



“PLAYING BALL”:

How HR professionals respond to institutional complexity

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Abstract

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Purpose: This paper is positioned in the intensive strategic human resource management debate by paying attention to the daily practices of HR professionals. The aim of this cross-sectoral study is to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday work of HR professionals within the Swedish context, by exploring their responses to institutional complexity in practice. The following questions are addressed; What characterises the work performed by HR professionals? How do HR professionals respond to institutional complexity in their daily work?

Theory: Drawing on a version of institutional theory, the study explores how conflicting logics affect the daily work of HR professionals. Furthermore, enacted sensemaking in crisis provides an agency-based lens, allowing further investigation of HR professionals' responses to institutional complexity through everyday crisis management.

Methods: The study is based on a grounded theory approach with a cross-sectoral unit of analysis, including 22 interviews with HR professionals from different organisational contexts. Through application of a performativity perspective and discourse analysis the cross-sector narrative “playing ball” was found.

Results: The findings suggest that exposure to high institutional complexity is apparent in HR professionals' work with “cases”. Supporting managers with emergencies and building close relationships that enable collaboration in “cases” are important parts in the respondents' work.

The reactive work can be described through Weick's enacted sensemaking in crisis as everyday crisis management and has consequences for collegial collaboration. Additionally, HR professionals' daily work can be described through their responses to institutional complexity, "playing ball". By acknowledging the everyday work of HR professionals as crisis managers, accountable for organisation's response to conflicting logics, the study contributes to the existing literature of strategic human resource management. The study also offers practical implications by suggesting HR professionals to rely on their existing practices to increase crisis management capacity and legitimacy.

Foreword

We would like to thank our respondents, whose time and invaluable insights constitute the core of the study. Furthermore, we are grateful for our supervisor's academic expertise, patience and ability to guide us throughout the project by constantly challenging our thinking and improving the work. Additionally, we would like to express our appreciation to friends and family for their feedback and support.

1. Introduction

HR professionals as spiders in the social web have crossed global, digital and boardroom borders, guided by strategic human resource management (SHRM) ideals. The debate surrounding SHRM has engaged researchers and practitioners for the past three decades, with the purpose of “[...] ensuring that the organisation have the skilled, engaged, committed and well-motivated employees it needs to achieve sustained competitive advantage” (Armstrong, 2008, p. 31). However, the idea of transforming HR professionals into strategic business partners was presented already in the mid 1990s, as an attempt to leave an imprint on male-dominated boardrooms and increase legitimacy (Ulrich et al., 1995; Ulrich et al., 2008; Ulrich et al., 2013). The HR transformation has been suggested to add higher professional value (Ulrich et al., 1995), develop organisational human capital for competitive advantage (Sheehan, 2005), while strengthening legitimacy towards top management (Pohler & Wellness, 2014).

The turn towards HR as a strategic partner has had an impact on reorganisation of HRM functions (Boglund et al., 2021; Ulrich et al., 1995) and HR roles on a global scale (Lindeberg & Månson, 2017). Moreover, the idea of HR managers’ presence in boardrooms has especially influenced the HR work in Sweden and France (ibid.). One of the expectations following the strategic ideal is that as much operational work as possible should be handed to line managers, responsible for implementing HRM practices (Armstrong, 2008; Krulis-Randa, 1990). Such delegation has been suggested to free more time for strategic work and enable the shift to strategic business partners (Boglund et al., 2021; Ulrich, 1997). Some researchers claim that delegating responsibility to line managers will not efficiently support HRM functions in their hunt for increased status and influence (Torrington & Hall, 1996). The authors emphasise that the ideal of an integrated HR strategy could serve as inspiration for proactive thinking. At the same time, Torrington and Hall (1996), acknowledge that strategic ideals might not be a realistic plan. This argument is supported by Francis and Keegan (2006) who claim that a consequence of the human resource business partner (HRBP) model and the HR transformation is the disconnection between operational and strategic mindsets. Additionally, the authors acknowledge the dominant strategic rhetoric within HRM and highlight the risk of increased distance in relationships between HR and employees. The same strategic rhetoric is also recognised to have an influence on the relationship between line managers and HR (Boglund et al., 2021). This relationship is described as asymmetrical and personal with focus on individual competencies (ibid.).

Several scholars have taken a critical perspective in the debate, calling attention to the gap between HRM research and practice, the common misconceptions and various professional struggles (Gill, 2018, Mahadevan & Schmitz 2020; Timmerman, 2010). These studies are almost always drawn from the assumption that the transformation of HR organisation has been successfully adopted and that HR professionals now perform their roles as strategic partners. Despite being told they suffer from low self-esteem (Ulrich et al., 2013), are unaware (Gill, 2018) and lack the necessary skills (Lawler, 2007), HR professionals keep fighting for recognition, torn between operational and strategic tasks (Pohler & Willness, 2014; Wright, 2008). Unfortunately, increased focus on strategy and the employer relationship, was already in the mid 2000's described by Kochan (2004) as an explanation for the loss of legitimacy experienced by HR professionals. The author describes the future of HR professionals as challenging, with demands for network creation, analytical skills, knowledge-based working systems, and effective HR practices. Moreover, Kochan (2004) highlights the development of HR professionals' analytical abilities as necessary, claiming that HRBPs should be learning modern skills to stay relevant.

As a response to the call for development of the HR occupation through modernisation, some scholars have paid attention to the imitation of characteristics from other traditional disciplines such as doctors (Lewis et al., 2019; Pohler & Willness, 2014). Evidence Based HR (EBHR) is one example of an idea stemming from natural science and medicine (Bohlin & Sager, 2011; Rosenberg & Donald, 1995). HR analytics is another idea, closely linked to EBHR with roots in basic HR metrics, concerning staffing, compensation and retention among others (Bassi, 2011). Both concepts can be linked to Ulrich et al. (2013) through claims appealing to the body of knowledge and global data insights as replacement for (and solution to) the self-doubt within the HR profession. Emulating ideas with characteristics from other disciplines often attempt to appear as solutions to the legitimacy problem (Pohler & Willness, 2014). Unfortunately, HR professionals still suffer from legitimacy loss (Heizmann & Fox, 2019), despite frequent attempts at modernising through adopting new concepts.

While HR transformation can be seen as a symbol of HRM integration within organisational strategies, critics question HRM function's overall value addition, claiming that the profession is more fragmented as a result of such transformations (Boglind et al., 2021; Caldwell & Storey, 2007). This has led several scholars to investigate the implementation of HRM transformation and the consequences of changes in HR professionals' roles (Boglind et al., 2021; Caldwell,

2003; Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Keegan et al., 2018). The HR transformation implementation has been claimed by Keegan et al. (2018) to create ambiguity and role conflicts concerning execution of dual roles. The authors highlight the strategic versus operational dilemma of HR professionals and showcase how splitting focus between the ideal and reactive work can create a vicious cycle. Furthermore, the struggle with legitimising one's new role as HRBP's is captured by Heizmann and Fox (2019). The authors address the need for further research on how the redesign of HR work affects internal relationships and activities considered as legitimate. However, this empirical data is limited to one particular organisation and a specific change process (ibid.). Furthermore, Boglind et al. (2021) explore the implementation of HR transformation and its effects on HRM functions in Sweden, highlighting the connection between strategic ideals and a strong market logic through an institutional perspective. During a complementary study (2018-2019) Boglind and colleagues found that the HR transformation concept has lost its attractiveness and was described by their respondents as just another easily replaceable idea for organisational change. This indicates that the strategic HRM turn is not the solution to the legitimacy problem. Previous studies have addressed consequences from the strategic turn and highlighted HR professionals' continuous legitimacy struggles. However, there is an empirical gap in SHRM research concerning collectively shared practices that characterise the daily work performed by HR professionals on a cross-sectoral level.

A theoretical framework drawing upon institutional complexity (Lewis et al., 2019) offers an opportunity to understand the everyday work of HR professionals as exposed to conflicting institutional demands in their environment. This paper argues that HR professionals can resolve their legitimacy problem, not only by enacting a strategic role, responding to the market logic, but by engaging more fully in other logics in their everyday activities. Furthermore, the study offers empirical evidence for the claim that HR professionals, by focusing on everyday practices, can initiate a positive cycle that extends strategic HRM contribution. The aim of this cross-sectoral study is to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday work of HR professionals within the Swedish context, by exploring how they respond to institutional complexity in practice. Therefore, the paper addresses the following questions: *What characterises the work performed by HR professionals?* and *How do HR professionals respond to institutional complexity in their daily work?*

The paper is organised as follows. The theory section is built on the cornerstones of institutional theory and introduces the concept of enacted sensemaking as a way to understand

how actors may respond to institutional complexity. This is followed by the method section that offers an account of the study's context, respondents, data collection and analysis. The findings present the empirical story of the respondents' imagined work as strategic partners in contrast to the reality of responding to emergencies through "playing ball". Furthermore, the discussion provides answers to the research questions by applying the theoretical framework and placing the findings in the current body of knowledge. Lastly, suggestions for future research are put forward and the paper is concluded with the underlining contributions.

2. Institutional Complexity and Enacted Sensemaking

HR professionals have been identified as a typical example of an actor exposed to high institutional complexity (Lewis et al., 2019). Despite this, the framework of institutional logics is still underused and has not been applied to empirical work within the HR profession. Additionally, the concept constellations of institutional logics enable explorative studies of the relationship between institutional logics (Goodrick & Reay, 2011) and organisational response (Greenwood et al., 2011). The dynamic characteristic of the current neo-institutional framework, built on institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), allows for addressing agency and enactment in the sensemaking process (Lewis et al., 2019; Pache & Santos, 2013, Weick, 1988). In this study institutional logics are used for exploring HR professionals' exposure to institutional complexity in their daily work.

Embracing complexity of institutional logics

Institutional logics stems from current neo-institutionalism and has gained recent interest as a result of increased exposure among professionals to conflicting institutional logics and institutional complexity (Lewis et al., 2019). The concept was first introduced by Freidland and Alford (1991) and can be defined as "socially constructed historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804) and "guide the interpretation of organisational reality" (Thornton, 2004). Four ideal types of institutional logics have been suggested to affect professional work: corporate, state, market and profession (Goodrick & Reay, 2011). Firstly, corporate logic depicts work as embedded in organisational routines and contingent on administrative control in a hierarchy, where managers decide the structure and content of work (ibid.). Secondly, in the state logic, the government has responsibility for regulating employees

of the state, controlling professional knowledge, credentials and practices (ibid.). Thirdly, market logic conveys unregulated competition in the market and consumer behaviour, determining success (ibid.). Lastly, professional logic refers to the trusted knowledge used in daily practices, either independently or in partnership with other professionals within the profession (ibid.).

When placed within an institutionally complex environment, tension and opportunity creation arise for HR professionals (Lewis et al., 2019). Tension surfaces when HR professionals are presented with multiple applicable logics leading to different behaviours depending on the logic chosen. Opportunities arise as HR professionals have alternative choices of legitimisation provided by different logics (ibid.). Meijerink et al. (2021) suggests that HRM activities can be both the source and solution to institutional complexity. When an actor is confronted with institutional complexity, it is common to delay actions (Raaijmakers et al., 2015). In the space created, the actor evaluates what aspects could be ignored, what actions give the most reward and what aspects would be beneficial to delegitimize (D'Aunno et al., 1991; Greve & Man Zhang, 2017).

One stream of research criticising institutional complexity addresses the deterministic perspective by highlighting the actor within this environment and emphasises the role of agency through the term institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). However, institutional work does not acknowledge the relationship between actors' agency within an institution and coexisting macro-level expectations. Some scholars have attempted to outline the enactment of professionals exposed to institutional complexity and available choices when navigating in constellations of logics, in a hybrid organisation (Pache & Santos, 2013). Moreover, David (2017) emphasises the active roles of agents reproducing and constructing institutional logics by showing how strategies adopted by professionals can include elements of several ideal types of institutional logics. These ideal types of logics have been recently studied in relation to professional work concerning strategic contra operational roles (Høiland & Klemsdal, 2022). The authors found that strategic professional work corresponds to a different prioritisation of coexisting logics compared to operational work (ibid.).

Institutional logics have previously been described as coexisting or competing in professions such as medicine (Goodrick & Reay, 2011) and social work (Greenwood et al., 2011). Moreover, scholars have explored the consequences of institutional complexity on legitimacy loss and organisational failure (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Greenwood et al., 2011). However,

previous studies have simplified institutional complexity in relation to professional work, by either comparing two logics, applying few components of logics (Greenwood et al., 2011), or claiming a single logic as dominant (Martin et al., 2017). Lastly, studies of institutional logics and HRM have explored singular sectors or narrowed down to explore a specific practice (Bévort & Poufelt, 2015; Meijerink et al., 2021; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013).

The theoretical contribution of this study can be carved out in relation to the lack of cross-sectoral empirical results concerning HRM in Sweden. Acknowledging the criticism in regard to complimenting a deterministic framework with agency (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Martin et al., 2017), this study contributes to increased understanding of how HR professionals enact institutional complexity in their daily work. The combination of enacted sensemaking and institutional complexity provides an opportunity to build bridges between macro and micro-levels of social analysis by exploring mechanisms that influence micro-level actors (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Yngve, 2021). Additionally, the sensemaking process takes place before institutional work can be carried out, meaning that institutional complexity can be fruitfully combined with sensemaking theory to highlight the connection between meaning and practice (Weber & Glynn, 2006). This connection is important for understanding the practices that constitute the actors' responses to conflicting institutional logics (*ibid.*).

Successful crisis management through accurate sensemaking

The concept enacted sensemaking stems from early work by Weick (1988) and is concerned with how “people enact the environments which constrain them” (Weick, 1988, p. 305). Enactment is defined by the author as both a process and a product. Furthermore, enactment is important in relation to understanding organisational crises. Crisis is defined by Weick (1988, p. 305) as “low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organisation”. In this study the term crisis is stretched beyond its use to include events with high probability to occur in relation to daily HR work, while there is still a low probability that an exact copy of a particular event occurs again.

Sensemaking theory is an action-oriented agency-based theory (Weick et al., 2005), which plays an important role in settings where actors are engaged in actions that can “construct or limit later stages in an unfolding crisis” (Weick, 1988, p. 314). The author exemplifies these actions through verbs; control, cope, solve, try, and improvise among others. An accurate enacted sensemaking process is crucial for avoiding unnecessary escalation during a crisis (*ibid.*). To better understand what impacts the accuracy of the sensemaking process, Weick

(1988) proposes three key mechanisms that affect actions and its outcomes during crisis: commitment, capacity, and expectations.

Of the three mechanisms, commitment determines how likely it is that an actor becomes involved in a crisis (Weick, 1988). Actors are often uninterested, preferring to avoid engaging in a crisis if possible (*ibid.*). Irrevocable, permanent and volatile actions are explained by the author as a recipe for non-causal explanations, serving to protect what is at stake. These explanations, also called tenacious justifications, are “forces for good or evil in crisis” (Weick, 1988, p. 310). Tenacious justifications can either provide meaning during uncertain circumstances by clarifying the situation or produce blind spots (Weick, 1988). The second mechanism that determines success within crisis management is capacity (*ibid.*). An actor is more likely to engage in a crisis if they feel they have the capacity to do so (*ibid.*). Increased capacity can improve crisis management, resulting in favourable outcomes (*ibid.*). The capacity of actors is affected by institutional memory which serves to align previous experiences of similar crises to the current situation (*ibid.*). On one hand, institutional memory can be an asset if previous incidents are rich and varied, while on the other hand, few and overworked justifications from previous experiences can limit perception and impede the process (*ibid.*). Lastly, the mechanism expectations, can be described as the self-fulfilment of top management’s assumptions of organisations and how these assumptions influence the sensemaking process among organisational members (*ibid.*).

Accurate sensemaking in crisis management demands a nuanced overview of the situation to deeply understand and rationalise what people do in crisis (Weick, 1988; Weick et al., 2005). While accurate sensemaking contributes to beneficial crisis management and reduced stress among involved actors, reluctance to engage in crisis affects crisis management negatively, inhibiting understanding, feedback and learning (Weick, 1988). Weick (1988) argues that crisis is related to operator errors and cannot be fully eliminated since it is part of human nature. However, human errors can be managed and reduced by paying attention to triggering events that can escalate into crisis (*ibid.*).

Sensemaking theory has previously been applied in the Swedish healthcare sector (Skålnén et al., 2005) as well as in qualitative studies exploring change processes and sensemaking of middle managers (Kieran et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Podgorodnichenko et al. (2021) addresses HR professionals' enactment in relation to corporate social responsibility practices. However, there is a current gap in research applying enacted sensemaking to empirical studies of HR

professionals on a cross-sectoral level. Exploration of the cross-sectoral narrative enables for highlighting verbs suggesting that a sensemaking process is taking place. Describing HR professionals' work through enacted sensemaking in crisis differs from the theoretical perspective of agency in the form of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The combination of sensemaking and institutional logics highlights the professionals' agency on a micro-level as a response to conflicting logics on a macro-level. By focusing on the relationship between professional practice and coexistent expectations from institutional logics, the framework allows for exploring HR professionals sensemaking of available courses of action before recommending solutions to line managers. Drawing on the call for future research regarding how HR professionals respond to institutional complexity, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge, by exploring the daily work of HR professionals through their enacted sensemaking of conflicting logics.

3. Method

In this study, HR professionals in the roles of HRBPs, HR-generalists or HR-specialists with similar characteristics as line manager support, form the unit of analysis. The study explores the typical case of HR professionals' daily work through a performativity lens, with particular interest in the HR professionals' words as actions (Austin, 1962, as cited in Diedrich et al., 2013). A qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews allowed for conversations with participants capturing the narrative used for describing their work. The interviews were conducted in the respondent's native language (Swedish) and quotations presented in findings were translated to English. An empirically grounded cross-sectoral narrative complements the existing research within the SHRM debate by providing empirical insights in relation to the daily work performed by HR professionals, instead of focusing on a specific organisation, project or implementation.

Research context

The empirical data consists of qualitative, semi-structured interviews gathered from a cross-sectoral setting of private, public, and nongovernmental organisations operating from western Sweden. Out of 19 interviews with unique respondents, two males were excluded as one interview recording could not be recovered and the other respondent's role did not match the unit of analysis, leaving data from 17 respondents presented in findings. In total, 22 interviews were conducted, including five follow up interviews. This cross-sectoral study includes

respondents spread across 11 different organisational contexts, increasing the transferability and internal validity of the results (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Table 1 shows the number of participants from each organisation present in the study.

Table 1

Number of participants allocated by sector

	Private sector	Public sector	Nongovernmental
Number of organisations	6	4	1
Number of unique respondents	7	9	1

The private sector consists of two larger organisations with more than 1000 employees and four smaller organisations with 150 - 350 employees. The industries represented include finance (2 organisations), automotive, fashion, logistics and shipping. The workforce size has a natural impact on the number of HR professionals working within the organisation. While all private organisations consist of several HR professionals, larger organisations have more room for HR professionals working closer to the business. Additionally, larger organisations have the capacity for strategic HR-specialists whereas smaller organisations often have a centralised function with HR professionals serving both purposes.

The public sector organisations consist of two municipalities and two governmental organisations. Despite differences in size of the municipalities, the HR functions are organised similarly with decentralised HR departments close to line managers, along with a centralised expert function with HR-specialists. The governmental organisations differ immensely in size as well as industry, while sharing the same structure of decentralised HR functions. Lastly, one respondent represents a non-governmental organisation (NGO) consisting of a small, centralised HR function with a few people.

Data Collection

All respondents play an equally important role as a member and actor, despite organisational context, as the study sets out to explore the shared practices ongoing in the social macro-network of HR professionals. A volunteer sampling (Morse, 1990) strategy was therefore

chosen, allowing participation from a wide range of organisations. Interviews took place digitally due to pandemic restrictions, with an exception of a few physical interviews on the organisations' premises. While creating a trustful relationship with respondents can become more difficult digitally, requiring more engagement from both parties, it can potentially lead to more detailed and well thought out answers (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Important factors such as internet connection, and sound was checked before the interviews (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). The interviews were conducted in two periods and complemented by follow-up interviews, representing five of the 11 organisations from the sample (Table 2).

Table 2

Number of follow-up interviews allocated by sector

	Private sector	Public sector	Nongovernmental
Number of follow-up interviews	2	3	0

Follow up interviews contributed to strengthening the credibility (Bryman & Bell, 2013) and functioned as focused interviews, providing clarity regarding patterns of interest (Charmaz, 2014). Data collection followed the iterative grounded theory approach through open exploration of the participants' experiences, views and actions (ibid.). Having alternate data collection periods allowed for integration of initial coding, memo writing, focused coding, and theoretical sampling in-between the interviews (ibid.). Moreover, the sampling strategy has somewhat limited the generalisability of the study as each organisation has only volunteered one or few participants. Additionally, self-selection from the participants' side carries the risk of bias as some case organisations have volunteered more participants than others, possessing more influence on the results. Thus, to decrease the risk of influence by a specific organisational discourse, the respondents were distributed in both early and later stages of the interview process. This enabled focused coding for a cross-sectoral discourse. The choice of volunteer sampling also holds the risk of researcher bias, as the respondents selected are from the researchers' professional network (Morse, 1990). However, at the time, none of the researchers were involved in any of the participating organisations.

Participants

In total, the study consists of 17 respondents, 16 females and one male, between the ages of 30-50. The representation of participants is heavily dominated by females. Despite HR being a female dominated profession (Kochan, 2004; Ulrich et al., 2013), the gender distribution of the respondent group cannot be considered a typical reflection of the profession. All respondents shared an educational background with a university degree, from diverse areas and had different years of experience working with HR (from 1-20), although most of the respondents had three to six years of HR experience. Work experience prior to higher education was commonly within service or sales. The respondents had different titles describing their current role, however all respondents answered the questions based on their roles as manager support.

Ethical considerations are taken into account by following the “good research practice” by Swedish Research Council (2017). Through numbering the respondents and referring to the organisational sectors by codes, confidentiality was highly assured. Information to participants (Appendix B) was sent through email and written consent was requested, informing respondents of their rights and terms of the study. As the HR work contains personnel cases of sensitive nature, the respondents were given the respect to share as much as they were comfortable with. The respondents' integrity did not cause any inconveniences for the data analysis since the study did not follow the case process over time.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using the inductive, grounded theory approach by Charmaz (2014) and the transcripts were systematically coded in three steps. In the first step, coding was focused on the daily work of HR professionals and how they spoke about their practices. Furthermore, we identified other actors mentioned by the participants, characteristics of the relationships, and how the actors were related to the respondents' descriptions of their daily work. After additional data gathering some cross-sectoral patterns with common categories were identified through the second round of coding. Three core aspects of the reactive work were shared by the respondents, including solving “cases”, providing managerial support and building close relationships. These aspects composed an image of central characteristics of the HR work, which contradict the respondents' driving force related to strategic work and was therefore considered of particular interest. During the third round of coding, the linguistic expression “playing ball” was captured. Data analysis of linguistic expressions is called the specimen perspective within discourse analysis (Talja, 1999). “Playing ball” was of interest due to its

characteristics as a collective, informal social action with coherent dispersion in the respondent group. When the respondents were asked to further define the expression, similar descriptions were given despite different organisational contexts, indicating that “playing ball” was common between HR professionals and line managers, or colleagues. In addition, “Playing ball” was also used externally when addressing professional networks or suppliers, however without leaving the employer representative discourse. The interpretation of “playing ball” as a response to institutional complexity was enabled by analysing the respondents' descriptions and the situations in which “playing ball” was mentioned.

4. Findings

The analysis of the empirical stories concerning the everyday work of HR professionals present the expectations of HR as a strategic partner, the excitement for strategic tasks and ambition of organisational development. Additionally, the strategic work is contrasted with three important aspects characterising the daily work, followed by the consequences of organisational “Fire Brigade”, requiring collegial collaboration and frequent engagement in “playing ball”. The following sections presents an extended analysis.

Imagining the work as strategic partners

As the respondents describe their backgrounds, their professional experiences previous to HR often came from service or sales. Some respondents chose the HR profession because they had negative experiences of being employees and were hoping to make things better as employers. A few respondents also describe starting higher education within business studies and by time realising that their interest was more aligned with people and organisational development. As students, several respondents believed they would be employee heroes, however they learned the shocking truth that they were training to become employer representatives, which conveys a common misconception within HR. Entering a profession with noticeable contradictions from the start, the respondent group share a passion for people, welfare, processes and organisational development.

Proactive and strategic work are talked about in positive terms among the respondents. Many HR professionals are assigned a certain responsibility area in which they work strategically. One respondent, from a large private organisation, expresses her hopes of becoming more proactive, especially related to the working environment.

The best thing is of course if you can work preventively in the workplace. It is extremely reactive compared to what you want, but you want to look at, what are the reasons we can work with in the workplace? [...] But it is also about trying to identify early different elements where stress or not well-being is common and try to see what is the cause, try to address it early in employee dialogue or work environment round, or whatever it might be, but we are not there. But that is my hope. (Respondent, 2)

The HR professional describes preventive work as something to strive for, simultaneously addressing that the organisation is not ready for change yet. It is clear that HR professionals have a will for working more proactive and strategic to support organisational performance. However, the respondents share stories of being needed by organisations as “Fire brigade”, which means less time left for proactive work.

Quite a lot of things that have been left behind because there have been other balls to run after. [...] I'm so incredibly operational. My job is to run to what is happening, very reactive really, rather than a proactive one. (Respondent, 2)

On one hand, the respondent emphasises down-prioritisation of proactive work, describing the work as reactive, running after balls thrown at her. On the other hand, strategic tasks are part of the respondents' assignments and many respondents have their own strategic responsibility related to a centralised HR process. A junior HR professional from the public sector describes personal freedom of how to address strategic responsibility with competency development plans. In this instance the respondent undergoes a creative working process when developing a new digital onboarding for the organisation.

[...] right now I work with introduction and onboarding material and reviewing it, and then it is something that I of course in dialogue with my boss, my colleagues, still prioritises and put more focus on, we will work to develop a digital introduction for new employees and seen the need for it, and it is ultimately based on my personal preference that I think it is time to have a digital introduction. I think it would create value and then how I design it, so it is very free and I think it's fun if you are a little innovative that it is a little freer. But there is also a little more and other stuff to do, so it is something that I work on when there is time. It really does not work to say that I cannot attend this rehab meeting, because I need to sit here and work with strategic competence development. (Respondent, 3)

However, the respondent expresses that immediate “cases” such as rehabilitation is always prioritised over long-term strategic work. Strategic work provides a positive element and creative break for the respondents. One respondent within the public sector who has recently

changed jobs to an operation with less disturbances, compares the two environments and describes an interest in strategic work, enabled by low frequency of “cases”.

In the work environment, these measurements that I mentioned there, we use data to follow the commitment and well-being and how we are perceived as employers. Although I, unlike where I was before, where there was an operation that required more fire brigade-HR, more disciplinary cases, more conflicts that needed to be resolved quite abruptly, or if there were disruptions in the operation due to various matters in one way or another [...] It is more fun to spend more of your time and energy on things that you see can be developed for the business than just (...) perhaps minimising the risk of bad business (Respondent, 1)

The respondent experiences the change of workplace in positive terms, as increased opportunity to engage in more fun and developmental tasks that can decrease organisational disturbances. However, it is rare to find workplaces absent from “cases” among respondents. One HR professional from a smaller, strategic HR department within a large organisation describes the work environment conditions as “luxurious”.

They (the operation) doesn't need much support, but they need some reminders with dates and so on, updated templates and so on. It has been an office that has been very quiet really and it has worked very well. We've had a major thing that took a lot, a personnel case, which took a lot of my time for a while, but otherwise it has kind of flowed quite well. They have employees who thrive well, all types of data that's collected, but a well-functioning office is quite a luxurious HR assignment. I would say that there are units or offices or businesses where it is...a lot of things happening but that's not the everyday I have, here it works well. (Respondent, 10)

The respondent describes how line managers in well functional operations, on a daily basis are autonomous in handling their employees. However, when “cases” emerge the need for HR support is increased considerably.

In contrast to the stories told by HR professionals, striving to become strategic partners, a respondent from an NGO describes the work as “mainly traditional HR work” and refers to supporting managers in different “cases” and emergencies. The respondent has previously been the only HR within the organisation and therefore relied on external support for verifying solutions. She describes her contact with external groups of HR professionals and experiences that the definition of HR as a support function is questioned.

I think, if I would have had a lot of experience with me since before, from another organisation, then it would have been a different matter. Now I did not have the support I needed anyway but now I've come up with a lot of good things here that have been very important to me, because I did not have that before

and didn't really have a manager... so I got a mentor that I could meet once a month or more if needed, and only talk about HR related issues. So it was a man I met repeatedly [...] You get so influenced by everything you read all the time, that it should be like being part of the development and going forward and like. If you are going to run the business if you are... I do not know if I see it like that really, but [...] What can it be, online maybe, or just following this network group that they can be like “no what? Do you work with such things? here we work with HR only” whatever it may be. (Respondent, 15)

The respondent highlights how HR professionals often strive to communicate their proactiveness and added value, aligned with expectations of becoming strategic partners. These expectations create internal conflicts, contrasting with the everyday reality of HR as a support function.

The reality of responding to emergencies

The first aspect of the respondents' everyday work as part of a support function and responding to line managers' needs, is largely characterised by dealing with emergencies. Most often emergencies are related to dealing with “cases”. “Cases” come in different shapes and sizes and can include one or several employees. A common type of “case” is conflicts, in teams, or between employee and manager. One respondent from the private sector describes how a conflict “case” has escalated over time despite actions taken.

I am now sitting with a case, quite infected personnel case, there is both a conflict between manager and employee [...] the employee is absolutely not satisfied with the job either. Has been given new tasks included in the old tasks and is definitely not on that train and does not really want to do it either. And now it has gone so far that this person has taken sick leave with all that entails. (Respondent, 2)

In this instance, a new obstacle in terms of sick leave occurring in an already severe conflict, worsens the situation. Repeated employee sick-leave awakes rehabilitation responsibility for the employer, which can either be dealt with as a combined “case” or form an independent “case”. In addition to exemplifying conflict as a common type of “case”, the respondent describes the type of escalation in “cases” that sometimes add to an already challenging situation. “Case” escalation is followed by frustration since the consequence is that the “case” demands more time from the HR professionals.

Rehabilitation is another type of “case” that demands time from the respondents, always holds the risk of escalating. In this example, a respondent from the public sector recognises the purpose of rehabilitation as reinstating a healthy employee back to work.

Yes, but the purpose of rehabilitation, it's about everyone being able to be at work and feel good at work. And most often if I get involved with rehabilitation, it is because there is someone who has either flagged that they are not feeling well or has been on sick leave. And then it's about us trying to get the person back. We will try to ensure that we have a work environment that makes the employee healthy at work.
(Respondent, 4)

HR becomes involved in rehabilitation either when an employee seeks help from the employer, or the rehabilitation system notifies the line manager that the employer needs to act.

The third type of “case” concerns situations related to employee misbehaviour. Misbehaviour cases differ from rehabilitation by concerning employee actions not aligned with employer expectations, regulations and agreements. However, based on the respondents’ integrity, they chose not to give concrete examples of misbehaviour “cases”.

Based on the respondents' stories it is clear that “cases” enter the HR function in different packages, however, share similar characteristics. One HR professional describes these characteristics using words as acute, unpredictable and difficult to control: “Of-course there are always cases that you cannot control. Then you have to work with what is most urgent or prioritised, in that way it is difficult to control, and you never know what will be coming up.” (Respondent, 17). The example highlights HR professionals’ reactive work, responding to emergencies and dealing with disturbances in the organisation. There are often formalised processes in place, regarding rehabilitation and misbehaviour, providing guidance for action. The process however does not always serve as a description of how “cases” turn out in reality.

This is how a rehabilitation process goes step by step, but in reality, it almost never looks like that. You try, but it can be that the case becomes something completely different, that it is not at all a rehab case, where there can be conflict in working groups or so. (Respondent, 10)

The respondent, with experience from many severe “cases”, tries to follow the process, nevertheless, experiences deviation from the outlined path. Additionally, HR professionals are sometimes outlining a path for others when providing advice to managers concerning the workforce. As employer representatives, given advice must follow legal requirements and be adapted to the local context. However, according to the respondents, this is not always an easy task. An experienced HR professional describes that there is no right answer, rather there are many aspects that need to be thoroughly considered.

There is seldom a given conclusion, there is almost nothing there. This is the only right thing to do. This is the wrong way to go, but you have to see a lot of the situation and the history and a lot of other factors that

you have to consider. [...] And so that it does not become random, it is important to react the same way among colleagues and think and try to act as equally as possible. So it is usually in such matters that one can go in and discuss and ask What would you have done? Have you had a similar situation? and then you have to try to find a way forward, based on that. (Respondent, 9)

When there is uncertainty about how to best solve a “case”, HR professionals take advice from other HR professionals. Taking advice from colleagues is often referred to as “playing ball” (translated from the Swedish word “bolla”). “Playing ball” can take different forms, implying getting advice from peers on how to interpret a situation or to find a suitable solution. It may also be to check whether similar “cases” have occurred in other parts of the organisation to ensure that employees are treated equally.

Supporting managers in need

The second important aspect characterising the daily work among HR professionals is responsibility for managerial support. The respondents emphasise that they are “there for managers” while explaining that support is given mainly from “behind the scenes”, complemented with support in person in more difficult situations. Supporting managers “behind the scenes” means that HR professionals trust managers’ capabilities in dealing with the situation autonomously with indirect support from HR. At the same time, supporting managers from “behind the scenes” means that the distance between HR as “employer representative” and the employees remains. Representing the employer is described as being “loyal to organisational decisions” and “ensuring things are done correctly”. One respondent describes the need for separating the employer and employee perspective, emphasising HR’s role as “manager support”, and expresses a preference for indirect contact with employees.

Preferably only indirect [contact]. But many employees, or some employees, want to call me. Some people think I have incredible power, but I do not, ... but (pause) and then they think that “now I really want to go ahead with this question and contact HR, HR decides.” And we do not and then I have to constantly push back, and say I am a managerial support, if there is something you need to lift something that you are not happy with and it does not work talk to your manager, and if you cannot talk to your boss so can you turn to the union. (Respondent, 4)

The HR professional claims not possessing much power, as imagined by the employees, however, having the mandate to deny the employee HR services. Despite extensive HR work in relation to “cases”, HR professionals describe how they support managers from a distance in other tasks during “absence of cases”. One HR professional from a smaller private organisation

describes updating policy documents and reminding managers of obligatory tasks related to the working environment.

You could say that I coordinate our systematic work environment work based on our annual cycle [...] That I sort of remind the managers. Now it's time and here you will find the material and then we have an evaluation every year, or we have like a yearly wheel and a checklist with the recurring activities we do, and there I follow and check. Like have we had two training sessions in all offices, have we had evacuation exercises. If we have the work environment policy updated, if we have an emergency plan and, like all documentation and routines, we report incidents and accidents, we must support the managers as well in those areas. (Respondent, 16)

Supporting managers from “behind the scenes” is often mentioned by the respondent in relation to their work with “cases”. However, respondents not typically involved in “cases” also support managers from “behind the scenes”. These tasks are not in relation to strategic work, instead include reminding managers of deadlines, renewing policies and ensuring compliance. While a major part of HR support can be provided in a free format (e.g. email, phone call, in person), difficult and severe “cases” often demand HR’s presence. In particularly severe “cases”, HR represents the employer together with the manager, in front of the employee and the union. One HR professional from the public sector, working in a department with several parallel employee “cases”, describes her role as employer representative and how “cases” often have a similar start, unfolding in different directions over time.

I work quite a lot with personnel cases, I have had a lot of them in my operations now. I have two rather juicy cases which are that they are difficult and usually when they are difficult it is that it has been perhaps for a long time with problems, but also it can be linked to ill health and sick leave. it goes hand in hand often. [...] But what has been overall in the cases I have had now is that the cooperation between manager and employees may not really work either and that they have difficulty communicating and find each other difficult. Sometimes you actually become almost like a mediator, so that they can communicate with each other. But that's probably how it starts, and then it's a little different. But what steps we are taking now I have in mind to include the trade union party in all those cases, which is what is good, I think. Then the employee gets support as there is an equal relationship between employer and employee and union, so that you do not sit and are more employer representative and I think that it can also simplify that it can facilitate my work in such a way that I can speak before different meetings sometimes with union parties also just how we set it up in the best way. (Respondent, 8)

The HR professional acts as a mediator and translator between the involved actors to decrease misunderstandings and prevent situations from escalating.

Building close relationships

The third important aspect of the respondents' work is building trustful relationships with line managers to identify needs and adjust support. Some HR professionals describe spending time adapting the support to managers' preferences. Frequency of managerial contact is one aspect, of several, that needs to be considered. One HR professional in the public sector describes the frequency of contact as dependent on the manager's personality, needs and security in leadership.

I have some managers that I have follow ups with on a weekly basis and then there are some that I may only hear from there once a month, and it depends a bit on what kind of person it is and maybe a little how confident they are in their leadership and how much support they need. (Respondent, 3)

The respondent acknowledges several aspects as relevant when deciding how to design the support. Some managers require more support while others may simply request for HR's presence and to take part in a conversation. One HR professional describes a situation where she is asked by a manager to facilitate a dialogue in a group of employees related to negative employee survey results.

Facilitate a conversation really. The manager is also there and cannot be quiet and is involved to varying degrees. But for some reason they kind of think or "that it's so good that you're here. People talk so much more and dare to say what they think and there will be so much better conversation" and I think it would be at least as well if the manager led it. But that's what placebo pills are, I think. As if they think it will be so much better, it will probably be, because I happen to be at the meeting. [...] if a person is uncomfortable with something then it is clear that it does not create a conversational climate that makes it a good dialogue. So the managers would have been more comfortable and felt like me in that situation. I was curious to hear what they think and hear their thoughts quite simply. But they are also relieved that I am not, it is not my group, so I do not have to feel hit if there are things that are not good. and it may not be as easy to be objective as a manager. (Respondent, 1)

She says that her interest in people distinguishes her from the manager and refers to herself as a "placebo" effect. Additionally, close relationships with line managers enable influence which comes at hand to reassure compliance of organisational strategy and regulations. According to several respondents, line managers are keener to follow their advice if the advice comes from someone they know and trust.

If you have a good relationship, you can come and say it in a better way and get the manager to [...] just come from nowhere. Who are you? And for example as an example where my memory is a great lesson I

learned. [...] When you have been involved in relocation, a person who due to lack of work was redundant and matched to a position with a manager that I did not know, so I call them and explain the situation and the rules that apply. "No, I do not think so. I will not receive any person here and there. Who are you calling? I do not know you" and the next time I had such a case then I took it via that manager's HR and so that I and the case with a HR that that person knew. Then it went much smoother. (Respondent, 17)

Thus, to avoid a situation where the authority of the HR professional is questioned, it is important to create a long-term and trustworthy relationship with line managers.

Collegial collaboration, a consequence of emergencies

Dealing with emergencies has consequences for how HR professionals collaborate with their colleagues. Responding to emergencies means that HR professionals need to quickly build the capacity needed to deal with "cases" and provide relevant support. This is done in several different ways, including actively seeking out people with knowledge and experience relevant for the particular situation. One junior respondent describes how situations never have ready answers and how exploring options by "playing ball" with colleagues is necessary.

There are situations where you do not have a ready answer that there will be a need to explore different possibilities and play ball with colleagues and then noticing that they also have this need to play ball. Not only me who is new has that need, but we all three have this need and through that dialogue you usually land maybe better decisions as well, so it has been a very important forum for me. (Respondent, 3)

The respondent starts by presenting "playing ball" as an act among inexperienced HR professionals, however, realises that experienced colleagues have the same need. Also, more experienced professionals claim they need "playing ball" sometimes. One respondent describes choosing closest colleagues as first choice when "playing ball" and if needed, moving further externally with suppliers or other knowledgeable partners.

It was a pretty tough issue and I played ball with my colleagues who know the organisation, the team, what, how do you think? And we may get anyway, but you probably need to play ball with someone, and then I called our supplier and played ball with those, because they do this every day and have a lot, so i played ball with them, and got a lot of input and we found a way in between and it turned out great. (Respondent, 5)

Gathering extensive input by internal and external perspectives is described as a middle ground, further directing the path forward. "Playing ball" is also convenient for respondents that may already have an idea of how to proceed in the situation. In this situation respondents choose to

“play ball” with their colleagues and experts to verify a solution they have thought through independently. The respondent explains lifting a matter in order to reason back and forth and hear other’s perspectives on the issue, moving forward either with the original idea or with a new solution.

It could be that I or the other person who needs to play ball already has a thought but needs to lift it and say it out loud to someone and maybe we can reason a little back and forth. "I think like this, what do you think about it?" that in it you get the perspective of others, but also this feeling that you, now I have raised this issue and have turned it up and down together. It may lead to me moving forward just as I had thought before or not, but it feels safe and nice to have raised the issue with someone else. (Respondent, 4)

Verbalising ideas with others can provide comfort and security while enhancing the quality and variations of recommendations.

Dealing with emergencies through “Playing ball”

“Playing ball” is a cross-sectoral expression among the respondents referring to a common practice when dealing with emergencies. All respondents “play ball” primarily with internal and external HR colleagues, independent of sector and level of experience. An important function of “playing ball” is to gain reassurance and certainty in giving a correct response in relation to the emergency and successfully solving the “case”. The action lays the ground for defending recommendations towards the managers. One respondent describes “playing ball” as the action of “talking back and forth” with someone, “confirming” and “verifying” how the HR professional has thought through a solution on their own.

You think you have a picture of how it should be or how it is, how you think this is the most correct. But then you still want to check with someone so that you are on the right track or that I have missed something. Have I thought wrong or? I do not think that I think wrong, but do you think that I ... But back and forth to discuss, as well as it is probably more to get a confirmation that you are on the right path towards what you work with, but that is what is often said. But it can play ball a lot back and forth just to know you are on the right track. (Respondent, 8)

Finding the right answer to act fair and compliant is important for the respondents. They would rather “play ball” too much than to risk providing unsuitable or incorrect recommendations to the managers. As an emergency arrives at the HR function, it comes along with managers' need to “play ball”. These situations are either characterised by one individual employee or a team. This type of “playing ball” often leads to further involvement of the HR collective as the matter

is raised with colleagues and experts. Throughout the process of “cases”, the respondents continue to rely on “playing ball”, seeking approval to find the best solution. With consideration to regulations, the respondents use “playing ball” as a tool for professional evaluation of the context, previous employer experience, and individual factors.

5. Discussion

This cross-sectoral study sets out to provide a deeper understanding of the everyday work of HR professionals and how they respond to institutional complexity. Increased understanding of the work performed by HR practitioners contributes to the SHRM debate by offering empirical evidence for describing how HR professionals handle both operational and strategic work on a daily basis. Furthermore, the study contradicts the claim that the HR function needs to modernise and develop analytical skills in order to stay relevant in the digital context (Kochan, 2004), by suggesting HR professionals to engage even more in traditional HR work to improve their value addition. Moreover, the study challenges the argument that HR professionals benefit from distributing operational tasks to line managers (Ulrich, 1997) by addressing potential risks with giving away a core responsibility.

The analysis of the respondents’ stories shows a contradiction between imaginations of strategic work and the reality of responding to emergencies. HR professionals’ share a strong interest in strategic work. This interest draws their attention towards strategic and proactive tasks, exemplified through common descriptions of proactive work preferred over dealing with operational work. The reality, however, is that a large part of the work performed by HR professionals is reactive, or what the respondents refer to as “Fire Brigade” work. “Fire Brigade” work is used as an expression to explain the emergent and unpredictable nature of “cases”. Responding to “cases” requires immediate attention and manifests as management support which becomes prioritised by the respondents above all other types of work. In order to adapt their support to manager’s needs, HR professionals rely on their close relationships with line managers. Close relationships are also present in the form of collaboration with HR colleagues, where suitable actions and recommendations are explored through “playing ball”. “Playing ball” is identified as a commonly used practice within the HR collective, discovered by a consistent cross-sectoral narrative used by the respondents, independent of organisational context and experience level. This practice is an important part of HR professionals’ work, specifically when involved in the reactive work with “cases”. While Francis and Keegan (2006)

has described the HR work in terms of the strategic and operational dilemma, it is our point of view that “playing ball” should be considered a strategic practice used by HR professionals for dealing with operational tasks. Furthermore, this viewpoint is built on the claim by Boglind et al. (2021) that strategy and the market logic is a dominant ideal within the HR profession, which according to Torrington and Hall (1996) cannot be considered a realistic plan.

The everyday work of HR professionals is characterised by a sensemaking process which enables respondents to perform their responsibilities as crisis managers. The analysis suggests that the respondents' engagement in emergent “cases” starts a sensemaking process where HR professionals “play ball” with line managers and colleagues, to explore different available options. “Cases” can be considered an example of what Weick (1988) calls a triggering event which occurs as a result of human errors, impossible to eliminate. As the crisis unfolds, enabled by the respondents' actions, the respondents invest time, increase capacity and commitment to the “case” which contributes to improved accuracy of the sensemaking process. In contrast to the types of crises described by Weick (1988), which affect the whole organisation, the crises that HR professionals deal with are often of a more modest nature, usually involving individuals or smaller groups of employees. However, crises still carry the risk of escalation, a risk that increases when “cases” are handed out to line managers with less time and capacity available for crisis management.

Delegating “cases” to managers could mean that HR professionals lose a core responsibility as organisational crisis managers. Firstly, delegation has negative consequences in terms of increased frustration among already pressured line managers, accompanied by further legitimacy loss. Legitimacy loss within the HR profession has been explored by several authors (Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Kochan, 2004). Moreover, the analysis suggests that the placement of operational HRM tasks should be re-examined in relation to external legitimacy for the HR profession. Secondly, giving away operational tasks to line managers combined with attention drawn to strategic work could gamble with the HR professionals' ability to prevent escalation of “cases”, since improving crisis management capacity demands dedication and attention.

Addressing the second question, the analysis has demonstrated how constellations of logics, previously explored by Goodrick and Reay (2011), influence HR professionals in their daily work. Exposure to high institutional complexity can be illustrated through the high probability of “cases” occurring in the organisation, involving different expectations, actors and interests that manifests as conflicting logics. In fact, paying attention to institutional complexity means

acknowledging constellations of logics (Goodrick & Reay, 2011; Lewis et al., 2019) and prioritising among these logics in relation to the specific situation at hand, instead of simply responding to or claiming a single or dominant logic (Goodrick & Reay, 2011; Martin et al., 2017). Drawing on the work by Boglind et al. (2021) institutional logics enable opportunities to discover several logics' impact on the HR professionals' daily work, without simply ascribing higher value to one logic. It is our point of view that implementation of one logic does not eliminate effects of other coexisting logics since the findings indicate that HR professionals are exposed to several logics simultaneously. Realistically, the goal of turning HR professionals into strategic partners, primarily focused on proactive work, might leave organisations less equipped to cope with their unpredictable environments. Additionally, whenever simplification is made by addressing a single logic, HR professionals are likely to experience continued legitimacy loss. For instance, legitimacy loss may either occur when neglecting the market logic and the organisational needs, or when the state logic and regulations are ignored. Furthermore, this institutional complexity is present in the respondents' descriptions, through examples of influence from several conflicting institutional logics.

Firstly, the corporate logic (Goodrick & Reay, 2011) can be interpreted by the characteristics of the relationship between the HR professionals and line managers. The respondents describe the relationship as close, trustful and mutual. However, also acknowledging how manager's leadership and personal preferences need to be abided by HR professionals in their role as support function. The same relationship between line managers and HR has been captured by Boglind et al. (2021), however without descriptions of the relationship as a result of corporate logic expectations. This hierarchy appeals to what Goodrick and Reay (2011) describe as typical within corporate logic and managerial control. Ultimately, it can be argued that the characteristics of the relationship with line managers is a consequence of what Lewis et al. (2019) refers to as HR professionals born within the institutional context, to serve organisational needs.

Secondly, the state logic (Goodrick & Reay, 2011) is present in descriptions of how HR professionals in their roles as employer representatives, are obliged to follow formal processes and be loyal to organisational expectations and regulations. While several "cases" belong to the formalised rehabilitation process and must follow laws and regulation, conflicting institutional logics and need for prioritisation appear for example when misbehaviour or employee welfare

simultaneously demands attention. This indicates that “cases” can deviate from the formalised path and unfold in an unexpected direction as a result of institutional complexity.

Thirdly, the market logic (Goodrick & Reay, 2011) manifests as the unregulated competition in the market which allows for HR professionals' experiences and expectations to become available to others through external networks and forums. Consider for example the HR professional influenced by social media platforms and HR professional groups. External strategic expectations caused the respondent to doubt her perspective of what the HR work means, questioning the value of traditional HR work and managerial support in “cases”. Sharing experiences internally by “playing ball” with colleagues can, on one hand, be described as an extension of what Weick (1988) calls the institutional memory. Institutional memory could either work in favour of more accurate sensemaking or produce blind spots (ibid). On the other hand, sharing organisational experiences externally can be considered counterproductive in relation to SHRM contribution, since the uniqueness of the organisation or what Armstrong (2008) refers to as organisational competitive advantage might be jeopardised.

Lastly, professional logic is present in terms of close relationships with other HR professionals. Close relationships enable personal experiences to be shared, through “playing ball”, back and forth. “Playing ball” is a response to conflicting expectations from corporate, state and market logic which enhances professional control over recommendations. Experience being shared internally as well as externally through “playing ball” in the HR collective contradicts Ulrich et al.'s (2013) descriptions of true knowledge as the foundation of a profession. Furthermore, HR professionals' response to institutional complexity in practice indicates that the strategic ideal within the SHRM debate, dominated by the market logic, does not fully capture societal expectations on HR professionals' roles.

Concluding this section, the findings support that HR professionals are responsible for the everyday organisational crisis management by supporting line managers in solving “cases” and prioritising among conflicting institutional logics through the practice “playing ball”. While Pache and Santos (2013) claim that professionals' make choices when navigating institutional complexity, in their case study of a hybrid organisation, our findings suggest that the HR work as manager support consists of helping line managers make choices by responding to conflicting logics through “playing ball”. Additionally, when attention is turned towards strategic work instead of the crisis, “Playing ball” can become what Weick (1988) calls a force for evil, with HR professionals relying on a few commonly used tenacious justifications and limited capacity.

Such situation would be accompanied by the risk of aggravating a vicious cycle (Keegan et al., 2018) where the action “playing ball” becomes a source for conflicting institutional logics (Lewis et al., 2019). In contrast, when attention is turned towards the crisis, “playing ball” can be considered what Weick (1988) refers to as a force for good, characterised by high capacity and well serving tenacious justifications. In contrast to the vicious cycle, this situation would be allowing “playing ball” to stand out as a solution to conflicting logics (Meijerink et al., 2021) Ultimately, enabling a positive cycle, with continuous increased commitment and capacity, works in favour for the HR professionals and organisations, allowing access to good quality institutional memory and accurate sensemaking.

6. Conclusion

This paper sets out to provide a deeper understanding of collectively shared characteristics of HR professionals’ work as crisis managers, responding to institutional complexity. Drawing upon cross-sectoral data of HR professionals performing managerial support, this study contributes to the literature on the strategic versus operational dilemma. It is our point of view that HR professionals would benefit from acknowledging their exposure to several conflicting logics instead of being blinded by strategic ideals which only acknowledge the dominant market logic. This paper offers empirical evidence for the claim that HR professionals can initiate a positive cycle that extends strategic HRM contribution, by engaging fully in everyday crisis management.

Additionally, the paper contributes to the theoretical field of institutional theory by drawing from the dynamic current neo-institutionalism and enacted sensemaking to gain deeper understanding of the relationship between professional work and response to institutional complexity. The study offers practical implications to HR professionals by suggesting to develop existing practices such as “playing ball” to increase crisis management capacity. Effective crisis management in handling “cases” is important for isolating crises. Such effective crisis management can be reached by striving for a variety of input from internal actors when “playing ball”, since variation will decrease risks of blind spots and improve the process. Accurate crisis management can be considered a valuable strategic contribution, while providing HR professionals with the opportunity to restore line manager trust and external legitimacy.

The results of this study must be interpreted in the light of the following limitations. The study does not claim generalisability, nor a complete account of all possible themes related to the daily work of HR professionals. However, the sample of this qualitative case study consists of people working with manager support in the HRM functions. A different set of respondents, for example with representative gender distribution, could have resulted in awakening a different discourse. While the cross-sectoral unit of analysis allowed for finding a shared discourse (“playing ball”), a case study of one organisation would most likely have resulted in another discourse. Future research is encouraged to investigate the effects of “playing ball” by following “cases” in a longitudinal study. A longitudinal study would allow for exploring the consequences of “playing ball” and deepening the understanding of HR professionals' prioritisation of institutional logics in solving “cases”. Additionally, we suggest future research to extend the findings by including other actors such as HR managers, HR-strategists, line managers and employees to broaden the perspective of how enacted sensemaking affects actors' responses to institutional complexity. Another opportunity for future research is the application of the theoretical lens to other professions exposed to high institutional complexity, serving as advisory or support functions, such as supply chain management or lawyers. Furthermore, a study aiming to explore the presence of other strategic practices used by HR professionals in response to institutional complexity is proposed.

The present analysis offers a nuanced viewpoint which helps to clarify HR professionals' responsibility as caretakers of the organisation's response to conflicting logics, whether packaged as "fire brigade" or strategic partners. Ultimately, the paper attempts to show that HR professionals should not be told to stop solving “cases”, rather, the never-ending stream of workforce related emergencies offer new possibilities for strategic HRM contribution.

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Appendix

Appendix A, Presentation Letter

Hello!

Our names are Justine Berg and Sadaf Azarijafari. We are two students in the Human Resource Management and Labour Relations program at the University of Gothenburg. We complement each other through different backgrounds and personality profiles but are united in the interest of pursuing evidence-based and data-driven development in the HR area. Justine is on leave from her role as HR Generalist in the public sector, where she has worked with HR issues at both breadth and depth since 2016. In the spring of 2021, she also ran a development assignment where collaboration as a project was used as an example of an evidence-based approach. Sadaf entered the master's program directly after bachelor's studies and has long worked extra as a resource for children and young people with functional variation in the city of Gothenburg and now works extra with recruitment alongside his studies.

In the spring of 2022, we will conduct a study in evidence-based HR practice in which a couple of organizations from both the private and public sectors will participate. The study is qualitative and the value for those who participate and for research is that the study has a strong focus on you as respondents and a great interest in the current and practical HR work you do.

Previous studies in the field have mainly been entirely theoretical, or quantitative. We have therefore chosen a qualitative study where we want to talk to you who work broadly with operational HR work and managerial support, about your role and what you do in your work. The interviews will include open-ended questions in a convenient conversation format, where you can give examples from your daily work to help us understand, among other things, what, how, with whom the HR work is performed.

Our wishes are a contribution on any number of respondents in roles corresponding to HR-Generalist/HRBP/HR-specialist, where each person has the opportunity to set aside time for an interview of about 1.5 hours and that half of the respondents have room for a shorter, supplementary interview. Interviews will be conducted during the period February-March 2022, if possible, at a physical meeting. Digital interviews can be considered if there are circumstances that require it.

If you, like us, believe that we can create great value from this study together, please contact us no later than January 10, 2022. In that case, we will contact you again for Information to participants regarding data management, publication of consent forms.

We hope to have the opportunity for continued dialogue! If you have thoughts about the study's structure, questions or just want tips on articles in the field, feel free to contact us.

Warm greetings!

Justine and Sadaf

Appendix B, Information to participants

“HR from a performativity perspective, a qualitative study of HR professionals in a variety of Swedish organizations. “

The aim of this project is to the aim of the study is to create a better understanding of HR professionals' practices, in a variety of organizational contexts operating in the Swedish market.

Participating in the study will firstly, provide opportunities for respondents to engage in conversations with researchers regarding evidence-based HR and the development of the HR profession. Secondly, participation can also contribute to connect HR-professionals from different organizations sharing the interest in EBHR for further collaboration. Lastly, participation can act as a benchmarking opportunity in relation to the trend.

The study is a student project and will result in a thesis within the Master Program in Strategic Human Resource Management and Labor Relations at the University of Gothenburg. The study is conducted independently by the students Sadaf Azarijafari and Justine Berg, under the supervision of Ola Bergström, Professor in Management and Organisation at the Department of Business Administration at the School of Business, Economics and Law. Please see further contact info below. The project adheres to the key ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council for research in social science research. Information about research ethical information for participants please see below.

Data Collection

The data collection consists of qualitative interviews that are recorded with the permission of the participant.

Voluntary participation and non-disclosure

Participation is voluntary and confidential. Participants can choose to cancel their participation at any time and have a right to withdraw from the study should they wish. Unauthorized individuals will not have access to the material and participants involved in the project are covered by professional secrecy. Personal names are not registered, and participants will be given a pseudonym and exchanged for numbers when interviews are transcribed and analysed. This also applies to organizations that wish to be given a pseudonym. Participants decide when it is suitable to meet (potentially online because of covid-19 restrictions) and participation takes place on research participants' terms.

Handling of collected material

Material such as recordings and notes are kept locked away on password protected computers and are only available to authorized researchers. The interviews will be transcribed to a computer. In the final thesis, extracts from interviews may be cited and given a pseudonym [e.g., a fake name/number]. The collected material and interview transcriptions will not be used for any purpose other than scientific research and for teaching purposes under the conditions described herein. The results may also be presented in a scientific article. Interview files will be erased after the conclusion of the project.

Results and publication

The results of the study will be published in the form of a Master thesis completed in June 2022. Participants will be able to download the essay from GUPEA (<https://gupea.ub.gu.se/>). Participants are welcome to attend the future presentation of the project on the 3rd of June 2022.

Contacts for questions and more information:

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Consent to participate

I have read and fully understood the scope and implications of participating in this student MA project. Any questions I had were answered satisfactorily.

- I agree to participate, and that the interview can be digitally recorded and agree
- I agree to my personal details being handled as described above.

Name and Signature (respondent)	Name and Signature (student)

Appendix C, Interview-guide

Background questions

- Can you tell us a little about yourself; your background and how come you started working in HR? What did you do before that?
- How long have you been working on HR issues?
- What is your educational background? Experience background?
- What is your current role? How long have you had this role?
- What are your main tasks? And responsibility?
- What's most fun about your job?
- What is the hardest / most boring / most challenging part of your job?
- How many management teams are you part of?
- Can you tell me about networks, relationships and collaborations surrounding your role?
Follow up: which ones, what is your contribution in each such and what do you get back? Collaboration with other parts of the organization? Which? The purpose?
- How is your HR function organized? How does it work? Where are you?
- What strategies, policies, guidelines and / or processes guide and guide your work?

Role, work and practice

- Can you give examples of tasks that you do where you decide how they should be done? Follow up: Where, what, how, with whom, after...
- Can you give an example of a decision you have been involved in and made recently?
- Can you tell us about a project or task that has taken up a lot of your time lately?
Follow up: How come? How? (we want to know why they do as they do, what / who influences them in a certain direction)
- Can you give examples of how you use data in your profession?

Impact questions

- What opportunities would you say you have to influence how you work?
- What opportunities would you say you have to influence how the organization works?

- Can you give an example of a situation when you created something that did not result in what you were hoping for? What have you learned?

Development and change

- Looking ahead, what development in the HR role would you like to see? What development do you think will take place?
- What characterizes a successful (municipality / company)?
- When do you feel like you're doing a really good job?
- When do you feel that you have failed in your job?
- What would you say is most important for you to succeed in your work?
- What do you think of when I say evidence?

Summarizing, concluding questions

- Is there anything I forgot to ask you that you want us to talk about?
- May we get back to you for a follow-up interview in about 30 minutes?

Follow-up interview questions

- Last time we talked, you came back to the concept of playing ball, could you tell us what it means to you? Who do you play ball with?
- Can you tell us about an example when you and colleagues played ball about something and what was the result of it?
- Can you tell us about an example of an occasion when you went against the input you received from colleagues? What happened? What was the result? etc.
- Can you give an example when you and your boss played ball about something and what was the result of it?
- Another word that came back was managerial support, could you tell me what it means to be managerial support?

- Can you give an example of an occasion when the manager went against the input you gave? What happened? What was the result? etc
- We have understood that HR can be seen as employer representative, could you tell us what it means to be an employer representative? (capture employee representation / union contact through the conversation)
- Can you tell us about an occasion when you had contact with employees, what was it about? What did you do? How did it go?
- Can you tell us about an occasion when you had contact with a team or group, what was it about? What did you do? How did it go?