changing roles of HR-managers and Firms et. al's., (2023) model for HR practitioners' identities. Both these models provide different roles HR may play in an organization, and make clear distinctions in terms of stakeholders and work tasks. Our findings challenge this rigid view of the HR role, and highlight the diversity of HR and the importance of combining these different roles, rather than dividing them. We argue that HR professionals need to adopt all the roles discussed above during the context of an organizational change in order for the change to be successful in the entire organization, from top management to floor workers. In a change process, no single role can cover all the different stakeholders and their needs. HR professionals need to combine the various roles due to the unique situation to target different stakeholders with different needs.

We would therefore like to extend both Ulrich’s (1998) and Firms et. al’s., (2023) model with adding on a new role to these frameworks, situated where the X is marked in the following models:



Our interviewees highlighted many different roles the HR professionals have during organizational change, making it difficult to categorize them within these frameworks. None of the roles was able to describe HR professionals' role during change. We therefore want to add on a new role, which is combining all of the roles at the same time in the context of an organizational change. We do not imply that the original models lack value, on the contrary they highlight stable environments where it might not be needed to bring all the stakeholders together is not needed. However, HR’s central role can provide an extension that explains their identity in an unstable environment, such as an extensive organizational change. Giving the central role an explicit name could be difficult. Through the analysis, it could be concluded that the role of moderator describes the central and multifaceted role of HR and by putting the additional roles that were identified, a new model was created to visualize the addition that we argue could be made toward Ulrich (1998) and Firms et. al’s., (2023) models.



Framework showing the roles of HR during change.

From our analysis of the roles identified of HR during the change initiative in MIC, we argue that it is possible to create a framework that could complement current frameworks and literature. In the descriptions of the roles during change, moderator is shown to have a central role in the organization, as HR in a moderator role need to work between other areas and stakeholders in making sure that they understand each other and are able to provide an environment suitable for change. Even though multiple roles could be seen as fundamental to change, as they are all of importance, moderator is argued to be of great importance not only during change but also in a preparatory stage, showing another reason as to why it could be seen as a central point in this type of framework.

5.3 Expanding the role(s) of HR

In light of the ways in which HR work to establish their role and how it can be used during change, it is our belief that a discussion surrounding the possibility for HR to make a greater contribution is possible. Previously we discussed the connections and correlations between the general HR theories, frameworks and HR in the context of change, showing contrasts and similarities that help us understand the role of HR. In developing this further, we believe that it is possible to draw on leadership theory in connection to the empirical material to see whether we can add to the role of HR in this change initiative, and thereby avoid the ambiguities that have been shown. As Alvesson et. al. (2016) describe, a leader is seen as someone who influences others by showing a vision and being supportive in a change of identity for instance. We argue that the literature describing leaders correspond with the ways HR perceive their role during change, and additionally how literature expresses HRs potential impact on change.

When trying to get a deeper understanding of the ways in which HR could have an impact during change, it becomes clear from our empirical data that HR professionals seem to believe in their ability to have an impact during change initiatives. For example, while analyzing our empirical data we see that HR could make an impact by visualizing a change initiative to both the organization and individual employee on the factory floor. The descriptions by the professionals interviewed seem to complement the literature, for instance as Maheshwari & Vohra (2015) showed that HR can improve perceptions of a change initiative. When dealing with change, we argue that the professionals interviewed had an overall agreement that they could be a part of translating what at first may be a complex and vague change initiative into something that employees can understand. For instance, both Smith and Karlsson are quoted explaining that in order for individuals to understand a change initiative, it is an important aspect to make them understand *the possibilities* and *what we should use this for*. While trying to show the future possibilities of a change initiative, which may lay quite far in the future, the HR professional would be actively visualizing something to employees in order to improve the way that the change is perceived. If put in perspective with Alfes et. al. (2019) and their findings on HR in the context of change, the HR professionals in MIC could be seen as knowledgeable and aware of the needs during change and also how to achieve those needs.

Looking further into the descriptions given during interviews and the ways it corresponds with literature show that HR professionals in MIC have two useful tools to apply when working with visualization and changing perceptions of change, these could be seen as storytelling and psychological safety. The descriptions of these tools, which were explicitly cited during our interviews, showcase the confidence and knowledge that HR seem to have when it comes to how to work with people during times of change, which Alvesson et. al. (2016) argue are important aspects of leadership in general. Using storytelling and more prominently psychological safety could be seen as ways in which HR engage employees with the change initiative, by emphasizing a feedback loop and open communication. In doing this, we see how the empirical data complement Alvesson et. al.'s (2016) descriptions of leaders, and that leadership is a social construct where involvement and followers are seen as integral. We also see how this could align with Sparrow et. al., (2010) as they describe how leadership within HR needs to engage employees and infuse meaning to a change initiative, which is something that the HR professionals in MIC appear to be doing. The knowledge that is shown on the needs of stakeholders in the change initiative, which is supported by Adams (2011), is also key in giving the HR department credibility (Brown et. al., 2017). There are multiple aspects of HR literature that correspond to HR professionals in the case of MIC, giving us reason to believe that the profession could be extended into a more leading role. In challenging this assumption, it is possible to develop a more critical discussion with respect to the nuances and confrontations HR face in the development of their role, shown in the first part of the discussion.

Adams (2011) adds to the discussion of HR as leaders in arguing that an important aspect is accountability. Although Duyens & De Vos (2001) could be seen as challenging this in stating that the role of HR is strongly impacted by the ways in which the organization perceives its role. This contrast adds complexity to the discussion of a potential leading role of HR. From the interviews, we can see how HR professionals in many cases express that they have a meaningful impact on change. Even though it may not always be clear how, maybe because of how little is actually known about the Skills-First approach in the case of MIC. This does indicate that HR professionals seem willing to take accountability for their potential in a change initiative, contradicting the findings of Baran (2019) who argued that HR oftentimes undervalue their role and impact in change. As HR professionals in MIC look to take accountability by viewing themselves as *change agents*, the complexities of the historic roles of HR and its reliance on the perceptions of others are called into action. In the analysis of the ways in which HR make efforts to validate and bring credibility to their role, it becomes clear that something is hindering HR from fully embracing its knowledge and ability to change minds and visualize organizational change. As discussed earlier, the HR professionals in MIC show how they can work with shifting perspectives of change by visualization, psychological safety and having extensive knowledge of how they can make sure of their role. But even though all of the above can be discussed and shown, there still seems to be hesitation.

The discussion of what appears paradoxical in the role of HR professionals in change could be taken one step further, in an attempt to extend current literature of the field. It has been shown how HR today seem stuck in a role with connotations that oppose the direction that the

profession could be heading toward. A possible solution and addition to the role of HR could be evaluated if the profession could be free from its metaphorical shackles by engaging in a new formalized role. Throughout time, HR has changed from administrative tasks to a strategic partner, all the while changing from Personnel Management to Human Resource Management, and going forward it may be reasonable to extend this further and discuss Human Resource Leadership (HRL). The benefit of creating a new role or title such as HRL is twofold as it could lead to HR distancing itself from connotations that are holding it back, and let HR professionals make use of their extensive knowledge of change to drive success. We believe that this addition to both practical and theoretical views of HR could challenge the ambiguities of the profession by separating and clarifying a potentially new perspective.

6. Conclusion

In the following chapter the conclusion and summary is introduced along with the practical implications. Lastly, acknowledgement of limitations and suggestions for future research are presented.

6.1 HR perception of their role

This thesis has studied the role of HR during the initial phase of an extensive organizational change in the multinational industrial conglomerate. The organization is transitioning to a Skills-First approach, emphasizing employees skills rather than formal knowledge. This organizational change aims to improve flexibility, effectiveness and retention rate within the organization. By performing 13 semi-structured interviews with senior HR members in the company, we answered the following research question:

- How do human resources (HR) professionals perceive their role in relation to initiating ‘Skills-First’ in a multinational industrial conglomerate?

The purpose with our study was to contribute towards a greater understanding of the HR role during an organizational change themselves initiated. The purpose was also to expand the current literature and discuss how the tensions inherent in the role affect them in their professional role during an organizational change.

By analyzing the empirical material, we interpreted that the HR professionals within the multinational industrial conglomerate identify themselves with five different roles; driver, visionary, supporter, communicator and moderator. Our identified roles share many similarities with existing literature regarding HR roles within organizations. However, the specific role of HR during an organizational change was not addressed with the current literature. We therefore suggested a middle ground within the frameworks, that combine all the roles at once, as our empirical findings indicated that embodying one single role during an organizational change is insufficient to satisfy all stakeholders. In our framework, we placed the moderator in the center surrounded by the driver, supporter, communicator and visionary.

The moderator was presented in the center to highlight the HR's role in balancing the diverse needs of the organization, as well as balancing all the other roles and the respective traits they have. This central position underscores the importance of the moderator's role as the intermediary, to ensure everyone's needs are met. We introduced this framework based on our empirical findings, which demonstrated that relying on one single role during an organizational change is insufficient for aligning the entire organization, especially as it is international.

On the basis of our empirical findings and theoretical perspectives, we concluded that the HR role has potential for further development. HR has been undergoing significant transformations over the years, and we believe this development is far from complete. HR has developed from an administrative role to being a more strategic role, yet the connotations are still hindering them from their full potential. However, HR development is still undergoing and we believe Human Resource Leadership might be the next step for HR professionals since our empirical findings show potential and knowledge about leadership. HRL can more accurately describe the leadership qualities that HR inhibits and might open up the discussion about leadership contributions of HR professionals.

6.2 Practical Implications

The purpose of this study has been to contribute to an increased understanding of HR's role in the context of initiating change. More specifically HR's perception of their own role during what is referred to as the Skills-First initiative, but it can be applied in a broader context, the context of HR initiating a change. How HR sees its role in a context of change and more specifically, leading the change, is interesting since it can help HR expand and reflect on their role. This insight is valuable not only for HR managers, offering a more nuanced perspective of the HR function, but also for other organizational divisions, such as business managers and CEOs, who can benefit from understanding HR's perspective in change contexts. Furthermore, during the discussion we consider the possibility to develop the formalized role of HR into HRL. This new role could have practical implications in organizations as it not only would bring about a change in roles of HR, but it could also impact how managers today work with change and in connection to HR. More specifically, practical implications for MIC might include gaining knowledge around HR's perception of themselves and open up a discussion on the relationship with other departments. It might also include reconsidering the role of HR in the context of the Skills-First initiative and incorporating terms of leadership.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

In describing the limitations of our thesis, it could be relevant to discuss the global context that the organization we studied is positioned within. Our thesis and the interviews conducted were all from a 'western' perspective, meaning all interviews were conducted with individuals working from Europe. This has not been brought up during the thesis as it is not part of the research question, but could still be an underlying limitation as some of our interviewees mentioned that there are sometimes large cultural differences between for instance European views on leadership and the views of Asia. As MIC is a global organization, there could be cultural differences that this study cannot show. Furthermore, as this study is positioned to understand and analyze the expressions of HR professionals in a socially constructed environment, we lack the perspectives of subordinates and other business areas that might have an opinion on the work done by HR. Lastly, the study is limited in its way of predicting practical implications to our discussion. Even though we are able to discuss additions and extensions to current literature, we are limited in our ability to predict and practically show their impact on organizations and the role of HR.

Given the limitations of the study, it could be interesting for future research to extend into the areas described in order to broaden and lift some of the limitations of this study. Future research could also focus on gaining a better understanding of the areas of which this thesis is concentrated on, being HR and its role during change. For instance, future research could look further into the implications of HR's need to be validated and legitimized in a context outside change. It could also be interesting to further develop the research on the theoretical roles identified in this paper, and how HR could work to balance and make use of their organizational position. Lastly, future research could focus on the addition of Human Resource Leadership (HRL) by providing a greater understanding of HR as leaders both in and outside the context of change.

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8. Appendix - Interviewguide

Intro:

Thank you for taking your time.

The interviewees will be anonymous in the final thesis.

Mention that we are recording.

Experiences and thoughts, no right or wrong.

X will do most of the questions, and the others may do follow up questions later.

Questions:

1. Please tell us a little about yourself and your role within MIC.
2. What is your level of knowledge/awareness about moving to a Skills-First approach?
3. Why do you think this change is going to happen?/why does this change have to happen?
4. How do you see your role in the change to come?
 - How would you convey this change? supporting role, informative, direct...?
 - In what ways will your role change?
 - (If you are) Ba nominee - can you tell us a little about this?
5. How would you describe this change for you? /What does this change mean for you?
6. What has been your initial reaction to Skills-First and reflections around the upcoming change?
 - How are you experiencing this change so far? How does it affect you?
7. Do you have any concerns about this change?
 - How would you approach conflicts?
8. What opportunities do you see with this change?
9. Has there been any previous change at MIC that you were part of?
 - Do you have previous experience with driving change?
 - What previous experience do you have in driving change journeys?
10. Do you have any expectations on how this will evolve? Next year or in the long run?
 - Short, mid or long term?
11. Would you say that the role of HR has changed in recent times?
 - What was it like before and after?
 - Will this change impact the HR role? and perception of HR?

12. What is the main change that you think Skills-First may provide? E.g: Ways of thinking, recruitment, ways of working?
 - How would you know if the change has been successful? Any thoughts on how to measure impact

13. Do you have anything that you wish to talk about that you think we haven't asked?