

Understanding and conceptualising the daily work of human resource practitioners

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore how human resource (HR) practitioners conceive of their practice, reveal challenges they grapple with in daily work and generate a conceptual framework of HR praxis.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on interviews with HR practitioners in Sweden and a review of articles that examine aspects of HR practitioners' work.

Findings – The HR practitioners' work is fragmented and reactive, filled with meetings and affords few opportunities to work undisturbed. Operational tasks are prioritised over strategic work, and their work sometimes involves tasks that are not HR's responsibility. The nature of HR practitioners' daily work mimics the work of their main "customer", i.e. managers within the organisations.

Practical implications – The HR practitioners were working mainly in the service of managers, which suggests that they have an internal focus. Consistent with current, prescriptive HR discourse, HR practitioners should adopt a multi-stakeholder perspective of human resource management (HRM) and a more external focus that is necessary to contribute to wider, organisational effectiveness. The findings could enrich what is taught in higher education by providing students with an account of the reality of HR practitioners' daily work.

Originality/value – The study provides a situated account of the daily work of HR practitioners, which is largely absent from the literature.

Keywords Human resource management, HR practitioners, Daily work, HRM-as-practice, Qualitative

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

What do HR practitioners actually do in their daily work? This is an intriguing question, and knowledge generated by studies that pursue this line of inquiry is likely to be of particular interest to HR scholars and students. There is an abundance of books covering the classic sub-functions of human resource management (HRM) (e.g. [Armstrong, 2017](#); [Werner *et al.*, 2012](#)), and a wide array of publications examining topics such as strategic HRM ([Boxall and Purcell, 2016](#); [Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2009](#)), the HRM-performance relationship ([Pauwe, 2009](#)), high-performance work systems ([Riaz *et al.*, 2020](#)) and the HR transformation ([Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005](#)). Thus, we have a large body of literature that offers prescription for what HR practitioners should do. However, documented knowledge about the actual activities that HR practitioners perform in their daily work is surprisingly scant. Consequently, we have a relatively poor understanding of what HR practitioners actually do in practice.

Theories and models – no matter how well-founded they are on research – are often perceived as difficult to apply in practice, which is beset with paradoxes, tensions and role



conflicts (cf. Keegan *et al.*, 2018). This phenomenon is frequently referred to as a gap between theory and practice (Foltean, 2019; Myers, 2008; Short, 2006; Wolfenden *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, previous studies show that there are considerable discrepancies between the topics considered in HRM research and the topic interests of HR practitioners (de Frutos-Belizón *et al.*, 2021; Gill, 2018; Markoulli *et al.*, 2017; Rynes *et al.*, 2002). There is also a tendency to de-contextualise the research setting, even when it may offer crucial insights into what is happening in practice and how HR practitioners perceive the nature of their work (Cooke *et al.*, 2020). Batt and Banerjee (2012, p. 1751) assert that most HRM-performance studies have “failed to convey any meaningful understanding of the organisational and industry context in which firms operate”. One factor that contributes to context-stripping is that HRM research has been dominated by quantitative surveys that are typically not well-suited to illuminating how contextually dependent, dynamic behaviours and activities endemic to organisational life are enacted in working life situations (cf. Einola and Alvesson, 2021).

The foregoing problematisation of the state of research in HRM suggests that we are missing pieces of the puzzle. We simply know too little about what HRM looks like in practice. This knowledge gap relating to HR praxis matters to both HRM scholars and students. As concerns scholars, the knowledge gap suggests that HRM theory may be insufficiently shaped by praxis knowledge. Regarding students, their ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of the field of HRM that stems from both theory and praxis is likely to be impeded. Therefore, inspired by the so-called “practice turn” in management research (Whittington, 2006), which has also been called for in HRM research (Björkman *et al.*, 2014; Vickers and Fox, 2010), and practice-theories built on studies of managerial work (Mintzberg, 2009; Tengblad, 2012), we contend that further knowledge of HR practitioners’ daily work is needed.

Thus, the broad aim of this study was to explore how HR practitioners conceive of their practice, reveal the challenges that they grapple with in their daily work and develop a conceptual framework of HR praxis. Accordingly, the study addressed the following question: What characterises the daily work of HR practitioners? To answer this question, we reviewed articles that examine aspects of HR practitioners’ work and conducted interviews with HR practitioners at public and private organisations in Sweden.

The present study makes two important contributions to the literature. First, the findings provide a situated account of the daily work of HR practitioners, which is largely absent from literature. Studying the accounts of those who carry out the day-to-day work contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of HRM work in practice. Drawing inspiration from other research areas, such as studies of managerial work, the paper contributes to the development of a theory for HRM that better reflects what HR practice looks like. Second, the paper contributes to the literature through generating a conceptual framework of HR praxis. The conceptual framework synthesises how HR work is portrayed in “mainstream” literature and the studies that we reviewed, and what the present study adds to an understanding of HR praxis.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We begin by describing the emerging practice perspective on HRM. Next, we outline the methodology and the methods that were used to locate previous empirical studies on the daily work of HR practitioners and to collect and analyse the interview data. We then present our analysis of prior empirical studies and findings of the interviews, discuss these in light of the previous research and generate a conceptual framework of HR praxis. Finally, we outline the study’s limitations and implications for research and practice, and then conclude the paper.

Meaning and significance of a practice perspective

There are growing concerns that organisation and management research has generated knowledge that is too distant from practice and therefore does not resonate with practitioners

(Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011; Van de Ven, 2018). Consequently, there has been a shift in focus towards practice in organisation research (Whittington, 2011) to bridge the research-practice gap, and to develop theories and models that more accurately reflect practice and can thus be used to change and develop practice (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011). Such a practice perspective provides an alternative approach for studying HRM (Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat, 2009) and can contribute to an understanding of the realities of how HR work is performed by the actors involved.

The design and analysis of the present study was informed by the research agenda for studies of HRM-as-practice proposed by Björkman *et al.* (2014) and studies of managerial work (Mintzberg, 2009; Tengblad, 2012). Björkman *et al.* (2014) drew upon the strategy-as-practice literature (Reckwitz, 2002; Whittington, 2006) to propose a typology that distinguishes between *HR practices*, *HR practitioners* and *HR praxis*.

HR practices include recruitment and selection, induction, competence development, appraisal and termination (Wallo *et al.*, 2016). In the HRM literature, HR practices are often classified according to how simple or sophisticated they are (Wallo and Kock, 2018) and described as either strategically or operationally oriented. Strategic HR involves activities aimed at aligning HR strategies with business strategies, while operational, or functional HR involves activities that are necessary for the delivery of HR operations (Lo *et al.*, 2015). For example, a strategic HR activity could involve designing strategic training and development initiatives that support business objectives, while operational activities would comprise the implementation of training and development activities that will enable the initiatives to be achieved (Armstrong, 2017).

The term *HR practitioner* refers to HR specialists who typically work within the HR departments of organisations. The analysis of HR practitioners' work has often involved identifying the required HR competences, such as in Ulrich and Brockbank's (2005) HR roles: *employee advocate*, *human capital developer*, *functional expert* and *strategic partner*, or in competency frameworks developed by industry organisations such as the Society for Human Resource Management (Cohen, 2015).

HR praxis refers to the actual work activities involved in everyday work and how HR is "done" through various actions. Thus, HR praxis consists of everyday activities such as having conversations with stakeholders, conducting formal and informal meetings, giving presentations on HR metrics and performing administrative tasks such as maintaining personnel records (Björkman *et al.*, 2014).

Studying managerial work is another research area that focusses on developing knowledge about practice. Building on pioneering publications such as Mintzberg's "The Nature of Managerial Work" (1973), researchers within this area have sought to classify managerial tasks and explicate the roles managers enact. Studies that seek to identify patterns in managers' work find that this is performed under unrelenting time pressure and there are rarely calm periods. Their work is often varied and fragmented and can quickly switch between strategic and operational issues. Furthermore, their working hours are often long, and it is common for managers to work during the evenings and at weekends. Their work often involves solving problems and "putting out fires", rather than developing strategies and plans, and tends to be of a reactive rather than proactive nature (Mintzberg, 2009; Tengblad, 2012).

Methodology

Literature search

To determine what is known about the daily work of HR practitioners, we conducted a search for studies following the guidelines provided by Booth *et al.* (2022), Callahan (2014) and Torraco (2005). Academic journals were the main source of evidence and were selected based

on quality by searching amongst journals listed in Scopus and Web of Science. Scopus and Web of Science were used as they are broad databases that span several relevant subject areas and index many journals of importance to this literature review. The following inclusion criteria were used to select articles for review: (a) peer-reviewed; (b) written in English; (c) reporting findings from empirical studies; and (d) having a focus on how HR practitioners carry out their daily work.

The keywords used were combinations of titles used for HR practitioners (e.g. practitioner, professional, manager, specialist, generalist, consultant, partner, expert and regulator) with terms aimed at capturing their daily work (e.g. “daily work”, “daily practice”, “everyday work”, “HRM in practice”, “HRM as practice”). This sampling generated 97 papers after duplicates were removed. In addition, 18 papers were found by searching highly ranked HRM journals and tracking references in previously identified articles (Callahan, 2014), giving a total of 114 papers.

The review process was guided by the steps proposed by (Booth *et al.*, 2022), and QSR NVivo 12 was used to store, organise and manage the data. As a first step in the review process, the abstracts were screened in Rayyan QCRI to determine whether they focussed on HR practitioners’ daily work, resulting in a list of 43 papers for further consideration. Second, the full texts were downloaded and assessed for eligibility (Page *et al.*, 2021; Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). A total of nine articles met all criteria for inclusion and were thus included in the analysis. Third, each of the included articles was carefully reviewed to identify findings related to the nature of daily work of HR practitioners. This step involved an inductive conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) focussed on the articles’ results, discussion and conclusions. Four broad themes emerged from the analysis of the study findings: (1) meeting the needs of stakeholders within the organisation, (2) tensions between attending to both operational and strategic activities, (3) seeking to be proactive, but being drawn into reactive, problem-solving activities and (4) coping with demands for services while being faced with time and resource constraints.

Interviews

There are inherent difficulties associated with quantifying and studying complex organisational phenomena such as daily work practices with ready-made measurements. Therefore, consistent with the explorative aim of the study, a reflexive methodology was employed (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017) whereby interpretations and reflexivity are crucial in the interface between theoretical perspectives and empirical data. Furthermore, the study of HR practitioners’ work practices necessitated a methodology that allowed us to get close to the data (Mintzberg, 1979). For that reason, we chose a qualitative methodology, which is conducive for studying complex, nuanced and situated HRM practices (Xing *et al.*, 2020) and also appropriate for inductive theory generation.

This study was part of a larger project that was conducted between 2017 and 2020 comprising several sub studies with different foci. The core data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) with 34 HR practitioners in eleven large Swedish public and private sector organisations. The interview questions focussed on the respondents’ daily work, working hours and workload, work tasks and their relationships with other organisational actors. Interview transcripts were supplemented with organisation charts, internal publications and interview notes and memos. The criteria for selecting respondents were full-time employment in an HR department, no managerial responsibilities and at least one year of work experience in HR. The respondents had worked in HR for an average of about ten years, and their average age was 42 years. HR managers with direct reports were excluded because they have broader responsibilities than non-managerial HR practitioners, which include managerial activities such as budget planning and control, staffing, delegation, employee development and performance management. HR managers

also have a wider range of decision-making powers in comparison to non-managerial HR practitioners. Our decision to exclude HR managers with direct reports was based on the likelihood that there would be too much “leakage” of traditional managerial responsibilities into the managers’ accounts of the daily work of HR practitioners.

Table 1 provides additional information about the respondents and their organisations.

In the conduct of this study, the ethical guidelines for research with humans were adhered to. Written and oral information about the study was presented in advance to enable informed consent. Participation was voluntary and the participants were informed about how the data would be used and stored.

Interviews were conducted in meeting rooms at the respondents’ workplaces. These lasted between 50 and 90 min and were recorded and fully transcribed. QSR NVivo 12 was used to manage the data, and the data analysis procedures followed the recommendations of Miles *et al.* (2014). The first phase of analysis began immediately after the initial interviews to ensure that data collection instruments were appropriate for the study setting and were honed to pursue emerging issues so that new and potentially better data could be collected. In the second phase of analysis, the researchers read the transcripts repeatedly to obtain a thorough understanding of the content of each interview. In the third phase, codes were

Resp.	Gender	Education level/subject area	Sector	Type of organisation	Job title
IP 1	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 2	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR coordinator
IP 3	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 4	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 5	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 6	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 7	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 8	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 9	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 10	Male	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 11	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 12	Male	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 13	Male	University/social work	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 14	Female	University/behavioural science	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 15	Male	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 16	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 17	Male	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR consultant
IP 18	Female	University/HR	Public	Municipality	HR specialist
IP 19	Male	University/HR	Public	County Council	HR consultant
IP 20	Female	University/HR	Public	County Council	HR consultant
IP 21	Female	University/HR	Public	County Council	HR specialist
IP 22	Female	University/HR	Public	County Council	HR consultant
IP 23	Female	Upper secondary	Public	Government agency	HR strategist
IP 24	Female	University/HR	Public	Government agency	HR strategist
IP 25	Female	University/HR	Private	Industrial company	HR specialist
IP 26	Female	Upper secondary	Private	Industrial company	HR coordinator
IP 27	Male	University/HR	Private	Industrial company	HR specialist
IP 28	Female	University/HR	Private	Industrial company	HR specialist
IP 29	Female	University/HR	Private	Industrial company	HR consultant
IP 30	Male	Upper secondary/military	Private	Industrial company	HR business partner
IP 31	Female	University/HR	Private	Industrial company	HR business partner
IP 32	Female	University/behavioural science	Private	Industrial company	HR business partner
IP 33	Female	University/HR	Private	Industrial company	HR business partner
IP 34	Female	University/HR	Public	Government agency	HR partner

Table 1.
The respondents

created in NVivo 12. The names of the codes reflected core concepts contained in the theoretical background of this paper and in the research questions. In this way, the coding process helped us to organise and interpret the interview data. In the final phase, we discussed findings that emerged from the previous steps and developed a shared understanding of the data in relation to existing research. The analysis and interpretation process involved an iterative interaction between data and theory (Danermark, 2002).

Analysis of prior empirical studies

During the literature search we found no previous methodical attempts to assemble and review research on the daily work of HR practitioners. As noted, a total of nine articles satisfied the inclusion criteria, which included the criterion of having a focus on how HR practitioners carry out their daily work. However, the foci of these studies varied significantly, and their main aims were not to cast light on HR practitioners' daily work. Rather, in most articles, this was a minor part of the findings. Moreover, most of the studies included data obtained from several different actors (e.g. managers at different levels, users of HR services and union representatives), not just HR practitioners. Thus, we extracted only the findings that were relevant to the present study's aim and focal research question.

Four themes emerged from our analysis of the included studies. The first theme was that HR practitioners' daily work revolves around meeting the needs of stakeholders within the organisation. This involved a balancing act in order to satisfy the interests of several stakeholders (Lang and Rego, 2015) and to be visible within the organisation so as not to be perceived as "sitting in their ivory tower" (Harris, 2007; Wright, 2008). The most important stakeholder was managers at different levels (Glover and Butler, 2012; Harris, 2007; Heizmann and Fox, 2019; Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat, 2009; Khatri and Budhwar, 2002; Lang and Rego, 2015; Roche and Teague, 2012; Welch and Welch, 2012; Wright, 2008). In their relationships with managers, HR practitioners were typically described as "service providers" (Heizmann and Fox, 2019; Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat, 2009) who gained trust and legitimacy by solving managers' problems (Harris, 2007; Lang and Rego, 2015). In addition, they also offered support by coaching and mentoring managers (Roche and Teague, 2012), or by acting as sounding boards (Wright, 2008). However, some studies found that HR practitioners lacked status and legitimacy, which complicated relationship-building with managers. In general, HR practitioners were not seen as having the sought-after business acumen (Lang and Rego, 2015; Wright, 2008). Thus, the willingness of HR practitioners to work in partnership with managers was not always reciprocated by managers (Heizmann and Fox, 2019). Furthermore, several studies also highlighted the nature of relationships with non-managerial employees as stakeholders (Harris, 2007; Heizmann and Fox, 2019; Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat, 2009; Lang and Rego, 2015; Welch and Welch, 2012), which in most cases was found to be problematic. This was because striving to enact the modern HR roles (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) caused HR practitioners to neglect their traditional employee-focussed roles, such as being an employee advocate and champion, in favour of working in partnership with managers (Heizmann and Fox, 2019). Harris (2007) argued that this shift in focus caused HR to become too distanced from the core work activities in organisations.

The second theme was tensions between attending to both operational and strategic work activities. This balancing act was mentioned in all the reviewed studies, with reference to the grand HRM transformation narrative. The increased focus on strategic work created tensions between HR and line managers. While senior management and senior HR practitioners supported the transformation (Harris, 2007), line managers wanted HR practitioners to maintain their involvement in operational matters (Harris, 2007; Wright, 2008), thus stemming the increasing devolvement of HRM activities to line managers (Heizmann and Fox, 2019). The HR practitioners felt conflicted – they wanted to take on a more strategic role,

but they also saw the need to retain the traditional operational, maintenance role (Wright, 2008). Findings also showed that although HR practitioners believed they were contributing strategically, top management was not of the same opinion (Khatri and Budhwar, 2002). Several of the studies also problematised the neat distinction between operational and strategic work. Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat (2009) noted that the SHRM project was vague and that there was lack of clarity about what taking on a strategic HR role actually involved. Glover and Butler (2012, p. 206) argued that it was difficult to “neatly pigeonhole roles”, because HR managers could work in change agent mode, while at the same time keep one eye on the HR compliance issues. Moreover, Welch and Welch (2012) claimed that the division between strategic and operational work was difficult to sustain in practice as some operational activities had strategic elements.

The third theme that emerged from our analysis of four of the papers concerned HR practitioners seeking to be proactive, but constantly being drawn into reactive, problem-solving activities (Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat, 2009; Khatri and Budhwar, 2002; Roche and Teague, 2012; Welch and Welch, 2012). In Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat (2009), the nature of HR practitioners’ work was described as mainly comprising “fire-fighting activities” that were short-term and reactive. Similarly, in Khatri and Budhwar’s (2002) study, HR work was perceived as highly administrative and when problems occurred, HR practitioners would solve them reactively. Roche and Teague (2012) found that HR practitioners often put longer-term issues on hold to attend to short-term concerns. In the study by Welch and Welch (2012), five companies were compared in terms of the reactive-proactive dimension and the researchers found that four of the companies displayed an overall reactive profile. The authors interpreted these tendencies as being determined by an array of contextual factors and the expectations of HR clients, such as managers and employees. Thus, contextual or situational factors facilitated or constrained HR practitioners’ efforts to attend to the roles they were expected to enact.

The fourth theme concerned how HR practitioners coped with demands for their services while being faced with time and resource constraints. Many of the HR-related issues uncovered in the studies were complex and time-consuming to resolve (Glover and Butler, 2012; Harris, 2007). There was rarely enough time for everything that needed attention, and consequently strategic issues were not prioritised (Lang and Rego, 2015). In the study by Glover and Butler (2012), a change process in the organisation led to new tasks emerging for HR staff and the need for HR services grew to the point where the working lives of the HR practitioners became frenetic. Additionally, the new tasks included being more involved in disciplinary matters, which created discomfort and stress for the HR practitioners.

Overall, we found several deficiencies in the reviewed studies and considerable scope for additional empirical contributions. First, there was limited empirical evidence to be found across the studies concerning how HR practitioners’ daily work is carried out. Second, most studies were conducted within private sector organisations. Third, it was often difficult to discern the findings that were derived specifically from interviews with HR practitioners, because the findings were typically based on interviews with several stakeholders. Thus, even though earlier research has provided some valuable insights into the work of HR practitioners, there is still much more that we need to know about the nature of their daily work. Consistent with Björkman *et al.* (2014), we argue that more knowledge is needed concerning the nature of HR practitioners’ daily work regarding the following questions: What is the nature of their work activities during a typical day, and what is the extent of their working hours and workloads? To which tasks do HR practitioners devote most of their working time? Which people do HR practitioners prioritise working with in their daily work? We address these largely unanswered questions through an empirical study that provides deeper insights into the nature of HR practitioners’ daily work across private and public sector organisations, as perceived by the HR practitioners themselves.

Findings of the interviews

The findings are aligned with the questions that emerged from the review of previous research and quotations from the interviews are used to illustrate these findings. The quotations were translated from Swedish to English, with a few minor corrections to the spoken language.

A typical day?

The respondents were asked to describe their work activities during a typical day, which for most of them was a difficult question to answer. Almost all the respondents explained that their work varied so much that it was hard to describe a typical day. For example, one participant (IP6) said: “. . . it's hard to describe a typical day, because no two days here are the same.”

However, there were some patterns in the respondents' answers. They usually started their day by reading emails and the contents of their mailbox then became a guide for how the day was structured. For most participants, their work was driven by requests for HR services, which usually involved a manager in the organisation contacting the HR department with a problem or a question. One participant (IP6) compared their work to a radio show that takes listeners' requests for songs to be played: “It is kind of like making requests for songs on the radio: ‘Call in and we'll play it.’”

Another distinguishing feature of almost all respondents' accounts was that a large part of their time was spent in meetings. The meeting content could vary greatly, and there were often many meetings during a day. Because of the number of meetings, it was unusual to have long periods of undisturbed time in their own offices.

Reactive work

Another explanation for the lack of time to work undisturbed in the office was that many of the respondents described daily work as more reactive than proactive. There were often urgent matters that needed attention and “fire-fighting” calls that needed to be prioritised at the expense of plans for the day's work.

I think that is the biggest challenge really because I often have a plan and then for various reasons it fails. It may be that the person to whom we want to offer the job drops out, or we do not get any candidates, and then we have to start over, and it usually clashes with other processes. (IP21)

According to the respondents, the reactive nature of their work was largely due to the fact that it was governed by work demands made by managers. To illustrate this, one participant (IP1) said: “I'm very demand-driven, so if a manager comes in with an urgent issue, for instance with an employee who feels really bad or something, I have to drop everything and support the manager.”

However, there were also respondents who mentioned that their work had an appropriate balance between proactive and reactive work. According to them, this was a result of using time management strategies so that they could respond to urgent matters. Another approach to meeting job demands was to allocate tasks to different employees within the HR department.

Furthermore, some respondents reported that their work was varied and fragmented. Participants perceived that it was difficult to switch between different issues with varying degrees of complexity. However, the variety of their work was perceived by some respondents as a positive aspect. The variety of the questions asked and not knowing how the day might unfold were viewed by some as appealing:

We will take on any issue, from small, simple questions like ‘Where can I find forms for health benefits or terminal glasses?’ to ‘We have a person who has acted violently against one of our customers, how do we handle it?’. So, it is very varied, and having this variation appeals to me. (IP6)

Working hours and workload

Although work was described as varied, reactive and fragmented, most respondents stated that they were able to maintain an average of 40 working hours per week. It was mainly participants from public sector organisations who stated that working longer hours was unusual, while it was more common to work more than 40 h in the private sector. Most respondents stated that they could largely determine their own working hours. This meant that some weeks could involve more working time, for example during salary reviews or when multiple recruitments were occurring simultaneously. To illustrate this, an HR coordinator (IP26) said: *"We have flexitime. We know what we are supposed to do, and if we deliver what is expected of us, then it is okay to leave early one day and work longer another day."*

Almost all respondents felt that they had considerable autonomy to decide how their working hours were allocated and the freedom to book meetings at their own initiative. However, there were exceptions, for example in connection with matters where other people's commitments needed to be considered. One participant (IP21) gave the following example:

Let us say that it is a recruitment process and it is for a managerial position, then there are quite a few people who want to be part of the process and then it is more difficult to control my time because I have to consider the other people's calendars.

Overall, most participants seemed satisfied with their workload and described it as reasonable. For example, one participant (IP11) said: *"At times it is a lot, but on the whole, I think I have a very reasonable workload."* Furthermore, it was not common to take work home, but this did sometimes happen, for example when there was so much to do that standard working hours were not enough, or when difficult issues were hard to let go of and stayed with them in their thoughts at home. To illustrate this, one participant (IP34) commented as follows: *"If it is a difficult matter or something that you do not know how to solve, then it can be there even if you go home, but that is probably how it is in boundaryless working life."*

Participants reported that when there was a lot to do, it could be difficult to determine what to prioritise and then direct their work efforts accordingly.

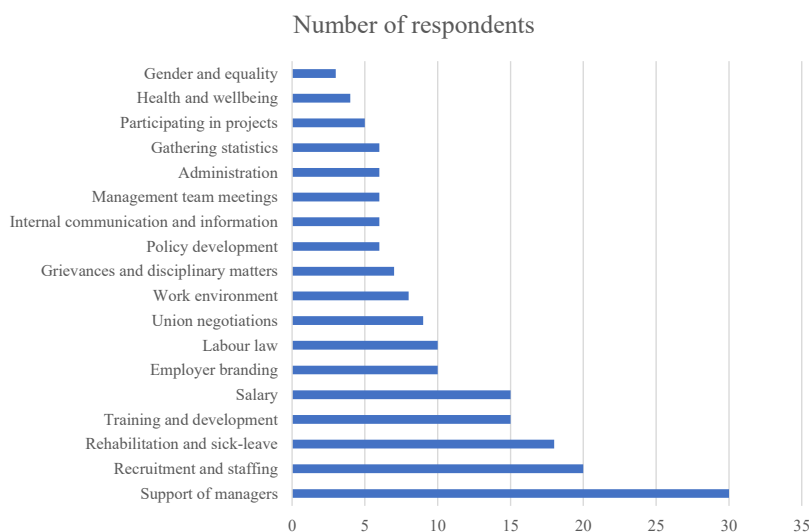
Work tasks

The analysis of participants' responses to questions about the nature of their tasks produced a long and varied list. Several of these tasks, however, consisted of traditional HR tasks, such as supporting line managers, recruitment and staffing, salary issues, employer branding, rehabilitation and wellness, grievances and training and development. [Figure 1](#) shows the most common domains of tasks that were mentioned in the interviews.

Furthermore, it was not necessarily the case that the most frequently mentioned tasks were also those that were considered the most important. The respondents found it difficult to answer the question about which tasks were the most important, because this depended on the organisation's current needs. It was also clear that many tasks were intertwined, such as labour law issues being raised in negotiations with union representatives in connection with rehabilitation cases.

In addition to the previously mentioned traditional HR tasks, the respondents also reported that they often had tasks that they did not believe were the responsibility of an HR specialist. These were tasks that they were given for various reasons, such as no other person or department wanting to take ownership of the task. For most respondents, such tasks were unwanted and took time away from their main tasks. For example, one participant (IP16) said: *"HR sometimes become the 'department for the unwanted', like: 'I cannot solve this, I'll send it to HR'."*

Examples included cleaning cabinets, key management, property maintenance issues, car rental, marketing and administrative tasks without a clear HR connection such as invoice management, handling claims forms and taking minutes at meetings. One participant (IP31)



Note(s): Only tasks mentioned by at least three respondents are reported

Figure 1.
Domains of tasks
mentioned in the
interviews

gave the following example: “One of those weird things that have fallen onto my desk is to approve the use of our car fleet. That’s such an odd thing, why is that my responsibility?”

Dealing with matters that were not considered HR’s responsibility was not easy, especially for respondents who did not have much experience in the profession. According to one respondent (IP3), tasks that should not be the responsibility of HR had to be referred to the right person or department:

I have a degree in HR and that is what I am supposed to work with, but then I know that the managers need help with everything, but it is not my job and there is probably someone else who can do it better. I can get questions that I do not think are within my job, and then I have to put the ball back in their court or refer them to the right place.

Attention to operational and strategic work

Participants were asked about their work that related to operational or strategic HR issues. Operational issues were described as the work activities that comprised the bulk of their daily work and involved performing tasks essential to operations in the short-term. Strategic work was described as work activities that were more forward-looking, and to some extent also more long-term. This type of work was often handled by a separate central function staffed by HR strategists, especially in the larger organisations. According to the respondents, strategic work was also present in their tasks. Typical examples of such strategically oriented work were writing policies, guidelines, and action plans, working with employee or organisational development issues, change management work and participating in strategy discussions within management teams. One participant (IP24) gave the following example:

We have to develop HR strategies for ensuring we have the right skills in the long run to cope with the changes we need to make. How do we cope with this digitalised world that is coming? What competences do we need?

However, most respondents stated that their work mainly involved operational issues. These issues tended to take over, and the strategic issues were then put on hold. One participant

(IP5) commented: *"I end up working a lot on operational matters, so you feel a bit more of this strategic focus would be good. But it is 'here and now', and fix and solve what is here now."*

Several respondents also voiced a desire to work more strategically and to make this part of the culture within their organisations. One participant (IP10) expressed this desire as follows:

In other words, just to bring in the strategic perspective and get it into the culture that HR is not an administrative function, it is professional staff support. It is about a little more than being good at producing lists of staff.

On this note, another respondent (IP29) expressed frustration that there was a lack of strategic perspective on HR issues amongst managers in the organisation:

Sometimes we can shout until we are blue in the face that we need to work more proactively with competence resourcing for example, to over-recruit. If we have good candidates, hire two because we know that they will be needed in the future. But the managers choose not to do it anyway, and then in three months they will be there saying 'Now we need skills'.

Documented HR strategies were unavailable in most cases, but most respondents were still able to explain the connection between HR's work and the organisation's overall strategies and goals. Making a clear connection between the organisation's goals and HR work was described with greater clarity by respondents in private sector organisations.

A recurring response, however, was that making a clear distinction between operational and strategic issues was very difficult. For several respondents, it was difficult to make such a distinction. Operational and strategic work were considered to go hand-in-hand. One participant (IP31) commented as follows:

We struggle with this almost every day because our role says that we should work strategically, but then the question becomes: 'What is strategic HR work?' And I have probably started to think that it is not possible to distinguish between them completely, because the strategic work also leads to a certain amount of operational work.

With whom do they work?

Regarding collaboration with people outside the HR department, all respondents said that they mainly worked with managers at different levels. The nature of the relationship with the managers they supported was described as very important, as this affected the work of the HR department to a great extent. One participant (IP03) commented on this as follows: *"So my role is to support managers with HR issues, but how they want to be supported can be different, so you have to adapt."*

Regarding interactions with non-managerial employees in the organisations, the respondents explained that this did not take place to any great extent. Exceptions were when the HR practitioners were engaged in domains of work such as recruitment, rehabilitation issues or disciplinary meetings. For many respondents, when employees contacted HR directly this was perceived as potentially problematic, because it infringed the principle that HR would operate through managers or through the available digital solutions. As one participant (IP18) noted: *"No, we do not have much contact with 'ordinary' employees, so to speak, we mostly have contact with managers."*

Discussion

The present study explored how HR practitioners conceive of their daily work practice. The findings revealed that HR practitioners' work was varied, fragmented and reactive, and mainly involved providing support on operational matters to managers, usually in meetings. Their direct contact with employees was limited. Operational work dominated, and there was

little time – or management expectation – for attention to strategic work. The varied, unpredictable nature of their work was perceived by some participants as a stimulating feature of the job. Furthermore, they reported a reasonable overall workload and very few occasions when it was necessary to work during evenings or at weekends. Their HR work activities were often highly integrated rather than discrete as portrayed in HRM literature, and sometimes included “illegitimate tasks” that were not seen by participants as being the responsibility of HR. These patterns of praxis were similar, regardless of whether the respondents worked in public sector organisations or in private companies.

The finding that the HR professionals were being asked to do things outside their remit (i.e. “illegitimate tasks”) raises questions about how HR’s role was viewed by line managers in the organisations. The finding suggests that the HR departments in these organisations may have not yet evolved from an administrative and operational role to a strategic one (Jackson *et al.*, 2014). This may be due to the regulation-oriented institutional environment in Sweden (Bratton and Gold, 2017), which could contribute to HR departments becoming bogged down in administration and compliance, rather than developing into strategic business partners. However, it is important to note that critical voices within the field contend that the dominant, main-stream literature discourse that focusses on the strategic business partner role has led to a situation where HRM is sitting too close to senior executives and neglecting other key internal and external stakeholders (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Marchington, 2015).

An analysis of the interviews suggests that the role of being a partner to managers (Heizmann and Fox, 2019; McCracken *et al.*, 2017; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) is of key importance and managers are perceived as the main “customer” (Harris, 2007; Lang and Rego, 2015), which shapes the characteristics of HR practitioners’ daily work. The predominant pattern in HR practitioners’ responses is that their work is highly contingent on the nature of the work of the managers they are supporting. Furthermore, the nature of HR practitioners’ work as described by the participants is remarkably similar to the findings of studies examining the nature of managerial work (Mintzberg, 1973, 2009; Tengblad, 2012). That is, managers’ work is varied, fragmented, reactive, filled with meetings and affords few opportunities to work undisturbed at the office. This is not surprising, given that the HR practitioners’ work priorities are largely governed by what managers consider to be most important. Thus, HR practitioners’ work is likely to mimic managerial work.

The emphasis in the findings on HR specialists’ time being dominated by requests from line managers evokes the notion of devolution of HRM to line managers, which refers to the transfer of operational responsibilities from HR specialists to line managers (Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2016). There are differing views in the literature on whether devolution is a sensible strategy. Some argue that devolution of operational HR tasks is necessary to free up HR specialists to engage in strategic activities (Intindola *et al.*, 2017), while others contend that devolution may make HR less strategic because power relinquished to line managers decreases the overall power held by the HR function (Reichel and Lazarova, 2013). Theoretically, devolution implies a partnership relationship in which HR specialists and line managers share an organisation’s HRM responsibility (Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2016). However, the existing evidence suggests that devolution is difficult to implement in practice (Intindola *et al.*, 2017) and the HR-line manager partnership is plagued by obstacles and problems which can lead to managers experiencing role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity (Evans, 2017). Data from our interviews suggest that there is considerable scope for improving the state of work relations between HR and line managers through measures that include: training the line managers for their HRM role and providing them with HR support resources; developing a common view of organisational policies; clarifying role expectations in the partnership; building trust between the partners; and structural arrangements such as embedding HR specialists within business units to improve collaboration between business units and HR (Intindola *et al.*, 2017; Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2016).

Interestingly, the HR practitioners reported that although their job demands spiked at times, the average number of working hours per week was reasonable. Overall, the HR practitioners did not experience excessive work pressure, and nor did they report often having to work outside normal working hours. This is in stark contrast to the job demands that managers face, who typically have to work long hours, including during the evenings and at weekends, to cope with unrelenting job demands (Mintzberg, 1973, 2009; Tengblad, 2012). A potential explanation for this finding regarding differences in job demands is that HR practitioners' absence of formal responsibility for employees may make them feel less connected to employee problems compared to managers. The HR practitioners appeared to have limited direct contact with employees. Thus, for them, enacting the role of "employee advocate" (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) involved engagement with employees through managers or the HR infrastructure, which is consistent with observations in previous empirical work (Harris, 2007; Heizmann and Fox, 2019; Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat, 2009; Lang and Rego, 2015).

The daily work activities reported by participants (see Figure 1) partly reflect the HRM literature, which tends to portray HR activities as if they are discrete (e.g. Armstrong, 2017; Werner *et al.*, 2012). However, participants' accounts of how HR activities are enacted in daily work suggest that HR activities are executed in very integrated ways (cf. Welch and Welch, 2012). For example, one participant described how labour law issues were raised in negotiations with union representatives in connection with rehabilitation cases. The intertwined nature of HR activities in practice therefore stands in contrast to the more disconnected portrayal of HR work activities in most HRM textbooks. Furthermore, participants' accounts of being assigned "illegitimate tasks" (Semmer *et al.*, 2015) suggests that the HR functions in these organisations faced challenges in terms of establishing legitimacy and professional identity, which has also been raised in previous studies (Heizmann and Fox, 2019; Lang and Rego, 2015; Wright, 2008). This finding may also indicate that the roles and responsibilities of the HR practitioners are unclear to the other actors in the organisations.

In line with previous studies (Kaudela-Baum and Endrissat, 2009; Welch and Welch, 2012), several participants said that it was difficult to distinguish operational work from strategic work in practice. This was because they considered their day-to-day operational work as being essential to the success of their organisations, and consistent with HRM literature they viewed HRM activities at the strategic and operational levels as being highly integrated (Armstrong, 2017; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Nevertheless, the participants reported that operational work often took priority over work of a strategic nature, which was perceived as somewhat problematic by the respondents. This was most likely a consequence of a lack of time because their operational work left little time for attending to strategic issues and the respondents reported they had difficulty finding time for planning. The reported lack of attention to strategic work may also have been related to weak alignment between the HR function and the organisation's strategic priorities, or a result of being at the "beck and call" of managers who mainly required services of an operational rather than a strategic nature (Harris, 2007; Wright, 2008). However, although lack of time for strategic work seemed to be a source of frustration for several participants, this does not imply that their daily work did not add value to their organisation. On the contrary, we contend that if the provision of operational support to managers is what is most needed, then that may well be a domain where HR practitioners are indeed adding the most value to their organisations.

Table 2 provides a conceptual framework that synthesises how HR work is portrayed in "mainstream" literature and in the studies that we reviewed, and what the present study adds to an understanding of HR praxis.

Limitations and implications for research and practice

The findings should be considered in relation to the study's limitations. These limitations also have implications for future research. The use of self-reported data potentially limits the

Table 2.
A conceptual
framework of
HR praxis

Nature of HR work as portrayed in “mainstream” literature	Nature of HR work as portrayed in the reviewed studies	Nature of HR work as revealed by the present study
Enactment of discrete HR roles aimed at supporting key stakeholders	Satisfying the needs of multiple stakeholders	Mimics the work of HR’s main “customer” – managers in the organisation
Attending to clearly distinguishable strategic or operational work	A balancing act between the strategic and operational	Prioritises operational over strategic work
Working in proactive and formalised ways	Working reactively and focussed on short-term concerns	The daily work is reactive, filled with meetings and affords few opportunities to work undisturbed
Execution of a discrete sets of transactional- or transformational-oriented HR tasks	Resolving complex HR tasks under time and resource constraints	Performing varied, fragmented, and highly integrated work tasks and at times dealing with unwanted tasks that are not HR’s responsibility

internal validity of the findings, because there may be discrepancies between what participants say they do and what they actually do. Observational studies of HR practitioner behaviour could be used to address this limitation. Furthermore, the internal validity of the findings may also be somewhat compromised by not obtaining the views of HR managers. Thus, future research should also include HR managers’ accounts of their daily work. Regarding external validity, the data were obtained from just 34 Sweden-based respondents, including only nine respondents from private sector organisations. To further the area of study from the current paper, researchers could conduct a wider survey of HR practitioners to see how representative the views expressed here are of HR practitioners more broadly. Furthermore, the study only provides HR practitioners’ perspectives on the nature of their daily work. The perspectives of other key stakeholders, such as line managers, would provide deeper insights into the nature of HR practitioners’ daily work. In addition, studies which explore the nature of HR practitioners’ work in different sectors and industries would help to create a better understanding of the nature of their daily work. The study was conducted in Sweden that has a regulation-oriented institutional environment which is characterised by strong labour legislation, powerful trade unions and well-developed regulations of occupational health and safety (Bratton and Gold (2017). Therefore, future studies could involve organisations that operate in market-oriented institutional environments characterised by features such as weaker corporate functions, precarious employment contracts and limited investments in employee training (Bratton and Gold, 2017). Lastly, the HR practitioners that we interviewed worked in large organisations with large HR functions and budgets for HR activities. This would influence the HR practitioners’ daily work activities. Therefore, it would be fruitful to study the nature of daily work of those responsible for HRM activities in smaller organisations. These organisations rarely have a cadre of highly educated HR experts (Atkinson *et al.*, 2022; Cardon and Stevens, 2004). In smaller organisations, the focal study participants would be line – and middle-managers who need to balance HR – and production-related tasks in their daily work.

The findings have important implications for HR practitioners in the sample organisations and potentially other contexts. First, the findings show that the practitioners were working mainly in the service of managers, which mostly involved dealing with operational matters and routine administration. In the opinion of participants, this focus was a major barrier to them contributing strategically. As several interviewees indicated, managers did not seem to fully appreciate the strategic significance of the HR function. This conflicts with the dominant discourse which maintains that the HR function should be more

strategic (e.g. Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). While there are several potential ways of helping managers acquire an appreciation of the HR function's strategic significance, two practical measures seem fitting for the organisations we studied. The HR practitioners could develop their competence in explaining with management's language how the HR function adds value to the organisation, and they could run workshops for managers aimed at altering their perceptions of the HR department. Second, our analysis of the interviews suggests that HR practitioners may benefit from adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective of HRM. For example, the interviews suggest that HR practitioners had limited engagement with non-managerial employees in their daily work. Commentators who adopt a pluralist stakeholder approach, as opposed to a unitarist shareholder perspective, contend that the HR function should seek to produce positive outcomes for a variety of internal and external stakeholders, such as the organisation's employees and its customers (Jackson *et al.*, 2014). Thus, in accordance with the pluralist stakeholder perspective, HR practitioners in the organisations studied need to align their work activities with the needs and expectations of a wider range of stakeholders inside and outside of the organisation. Third, the findings suggest that the HR practitioners should disentangle themselves from their internal focus on serving managers and be more externally focussed. Examples include scanning the labour market for prospective employees with strategically valuable skills and following global or national political developments that may have implications for HR policy and practice. Attentiveness to developments in the external environment is necessary if HR practitioners are to meaningfully participate in strategic debates within their organisations. Fourth, collectively the findings indicate that HR practitioners should bring higher levels of agency to their role enactment and workplace relationships. Perceiving their role with high agency should enable them to better cope with competing occupational demands and fend off tasks that are not HR's responsibility. Fifth, regarding implications for HRM education, the findings of this study could enrich what is taught in higher education by providing students with an account of the reality of HR practitioners' daily work and guidance on how they could respond to the associated occupational challenges.

Conclusions

Based on the interviews and a review of previous research, we conclude that the nature of HR practitioners' daily work is largely shaped by the nature of their main customers' work, which were the managers within their organisations. When managers work in a reactive and fragmentary manner, this spills over into the HR practitioners' daily work and influences its characteristics. One difference is that HR practitioners do not work extra hours to the same extent as managers, which may be because most HR practitioners at this level do not have managerial responsibilities. HR managers may work long hours, but for the reason outlined previously we did not include them in the present study. Overall, the image of HR practitioners' work emerging from this study is largely incongruent with the portrayal of their work in the mainstream HRM literature. In the literature, their work is generally portrayed as being proactive and formalised, rather than reactive and improvised, as our findings suggest. Moreover, the participants' work was largely oriented towards tasks that are typically described as operational, and there was little time – or management expectation – for engagement in strategic work. Furthermore, it was often difficult for the respondents to distinguish between the operational and strategic aspects of their daily work activities. Finally, the patterns of HR praxis were similar, regardless of whether the respondents worked in public or private organisations.

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