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Do HR Business Partners become professionals after the HR transformation?

Master Thesis in Strategic HRM & Labour relations

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Abstract

This master thesis is both a contribution to the academic and practical field of human resource management, with a comparative study at two multinational companies in Sweden. The report focuses on HR Business Partners (HRBPs), if and how they have become professionals after the HR Transformation. Furthermore questions like what are they working with, how are they formed and what kind of professionalism form describes HRBPs best, is answered. Limited amount of previous studies have been made to look at HR from the professionalism perspective. Hence, in the Swedish context there has not been made any case studies about HRBPs as professionals. The contribution of this study is to explore HRBPs and to map them with professional ground.

As a theoretical framework, professionalism concepts are used to understand in depth the aspects of what makes professionals. These are terms of power, knowledge, trust and adding value. In addition practical concepts as roles, strategic and operative work are presented.

This master thesis is a qualitative case study collecting in-depth data to illustrate a detailed synopsis of a particular phenomenon to give a holistic view of the HRBP role. Two multinational companies, based here in Sweden, are presented in a comparative manner. Similarities and differences are outlined to bring rich understanding of the phenomena. 15 interviews were carried out in the companies and are analysed with content analysis.

Research results show that HRBPs are partly becoming professionals depending on how many years have passed since the launch of the HR transformation. From the case study, HRBPs are defined by the body of knowledge and by the organizational factors. Meaning how many resources they have to manage and the overall mindset of the companies that allow mastering a strategic role of HR. Main hindrance towards ideal professionalism is explained by the lack of full mandate in decision making, lack of competencies and too much focus on administrative tasks. However, HRBPs are adding value to the business and are described as corporate professionals.

Key words: *HR Business Partners, professionalism, professionals, HR Transformation, strategic, operative, adding value*

Acknowledgement

Master thesis report provides an interesting reading about mapping the HR Business Partners after the HR Transformation as professionals.

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List of abbreviations

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
HR	Human Resources
HRBO	Human Resource Business Officer
HRBP	Human Resource Business Partner
SSM	Shared Service model

Parts of SSM:

- Service Center, sometimes used as Shared Service or HR Direct = the help functions: administration, call desk
- Centers of Expertise, sometimes called Centers of Excellence or Central HR = creating strategies and HR processes for the whole company, help also in specialized questions
- HR Business Partners = work close to the line with various (strategic) HR questions

1. Introduction

In rapidly changing business markets companies need to adapt to market trends and therefore the organization must also be open for transformation and redesign in its sources. The real implications lie on how human resources should be managed and structured. Due to increased use of information technology and increasing amount of knowledge, companies need to handle these complexities which are only some of the factors that enforce change (Ulrich, Allen, Brockbank, Younger, Nyman, 2009).

Beginning of the 21st century was the time when large organizations started to implement HR transformation (sometimes called HR Evolution). Much of the influence comes from professor David Ulrich and his colleagues (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Beatty, 2001; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich et al., 2009). Intention of HR Transformation is to reduce cost of personnel and to add value in a sense which makes the work of HR professionals more effective.

From a broader view, the HR Transformation is about following the straight business needs being closer to the business than just following basic HR transactions (Sotkiewicz and Jensen, 2007). That is why Ulrich et al. (2009) have emphasized in building HR from the Outside in and to focus more on adding value to the business. According to Storey (2007), role of HR Business Partners (HRBP) is to be part of the management boardroom team whose responsibility is to translate business needs with relevant strategies into ways how to manage people. Effectiveness of the role depends on the inclusion of HR and the focus should be set on strategic driven HR rather than operational-administrative role, stated by Storey (2007). HRBP role was launched with the HR Transformation. Distinction must be made, that before the HR Transformation, role was called HR generalist and business officer. However, these roles seemingly existing before, take several years in order to grow and establish into HRBP role. This has given the shift of the function towards professional way. Their position with a mark of status and power has come to different stages, depending on the organizational system, business stand on the market, decision making of senior managers and organizational culture (Griffin, Finney, Hennessy, Boury, 2009; Lawler III and Mohrman, 2003; Ulrich et al., 2009; Kates, 2006). Therefore, business partnering can take various forms from change agent (Caldwell, 2001; Ulrich, 1997) to strategic partner (Lawler III and Mohrman, 2003; Truss, 2008; Pritchard, 2010) to internal consultant (Wright, 2008) or most recently what is discussed by Ulrich et al. (2009) operational executor and embedded HR.

Moreover, there are many benefits in having implemented the HR transformation or sometimes even called the Shared Service model (SSM). These are discussed by Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) organization (2007), claiming that due to repositioning of HR function they can be more strategic contributors and add even more value to increase the quality of HR work. Others, Griffin et al. (2009) mention general factors that have an influence on HR, like the count reduction and cost savings which is also mentioned by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005: 78) as “on average, large firms spend about \$1,600 per employee per year on administration” making it easy to calculate cost savings of SSM.

However, studies have not grasped upon HRBPs as professionals. Therefore, this study is an attempt to present HRBPs by using different professionalism theories (Evetts, 2003, 2005, 2006; Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Hall, 2011) to show if and how HRBPs are becoming professionals. According to Evetts (2005) professionalism in work needs to be more presented than just presumed as for such knowledge-based practitioners in modern societies. Much of the research has talked about HR in general which is sometimes too ambiguous (see for example Ulrich et al., 2009), but HRBPs in concrete has not been

explored in how they are becoming professionals with relation to what are they working with in a specific field. It is important to note, that professionals are created by the power and knowledge base, and the effective use of these determines their status at the companies (Evetts, 2003). The contribution of this study is to gain new evidence in a homogeneous world where professionals claim meritocracy. There are differences in how they are working and adding value, explained by the context of business organization. These characteristics are emphasized in order to understand how HRBPs establish its status and occupational closure in organizations. What makes this study an interesting case is to describe how HRBPs become professionals by using different forms of professionalism. In addition, to receive an in depth understanding of what HRBP role is about after the launch of SSM.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis report is to look at HRBPs at two case companies in the Swedish context and to explore whether and how they have established as professionals. Interest of this study is driven by the HR reorganization with HR transformation creating the role of HRBP which is considered ambiguous in companies.

1.2 Research problem

In the thesis report professionals are described in two different perspectives. The first one is the practical concept of professionals which is used in the studies of Ulrich and his colleagues (1997, 2005, 2009) from an organizational business perspective. Since 1996 Ulrich has discussed in numerous issues about HR roles (among other business partnering) how HR function must change and to look at it from a professional sight in terms of what has happened to earlier HR professionals. The other perspective applies professionalism as a theoretical concept with authors like Evetts (2003, 2005, 2006) and Muzio et al. (2011). Unlike Ulrich, these authors do not talk about HR and business, but analyse professionals from a sociological perspective, e.g. how professionalism is managed and understood in the changing economy and world. However, none of the above mentioned studies have talked about HRBPs from a professionalism perspective. Lack of studies has motivated the need for this research to combine business and sociology perspectives together.

Constructing the research problem, the focus was guided by changes in HR organization, among others the HR transformation or the creation of HR SSM. Positions were divided into three distinct functions: Service Center, Centers of Expertise and Business Partners (Ulrich et al., 2009). Among those roles there is a risk of becoming a too wide HR professional. Particularly HRBPs who must choose a side of being a strategic or operative partner, because their role is in accordance with the needs of business line managers. Due to that, the claim of assuring professionals (meaning to have the roles and competencies in place) must go in line with HR value proposition (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Studies have not much grasped on how HRBPs in particular are adding value and therefore this concept was attached to explain professionals which is also part of Ulrich's understanding of professionals.

In Swedish context authors have mostly focused research on the HR transformation and its reorganization to three functions (Boglund, Hällsten, Thilander 2011). These authors claim that the HRBP role has reduced after establishment of HR service centres and the role was kept in old patterns by giving support and priorities to local unit demands. However, HR transformation can permit a chance to increase the professional status of certain HR professionals which these authors suggest to take up in a further research (ibid). Another study has been made in the Swedish context. Hällsten (2008) results showed that within the HR transformation process, some difficulties arise to appear as "One HR" organization and to add value to the clients, mostly to (line) managers. Besides, due to lack of one HR function

this has had an effect on HRBP role, because the launch of transformation did not turn out to be as planned (ibid). Therefore, understanding of the role and its position depends on how far companies have reached with HR Transformation. It causes some variation in the professionalization which is taken up in this study.

Besides Ulrich and others (1997, 2005, 2009), Gilmore and Williams (2007) have brought out some contradictions within their research to conceptualize the personnel professional of CIPD. In strategic and long term perspective managing people should be aligned with organization's business objectives, but this control is nowadays handed over to managers leaving HR to a partly autonomy. However, in their study professional status was not created in CIPD and in one company perspective it left personnel in a powerless position. Therefore in the study it is presented how organizations or corporations have an influence in forming professionals. Gilmore and Williams (2007) also discovered that the social closure might heighten professional status in the organization. And by closure it is meant the establishment of professionals, which has motivated to make this study. Researches (see for example Wright, 2008) have covered some power issues with legitimization and level of status, but not that much about knowledge and trust arising from professionals. Even Evetts (2005) has emphasized that it should be examined on how practitioners' trust relationships and competencies are being challenged.

Determination for this study is also facilitated by Ulrich, Younger and Brockbank (2008) claims to further examine whether there are differences in HR organization throughout by industry, by company and by geographic region. This is clarified in the following study by choosing companies from different industries: manufacturing versus telecommunications, with the headquarters based here in Sweden, however active in a global market.

Division of HR has caused different demands for position holders and difficulties in HR profession. Due to split of roles which used to be determined clearly, leads to confusions and ambiguities. Therefore, my interest is to explore one particular group from SSM and to map HRBPs as professionals with a base of knowledge, power, and trust with a focus on work they do. The core issues to answer and to find out are whether and how it can be discussed about establishment of HRBP professionals after the HR Transformation.

1.3 Research questions

In order to fulfil the purpose of the study, evolved from the research problem, following main research question has been developed:

If and how have HRBPs become professionals after the HR transformation?

Main research question contains the following sub-questions:

- What are the HRBPs working with? (e.g. strategic, operative work, adding value)?
- How are HRBPs as professionals formed in the companies (e.g. power, knowledge, trust)?
- What kind of professionalism has been created (e.g. organizational - corporate, occupational)?

The main research question consists of theoretical and practical perspectives. The first sub-question follow the line of practical contribution and the two last sub-questions are much determined by the professionalism theory used in this study.

1.4 Disposition

This thesis is divided into different sections. First, is the introduction of the thesis, describing the purpose of the report with research questions and an overview of the research problem. In further sections, earlier research done in the field is presented and so are the theoretical concepts to analyse the presented findings. After that methodology with ethical considerations is introduced. Further on, the results section is followed to expound the reflections of the respondents of this study. Finally, the thesis report ends with discussion on empirical data, followed by the conclusion answering above stated purpose and research questions.

2. Earlier research

As a background to this research, studies about HR professionals, strategic and operative work and the HRBP roles are presented. Most of these mentioned studies will be taken into discussion to analyse HRBPs and to create a better critical understanding of the professionals.

2.1 HR as professionals

Following chapter presents main findings about HR as professionals which are important to know. This creates a good overview of the study background which is the base to interpret in the empirical results.

Different viewpoints exist in understanding the concept of HR as professionals. For example, Gilmore and Williams (2007) argue for the fact that no actual definition of professionalism exists as it is a shifting phenomenon. Therefore, practitioners must establish themselves to think and perform as professionals, and these forms need to be recognized by public, academics and the professionals themselves (Randle, 1996, cited in Gilmore and Williams, 2007). Moreover, in the study made by Gilmore and Williams (2007), they found CIPD organization (a well-known UK based HR institution) to claim for professional status, to capture the standards and factors necessary for HR practitioners. Important factors for professionals are: “they must operate as thinking performers, be capable of strategic decision-making and of adding value by engaging in strategic business initiatives” (ibid: 408). In addition, the way to show their professionalism is to keep in mind that any practice developed must increase the business performance.

Furthermore, another study has been made about CIPD to investigate attitudes of members and engagement with continuing professional development (CPD), by Rothwell and Arnold (2005). They concluded that the passion for the profession is the main driver of the perceived value of CPD. The most popular way on updating strategies were informal and organizationally located with less emphasis on courses and qualifications. Besides, the more a profession is affected by changing conditions, the more continuous learning is needed to avoid dislocation (ibid). This is reflected to HRBPs whose working conditions are changing quite often, mostly in the beginning of the HR Transformation years, which create the importance to conduct trainings reducing confusions on what is expected from this role. Principally expectations are created by line managers. This relates to a study made by Harrison (2011), to reveal the existing problem on how to educate HR. He has investigated the impact of the line manager and learning culture on the development of professional practice for the novice of HR practitioner. For unknown reason, there has not been much effort to develop the knowledge of HR practitioners as it is to other specialities. There appears to be no strategy to develop practitioner knowledge, as well there exist little understanding on how to do it. Moreover, to fetch to a success, it lies in the hands of putting focus on people and to give them the power and the right support to make a difference in the company (ibid). HRBPs are there in the companies to manage people, but also to support managers in the

business line. In all the activities efficiency plays a key role and Brockway (2007) has identified factors of becoming an effective HR business partner. In order to become the strategic partner, HR must look away from traditional set of delivering service to think and act more future oriented. Besides, HR practitioners need to develop and sustain robust relationships and to focus on service delivery, the basics of HR services. Furthermore, HRBPs must make clear use of their expertise, because it provides them with origin of power (ibid).

Even Pritchard (2010) has made a study about HRBPs by focusing on the social construction of becoming a strategic partner. HR practitioner function is dependent on legitimacy of function, which is received by the body of knowledge and gives partner a status as trusted advisor. Hence, personality and the capability with the claims of freedom and influencing role are described as part of being a strategic partner. However, still there remain tensions and difficulties between old and new roles as a generalist to perform in daily activities and to deliver the required strategic approach (ibid). Similar to Pritchard (2010), Wright (2008) also argues for legitimacy of function which is based on the acceptance of senior managers of the expertise and acknowledgement of HRBP role, and not on the power relations itself. Therefore, some of the characteristics of HR partners are related to “superior influencing, relationship and networking skills where becoming trusted advisers emerges a central part of their role”, stated by Wright (2008: 1075). His findings show that it is easier to accept identification to “organizational legitimacy” than to the HR profession itself, which are related to corporate professionalization (Muzio et al., 2011) and organizational professionals (Evetts, 2005, 2006) discussed later in the theory part.

However, there exist some of risks in being a HR professional. Kochan (2004) argues that in some cases HR professionals could lose their credibility in the deliveries they provide, because they are not able to challenge and give individual perspectives on the processes and policies of the company. Relevant over here is also to mention some of the competence base that needs to be part of HR professionals’ package. Crouse, Doyle and Young (2011) emphasize that HR professionals need to develop their current competencies due to changed roles. Therefore, when HR practitioners become more specialized, there may be a problem to find the head personnel within HR, since they need a broader background and more general skills. HR practitioners need key competences, such as: technical, strategic, organizational management and interpersonal and personal skills (ibid).

In addition to Kochan (2004) and Crouse et al. (2011), even Kenton and Moody (2003, cited in Kenton and Yarnall, 2010) have brought out some of the shortcoming characteristics which are very important to overcome. These are: “lack of understanding of the role within the business; lack of trust; lack of senior management support; and lack of power to action projects/proposals”, referred by Kenton and Moody (2003, cited in Kenton & Yarnall, 2010: 9). Mentioned factors are related to professionalism and in order to perform successfully, HRBPs need to understand their professional area very well in order to gain that position and status in the company. Moreover, this research focused on internal consultants which link to HRBPs as another possible way how to interpret HR professionals with their current challenges. In addition HR professionals can also be described as trusted partners. McCracken and Heaton (2010) in their study define that HRBP model can play a successful role. This by letting HR specialists to keep their identity as experts and trusted partners through “building credibility, developing relationships and managing potential role conflict”, stated by McCracken and Heaton (2010: 13). Moreover, in order to have successful relationships with the line, HR should have the business awareness and operative skills to be respected by line. Relevance lies also in the coaching and mentoring role to line managers (ibid).

This chapter has created the base on understanding how HR as professionals are interpreted by different authors, what are some of the risks in being a professional and what needs to be developed further to become effective and trusted strategic partner to the managers. Most importantly, the body of knowledge or competence has mayor impact to be a professional and to gain the status and power to be a good specialist. These aspects are further taken into discussion and connected to the empirical material to answer the main research questions: if and how HRBPs are becoming professionals. Hence, it is also related to the two first sub-questions: what HRBPs are working with and how are professionals formed.

2.2 Strategic vs operative work

In the second part of early research, reflections upon strategic and operative work are made which is also part of professional work, but it differs from professionalism as these works happen at different hierarchy levels of profession. In higher positions (e.g. senior partner who may be at the same time the manager of HRBPs) the work is more strategic (Ulrich et al. 2009). An extensive amount of literature exists within strategic and operative concepts used in different articles and books. Here, I will grasp upon the most interesting ones for my study.

When talking about the HR transformation a distinction of understanding must be made between transactional and transformational HR work (Ulrich, 1997). Transactional work is more administrative or sometimes said operative which is standardized and centralized assignments similar throughout the whole organization, for example: administrative payroll work, benefits, recruitment (Ulrich et al., 2009). Transformational work is more strategic and not standardized; work varies in different parts of the organization corresponding to the needs of the local business unit. However, with operating tasks, if the basics of administrative work are not done well, strategic impact of the work is not present for long time (ibid).

Focus on the factors which make HR strategic partners depends on the activities time is spent on, noted by Lawler III and Mohrman (2003). These authors have stated (ibid: 10) that “strategic goes hand in hand with planning, design and development of business needs”. Important is also to show interest and have the capabilities in order to be involved in the strategic process. Besides, companies should think on implementing information systems that can free up time to focus on strategic activities by eliminating transactional work, noted by Lawler III and Mohrman (2003) and study by CIPD (2007) explaining it as ineffective technology in place.

Some of the factors and tensions which cause imbalance of transactional over transformational work are mentioned in the study about the public organization by Truss (2008). HR function is becoming more strategic, but it is not replacing the traditional HR roles as these still stay existent. In what can hold HR’s full potential back to be strategic is the burdensome and time consuming procedures. Even gap of views between line managers and HR of its strategic role can cause tensions. To solve these complexities depends on organization’s will to change the nature of the work contribution (ibid). However, Kates (2006) argues that these operational challenges are created by the organization design. The goal of business partner model is to actually maximize the effectiveness of the organization and the way it is structured or organized. One of the interesting points she brings out is that there must be a right balance between functional, enterprise and line of business initiatives work.

Particularities of the HR Transformation are mentioned in the study made by CIPD (2007:40) as in large organizations emphasis should be put on the separation of “thinking of doing”. Authors also claim some of the problems in implementing the HR Transformation which come apparent and have an effect on HR professionals. For example skill gaps in staff,

deficient resources and the necessity to define new roles. Interestingly, CIPD (2007) study points out to important parts of the HR work: in order to be successful one has to develop influencing skills and strategic thinking. Hence, the skills like knowing the business, understanding leadership, the will to innovate, add more value to the function delivery and are necessary to improve on (ibid). This can be taken into consideration, as mentioned by Brockway (2007) that in order to become more strategic partner, HR professionals need to move away from operational work, and require a new updated skill set. This is similar to what was also mentioned by Wright, McMahan, McCormick and Sherman (1998) who discuss the challenges for HR in the future to develop right skills, e.g. analytical skills in order to contribute to the business. Therefore, it can be stated that in order for HR function to be effective, they need to have the set of skills and competencies to earn their position at the management meetings and make a contribution to the business success. It is much connected to the knowledge and expertise in how they can be valued and work strategic (ibid). To play a strategic role well, HR must have the credibility and certain skills (analytical and interpersonal), stated by Beer (1997). Besides, they need to understand the requirements of strategic HR function and to show initiative to change and transform. Moreover, in the function one has to build comfort in dealing with uncertainties and ambiguities to change (ibid). There are specific behaviours which need to be aligned with long-term perspective and HR must find ways to support the business strategy. They need to think of the larger context what is happening on the market, what consequences it can have to the present state of the business and culture and align these with the mission and vision of the company to reach the desired future state, stated by Kenton and Yarnall (2009). Therefore strategic thinking and business acumen should be part of HRBPs thinking frame.

In relation to the HR Transformation, mentioned earlier in the study by CIPD (2007), even Holley (2009) consultancy group has put together a set of HR Shared Service functions with its implications. By drawing on impact of HRBPs, the greater form can have in times when organization is going through a change rather than being stable. HRBPs must also be seen as a whole: ones who are adding value in a cost-effective manner and ones who deliver support and service. Important is to prioritize effectively the amount of work that needs to be performed (ibid).

In contrast to above mentioned studies on HR professionals, Francis and Keegan (2006) criticize previous studies as too less focus in the increase of thinking strategic concept is put on employees. This makes employee aspects to be concerned and disconnected among operational and strategic mindsets of HR. Moreover authors (ibid) claim that there is no one commonly accepted definition of business partnering. This can be reflected as companies interpret the roles differently according to their current needs.

From this chapter the distinction has been made between operative (transactional, administrative) and strategic (transformational) work, the last one being the criteria to become truly strategic partner and HRBP. In order to follow the pathway to strategic, new skillset must be developed to have high analytical, influential skills and the strategic thinking with credibility in activities. Besides, lack of information technology in place and burdensome of administrative work can with uncompleted HR transformation make HRBPs ineffective and not strategic partners. This chapter has a crucial point to keep in mind, as it facilitates to answer the main research question: if and how HRBPs are becoming professionals. Hence, it is also related to the first sub research questions to answer to what are HRBPs working with.

2.3 Adding value in practice

In this chapter, in relation to answer to the first sub research question, I briefly grasp upon value added practical studies by Ulrich and others (2001, 2005). Although later on, I also bring it out under professionalism theory as a theoretical concept, presented by Gilmore and Williams (2007).

In simple terms, the ideas of adding value in relation to HRBP work is to think of the company perspective in profitability, or in commercial terms. Ulrich and Beatty (2001) claim that adding value can be made through coaching or performing as an architect, facilitator, and a leader who force activities. On the other hand, Ulrich and Brockbank (2005: 202) state that “caring for employees builds shareholder value”. As shareholder concern about tangible financial results and intangible capabilities, HR professionals need to add value for shareholders to keep a track on and present productivity reports (ibid). Therefore adding value is connected to profitability to think how all the actions made could relate to the business objectives and fulfil the long term business vision to reach a high position.

2.4 Roles as a function

Notice made on HR roles is relevant to make to cluster what kind of HR business partnering and diverse angles they can be regarded as. According to Farndale, Paauwe and Hoeksema (2009) HR function in the SSM can be looked upon two logics or perspectives. First, is the professional logic which “focuses on the expectations of line managers, employees and other stakeholders and refers to the degree of customer orientation of the HR function and the quality of its services”, stated by Paauwe (2004, cited in Farndale et al., 2009: 545). Second, is the delivery logic which “focuses on achieving cost-effectiveness, through a choice of delivery channels for the range of HR services: HR department; line management; teams; employees, etc.”, stated by Farndale et al. (2009: 545). Therefore, from the study, HR function must have a clear vision set by the company covering those two aspects: delivery development (thinking in cost terms) and concentration of professional (to have a customer approach in all the services delivered with quality). Besides these responsibilities and roles are in demand to be expressed and communicated as clearly as possible (ibid).

Discussion about HR business partnering is also made by Ulrich et al. (2009), stating that HR is divided into operational executor and embedded HR. There are two rather different approaches to fulfil this function However, only one role can be mastered by an individual, but all the roles must be present in the organization.

- Operational executors are much involved in operational HR work at a local level of business units rather than working with strategic value adding issues. They spend times doing individual casework (e.g. handling disciplinary cases), perform operational tasks (setting up and attending recruiting interviews), doing analysis and reporting (managing compensation reviews), delivering initiatives (new employee orientation). Sometimes HR in this role is lacking focus on key business and customer issues in delivering their operational tasks (ibid: 74-75).
- Embedded HR think and contribute in strategic work by supporting and engaging in business strategy and give proactive insights to managers on how to invest in resources in order to increase business performance. Moreover, they discuss effective strategy development in the management team and have a personal vision of future business. They also focus on employee interests – what needs to be done; select and implement HR practices and make sure they are aligned with business strategy and measure and track performance (ibid: 70-71).

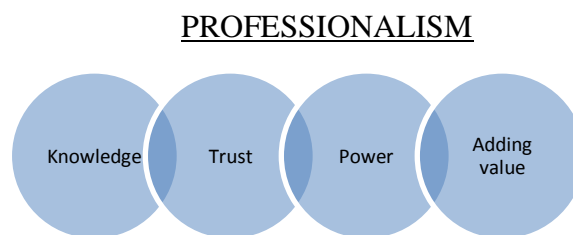
Above mentioned roles, whether HRBPs are more of an operational executor or embedded HR and the logics of professionals and delivery attempt to answer the first sub research question: what are HRBPs working with. These concepts help to understand how work defines the roles.

3. Theory

In the master thesis, theory of professionalism is used to base a good understanding in forming professionals. This concept is presented in a traditional set by Evetts (2003, 2005, 2006) where author discusses that in the new direction of professionalism it is suggested to use a discourse to promote and facilitate specific occupational changes in service work organizations. The change of discourse derived by the launch of SSM where the profession name of HR Business Partners transformed from HR generalist with some of the changes in the occupation. Therefore, in this study the traditional understanding of professionalism is compared with the practical expectations about professions, using Gilmore and Williams (2007) research on CIPD's professionals. In addition, corporation professionalization concepts are used from Muzio et al. (2011) which is rather similar to Evett's organizational professionalism, claiming professionalization to be associated with organizations.

Regarding the practical professional research by Gilmore and Williams (2007), this is brought out here in the theory part, to compare it with Evett's organizational and occupational professionalism as an extended theory. According to Gilmore and Williams (2007) CIPD's professional project is determined as professionalism created by complex realities in people management in organizations. From the capitalist point of view, practising strategic capability is important in professionalism and the practitioners should be considered part of the management team and add business value with their work (ibid). However, contemporary personnel function cannot be regarded from classical model, because there are set limits regarding "professional privilege and autonomy", stated by Evtetts (2003: 400). It is also claimed that in the rise of new professional projects, like HR managers working in large companies, traditional forms of professionalism with "occupational closure and self-regulation" cannot control the knowledge or market to an independent standing professional group, stated by Muzio et al. (2011: 448).

Evetts (2006) emphasizes on the dual character of professionalism, on one side there is the provision of service and on the other side the use of knowledge and power for control. Moreover, trust is important in client-practitioner (ibid), e.g. in employee relations. From Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), adding value aspect related to professionalism is included. Even Gilmore and Williams (2007) state it to be part of professionalization. To grasp upon sub-concepts of professionalism: knowledge, trust, power and adding value; a model has been drawn to understand the theory concepts used in the discussion:



Model 1. Professionalism theory concept derived from Evetts (2006) and research by Gilmore and Williams (2007).

3.1 Knowledge

Evetts (2003) defines professions as service or knowledge-based occupations, there communality is based on higher education, vocational training and experience. From other perspective practitioners deal with risks and uncertainties at work using their expert knowledge in order for customers and clients to face with these risks. Knowledge plays a crucial role in presenting the collective information and the insights of the profession. Once these insights are established and standardized in terms of how to operate with clients, they must facilitate in reaching goals. In other sense effectiveness and efficiency are improved once knowledge is established through insights and business leaders achieve their business results (ibid).

It has been stated by Ulrich et al. (2009: 60) that “HR rests on a body of knowledge about how people and organizations operate”. In relation to, Muzio et al. (2011) state it as competence closure. Lawler III and Mohrman (2003) express the importance of knowledge by combining expertise of HR with the expertise of the line by improving HR/line task teams in business understanding of HR professionals. They must acquire and master body of knowledge (in this case speak the language of business). It is stated by Kessler (1995) that HR professionals must be credible and possess a strong knowledge of the business in addition to technical HR know-how.

Positioning as professional requires skills and education in order to practice competencies (Evetts, 2005). Ulrich et al. (2009: 107-110) have well defined professional competencies:

- Credible activist – to be credible (respected and listened to) and active (to offer point of view, take a position, challenge assumptions). To be “HR with an attitude” and to create sustainable business outcomes as to link the people and business dimensions with energy, insight and impact.
- Culture and change steward – coach managers, facilitate change, develop disciplines to make the change happen – this includes implementation of strategy, projects or initiatives.
- Talent manager and organization designer – HR master theory, research, and practice in talent management and organizational design, and make sure that all capabilities from above two are aligned with strategy.
- Strategy architect – professionals have a vision for how the organization can perform and win in the market, now and in the future; they make sure that leader behaviours match the strategy.
- Operational executor – HR execute the operational aspects of managing people and organization: they draft, adapt and implement policies, fulfil basic administrative needs.
- Business ally – HR contribute to the success of a business by knowing the social context or setting in which their business operates; also know how the business makes money: know the customers, have a good understanding of internal business processes and add value to functions.

On the other hand professionalism is tied with “common experiences, understandings and expertise, shared ways of perceiving problems and possible solutions”, stated by Evetts (2003: 401). Knowledge is well exemplified, in one of the conversations with Volvo Busses HR manager, as stated by Rolandsson and Oudhuis (2009). Important is to industrialize HR in practical terms and to stay informed with the outer world, for example in questions like competence development, and to hold contacts with external networks (ibid).

3.2 Trust

Professionalism in professions emphasizes the importance of trust in economical relations so that people put trust in professionals. Professionals must be worthy of trust, and remain the confidential level in order not to abuse for wrong reasons (like doctors must not reveal the patient's background). In successful relations, professions will be rewarded by authority and higher status. Some research has defined that through higher rewards occupational power will be gained. Trust is also needed in a sense to put clients first which is later rewarded with authority. Together in the arena they create shared value system (Evetts, 2006).

Rolandsson and Oudhuis (2009) found from their conversations with one of the HR managers that in HR work and in its professional group it is important to increase the confidence and trust through clearly integrating HR work with value creating processes. HR must obtain distinct responsibility of results. It covers to take active part in a dialogue and make good relationships with other groups in and outside the company. In HR SSM in order for HR to become more trustful partner, the function must be clarified (ibid).

Due to the fact that professional services are intangible, establishment of trust is important (Gilmore and Williams, 2007) In order to achieve trust; one has to appear respectable and authentic for the client (ibid). Most of the cases, it is demonstrated by the outward thinking (thinking out of the box) of business ability (ibid). Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) emphasize trust in building a relationship of trust between the HR professional and line manager by having one to one talks and discussing the issues after meetings on what consequences behaviour can have on other team members.

3.3 Power

Professionalism grasps upon "competition for status and income", stated by Evetts (2003: 401). Larson (1977) used the concept professional project, meaning that occupational groups seek a monopoly position in the market for their status, mobility and service provided in the social order. It is also described as looking for a "monopoly of competence to be legitimised by expertise and a monopoly of credibility" (ibid: 38). Freidson (2001) understands power as control of work and his understanding of professionalism exist when an organized occupation acquires the power to decide who has the competence to perform the assignments of work and to control the measures to assess performance.

Moreover, discourse of professionalism creates power relations which can be looked in two ways. According to McClelland (1990, referred in Evetts, 2005: 7-8), professionalism "differentiate from within (successful manipulation of the market by group) and from above (domination of forces external to the group)" In the first practitioners can promote themselves with image to clients and bargain with states to keep its responsibilities and are able to count act on their own interests. On contrast, from above approach covers employers of the organization where service is provided and decision making is autonomous. Usually this discourse is seen as false and something needs to be changed in occupations. This form is welcomed, as practitioners can improve their occupation status and rewards. Influence to occupational control is perceived by the organizational managers, not the workers themselves. Besides, organizational objectives regulate the occupational control of relations with clients and limit the service given by professionals (ibid).

3.4 Adding value

Adding value as explained before in early research in practical terms is connected to returns to the company in activities combined. However, as a theoretical concept it is covered by professionals' ability to facilitate the understanding of "new language of the commercial and

managerial world”, stated by Gilmore and Williams (2007: 401) and contribute with their performance to bring in organizational profit. Other ideas cover the idea to align work with organization’s mission and assist the managers with the mindset to think of the vision and strategic goals of the company. Besides that, one has improved the focus on customer by being flexible and by stimulating change (ibid).

Keeping that all in mind, the most important to adding value is to build good relations with line managers and be the “thinking performer” (Gilmore and Williams, 2007: 403). Moreover, authors distinguish two marks of professionalism which are evident in CIPD. One of them is to integrate HR and business objectives, and other to deliver what is promised. However, there exists uncertainty for professionals to contribute to business which sways personnel status in organizations. Absence of understanding the ambiguity of the role and the implications in work are harmful for less experienced practitioners in efforts to come aligned with business partner role. Authors emphasize how personnel need to think out what the work entails and the environment where they are working (ibid). Therefore, critical thinking describes the truly thinking performers.

3.5 Summary of professionalism theories

In the theory chapter, the most important aspects to take along to the empirical discussion are to remember that knowledge is the base of education and competence which creates HRBPs. Besides, relevant for analysis is also how power and decision making and adding value with the thinking performer concept and profitability determine the creation of professionals. These concepts help to answer the second sub research question: how are HRBPs as professionals formed.

3.6 Forms of professionalism

This chapter aims to answer to the third sub-research question, different forms of professionalism are presented, in order to distinguish which kind of professionalism has been created when describing HRBPs. It is also useful in a sense to map HRBPs in the field. During the HR transformation occupational changes took place in order to be cost efficient and to satisfy the demanding needs of customers. Therefore, different discourses are constructed then talking about professionals by managers, employers etc. Models from Muzio et al. (2011) and Evetts (2005, 2006) facilitate to describe which kind of professionalism HRBPs have established.

In the new directions of professionalism, Evetts (2006: 140-141, 2005: 10) discusses two forms of professionalism in the following model. Organizational professionalism is more of a discourse used by managers who create professionals by following the authority levels which is rather business objective based than decided collectively, as in occupational professionalism. Decision-making follows the hierarchical line depending on position (senior manager etc.), whereas in occupational professionalism it is more based on the credibility and practitioners can self decide. In occupational form controls are decided by professionals, then in organizational managers decide the control level. Lastly, base of knowledge in organizational is based on specialized training and the grade is important, however in occupational professions share the same education and follow the training.

Organizational professionalism	Occupational professionalism
discourse of control used by managers in work organizations	discourse constructed within professional groups
rational-legal forms of authority	collegial authority

hierarchical structures of authority and decision-making	practitioner trust by both clients and employers
standardization of work practices (procedures)	discretionary decision-making in complex cases and occupational control of the work
control of managerialism	controls operationalized by practitioners
occupational training and certification	shared education and training

Model 2: Two different forms of professionals in knowledge-based work (Evetts, 2006: 140-141, 2005: 10)

Besides Evetts concepts of professionalism, Muzio et al. (2011) talk about corporate professionalization (rather similar to Evetts organizational professionalism) which is contrasting the traditional old way of looking at professionals (more like occupational). In corporate professionalization knowledge base is created by the needs of the corporation and competence is crucial here. Rather than following the state based laws, market consensus is more of a key strategy for professionalization. It is done by different activities by persuading and arguing for the choices in a professional way to provide services that a client is requesting. Their legitimization is based on adding value to the market than to the public state. In corporate form membership is rather understood as individual in an organization context, sometimes it can even be group membership. Structure of association is quite complex following different levels (e.g. senior – local). Relations with clients are closely related together rather than just stretching out. Lastly, jurisdictions or in other words borders of work and competence are on international level across borders, than just one country based.

	Old “collegial professionalization”	New “corporate professionalization”
Knowledge based	Reliance on abstract body of knowledge	Co-production of knowledge with industry, situated knowledge, focus on competences
Market	Statutory closure via chartered recognition	Building of market consensus and deliver occupational closure via corporate practices (professional membership requested by clients in processes)
Legitimacy	Legitimized by public benefit	Legitimized by market value (profits)
Association form	Individual membership, single-tier membership structure	Individual and organizational membership; multi-level membership structure
Relations with clients and employers	Arm’s length	Close engagement
Jurisdictions	National	International

Model 3: Characteristics of “corporate professionalization” compared to traditional models (Muzio et al., 2011: 457)

Mentioned concepts are taken up later in the last part of discussion section: forms of professionals to analyse which kind of professionalism describes them the best.

4. Methodology

In order to form this study, a comparative qualitative case study was conducted at two multinational companies: Combi and Techno (names fictive) with HRBPs. Case company examples make it possible to answer to the purpose of the study whether and how HRBPs have established as professionals.

4.1 Why these large multinational companies?

Before carrying on explaining the method of this study, it is necessary to motivate why to have these multinational companies in the sample. The reason for choosing these case companies is related to two factors. Firstly, they have implemented the HR Transformation. Secondly, the size of the organizations has made sense to allow reorganization of HR functions.

Combi is a large manufacturing company and is currently going through a lot of changes, especially in the strategy line to reach its business goals and in culture. The reason to choose Combi is due to contacts made with this organization in an earlier course and by realizing they had made the HR transformation. This was made in 2007. Furthermore, Combi became even more interesting case then setting up interviews it was realized that they had split the role of HRBP in two business units.

Techno is a large telecommunication and data communication systems provider. The reason to choose Techno is to compare and contrast it to Combi in reaching out with HRBP professionals in their fields. Techno made the HR transformation in 2002 and within these 10 years a company might have established HRBPs very well.

This adds value to explore and compare two multinational production companies in different, but successful business segments on the market. These two companies help to understand the relationship between HR and the production businesses and to suggest some of the proposals on how Business Partner professionals could be shaped in the future by reflecting on the challenges organization actors are facing at the time of writing this thesis paper.

4.2 Case study

This study was combined using empirical qualitative data in order to get viewpoints from HRBPs working in the case companies. Therefore, as a research method, case study method was chosen to get a deeper and holistic view to visible approach in the two organizations in the industry. In this way purpose of the study could be reached in exploring if and how HRBPs are becoming professionals. Case study research advantage is that in-depth data can be obtained that would not be possible in the case of a larger sample (Yin, 2003). Moreover, this method is chosen, as it “provides richly detailed portrait of a particular phenomenon” (Hakim, 2000: 59). In order to form a case study, data was collected through conducting interviews with HRBPs at the companies. Most of the questions followed semi-structured line in order to get close up views and insights to respondents’ opinions (Silverman, 2006), besides some of the addition questions were asked. Semi-structured interviews are relatively objective which help the interviewer to maintain a neutral role. It is important to hold a balanced position, on one hand to be friendly and non-formal and impersonal and guided on the other side (Fontana and Frey, 2000).

4.3 Going to the field and conducting the interviews

For a pre-understanding of the field some prior work has been done at Combi. One observation day was made prior to this study to get a better background of HRBPs and to understand the field which helped to find interesting paths to make a research on. As well one

pilot interview was conducted in order to test questions/themes of the interview guide. During the pre study, it was realized that additional company in the study adds more value. This in order to see how HRBP role works in another company and what kind of differences/similarities can appear in becoming professionals. Therefore, Techno was included in the study and comparisons are drawn to add higher value to the content of the study.

Interviewees were found through contact persons in two companies. In Techno I had a contact person who directly gave the contact of the suggested people (who are the only HRBPs in this region) to be interviewed. In Combi, I used snowball method, except 4 persons who I knew beforehand from previous case study work in the university. Other names and contacts were asked from these 4 informants. Interviews at Combi were held with 2 senior HRBPs and 8 HRBPs at the two sub-organizations: core and local business units (local meant as Swedish focused unit). Interviews at Techno were made with 2 senior HRBPs and 3 HRBPs at different sub-organizations: local and close to core business units.

In total 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out at two companies: 10 interviews in Combi and 5 in Techno company. I am aware that the field is changing in time, so therefore this study reflects on answers on a specific period and I try to give a snapshot of this time. During the interviews, interview guide (see Appendix 1) was being followed and some of the additional questions were asked. Interviews lasted approximately 1-1,5 hours. Interviews were conducted in the offices (some in cafeteria areas, some in working rooms) of Combi and Techno to be close to the respondents working field. All the rooms were booked and suggested by the interviewees themselves. All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The names of interviewees are kept anonymous in order not to harm or reveal any of the participants in this study.

4.4 Data analysis

Qualitative data is analyzed using content analysis. It has been noted by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) that research focuses on language as to communication characteristics and also on the text content or contextual meaning. Content analysis goes deeper than just counting words from the text. The aim is to bring together a similar meaning to the text under the respective categories (ibid). In such analysis, I carefully interpreted what the interviewees meant with their statements. Several times I carefully read the texts line by line and made remarks of the text which helped to make codes directed closely by the sayings of the respondents' text. Therefore, these codes are interpreted by me and close to the empirical data. For example: "*it's all about individual*", the code individualism was created. Later on, these codes were made into categories and put into a context following the line of the interview guide themes and the key concepts of the research questions (e.g. power, knowledge). Following the example, code individualism was related to power as individual has some power or mandate to decide the role. This is called inductive based content analysis, which is more bottom up (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This kind of analysis is more open and explanatory in nature as it is very much based on intuitive interpretations to ask from empirical findings: what is interesting here? I have used this kind of analysis; because some of these interesting facts always came up to me which made it necessary to add into the study. One example is the code self confidence which was added under category knowledge as an important factor in forming professionals.

Sometimes several codes were developed under the same category and some category has sub-categories. For example, under category knowledge, I created sub-categories of academic, working and shared knowledge as they all describe the knowledge base which is the bigger

theme. This theme is also correlated to the theory concept knowledge which derives from using directed content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) in directed content analysis, categories are theory based and their purpose is to affirm or elaborate some theoretical frame or theory. Existing theory or earlier research may facilitate the focus of research questions (ibid). In this case professionalism theory has helped me to make interview guide questions and the research questions in a way by knowing what to ask from interviewees and to have some expectancy already in the field how to later analyse the statements. Existing theory has also been the guidance in seeing the relations between codes that could make these categories. In deductive based content analysis a category has been in front and then codes had been made (ibid). It is more of top down analysis and results from directed content analysis whether support or not evidence to theory, noted by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Mayring (2000) describes this approach as deductive category application. I have used both deductive and inductive based content analysis.

4.5 Validity, reliability

Normally, in qualitative research concept of validity is not common to use as it is in quantitative studies, however it is essential to create trustworthy and quality in results (Golafshani, 2003). Validity in this study was created by building a trust between respondents as HR professionals themselves suggested places for interviews. I believe this has given HRBPs freedom to decide on where they want to talk about their role and made them comfortable to speak in a self-picked harmonized atmosphere. In this study, case study aspects were followed by giving the overview of the situation in two companies and comparing two cases with interviews. Besides, I had made some pre-studies in the field with one observation day and with one pilot interview to create the understanding of the field. Using different sources increases the validity of the study, stated by Yin (2003). Then making interview questions I also used theoretical framework as a guidance, which appointed to Yin (2003) again, increases the validity of the research. I have also made notes and self reflections on the field which has enabled me to present detailed and rich findings, indicated by Creswell (2003). In the empirical analysis clear rules were followed on how to analyse text which makes it possible for another researcher to come to the same coding scheme. Besides, all the material was recorded and transcribed and it is possible to be reviewed.

4.6 Ethics

The names of the companies have been changed and given pseudonyms in order to keep them confidential. The principle of voluntary participation was followed. All the informants who did not have time or did not want to be involved in the study could refuse and were not forced to participate in the research. Names of the interviewees are kept anonymous throughout the study in order to avoid the risk of revealing them and to protect their rights. Therefore, respondents are stated as HRBPs: some referred as local, some senior. But none of the business departments are disclosed.

5. Results

In the following section empirical findings from the interviews carried out in the companies are presented. Extracts from interview transcriptions illustrate the views of HRBPs in the case companies. The first section before and after Transformation and understanding of HRBP role aim to answer to the main research question; parts of knowledge, trust, power and adding value respond to the first and third sub-research question. Furthermore, the last section workload focuses on replying to the second sub-research question.

5.1 Before and after Transformation

In Combi company role of HR business partners existed before the HR Transformation in 2006. By that time the role was called HR Business Officer (HRBO). From the change in 2007, HRBP role focused more on the future and strategic work and the responsibility area was quite narrow at the time. This meant creating different roles to support HRBPs in administrative work: there existed recruitment for blue and white collars; help from Compensation and Benefits and Labour Affairs. However, in 2008 due to the economical crisis resizing took place at the company and these support functions were removed. This meant for HRBPs to be driven back to old forms of working. Year 2009 was described as a quiet year, where not much happened (no recruitments, no retention) and people were holding their positions. Neither did the company make profit. In 2010, company shifted to new ownership and CEO with new prerequisites to take forward the company. Due to high turnaround in one of the business units (people moving internally to different positions and making a career path), a lot of HRBPs were stuck working with salary settings and that has created a need to split the role back to the previous set-up: split HRBP and HRBO (but not in all business units) with officers concentrating and supporting with operative tasks, like salary setting and recruitment.

The company Techno made the HR transformation 10 years ago and in the first years they struggled to get the Shared Service Model working, especially in a sense, whom line managers should return to with what kind of questions. Before supporting HR functions, like compensation, benefits and recruitment, were operating next to every single line organization. Compared to Combi, Techno did not have HRBO positions, however they had something called as HR generalist or HR manager which had similar, but broader function in the line organization. After the HR transformation HR functions were centralized and now administrative help is given by Central HR and basic questions about salary settings or vacations are asked from Shared Service. This facilitates the work and functioning support enabling HRBPs to concentrate on more strategic questions. Currently, HRBPs are the only ones working in the line, by being occupied with strategic rather than with administrative tasks. Hence, some of the senior HRBPs besides supporting the business line, have a responsibility to manage HRBP group and to make global HR processes, e.g. talent management programme.

5.2 Understanding HRBP role

In this section, the most commonly mentioned parts of understanding HRBP role are reflected by HR specialists. It is related to if and how professionals are established and what do they do.

In Combi, HRBPs relate the role to supporting the business to be efficient, but sometimes it is just reflected as things “we must do”, but in reality this stays on an idea level. Other part is to translate the business needs into HR. Besides, they mention coaching the managers in different cases (like discussing employee’s low performance, rehabilitation cases) and change management, moreover being present in the managerial meetings is important. Sometimes management team needs to be influenced with HR thinking, to stick out from technical language. They also relate their role to help the business be strategic and connect it to the culture and to the HR strategies; however what they do is only support, keeping aside the strategic part. Mostly it is based on the business needs, but sometimes even local managers’ needs, stated by one of the HRBPs in Combi.

I see it was to be more strategic Business Partner and not the support function, more helping the business unit to be more strategic in HR related issues, but of course it is based on their needs. (HRBP, Combi)

Compared to Combi in Techno HRBP role is related to being committed in actively thinking with line managers. Commonalities are found between companies, because Techno also work with the management team to bring in the HR perspective into discussions and push and argue for various choices. Respondents in Techno reflect it as a role to influence and drive HR processes in order to get the best results out in the organization. In other times it varies just to simplify processes, e.g. in competence areas, and give managers the understanding of it, as they need the HR mindset:

...you have to sort of translate questions to try to move in the sort of HR dimension into those questions. Because they do not need one more technical person, they need someone with different mindset. (senior HRBP, Techno)

Claims of administrative work cannot be overcome in Combi, however business partners want to be more focused on strategies and to bring in the HR voice in the management team to change things.

We have to do a lot of administrative part, but what I really need to focus on is our management team, strategies and how and what I can give to the organization from an HR perspective that makes a difference. (HRBP, core Combi)

In Techno they also realize that the HRBP role covers administrative work, however compared to Combi, instead of wishing the role be more strategic, Techno has the base to make a difference in translating strategies, by bringing in the knowledge with HR ideas.

I see my role in two different parts: one part is to do the simplest things, get all the HR processes right. The other part of my role is to translate the strategies of business unit into something that is within my area of expertise. (HRBP, Techno)

In Combi sometimes people prefer to make the distinction between HRBO and HRBP role, the first one is more into daily business and solving questions in hand (e.g. salary settings, recruitment and competence questions based on the needs of individuals). The second one is more general looking into long term perspective, planning the resources and making the strategies based on how they want the organization to appear in the long run, e.g. in 2015. Therefore, Combi more reflects on how they desire the HRBP role to be. These perspectives in Techno were not mentioned during the interview. One of the respondents in Techno summarizes the HRBP role as part of the strategic role in the management team to support managers leading the business and sometimes help in operative questions.

That is the plan, if you are HRBP sitting in the line organization you should be focusing on more strategic questions. Help managers sort of drive the business. Of course since you are a visible in the line, sometimes you get questions of more operative nature as well. (senior HRBP, Techno)

5.2.1 Differences in HRBP roles

This part HRBPs reflect on their every day work which means to be present in the managerial meetings. Besides understanding the needs of managers and where the business currently stands. In Combi some difficulties arise in operating as HRBP as the role keeper does not follow the content of the meetings and cannot bring in the HR voice. By colleagues this kind

of behaviour is not accepted and brings up concerns if the human capital of the company can become a strategic partner.

In a few cases I speak to a colleague, and she doesn't understand what they speak about in the meeting and for me we will never be able to be business partner, if we do not understand what they talk about. (HRBP, Combi)

In contrast to Techno, where HR specialist feel confident being part of the management team and has the confidence to speak out. Ways of performing differ among HR colleagues, but the essence of being present is most important part in daily work.

I am part of the leadership team. I would say that it might probably differ between me and another colleague HRBP in how you prefer to operate... I have the buy in. (HRBP, Techno)

Forwarding the discussion of sitting in the management boardroom, it is not just about to be there, but to have the active voice. Respondents in Combi express themselves only as observes in the setting of the long term plans, which is huge difference between Techno and Combi.

I am involved in and perhaps to some extent a silent listener in many discussions connected to the long term ambition of business unit. (HRBP, Combi)

In contrast to Combi, in Techno being effective HRBP in the management team is to look outside HR perspective and take part in the discussions for the improvement of the company. Then managers perceive a partner strong, autonomous and independence is given to the HRBP. This is part of the knowledge to be active and to see perspectives out of the HR area which comes over years of working.

I don't know if they see me only as HR. I don't think so. Because they think that I am also perceived as a person who can contribute to the better of the organization, not only as HR, I could question anything. And that is very good role to have, because then you could go to any discussion... That mandate comes by experience and with time. (HRBP, Techno)

Compared to Techno only few HRBPs in Combi are strong enough to show the business acumen. Work between driving the processes and supporting the local business needs is divided into 50-50. On one hand they show their excellence and knowledge, and other part is to align to customers requests.

Some things we are really drivers in making the business successful. And then there are the few other things that should really be added from the line what they think is the most important as customers. So one part is from us the Expertise and we are challenging and we are supporting what is important for the unit. (HRBP, Combi)

5.3 Workload

In this section the workload of HRBPs and the strategic and operative work with some of the problems headlined is presented. In the last subheading the borders of work – called jurisdictions is reflected upon. Much of the workload is determined by the amount of people to manage (managers, employees, other HRBPs), some present here in the Swedish local market, others in global, present in different countries. In order to show how many employees and managers one HRBP is responsible for supporting, a table summarizes this (see Appendix 2). This model shows company and unit differences among respondents. On average HRBPs work with more than 200 employees and have at least 20 managers whom they support daily. Besides, working with blue collars (case of Combi and Techno local units) involves more

daily tasks; like rehabilitation, performance cases. Compared to working with white collars, blue collars competence levels and processes differ and HRBPs have to modify these processes. However, working with more than one country (case of Techno and core Combi) requires a holistic perspective of the business and therefore the tasks relate more to strategic work.

Resource problems are mostly reflected by respondents in both case companies, by having too many employees and managers to handle for one HRBP to work strategic, especially blue collars issues which have another dimension of concentration. Local HRBPs in two case companies are not satisfied having one HRBP to manage over 500 employees. In Combi they even mention it can be a hinder to work strategically.

I fully understand that is not easy to work strategic due to workload, managing so many people with no help from the systems etc. (local HRBP, Combi)

Transformation is the good way of thinking, but we are too lean. It is not optimal to be 500 employees per HRBP. (local HRBP, Techno)

Next two sections entail understanding of empirical concepts strategic and operative in relation to work.

5.3.1 Strategic work

All respondents reflect strategic work as a way of thinking in long term perspective and the needs of the organization. These decisions are happening in the management team. It is well exemplified in the following statements by Combi and Techno, where in Combi strategic work is based on the needs which are more related to demands of the organization has now and in the future, but not in the global sense. However, in Techno, one of the HRBPs mentions that work is driven by the needs of the company and the wanted position in the market which must be in the horizon in everything they do. Besides, think what impact actions could have globally and to understand the main competitors and happenings on the market.

A lot of strategic work is done in the management team discussions. You have to know what the customer and the organization do and what are the demands in your organization. (HRBP, Combi)

If we make decisions, it is also about the global context and it lets impact on different countries and would it work there as well. Think one step ahead and think further down the road, instead of just thinking and isolating it to specific topic or unit at what we are working today. (HRBP, Techno)

Strategic work is also related to influencing the business and being proactive. It involves a lot of meetings and planning (e.g. talent management, set competence base etc.) and preparation for it (to make analysis of statistics). More of the culture and change management questions are stated by HRBPs in core Combi and in Techno, but not on the local level. Whatever done, must have a positive effect on the business and therefore business partners always need to have the “thinking frame” of what could be improved here. For managers it also plays a crucial role to have someone with other mindset than engineering or technical skills. Respondents in two companies understand it in similar ways. Differences inside Combi lay on which kind of business unit (the size and what kind of managers) practitioners really work with. Due to that one’s working closer to senior managers, work is derived as more strategic, however in the sections management it is more of people management and operational work.

5.3.2 Operative work

Interviewees in the companies understand operative work as the basic work that needs to be done. Respondents in Techno state operative as here and now issues that have no long term affect, all say that work is done by solving conflicts between people or daily problems (e.g. rehabilitations cases).

Communal ground in operative work in two companies is related to HR processes (e.g. salary settings, recruitment) and discussions with unions. At the moment of carrying out interviews a lot of salary settings were on the agenda. In Techno the administrative questions of line managers are solved by HR Service Center, however in Combi responsibility lies on HRBPs. For example, they find it easier to discuss about what they do than thinking of higher perspectives, like talking about strategic activities.

Operative is everything I do. It is easier to talk about strategic part what am I doing. (HRBP, Combi)

Despite the business partners being part of the leadership team, the role still maintains operative (employee questions, the so-called HRBO part) and strategic work (adding value and visions of the company), stated by one HRBP in Techno.

Even if you are sitting in the executive management team, you need someone to get employed or make a salary. So no matter where you are, you have both of these roles. (HRBP, Techno)

5.3.3 Some problems in strategic and operative work

In addition to strategic and operative work, it is important to bring out some of the hindrances in their work which better explain claims or the becoming way to professionalization. One of the mentioned problems reflected by all of the respondents is time of doing these tasks, because there is a lot of daily operative work HRBPs are involved with. One of the respondents in Techno, comments on the importance to balance those tasks by being structured and prioritized in order to find more time for strategic work. In Combi, one of the respondents mentioned the difficulty to influence and lead. Besides, few HRBPs working in Combi state that there is a competence gap which needs to be solved by giving out more trainings. Moreover, respondents in local and core business units in Combi refer to that they require tools and systems to facilitate some of the ad hoc based work. However in Techno these issues are not noted, which means that compared to Combi they do not have any problems with competence.

5.3.4 Jurisdictions

Boundaries of work (in other words jurisdictions) in companies are determined by in which boundaries, be it international or national, practitioners perform. Combi is characterized as being active in the local Sweden market, and expanding to global market, however Techno is part of a global market. Remarkably this factor is reflected on how HRBPs present themselves and whom they work with. In Techno, interviewed HRBPs are usually responsible in HR questions in local Sweden market, plus being responsible in 3 to 4 markets around the world. Their duty is to manage local HRBPs in these international markets, to cooperate together and report changes, etc. In Combi, especially in corporate staffs HRBPs hold equivalent role to Techno, as their business unit is located in several markets outside Sweden. They also play magnificent role in international management teams by being in charge of HR in specific organization units. However, in local units in Combi HRBPs are in charge of local business questions/problems to solve, and work does not involve cooperation with units outside Sweden (with few exceptions, as organization is growing and some units in that business unit own sites in other countries).

Sometimes HRBPs run some projects together to support each other in tasks and to save time. Best experience is given from the fields one has worked before and at times divide the work. These are kinds of sharing information sessions to work together with processes in a common way and use the best practices. This is common in Combi, as practitioners sit location wisely close to each other, and not common in Techno and Combi core sites, as usually HRBP sits alone in the whole office area.

5.4 Adding value

Adding value plays a key role in meeting the business objectives successfully over time and to fulfil the strategic ambitions of managers. The core of it is the ability to see business from personnel perspective and bring it into the meetings. Besides, it is relevant to challenge the mindset of line managers, which was stated by both case companies. Compared to previous times, practitioners mention not only to concentrate on HR area: salary setting, but to see the holistic view, how to make improvements all the time – long term planning, strategic work. However, everyday HR processes, e.g. recruitment, are not seen as value adding activities to the business. Besides, sometimes HRBPs in Combi in contrast to Techno coach managers in order to support managers to boost their self confidence in their role. Here they bring up different ideas and approaches in the high managerial meetings which can affect the business in order to be a good leader in general. Sometimes it involves coordination of tasks, and letting the things to be under control and to contribute in deliveries.

It's a lot of this coordination really. It's like the oil in the system. (HRBP, Combi)

Adding value is very much related back to the competencies and the attainment of being involved in various parts of the organization, in a sort of sense, knowing the way around. This was stated in both companies. One of the respondents in Techno, describes it as having the networks of knowing the right people, being there listening to the managers and having the overview of the business needs.

I think I add value as I have been working in some many different organizations at Techno and I have the networks...It is always crucial to be there for the leaders and to be very good in listening and to have the very broad understanding of the business needs. (senior HRBP, Techno)

Besides, adding value is to bring in the right arguments in the management team at place, influence decision making and to bring in the understanding level of the business and its needs. Here, Combi and Techno have similar understandings of the essence of it.

It is my ability to be part of that discussion and to actually influence. Many of the goals are those connected to HR and competence, that at the moment I feel very much as HRBP. (HRBP, Techno)

Right now I am very proud of HRBP work in that sense. That is precisely my own interpretation of being a business partner, see what the business needs and this is the opportunity and we need to do it. And I can argue in a way that makes the business understand that ok we need to evaluate this. (HRBP, Combi)

5.5 How does knowledge matter?

First of the interview questions asked from respondents were related to their background of academic education and practicalities, like how many years have they worked in the company and hold the roles in the company. Knowledge is one of the aspects which form professionals and later on in the discussion it is related to competence levels.

5.5.1 Academic knowledge

Most of the respondents hold a formal higher education from human resource field, some of them focused on organization and work, some on psychology, some have background in business administration. Few of the respondents however have not graduated and some have changed their careers coming from other fields and positions than HR. Although to gain the second profession, HR courses were followed. Therefore, certificate of education is important, as stated by one of the respondents:

So I think if you say you are a professional in something, usually it is underlying that you have kind of exam in that area. (HRBP, Combi)

5.5.2 Working knowledge

Interviewed HRBPs have worked more than 10 years under the same company. Some have kept business partnering role during the whole period of working time in the same company and at the same unit for at least 10 years. Some have changed business units during the time, but not the HRBP role. Others have changed their background from one field to another and few have been sitting in different HR roles (e.g. in central HR working as a specialist). Diverse working expertise has given broad knowledge base of organization. In both companies HRBPs mentioned working in central HR roles which has given good internal networks of having many colleagues whom one turns for support in order to solve issues. Even knowing the organization after being part of the firm gives advantage to be updated with information and makes it easy to find people who know the answers.

In roughly 5 years, I have had lot of contact with Central staff organizations. Meaning that I have quite good network and which I today use as HRBP then I need guiding or coaching or help with policy or interpretations. (HRBP, Combi)

Being so many years in the organization and working in central HR and working with leadership, you have a very good network and that means I have learned whom and where to call when I need help. (HRBP, Techno)

This knowledge about different roles in HR has also helped them to understand perspectives in working close to the line to conceive customers; and in central roles the views get narrow-minded to HR focus only.

5.5.3 Shared knowledge

A part of shared knowledge is perceived then sharing ideas and having some group meetings to discuss critical issues at the time and support each other to find common ways to operate. Although this shared knowledge is more seen on local level, for example at Combi, and due to physical closeness, as HRBPs sit close to each other. But no matter the location, the need for sharing the knowledge is present to brainstorm and get new ideas.

I think we need each other to discuss ideas and to have someone to create new ideas. (HRBP core, Combi)

Combi (both in local and core units which were part of this study) in contrast to Techno has recently implemented group meeting sessions among HRBPs which increase the knowledge sharing possibilities and legitimacy of group professionalization.

My guess is that this meeting is one of the places where we could have increase of professionalism, definitely. (HRBP, Combi)

Even Techno, has once in a while meetings with HRBPs and sometimes they run some projects together to drive and share the knowledge, but not regular group meetings.

Part of the shared knowledge is also networking both externally and internally which both of the companies actively use to communicate with other companies. It is an opportunity to gain best practices and the knowledge to drive processes. Besides, to meet colleagues from the same level position, who for example can be some of the course colleagues from university. Some HRBPs from Techno and Combi even take part of mentoring the students studying at the university to be updated with latest theories and to coach young professionals.

5.5.4 Developing personality

Not only is the academic knowledge and years in the organization important, but also some personal characteristics, like self-confidence which must be maintained and built by HRBPs. One way of doing it is to train oneself, like in Techno case to reinforce competence which even HR team need to boost.

I have always had with me a very good self-confidence. I think it is important that HR community in general strengthen their self confidence and stand up for the competence we have. (HRBP, Techno)

Other way is to work and have the traits of being a consultant than just being an internal employee, mentioned by Combi. It takes some time to get accustomed to be more like an external partner among HR humble community as HR in Combi does not have the mindset to change, yet.

It is a question of your personality and what you think you can do. So that is something that I have discussed with my HRBP colleagues, that maybe we should be more of like the consultants coming in with a lot of self confidence... but I think HR people are not so used to be doing like that. (HRBP, Combi)

5.6 Is trust important?

Trust is another aspect of forming professionals which is important especially in the relationships and cooperation between practitioners and managers. It is much related to receiving the respect for HR as a function by line managers which Combi HRBPs have established well in their opinion.

I think managers have a good respect for HR as a function. It is a good dialogue between line manager and HR in my experience. Well I mean they have respect for HR as a function. (HRBP, Combi)

In contrast, HRBP in Techno take trust relations further by explaining it with the knowledge base to know sufficiently enough about business contexts and the key stakeholders in order to engage oneself in managerial discussions. Therefore, it is not just being present in the meetings, but to offer innovative, integrated HR solutions to business problems to meet the objectives of the business unit. In that sense they have the voice and respect is earned.

I am very integrated part in the management team. We are the ones they turn to when they have issues. I think we have a good reputation and I think they turn to us for aid or consultancy or support or coaching and there are lot of areas. But the relation is based on my ability to actually respond in added value way. Our ability or opportunity to be an HRBP is good. It is a matter for them to be taken to the same strategic opportunity which they today have...We have the voice and they listen. We have trust. (HRBP, Techno)

Trust is built by delivering what promised and prioritizing the most important activities that needs to be transmitted immediately, mentioned in Combi.

To gain trust I need to focus on right things and prioritization, not pushing further the initiatives at the same time but what is most important to be delivered now. (HRBP, Combi)

However, in Techno, it is understood with competence and reliability to deliver what they know the best and then get awarded by trust.

Trust is built by competence. If I contribute with what I am good at and give other people insights into area there they don't know as much as I know, I get the trust. For me it is about competence and accountability. (HRBP, Techno)

5.7 How much power do they have?

Central theme in forming professionals is related to power and taking place in the arena. Power comes with seniority of holding a position for many years and in taking the mandate to lead in being fully responsible for HR structure and the practicalities of HR in the line management team. Most of the final decision making is done by managers, however along the process HRBPs play a crucial role in helping to understand different ways to solve issues and think in another perspective. This coaching role is well-exemplified in the following statement:

I can give manager ideas on how to handle certain things, but can't tell them what to do. But I can give them choices and then it is up to them on how they want to act or handle this. For us we are a partner in coaching in a way on how they can think and you could do this and that. It's up to them. A decision which they can own. But we give them ideas. (HRBP, Combi)

5.7.1 Decision-making

Autonomous of the HR role is reflected by leaving the doors open for local managers to decide. Supporting and facilitating aspects are mentioned here. It is kind of a political game and influencing role to find the best solutions for the organization, reflected by HRBP in Techno who is the daring thinking performer with the manager providing options on what decision to make.

The role HR, it is not a threatening role, meaning if I think something, you don't have to do what I say. I can just still think and reflect together with you. You as a manager will decide on how you would like to do it. Some things will be important and I don't think you should go through this and then they won't do it. (HRBP, Techno)

However in Combi, not a complete authority is given to HR, although this power can be taken in time with building relations, competence and connection to adding value.

In reality I have few authorities and my ability to succeed in my work is based on the relations, and the competence and the ability to add value to their daily or strategic operations. (HRBP, Combi)

Therefore, Techno seem to have more authority than Combi in a way how reflections were made. In addition freedom of the role is given by not having direct hierarchical relationships with the manager HRBPs works with. Usually HRBP's manager is someone from HR team. This enables to take away barriers from the line management team for a business partner to say something inappropriate. It gives opportunities to be open and freely express opinions. Besides, it yields independence in the role.

However, this freedom is not completely owned by them, as operational manager or the top management team determines what the HRBP should work with and what kind of (strategic) approaches the company should have. In Combi, respondents revealed that sometimes lack of strategic issues on table hinders to think and work in strategic ways. In Techno, this problem does not seem to be on the concern.

5.7.2 Individualism

HRBP professional is very much related to the person's strengths and likes, so the person itself creates the HRBP role the way they want to. Besides, the job description is written very generally, so it leaves a lot of space for the HRBP to decide itself how the role should look like and what they should do, reflected by Techno and Combi senior HRBPs.

It has been the combination how I am and what kind of competence I have and also that have been working with managers and they expect me to be fully involved...I mean it is all about the individual and how I want to work and how managers surrounding me expect me to work. (senior HRBP, Techno)

However, in Combi not always all HRBPs take the mandate to decide new ways of working, but rather stick to old ways of completing the tasks.

We could maybe be doing theses different things over time but we are not so advanced in HR, you stick to your thing you are doing. (HRBP, Combi)

6. Discussion

The main purpose of this report is to better understand and explore whether and how HRBPs have become professionals after the HR Transformation. It is seen as how they position as new professionals on the market and to explore their understandings of daily work in order to describe what creates HRBP professionals. First part of the discussion explains professionals from the practical perspectives as these two sections are discussed with findings of early research and the last two sections are reviewed with theoretical interpretation of professionals, using professionalism theories.

6.1 Becoming professionals

Addressing the main research question, if they are professionals, from Techno it can be clearly seen that after 10 years of HR Transformation, the professionals have been established. It is explained by the competence held and having a strategic perspective looking away from traditional delivery set, claimed by Brockway (2007). They have become effective partners and role expectations are clearly followed by the line of activities and developments asked from line managers and business (Lawler and Mohrmann, 2003; Wright et al., 1998) following professional logic (Farndale et al., 2009). In addition, the Shared Service Model (SSM) does not cause hindrance in the strategic work nor confusions in the role what to prioritize first and perform (Holley, 2009). SSM rather facilitates, as most administrative questions are directed to Shared Service and operative tasks, like salary settings and recruitment processes, are guided by Central HR. This can also be determined that the roles are described quite clear and are understandable for HR professionals. Following Kates (2006), Techno has found an organization design which creates effective HRBPs and they seem to have the right balance between operative and business initiatives followed by the line.

However, in Combi, not all the HRBPs can be described as professionals as they have not reached the strategic role to have the business mindset, which may be lacking from managers as there is a lack of strategic issues on the table. This is explained by being stuck in

administrative questions. It can also be determined by the HR transformation not reaching so far after 5 years due to different changes and reorganization in the company. Other reason is because of the misunderstanding of the role within business or the lack of senior management support (Kenton and Moody, 2003) which gives many challenges to the HRBP role. Besides due to lack of training and strategy to build up a new and/or right skill set (Beer, 1997; Brockway, 2007; Harrison, 2011; Crouse et al., 2011; Wright et al., 1998), which is mentioned by business partners as a competence gap that needs to be overcome in order to become a strategic partner. That is also one of the challenges in their role to dare to overcome old forms and thinking and act in a decisive manner. Moreover, the roles in Combi might need some clarification to define what exactly is expected from HRBPs. Belief of the split of HRBP and HRBO might be helpful and bring in lucidity of the roles in HR, but what effect it might have on line managers, is still unknown.

6.2 Strategic and operative work with adding value

To answer the first sub-research question, on what are the HRBPs working with, it is explained by looking how HRBPs talk about the role of HRBP, strategic and operative work and adding value. Hence, some of the problems are presented which may hindrance on a way to professionalization. Adding value was presented in the theory section as a part of professionalism by Gilmore and Williams (2007) and in earlier research by Ulrich and colleagues (2001, 2005), however in this section it is discussed in relation to practicalities of HRBPs' work. In analysis early research with parts of strategic and operative work, adding value and roles are used.

6.2.1 Adding value

HRBPs relate adding value to performance, like influencing to reach the goals of HR and competence, influence and argue for the choices which should be evaluated by line managers and the general support to managers, mentioned in understanding HRBP role. The aspect of arguing for choices could be related to as being critical in the mind and relates close to "thinking performer", stated by Gilmore and Williams (2007: 403). Although it is arguable, as how much business partners truly think of the environment they are performing. I would argue that business partners in both companies could be better "thinking performers" than they are currently, because not all of them relate adding value to a critical mindset, but originates from the idea of bringing in personnel perspective. Besides adding value is to coach managers (Ulrich and Beatty, 2001) to reach a better level of leadership and coordinate processes which would bring in profits (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). However, again, it is arguable to how much do the business partners consciously think of business objectives and shareholder value in presenting productivity reports (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Therefore, the concluding marks of adding value is that it is only partially bringing in commercial value add, and that the absence of understanding the ambiguity of role (Gilmore and Williams, 2007), stated in CIPD study, is still present, especially in Combi.

6.2.2 Strategic/operative work

HRBPs in both companies understand strategic work as a way to think long term in HR and business activities, although differences arise then they talk about the scope and landscape of "thinking frame". In Techno, HRBPs are working more with (senior) managers across countries and therefore their mindset is more related to global perspective and the weight of work is more transformational (Ulrich et al., 2009) varying within business units needs. Compared to Techno, in Combi company strategic work is determined by the needs of organization at present and not on a global level nor in a long years perspective. Therefore concluding, as similar to Muzio et al. (2011) the jurisdictions in Combi are more on a national market level and in Techno on the international level. Combi is also more complex in a sense

due to different competence levels of HRBPs and the needs of line managers work varies between transactional and transformational. Therefore, the business partners take the role of both Embedded HR and Operational Executor at Combi, and at Techno are more concluded as Embedded HR (Ulrich et al., 2009). Looking at Farndale et al. (2009) perspectives, HRBP role is more related to professional logic and not on the delivery logic, as the focus lies on the customer approach with the quality of services provided. Besides the strategic work in both companies is determined by the managers and employees HRBP has to manage. In local units of Combi and Techno, work is more of operative flavour, as the needs differ between blue and white collar demands. Furthermore, in a sense having too few resources of HRBPs to manage the mass; work in both companies is half of the time administrative in order to get the basis right (Ulrich et al., 2009).

Before turning to problems, a quick grasp on operational work is given. If strategic was related to being proactive and having the analytical skills (Beer, 1997; Wright et al., 1998) to think in the improvements of a company, then operative is more here and now issues, mentioned at both case companies. Communal is also to deal with HR processes and make salary reviews. However, then most of the administrative operations are facilitated in Techno, by the help of Shared Service, then in Combi it is the HRBP who has to fix it all. This was reflected by some of the HRBPs in Combi, as they find it easier to work operative which might be a cause of not having the mindset yet to think in a bigger scope or lack of competence (Kochan, 2004; CIPD, 2007; Beer, 1997; Wright et al., 1998; Rothwell and Arnold, 2005; Crouse et al., 2011). All in all, HRBP work involves both a strategic and operative nature of work.

Challenges and problems, as mentioned earlier, are related to resource issues as having too less HRBPs to manage the business units, reflected in both companies. Techno, relates it to a need to prioritize tasks effectively (Holley, 2009) what to spend time on. Some respondents in Combi, found it hard to influence all the time which again refers to competence gap. It can be useful to reduce the burdensome of operative work done, mentioned as well in Truss study (2008) to have the technical (information) systems in place (Lawler III and Mohrman, 2003) to free up time to think strategic. Other way to explain the problem is due to ineffective technology (CIPD, 2007).

6.3 Forming professionals

Answering the second sub-research question, how are HRBP professionals formed in the companies, is explained by using the concepts of professionalism mentioned earlier in the theory section: knowledge, trust, power. This section is theoretically raised, but some of the earlier research on HR as professionals and roles facilitate the understanding of the formation of professionals.

6.3.1 Knowledge use in a way towards professionalism

Professionals are formed by the knowledge. Following the line of knowledge, business partners are defined with higher education and with vocational training (Evetts, 2003). They all hold some kind of HR education through different courses or university degree followed. Not all the business partners have the HR background, as some have been working in line management field or in engineering, which does not hinder to work with HR. However, in years they have built the HR competence and combined two fields successfully together, which somehow is advantage in understanding the line and colleague HRBPs value this knowledge. It is combining the expertise of the line with HR (Lawler III and Mohrmann, 2003). Over the years of working in the organization, it has provided the credibility of partner to possess the understanding of organization and its functions; it is like they have required the

body of knowledge (Ulrich et al., 2009) and occupational closure (Muzio et al., 2011) of HRBP role to find effective ways to operate. Moreover, they have built credibility and developed relationships with other HR and line managers, which makes them to keep the identity as experts (McCracken and Heaton, 2010). Besides, they know the way around and whom to turn to solve difficult cases. Mobility in the position is very important to understand the customers and to know other HRs which is part of internal networking to facilitate their work and take away the burden of operative work by turning to colleagues to receive best practice. This is done in both companies, and reflection from respondents of Combi with having group meetings in place can increase their professionalism and continuing professional development to update informally and continuously learn in times of changing conditions (Rothwell and Arnold, 2005). With common expertise in teams they use it as a tool to find solutions to problems (Rolandsson and Oudhuis, 2009; Evetts 2003). Part of HRBP role besides knowledge is being present in managerial meetings to come in with personnel perspective, the so-called know how (Kessler, 1995), and speak the language towards interest of employees and employers. Both companies stated, managers do not need another member to talk the technical language, but a partner to come in with another mindset.

Most relevant competencies in place for HRBPs in both companies are actively being credible activist (Ulrich et al., 2009:107-110) by thinking of HR perspective then management team thinks of producing another product. Besides thinking what impact does this movement have on business then hiring the person to this position and to bring in the best competence in people. Besides operational executor competence is well derived in HRBPs in two case companies, as they deliver operative work well and know how to manage people and processes.

However, there are some of the competencies which need further training. Due to changed roles HR practitioners need more technical and organizational management skills (Crouse et al., 2011), so the continuous learning is important for the professional development (Rothwell and Arnold, 2005). Some specific patterns which should be considered to work on: for example, culture and change steward competence was partly reluctant. HRBPs in both companies do coach managers, but only HRBPs in Combi (core units) who are working with senior managers and senior HRBPs in Techno mentioned they facilitate change or develop disciplines to make it happen through being part in different projects. Therefore, HRBPs need improvement in gaining competence in implementation of strategy or to be drawn into these processes by top management. Besides both case companies could improve on competencies, presented by Ulrich et al. (2009: 107-119) by being business ally – in terms of to think more of social context there the business operates and to encourage being more strategy architect – to have visions how organization could perform better to gain market competitiveness. Some respondents in Combi do not pay attention to outer context of business by looking into market competitors and not think in global perspective. In addition, a final mark should be made to personal characteristics (Wright, 2008) to develop and increase their self-confidence (Rolandson and Oudhuis, 2009) to act similar to consultancy with superior influencing skills.

6.3.2 Trust matters

Professionals are formed by trust, and it is important in relations and by having the respect from managers and other colleagues. Trust is present in all professionals in case companies, as they are being listened and taken into account with ideas and offers. However, it is questionable if they all think out of the box in a bigger scope. If not, then it determines them as operative partners. However, the mark of line managers turning to HRBPs to discuss sensitive cases (e.g. rehabilitation, bad performance of employees) determine that establishment of trust is made (Gilmore and Williams, 2007) and that line managers have the

confidence (Rolandsson and Oudhuis, 2009) to share and discuss confidential cases with HR professionals. Sometimes HRBPs in Combi coach managers to raise their self-confidence or discuss their behaviour in a team, is a sign of trust relationship (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) and relevance in acting as a professional (McCracken and Heaton, 2010). However, there are differences among companies, trust in Combi is understood through activities in present context, but in Techno they think as well their competence and accountability in actions in a value adding way.

6.3.3 Claims of power

Professionals are formed by power which is a strong connotation. Whenever talking about professionalism, it raises the questions of status and control of work (Evetts 2003, Freidson 2001). Obviously HRBPs do not have the full power in the organizations in making decisions, however can as occupations control their work done, but the evaluation of the work performance leaves up to the managers to be decided. So in that sense, as stated by Freidson (2001) they do not fully have the measures to control to rate their performance of work. However, they can gain monopoly of status or power with their competence/knowledge provided (Larsson, 1977; Brockway, 2007) by influencing and coaching managers to make the decisions that seem right to take in both companies. Interestingly however, the professional position gives much of a freedom to decide the way to work and is much based on the individual's strengths and passion for the profession (Rothwell and Arnold, 2005) to continue with processes one feels good at, stated by HRBPs in Techno. Besides, in being more years active in the organization, gives the seniority status of no-one doubting in the correctness of HRBPs opinions brought out in the management team. All in all the power is legitimized first by the acceptance of line managers (Wright, 2008) and by the quality of competence and expertise brought in (Brockway, 2007) which also gives a status as "trusted advisor" (Pritchard, 2010; Wright, 2008).

Independence of HRBP role is driven by the fact that they do not report to the line managers, but to their own HR manager. This makes defining the power of HRBPs somehow difficult, as from one side they have the full control of their work as they can freely give out opinions without being afraid of losing status. But on the other side they are not the decision-makers in the management team, but more or less service givers by bringing in HR perspective to think of employees and the influence these decisions can have to the organization in general. So the shift away from focusing on employees (Francis and Keegan, 2006) is not present.

Determining how professionalism is created there exists two ways. Senior and HRBPs working in global business units at Techno or in core units at Combi, are defined as professionals created from within (McClelland (1990, referred in Evetts, 2005: 7-8)) as practitioners follow the HR activities from the strategy and can manipulate to bring in interest of their own which allows them to create good brand of their position and to be delighted with prestige. But it only comes with years of experience working in organization and creating good trustful relations with line managers (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Brockway, 2007). Reflected from the study, another reason why HRBPs in Techno and Combi core units are reflected power within is because they work close to senior management with managers who are part of executive team. This is because they have relative freedom to decide their work and guide managers. However, HRBPs working in local line in two case companies have been designed by the needs of managers. Therefore, they do not hold the mandate to decide the variety of work and are created professionals from within.

6.4 Forms of professionalism

Answering the second sub-research question, on what kind of professionalism has been created using theoretical framework of Evetts (2003, 2005) of organizational and occupational professionalism and corporate (similar to organizational) professionalization presented by Muzio et al. (2011). Evetts ideas are presented first and then Muzio and his colleagues.

From the results of empirical data, not a direct form of professionalism claim of Evetts (2003, 2005) can be made, whether HRBPs are more presented as occupational or organizational professionals. This is due to the fact as these are ideal forms presented. Mainly, it is argued that they act as organizational professionals and it is more applicable professionalism form in knowledge-based work. Firstly, the claim for it is, because discourse of control is created by managers, not by professionals themselves as HR Transformation was presented by the organization and defines the role of HRBP. Secondly, practitioners have few authorities and control over decision making in the sake of whole business, which is rather done by managers. However, practitioners can take some mandate by influencing managers. According to Evetts (2005) decision making is described as having hierarchy structure of authority set by the companies rather rational-legal than collective and the work done is quite standardized with set HR processes in place. Mainly in strategic and operative work we can see similarities in the case companies with the activities taken: being the facilitator and the supporter in processes, challenging the mindset of line managers, etc. However, somehow HRBPs act as occupational professionals in local Combi, especially after the recent change in two departments. Not all HRBPs are as individuals, although some still sitting alone in business units, but the shift in work practice by having group meetings has created collegial base for information and experience sharing, in a way created by shared education with the group association, stated by Evetts (2005). Moreover, other aspect arguing for occupational professionalism is the „practitioner trust by both clients and employees“ (Evetts, 2005: 10). Trust and control are created through knowledge. HRBPs show it by selling in their arguments and by understanding of the business and its need in correlation to the business objectives and goals. If trust is maintained, practitioners are rewarded by authority (Evetts, 2003; Kessler, 1995) to play strategic role in the management meetings and are truly listened.

Analysing professionalization from Muzio et al. (2011) perspective, frame of corporate professionals is used. Compared to Evetts (2003, 2005) this form is more applicable to HRBPs. First of all, base of knowledge is important which is created by the industry and is much based on practitioners' competence, discussed above as well. Just an abstract body of knowledge (mentioned also by Pritchard, 2010; Ulrich et al., 2009) like in old forms, is not enough. Secondly, their market and occupational closure is created by the organization practices, embracing HR processes which HRBPs feel closely related to and by providing the service to clients, managers. Legitimacy of HRBP professionals is determined as mentioned before with knowledge, but also by the adding value perspective and not just only the profits. Then it comes to belongingness, then HRBPs at Combi local and core units can be described as organizational and collegial; however HRBPs in Techno are described as individuals, by not having the group meetings and group deliveries. Moreover, the membership structure is rather complex with different levels, e.g. senior HRBPs control and manage other HRBPs located across organization. Besides, HRBPs are very closely engaged with clients as their managers and employer. They participate in the managerial meetings and coach and support customers daily. Instead of just reaching out to what managers want, they hold close relations and are engaged together. Lastly, explained also in previous section, jurisdictions (in other words borders of work and competence) of HRBPs are internationally based on the country perspectives, but in Combi local units national jurisdictions are more present as the focus is more on a Swedish local context.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis report was to explore if and how HR Business Partners have become professionals after the HR Transformation at two companies in the Swedish context. A case study with 15 interviews was performed in order to make comparisons of companies and to map HRBPs. Answers were analysed with theoretical and practical concepts of professionalization and with early research about strategic and operative work using inductive and deductive based content analysis. Research questions guided the line of the study. Main question was:

If and how have HRBPs become professionals after the HR transformation. Professionals with status and occupational closure are determined by the years of having the HR transformation in place. In Techno, with over 10 years after the launch of the HR Transformation has reached to a position where HRBPs have become professionals who are not stuck in administrative based work. The roles have been clearly defined and HRBPs work effectively by adding value. However, in Combi, with roughly 5 years of HR Transformation, HRBPs have not become fully professionals as roles are not defined clearly and partly because HRBPs are struggling with a lot of administrative work. Moreover, strategic role of HRBPs in Techno is facilitated by the clear use of HR SSM as Centers of Expertise and Service Center execute some of the administrative tasks which HRBPs in Combi are lacking at the moment.

Jurisdictions of the companies define the work they are doing. Mostly in local business units in Combi work is based on Swedish market needs and is affected by national than by the global level market. However, in core units in Combi and in Techno it is dependent on international level due to responsibility of line managers across borders. So there are “thinking frame” differences presented in case companies. Strategic work is more related to planning in long term and operative work to set the basics right (salary reviews, HR processes). Defining HRBPs, in local levels in Combi they are more acting as operational executors, but in the core level of Combi and in Techno as embedded HR (Ulrich et al., 2009). Adding value determines them as “thinking performers” by influencing and coaching managers. However, both companies could improve the critical mindset to think of business objectives and the shareholder value to increase profitability.

The way how HRBP professionals are formed is quite generic (see also Appendix 3). The aspect of power is created by decision makings and control by line managers (they also give the legitimacy), however professionals still have some mandate. For example Techno has higher influence level in management decisions which Combi could improve. Independence of the role is created by reporting to the HR manager and not to the line manager. However, differences in creating professionals depend on the position hold. Senior managers in Techno and Combi are created within and local line HRBPs from above. Meaning the more years one has worked in the organization the more power can be gained. Power is interconnected to trust. HR has a good reputation and is respected by the line managers. Trust is also to deliver what promised, which in Combi relates to daily based deliveries, but in Techno deliveries adding value determined by the competence of HR. Knowledge base is another important aspect of professionalism, defined by the HR education and years worked in the organizations which create setting of occupational closure. In Combi professionals share knowledge in group meetings which can increase their professionalism. Due to that membership in Combi is described collegial and they are physically located closer to each other. In Techno it is more individual based as HRBPs sit in distance in different business unit offices. Even if the knowledge is present among HRBPs, they still need to work with their competence, especially in Combi in order to overcome the competence gap.

Finally, the concluding mark of this study remarks that HRBPs are becoming professionals after the HR Transformation, but it depends much on the context of the company and the country perspective which they have been given jurisdictions. Therefore this mark determines HRBPs more as corporate professionals who are dependent in close engagement with managers. Their work is related to the business needs following the company practices and processes in international or national market by adding value.

7.1 Suggestions for the companies

Based from the discussion, I would like to present some suggestions for the companies. First of all, since the roles are not yet established in Combi, I recommend defining the HRBP roles clearly and set down the expectations from line managers. Therefore, role shall be set generic and business unit specific. In Techno roles are quite clear, but in both companies a clear job description within the company (business unit) context set by HR and line managers could facilitate the expectations. Secondly, since in Combi there are some competence gaps it is essential to give trainings to specialists in order to grow into strategic professionals. This is also useful for Techno when hiring new talent to revise competencies. For example companies could improve HRBP skills by being more active in culture and change management and driver in strategies. Nevertheless, it also makes sense to implement behaviour of consultants and raise self-esteem of HRBPs. Thirdly, I recommend to make more use of technological systems to manage the workforce. Besides presenting findings in large excel tables, alternative ways could be implemented by using innovative resource systems. Finally, to become stronger corporate professionals, companies can learn a lot from each other. I suggest for Combi to grow their jurisdictions into more international level expanding scope of mindset and Techno to practice group level meetings to make more use of internal competence.

7.2 Limitations of the study

One limitation of this research is the concluding mark that it examines only two case organizations to understand them in depth which makes the generalization of facts to a wider context not possible. However, drawn conclusions of this study are applicable to companies which have applied HR SSM and for other organizations in similar positions. I am aware of the fact that I have taken more interviews from Combi company and not so many from Techno company. In Combi, I could have had the opportunity to interview more people, but as the purpose of this study was to have a comparative character, it would not have made sense. Therefore, I added Techno to the study and picked all the HRBPs possible in the West Sweden region to take part in this study. Due to that no more respondents could have been found in Techno in this particular region as there are no more people working. Despite the inequality of interviews carried out in the case companies, the answers of interviewees were taken equally, in order not to imbalance the answers. Therefore, I claim the results from two companies by making comparisons between are evenly valid.

7.3 Suggestions for future studies

From limitations I have some suggestions for future studies. I recommend exploring other HR professionals with professionalism theories to determine how specialists are becoming professionals and how do organizations influence it. Some of the factors of HR SSM have been apparent in this study, and I would suggest looking further into the relations, communication and the division of work how to better manage the SSM in order to work effectively. In addition, how to create clear, not overly ambiguous roles in SSM? Interesting enough in the future research would be to examine the companies which have come to middle phase of HR Transformation (third to fifth year after launch) to measure the effectiveness of

the SSM model and what kind of barriers it creates and what needs to be implemented to overcome these challenges. Thence, I suggest for a future research to focus on one company perspective fully. Researchers could then interview other professionals of HR Shared Service: Centers of expertise and service centre administrators to find the ways of professionalization. One example, is to explore Combi further, because at the moment of writing, company was implementing HRBO and HRBP positions. It can be further analysed how it facilitates the work of HRBPs to work with more strategic focus.

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Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Background, experience

- What business unit are you working right now? How many years have you worked at this company? What education do you have?
- How many years have you worked as HRBP?
- What does HRBP term mean for you? What is HRBP? What is the goal of HRBP role? (job description as such)

HRBP and Transformation (Evolution)

Differences in what did before and after HR Transformation

- What did you work with before HR Transformation?
- What did/do you work with after HR Transformation?

Tasks

- Describe a typical working day! (*How are you working more long term, how with short term assignments?*)

Strategic

- In your everyday work, please describe when are you working strategic? What does it mean strategic?
- What are the strategic work issues?
- What enables you to work more strategic?
- *What strategies do you specifically do?*
- *How do you contribute here?*

Operative

- Describe when are you working operative?
- What are the operative work issues?

PROFESSIONALISM

Relations, value, trust, power

- Whom are you working with on daily basis?
- How do you work on daily basis in relations with others? How with line managers? How with Service Centre?
- What do the others think about your work?
- When do you get feedback from other members of org? What feedback get?

Associations

- Are you working with other HRBPs? How do you work with each other?
- Do you have any internal associations / groups of people working in the same area?

- If yes, what do you discuss there?
- Do you feel belonging to HRBP profession or some other belonging?
- Could you say/feel you are a HR business partner (professional) in your organization?

Trust

- Do you work with your colleagues to create trust? How do you create yourself as a trusted partner?
- How can you contribute trust in relations to line managers?
- How could you be a trusted partner to your clients - line managers, employees etc?

Value

- What is the value of your work? Some concrete examples.
- Is your work appreciated? What is and what is not? And why?

Adding value

- How other members appreciate your work? What does it mean adding value?
- When do you feel your work is adding more value?

Appendix 2 – Resources to manage

Legend:

C1 – company 1, Combi

C2 – company 2, Techno

P1 – person 1; P2 – person 2, etc.

Local, Core – the unit of company

	C1P1 Core	C1P2 Local	C1P3 Core	C1P4 Local	C1P5 Local	C1P6 Local	C1P7 Local	C1P8 Local	C1P9 Core	C1P10 Core
Managers	30	58	22	70	35-40	35-40	35-40	35-40	65	42
Employees	300	950	200	700	350	350	450	1000*	370	330
Consultants						200	350			
Countries**	1	1	several	1	1	1	2	1	several	3

Table 1. Combi

*Out of 1000, 350 white collars, 650 blue collars

**global organization to support

	C2P11	C2P12 Local	C2P13 Senior HRBP	C2P14	C2P15 Senior HRBP
Managers	60	60	20	50	14
Employees	850	1000***	5*	600	8****
Countries**	4	1	4	2	4

Table 2. Techno

**global organization to support

***Out of 1000, 600 white collars, 400 blue collars

****Amount of HRBPs to manage

Appendix 3 – Characteristics of HRBP professionals

This tables fetches conclusions on how specifically HRBPs become professionals.

Factors	Combi	Techno
Knowledge	HR education, years worked in the organization;	HR education, years worked in the organization
Competence	some gaps in competence	
Power (legitimacy)	Not fully	Not fully,
Decision making and control	By managers	By managers, although can influence a lot
Power created within	senior HRBPs	senior HRBPs
Power created above	local HRBPs	local HRBPs
Independence of role	Through HR manager	Through HR manager
Trust - relations with managers	Good HR has good reputation	Good HR has good reputation
Trust – deliver what promised	Deliveries are daily based	Deliveries add value, based on competence of HR
Adding value	“thinking performer”, influencing, need to increase critical mindset	“thinking performer”, influencing, need to increase critical mindset
Membership	Collegial (group meetings)	Individual
Jurisdictions	National, international	International

Table 3. Characteristics determining HRBP professionals