

Have HR strategic partners left the building? The (new) role of HR professionals from a social-symbolic perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This manuscript explores the evolving roles of HR professionals amidst global megatrends and organizational transitions, focusing on the Italian context, which has experienced disruptive adoption of new forms of work such as remote and hybrid work. In this challenging scenario, our research aims to uncover if and how HR professionals are transforming their roles or maintaining the status quo in navigating organizational changes, dealing with the upcoming working scenario, and challenging conventional perceptions of HR practitioners.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs the social-symbolic work lens, that contributes to a deeper understanding of how HR professionals work to construct organizational life, the identities of employees, and the societal norms and assumptions that provide the context for organizational action. This perspective highlights HR professionals' personal efforts, consisting of the emotional labor entailed in steering organizational transformations and, eventually, maintenance in a context where remote work has become prevalent. Data was collected through 16 online focus groups involving 76 HR professionals from Italian organizations.

Findings – Our research offers two interrelated contributions to HR literature. First, we provide pieces of evidence on how HR practitioners act as agents of change in two emerging roles: the “Wannabe Hero” and the “Ordinary Hero”. This challenges the prevailing rhetorical discourse about the so-called HR business partner. Secondly, we delve into the persistent obstacles that hinder HR professionals from making a substantial impact in addressing radical changes. These findings will provide useful insights into effectively engaging HR



practitioners as agents of change in organizational transformation, shedding light on praxis, structures, and their emotional work.

Originality/value – The paper analyzes HR professionals' social-symbolic work, which offers an original contribution to the comprehension of the activities they carry on in practice and the emotions they have been experiencing. These influence both the way HR professionals play their role and the organizational and institutional environment.

Keywords HR professionals, HR role, Social-symbolic work, New forms of working, HR activism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Organizations are grappling with disruptive challenges posed by global megatrends, including the digital revolution, digitization and digital transformation, robotization and automation, the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence and machine learning, health and social-economic crises, and geopolitical tensions (Minbaeva, 2021). In response to the growing relevance of these challenges, organizations are looking for structural and sustainable solutions that empower paradoxical trade-offs such as efficiency and creativity, productivity and well-being, autonomy and engagement, and flexibility and stability (Clegg, 2002).

This intriguing, even ambiguous, scenario represents a tremendous opportunity for the human resource management (HRM) domain, affecting human resources (HR) professionals in dealing with the introduction of new forms of flexible work arrangements that disrupt employment relations in bound spaces and structured time (Minbaeva, 2021). These significant disruptions are prompting a radical reevaluation of traditional HR practices and roles (Ulrich and Dulebon, 2015; Keegan *et al.*, 2018), pushing HR professionals to become core members of business decisions, moving from a supporting function to a “transformative driver, able to accompany and activate the changes around themselves by channeling them within and outside the blurring boundaries of their organizations (Harney and Collings, 2021).

HR professionals might act in a new, more generative role, supporting the shift towards more innovative ways of working (Lopez-Cabrales and Valle-Cabrera, 2020). Moreover, HR professionals could prevent the potential drawbacks of the ongoing transformations, such as people's discomfort and unskillfulness at the individual level, loss of inertia and control at the organizational level, and growing unemployment and social inequality at the societal level (Bissola and Imperatori, 2022). Finally, but no less importantly, they could seize this opportunity to reassess their personal and professional identity, aiming towards a renewed sense of unity, legitimacy, and credibility.

Nonetheless, the issue of legitimizing their role has consistently posed a significant challenge for HR professionals. A substantial body of literature underscores the enduring struggle to recognize the HR department as a valuable function that actively contributes to organizational goals (Heizmann and Fox, 2019). Research highlights that while line managers acknowledge the importance of human capital in deploying successful strategies, they often fail to recognize the distinctive role of HR professionals in contributing to a company's profitability (Kuipers and Giurge, 2017). This gap persists in practice, despite the evidence, the often thorough contributions of academic literature, and the aspirations of HR professionals to elevate their role as strategic business partners.

In this vein, our research aims to analyze the reflexive, purposive, skillful actions of HR professionals intending to reshape or maintain their role and organizational life. More specifically, we examine how HR professionals work “in practice” to act in a new professional role at the individual level and challenge a new way of working at the organizational and institutional levels. Furthermore, we ask if and how they contribute to reinforcing the *status quo*. Thus, our overarching research questions are:

What work do HR professionals do in addressing the challenges associated with the changing nature of work? What are the key dimensions that influence their work and roles?

Consistent with the stated aim, the study employs a social-symbolic work lens and qualitative approach (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012). The social-symbolic work lens contributes to a deeper understanding of the struggles that HR professionals face and how they actively work to evolve their roles between operations and strategy, short-term and long-term, past and future. It also enables us to highlight the emotional labor entailed in steering organizational transformations in a context where remote work has become prevalent.

Our research involved 76 HR professionals from companies across Italy, organized into 16 focus groups. More than many other countries, Italy faced profound impacts of the pandemic from its outset. This situation led to a rapid shift toward flexible work arrangements, with the number of remote workers increasing tenfold during this period—from approximately 570,000 in 2019 to 6.58 million, nearly one-third of all Italian workers, a few months later.

Our findings reveal a compelling discrepancy between the perceptions HR professionals report regarding their aims and both the ways in which they play their role and the impacts they attempt to achieve at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels. The findings contribute to explaining the so-called academia-practitioner gap (Rynes, 2007) - which refers to the misalignment between academic research and real-world practices in organizations, so that the theories and methodologies developed in academia may not always directly address or suit the practical challenges faced by managers and HR professionals and can hinder the effective application of academic knowledge in the business context - and enable us to identify six stereotypical roles that HR professionals play that characterize their approach to facing the most recent challenges.

Theoretical framework

New working challenges and new HR roles

The evolving landscape of organizational structures is increasingly adopting more flexible work arrangements, encompassing adaptations in both time and location. This transition requires a paradigm shift from “work as physical presence” to “work as achieving results.” Hypothetically, this shift may lead to a greater degree of organizational innovation, facilitate the adoption of more agile organizational forms, and reduce administrative costs (Bissola and Imperatori, 2014; Bondarouk and Brewster, 2016; McMackin and Heffernan, 2021).

New forms of organizing seem to affect HRM activities in three ways. First, HR professionals may eventually take the crucial role of agents of change, helping the organization to establish the “new” workforce mindset and develop competencies in remotely interacting with machines, colleagues, and supervisors in an open community context (Jørgensen and Becker, 2017; Omar *et al.*, 2023).

Second, workplace transformation requires a change in the employee-organization relationship. Performance must be clearly defined and measured as work results; career paths must be organized consistently; the ways of interaction and the time and space for collaborations must be openly set; organizational areas (i.e. offices and plants) need to be specifically redesigned for the new work processes to allow workers to better self-manage their time and space. HR professionals must enable organizations to manage a composite and segmented workforce. For example, there is an increasing need for practices relating to a diversified workforce that balance both organizational and worker expectations in terms of sustainability and fairness (Strohmeier and Parry, 2014; Bondarouk and Brewster, 2016).

Third, HR professionals have the potential to increase their commitment to a sustainable, human-centered approach that aligns with the characteristics of emerging organizational structures by designing and implementing solutions that prioritize social sustainability. HR professionals may play a pivotal role in enabling people to exert more influence on their job characteristics (Jogulu *et al.*, 2023). This, in turn, enhances their work motivation, contributing to socially sustainable development, or acts to develop trust-based

cooperation, which facilitates organizational innovation in virtual environments and flexible work arrangements (Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagińska, 2021; Di Lauro *et al.*, 2023). In particular, over the last 2 decades, scholars have noted the emergence of ideal conditions for HR professionals, potentially opening new career opportunities, transforming the impact they could have on people, businesses, and society, and supporting the development of positive work transformation and human-centered organization (Boudreau and Lawler, 2014; Cooke *et al.*, 2022; Khan, 2014). A wave of recent studies published after the pandemic suggested that the present time offers a distinctive opportunity for the HR function to gain acknowledgment as a critical force able to develop sustainable solutions and ensure legitimacy by promoting a renewed organizational setting in which workers remain central (Biron *et al.*, 2020; McMackin and Heffernan, 2021; Wright, 2021).

HR professionals' roles and the legitimacy struggle

Although numerous studies have emphasized the importance of strategic approaches, HR professionals frequently struggle to establish their credibility and relevance as contributors to organizational performance, thereby being confronted by issues of legitimacy.

On one hand, the HR department is tasked with taking a strategic role in recruiting, allocating, utilizing, developing, and retaining employees to support organizational performance. On the other hand, HR managers often find it challenging to consistently achieve the status of a business partner and effectively align the evolving dynamics of the economy and workforce with the needs and interests of employees and the organization and the broader societal demands (Kochan, 2004; Harney and Collings, 2021).

Building on the seminal work of Karen Legge (1978, 1995), research has demonstrated that HR professionals have lacked the power to implement effective managerial solutions due to three ambiguities identified in the personnel function (Ritzer and Trice, 1969). Firstly, there is uncertainty about whether personnel management should be viewed as a set of activities performed by all managers or as a specialized function confined to a dedicated department. Secondly, there is ambiguity in defining and measuring the unique contributions of the HR function. Thirdly, there is uncertainty regarding the personnel specialist's role as part of the management team despite maintaining a privileged relationship with employees. These ambiguities, coupled with a lack of power, have led to what Legge (1978, 1995) identified as three vicious circles. First, the absence of power in decision-making on people issues means that problems are only addressed reactively. Consequently, senior line managers often perceive the personnel department as ineffective, further justifying its exclusion from strategic decision-making. Second, the absence of clear success criteria and strategic priorities compels the HR function to cater to various demands from internal customers, reinforcing its image as a non-focused, miscellaneous department. Third, the low status of the HR function discourages new talent from entering the field, making it challenging to initiate change from within and break these vicious cycles.

Extensive research has been conducted in the decades since Legge's seminal studies; however, it is still argued that HR professionals are often seen merely as clerks of work, handmaidens, and administrative experts, primarily engaged in short-term, non-interventional, compliance-focused tasks (Reichel and Lazarova, 2013). Despite a wealth of research advocating for HR specialists to evolve into roles such as advisers, internal consultants, architects, business partners, changemakers, and change agents, the transition appears slow and fraught with challenges (Galang and Osman, 2016; Azam, 2023).

The issue of power deficiency has recently become even more relevant. While HR specialists strive to evolve into business partners, they might progressively neglect to advocate for employees, becoming mere agents of capital (Wright, 2021). Jewell *et al.* (2022) highlighted a widening gap between academic researchers who theorize about the strategic

work of HR professionals and the consultants and managers who act upon and implement HRM practices. In daily practice, HR professionals aspire to gain a strategic status (Brielmaier and Friesl, 2021), but gaining credibility and power remains a significant challenge for them (e.g. Guest and King, 2004; Jewell *et al.*, 2022; Kulik and Perry, 2008; Pritchard and Symon, 2011; Reichel and Lazarova, 2013).

In line with the noted academia-practitioner gap, our research aims to better understand HR professionals' behaviors, particularly focusing on how they engage in various work practices that influence personal, organizational, and institutional changes and how they contribute to maintaining the *status quo*.

HR professionals' roles extend beyond individual factors shaping identity, emotions, and career development, and are deeply embedded in a complex organizational context characterized by organizational work that affects the creation, maintenance, or dismantling of explicit or implicit rules, procedures, and practices. This paper explores how HR professionals work in and navigate a changing work environment; how they contribute to the evolution of careers, roles, and identities; and how they transform the organizational contexts challenging—or preserving—the established institutional order. To analyze these dynamics, we employ the theoretical framework of social-symbolic work, which examines the efforts by individuals and groups to shape meaningful patterns within social systems (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

HR professionals' social-symbolic work

Social-symbolic work involves purposeful, reflexive efforts to shape social-symbolic objects by individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). These objects are meaningful patterns in social systems that are generally pragmatic and often associated with political contests over their meaning and evaluation. Three key dimensions of social-symbolic work have been identified: discursive, relational, and material; they give rise to three forms of social-symbolic work: self-work, organization work, and institutional work. The social-symbolic work perspective enables comprehensive observation of various forms of work and their interplay, which are instrumental in shaping the construction of social problems (Karakulak and Lawrence, 2023). Social problems, viewed as social-symbolic objects, are inherently dynamic and susceptible to change through the deliberate intentional actions of engaged actors. A social-symbolic object is any meaningful pattern within a social system, whether discursive (e.g. text, talk), relational (e.g. social interaction), or material (e.g. physical items). Individuals engage in social-symbolic work to influence these patterns, shaping themselves, their organizations, and broader institutions (Lawrence *et al.*, 2019). This perspective also highlights the recursive nature of the relationships between the work and the objects it targets, underscoring a continuous interplay of influence and change (Caza *et al.*, 2021; Weick *et al.*, 2020).

Lawrence and Phillips (2019) describe self-work as the act of shaping one's social-symbolic dimension, which significantly influences both the individual and those around them. Self-work encompasses identity, emotion, and career. Identity work involves a dynamic interaction between the individual and their environment, bridging personal self-perception with social expectations. This often results in a compromise that aligns one's self-concept with what is required in the social sphere (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, identity work is not only about defining and asserting oneself but also, at times, adapting or conforming to meet the demands of the social world.

Individuals also engage in emotional work, defined by Hochschild (1979) as altering the degree or quality of an emotion or feeling, particularly in the context of the workplace (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). This form of social-symbolic work, which encompasses identities, emotions, and careers, allows individuals to shape their social environment and address challenges such as low professional status.

Consistent with the social-symbolic work perspective, individuals also engage in organizational and institutional work to uphold their *status quo*. Organizational work involves actions aimed at constructing and shaping organizations (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Conversely, institutional work involves actions aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting the institutions in which organizations are unavoidably embedded (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). According to this approach, organizational practices and their boundaries are viewed as social-symbolic objects.

Individuals engage in “boundary work,” as the actors’ efforts to establish, expand, reinforce, or undermine organizational boundaries (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010), shaping the sphere of influence, identity, and organizational practices (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Additionally, practice work consists of individuals’ efforts to influence legitimate organizational and institutional practices within a domain (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Some research studies have examined how these practices are contested and disrupted and how they are maintained and supported (Maguire and Hardy, 2009). Such studies propose that by linking self, organization, and institutional levels through individual actions aimed at personal self and collective benefit, broader institutional changes can be inspired.

HR professionals engage in various forms of social-symbolic work, influenced by their past experiences and matured consciousness regarding relevant issues, their roles, and the availability of resources within the organization. Creed *et al.* (2022) suggested that these forms of work reflect individuals’ awareness, desires, and personal beliefs. They argued that individuals utilize resources to commit themselves to the work and make a change. Furthermore, the reviewed studies tend to show that most individuals believe the business cases and act to protect the *status quo*, while others work to balance their true selves and what is expected from them via their emotions, identities, and careers. Indeed, some scholars believe that resistance to change lies at the very heart of institutional theory and behind the assumptions of institutional work (e.g. Willmott, 2015). Consequently, they have recommended identifying and analyzing the forms of work that enable individuals to create a new and more sustainable work context, and the forms that continue to uphold the existing unaltered order.

We integrate this social-symbolic perspective with HR professionals’ narratives, perceptions, and behaviors to explore how individuals engage in various forms of work—either to preserve the existing *status quo* or to change their work and role to develop new practices within organizations.

Research design and method

To answer our research questions, we selected the context of HR professionals working in Italian companies. The Italian context seems particularly significant considering that Italy, more than other European countries, was deeply affected by the pandemic since the very beginning. This radical transformation has influenced Italian organizations to embrace remote and hybrid work extensively, despite the country having started with one of the lowest levels of remote work adoption and readiness in Europe. The Italian organizational environment is diverse, featuring a mix of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), large international companies, innovative start-ups, and traditional bureaucracies—many of them have set out on different paths of investing in formalized HR practices and management systems.

The inquiry approach: focus group methodology

The subject of this study is a complex phenomenon, deeply rooted and tied to behaviors carried out within organizations, thereby encompassing the relationships between

organizational actors including HR professionals, board members, general managers, and workers. To effectively investigate these intricate empirical dynamics, we employed a qualitative methodology, collecting a comprehensive dataset that captures the nuanced narratives of decision-making processes, individual and collective actions, emotions, and the identities of HR professionals and other key players. Our objective was to understand the subjective reasons behind these processes and their potential future implications. To strengthen the significance of the data to be collected and its representation of the complexity of human interactions, we opted for a focus group methodology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). We believe that the dialogues within these groups allowed for an intersubjective analysis due to the juxtaposition of varied HR professionals' experiences and assessments. The focus group setting enabled the researchers to unveil the collective sense-making processes and the subjective perspectives of participants, offering rich insights into the underlying dynamics of organizational behavior (Morgan, 1997).

To target an informed and committed sample, we collaborated with the AIDP (the Italian National Association of HR Professionals) and its national ad hoc special interests group focused on innovation and the future of work. This team instructed its regional subgroups to select between five and seven HR professionals from each territory as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000). Participant selection was voluntary, initiated by regional subgroup representatives sending emails to all association members. These emails outlined the focus groups' activities and key discussion topics, allowing for the self-selection of interested candidates. We successfully conducted 16 synchronous online focus groups from July to November 2023, engaging 76 HR professionals across Italy. Each focus group lasted a minimum of two hours and was facilitated by a lead researcher, with one or two additional researchers responsible for notetaking, monitoring the discussion's progress, and minimizing biases in data interpretation.

The researchers developed a conceptual framework and adopted an interview protocol. The focus of the analysis was the practices of HR managers during and after the pandemic, their perceptions of their role in the new changing environment, and their relationships with others in the organizations. The conceptual framework was formalized in a one-page summary of the study, which was augmented by a short list of topics of interest and open-ended questions and sent to participants in advance of the focus group.

During the focus groups, participants described their experiences and practices inside and outside their current work environment to convey individual, organizational, and societal phenomena (Ozturk and Berber, 2020). At the end of each focus group, participants were asked to submit a short online questionnaire collecting individual and organizational demographic data (i.e. seniority, education background, company size, industry). All meetings were recorded and transcribed to ensure reliable use of the collected data and were anonymized to meet the General Data Protection Regulation.

The sample

The 76 participants were all members of the AIDP network, and some were also part of the regional-national special interest group focused on innovation and the future of work. All were committed to actively contributing to the research endeavor. The group was gender-balanced, with males comprising 47% of the sample. Participants' educational backgrounds varied widely, including legal (26%), economic (39%), scientific (0.2%), and humanistic degrees (31%). Participants were employed by medium to large companies, some with international offices, across diverse sectors such as mechanical, chemical, food, automotive, ICT, pharmaceutical, services, and consultancy. The companies they represented were evenly distributed across southern, central, and northern Italy. Most of the samples (45%) were HR professionals aged 46–55, while 26% were between 36–45 years old and 28% were aged 56–65. Service companies were represented by 62% of the sample.

Results

The analysis shed light on the phenomenon under investigation: the work of HR professionals in addressing the upcoming challenges and the different actions they take in changing or preserving their work and roles. The analysis examined the perceptions HR professionals have about what their role is, how it should be, and how it should be changed in the tradeoff between the employee's wellbeing and the company's success, namely whether they aim to become an operation manager or a strategic partner and agent of change for a more innovative and sustainable environment.

Nearly all the managers interviewed concurred that the evolving work environment requires HR professionals who act as facilitators for the transformed employee-organization relationship and as advocates for a human-centered approach. Moreover, they also emphasized the importance of rethinking organizational processes and structures. Ultimately, HR must also be equipped to implement updated tools that enhance employee well-being and contribute to organizational sustainability and innovation. The three approaches to work outlined in social-symbolic theory were evident in the HR professionals' discussions and interpretation of this new role.

HR professionals' social symbolic work: self-work

Most HR professionals defined their work in terms of the emotions they feel and the identities they express as professionals.

I was on the market, and they hired me in the company because I gained experience in different departments. I am a specialist in personnel administration as well as in industrial relations and the company needs this kind of competence since it is very unionized. I'm trying to introduce automation in some processes, such as compensation, to have more time for people or for projects that bring me and the company higher added value. My company is very unionized. The company's owners force me to apply personnel policies that the unions can accept. This is my role as an HR professional: to stay in the middle and to try to produce results for the shareholders. (HR Director of a small, medium enterprise, family-owned, male)

Other HR professionals spent a long time describing how they introduced hybrid work, underlining their identity as HR professionals who were "really" working for radical changes and keeping motivation high.

Obviously, we found ourselves working in full remote mode first, and then we decided that once the critical situation linked to the pandemic had passed, we forced ourselves to work in hybrid mode, whereby we go to the office twice a week and stay at home three times. So, I'm honest, this is a decision I made. My role imposes this decision. I am the HR director, and I think I need to take the responsibility to be credible [...]. People, either at home or at the office, work well if they have the right motivation. If they are not motivated, we must accommodate their demotivation. And this is the role of HR managers: to serve and listen to employees. This makes me really satisfied, even happy, about the work I do. (HR Director of a medium public company, female)

These examples underline two antithetical interpretations of HR professionals' self-work, which are driven by personal and professional identities, emotions, and distinctive competencies. The first HR professional is driven by a more conservative identity, working on meeting the company's needs in practice, with a very limited impact on reshaping his role. On the contrary, the second HR professional sees herself as a catalyst for cultural change, emphasizing the human-centered philosophy as a cornerstone of modern organizational practice and acting on her personal habits to test and implement radical changes.

HR professionals' social symbolic work: organizational work

HR professionals also perform organizational work oriented toward maintaining or disrupting the organizations' rules, practices, and routines in which they are embedded.

HR's customers are the company's customers. If we hire good workers, we are performing in the right way for customers. The culture of the organization reflects the company's promise to its customers and investors. In this sense, the employee's experience also has to do with customers having a better experience. We need to have sophisticated HR practices to align people's interests with the organization's ones. If we don't use culture keeping this in mind, we miss opportunities towards the market and to achieve a sustainable impact. [HR professional of a large public company, male]

These words clearly express the willingness to work in aligning the HR practices with the organizational culture that considers the organization's value in the first place, enacting an organizational change. Another HR professional stated:

It is difficult to get ownership to change organizational practices as the prevailing model is that of physical presence in the office. During the pandemic, we were forced to use the remote working mode because of a health emergency, but after that everyone came back to the office. Everyone is aligned with the company's decision, and there are no complaints from the workforce. However, our workforce is largely composed of young workers with children who need greater flexibility. So far, I'm solving case by case to ensure our young workers have more flexible work arrangements. I need to find ways to institutionalize some of these practices, but it is not easy to modify old mindsets . . . (HR manager, private medium enterprise, female)

At first sight, it seems that the HR manager is trying to change the company governance mindset, even if her work reinforces the organization's prophecy of the linear paradigm of considering strategy first instead of organizational design and people needs. This respondent highlights the desire for a more strategic role, which is not fully recognized by the organization and remains, therefore, an alibi in the self-fulfilling prophecy.

HR professionals' social symbolic work: institutional work

Social-symbolic institutional work emerged less frequently during the focus groups. Only a few HR professionals reported practices that could be related to the wider environment in which organizations are embedded. One HR professional talked about his involvement in long-term projects that do not focus only on practice and procedural changes but also on the modification of the broader culture in which his work is rooted. He pointed out that in the long term, these projects strongly impact the institutional logic rooted in the company's context, changing the culture beyond the company's borders and shaping innovative practices at large.

Specifically, an HR professional from a company strongly intertwined with the local socio-economic environment can play the role of the "true hero" capable of changing rules and influencing the external world. He described his involvement in long-term initiatives that significantly altered the company's culture. For instance, employees who were traditionally reliant on non-technological, in-person methods and accustomed to traveling long distances for work have adapted to and embraced remote working, shared mobility, and multicultural integration. The medium-term impact of his actions on the entrenched institutional logic has transcended the confines of the company, fostering sustainable practices on a broader scale. Indeed, he stated:

All this was possible because, at the basis of my working relationship, there is an in-depth knowledge of the community and a trustful relationship with both the company's owners and other stakeholders. The local public government followed us because we have demonstrated our ability to design effective solutions for our employees. Every day we reinterpret their needs. Now, for example, those who come to work want to find their desk, so we need an organizational model that manages spaces and desks. We are experimenting with one right now! (HR Director, large public company, male).

Discussion

An evolutionary lens on HR professionals' work

Significant research findings emerged from analysis of the outcomes of the focus groups through an evolutionary lens. Our respondents described their actions and experiences before, during, and after the pandemic. This longitudinal approach helped us to identify clear patterns and shifts by comparing the transcriptions of the focus groups with the corresponding time frames.

According to the participants, the pandemic served as a catalyst for HR professionals, placing them at the epicenter of strategic decisions within organizations. This period demanded agile decision-making, compassionate leadership, and innovative HR solutions. Despite their varying backgrounds, the HR professionals in the study uniformly looked back on this time with pride, highlighting their critical role in steering their organizations through the crisis. They highlighted their contributions to maintaining workforce resilience, ensuring employee well-being, and swiftly adapting to remote work demands. However, this period of powerful influence and visibility for HR professionals did not last. As organizations moved into the post-pandemic era, a noticeable rebound occurred. Some HR professionals successfully sustained or even increased their influence, while others struggled to maintain their central roles. This divergence underscores a critical competency that emerged during the pandemic: the capacity for role shaping.

The capacity for role shaping is a multifaceted competency that encapsulates an HR professional's ability to recognize and actively enhance the potential for transformative influence. This concept aligns with Holbeche's (2023) emphasis on strategic skills and the capacity to drive change, in keeping with the claim that HR professionals must evolve their skills in response to changing the world of work (Cappelli and Tavis, 2016). This capacity became particularly crucial during and after the pandemic, as it involved the ability to effectively manage exogenous changes and navigate the uncertainties and complexities of that period.

However, the discussions in the focus groups revealed a divide among HR professionals. While some were proactive and embraced the new role and the responsibilities associated with driving organizational change, others viewed this work as an unattainable ideal. Despite their desire to act as change agents, the latter group often lacked concrete strategies or held very generic and sometimes idealistic views on how to embody this role and acquire its essential skills for success. They frequently emphasized their role as mediators between managers and workers, given their ability to listen to employees and deal with the needs of employers, and lamented their limited capacity to enact change. This underscores a crucial gap in the self-perception and actualization of strategic influence among HR professionals, which has significant implications for the evolution of HR's role in organizations. A notable example of this gap emerged in discussions about digital transformation and how it may affect modern HR practice. The importance of digital technologies, especially artificial intelligence, emerged sporadically in discussions and was predominantly explored when explicitly prompted by the focus group moderators.

Six HR professional archetypes: from work to role

Although the research results span various directions and themes—a common characteristic of qualitative studies that aim for intersubjectivity and encompass a multitude of experiences and evaluations—there is convergence towards a consistent composite image. In this image, two interpretative dimensions emerge that enable us to grasp and depict the role of HR professionals: the *nature of the HR professionals' social-symbolic work* and their *capacity for role shaping*.

Considering the first dimension, the social-symbolic work framework helps to understand how individuals give meaning to and shape their social world through symbolic work

(Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). This approach identifies three main domains in which HR professionals can enact their role: self-work, organizational work, and institutional work. Self-work focuses on the personal development and shape of the HR practitioners themselves, organizational work targets the practices within the organization, and institutional work seeks to influence norms and expectations at a broader level. HR professionals’ engagement at any of these levels depends on different issues, such as the skills, emotions, values, and relationships they enact in confronting the pressures of their institutional environments.

As for the HR professionals’ role-shaping capacity, our results suggest that the HR professionals’ work has the effect of maintaining the *status quo* or spurring for the change. This capacity is a critical competency that determines whether HR professionals predominantly engage in a real transformative attitude, despite their stated aspirations.

After analyzing these dimensions, we suggest six archetypes of HR roles (Table 1), moving beyond the idealized, rhetorical, theoretical, and somewhat cynical label of “strategic business partner.” This framework offers a more realistic view of the potential roles HR professionals assume in practice that is grounded in empirical evidence.

In the following, we describe the main characteristics of each HR professional archetype.

Comfort Zone Cruiser: This type of HR professional finds comfort in familiar territory, focusing on personal stability and routine tasks. Resistant to change, they prefer to stick to what they know best. Their development is often self-centered, and they might struggle to see how their personal growth translates into broader organizational benefits. They usually adhere to traditional best practices, insist that nothing new has been invented, and use practices that maintain the *status quo*, defending their “as is” professional identity.

Wannabe Hero: Aspiring to be a strategic player and make an impact, these HR professionals often talk about driving change but tend to revert to operational tasks. They may have excelled during the pandemic but find it challenging to sustain a pivotal role in the long run, often due to a lack of skills or organizational support. They sometimes feel more acknowledged by workers than by top managers.

Rulebook Regulator: Characterized by strict adherence to policies and established norms, this archetype ensures the organization remains compliant with external regulations and internal procedures. In this case, HR professionals expressed that compliance restricted their ability to drive innovative changes at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels.

Self-Made Visionary: Proactive and forward-thinking, these HR professionals are deeply invested in personal development, with a clear understanding of its strategic and social implications. They align their growth with organizational and worker objectives, values, and aspirations, skillfully navigating their career paths to maximize impact. They are highly concerned with their personal reputation and are recognized by both managers and workers.

Ordinary Hero: Emerging unexpectedly during the pandemic emergency, these HR professionals have proven their worth and successfully transitioned into a role of vital importance. They have maintained and leveraged this influence post-crisis, actively contributing to organizational change and innovation toward a more sustainable environment.

Table 1.
HR professional
archetypes

		HR professionals' role shaping capacity	
		Low	High
Social-symbolic work	<i>Self-work</i>	Comfort Zone Cruiser	Self-Made Visionary
	<i>Organizational work</i>	Wannabe Hero	Ordinary Hero
	<i>Institutional work</i>	Rulebook Regulator	Industry Activist
Source(s): Authors own creation			

Industry Activist: Eager to challenge the *status quo*, these HR professionals act as a force for change at the institutional level. They are often involved in inter-organizational interest groups and engage with broader industry trends and societal issues, driving institutional transformations that align with a new, sustainable logic of working and contributing to the evolution of HR practices at large.

From the focus group discussions, it is evident that the pandemic significantly influenced the HR professional's role, facilitating the adoption of models with higher shaping capacity. During the crisis, HR professionals were frequently legitimized and allowed to take on impactful work at the self, organizational, and institutional levels (see, for instance, the Self-Made Visionary, Ordinary Hero, and Industry Activist archetypes). This is not surprising, since crises are commonly recognized as crucial moments for disruptive innovation; in this study, the pandemic was crucial for HR professionals to gain legitimacy (Farndale *et al.*, 2019). However, in the post-crisis period, only some HR professionals managed to sustain the roles described in the right part of Table 1, while the majority regressed to roles in which the desire to assert themselves was high, but the real impact generated remained low (Comfort Zone Cruiser, Wannabe Hero, Rulebook Regulator).

The discussions revealed that the factors enabling HR professionals to maintain high-impact roles after crises are generated at three levels of social-symbolic work. At the self-work level, it is crucial to possess up-to-date digital tools and specific high-level skills such as knowledge of technical and innovative people management tools. At the organizational work level, organizational governance's legitimization of the strategic importance of HR professionals' roles and personal qualities like charisma and competence has become decisive. At the institutional work level, which was less represented in our sample, the HR professional's ability to maintain impactful roles hinges on their ability to legitimize themselves in the external environment through actions recognized as effective and their exploitation of personal and professional networks, such as being a member of associations of HR professionals or industrial networks.

Study implications and contributions

Our study sheds light on the various roles HR professionals play and the work they carry out. A predominant concern among HR professionals appears to be defending their roles and existing practices, as well as upholding the primary interests of the organization's governance. This often relegates HR professionals to a secondary role; ensuring the workers' well-being is recognized as necessary, yet they struggle to gain substantial consideration.

Our study reveals that while HR professionals have the potential to be impactful social changers and declare aspirations to the same effect, in many cases, they predominantly engage in reactive and defensive tasks that have little to no impact. The focus tends to be on maintenance rather than proactive engagement in organizational redesign. They are more reactive, making gradual adjustments in response to organizational, social, and technological transformations, rather than being proactive by monitoring trends and planning developments to preempt problems and capitalize on opportunities. Consequently, the evolution of HR professionals' roles often mirrors a *gattopardesque* scenario, where the expressed desire to change everything often results in very little actual change, if any.

Theoretical implications

Our main contribution to the HRM literature lies in providing evidence regarding the persistent obstacles that hinder HR professionals from making a "practical and real" impact in addressing radical changes. These findings offer valuable insights into effectively engaging HR practitioners as agents of change. Additionally, our results contribute to the

growing interest surrounding the new way of working (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2022), thereby enhancing the understanding of the role of HR professionals in guiding these new working paradigms (Aust *et al.*, 2020; Lopez-Cabralles and Valle-Cabrera, 2020).

The literature on the role of HR professionals is extensive, with numerous pieces of evidence confirming the centrality and impact of this function on organizations' economic and financial outcomes (e.g. Becker and Huselid, 1999; Paaauwe and Boselie, 2005; Delery and Roumpi, 2017). Recent literature has also emphasized this centrality concerning innovation and sustainability, providing evidence of the social and environmental impact of HR functions. However, these findings often fail to align with the legitimacy and prestige enjoyed by HR professionals, revealing a gap between theoretical assertions and actual managerial practices within organizations; this is the so-called academia-practitioner gap (Kaufman, 2012). Our results address this gap by showcasing the efforts of direct stakeholders following a crisis period that thrust them into the forefront of organizational life. The pandemic, with its dramatic nature, served as a powerful mechanism for temporarily revamping and legitimizing the work of HR professionals, affording them the opportunity to demonstrate their impact. Some effectively utilized this exceptional moment and managed to perpetuate its effects by acting as change agents toward new ways of working while maintaining their central position, prestige, and power within organizational dynamics. Conversely, others adopted a reactive and non-transformative approach, thus contributing to the maintenance of, if not the regression to, pre-pandemic norms.

We wish to remark on some points in more detail, in light of the evolutionary lens we adopted regarding HR professionals' work. First, our study provides evidence of how HR professionals act as agents of change across six emerging HR role archetypes. Three of these archetypes (i.e. the Self-Made Visionary, the Ordinary Hero, and the Industry Activist) exemplify HR professionals who successfully reframe their roles, innovate within their organizations, and reshape the institutional discourse around the new relationship between people and work. In contrast, the other three roles (i.e. the Comfort Zone Cruiser, the Wannabe Hero, and the Rulebook Regulator) depict HR professionals who largely maintain the *status quo* and have minor impacts despite their aspirations to be strategic and crucial. Sadly, most of our focus group participants fell into these three archetypes. These findings challenge the prevailing rhetoric surrounding the so-called HR business partner, typical of the literature on the role and legitimization of HR professionals (Legge, 1995; Kochan, 2004; Biron *et al.*, 2020; Wright, 2021). This study contributes to the literature in this field by offering a new interpretation through the lens of social-symbolic work. Our perspective helps us to understand the various work HR professionals undertake and the defensive motivations that hinder substantial change, despite well-intentioned declarations. More concretely, our results identify a set of elements that inhibit such changes, including the challenge of aligning differing interests, the defense of HR professionals' identity as a strategic business partner, a lack of persuasiveness, the experience of emotional barriers (such as fear and frustration), and the inability to listen. These factors contribute to difficulties in effecting real change and often result in excessive trust in solutions implemented through traditional practices rather than in meaningful dialogue. However, our findings also reveal the potential for real impact and the transformation of vicious cycles into virtuous circles through the role of a "superhero" (Bissola and Imperatori, 2022). This transformation is possible only by simultaneously engaging in self, organizational, and institutional work in a combined and virtuous manner, where managing one's emotions and navigating the interests of all stakeholders, even when they are controversial, is crucial.

Second, our study enriches the social-symbolic literature by demonstrating the value of integrating personal, organizational, and institutional work into a cohesive research framework. While Lawrence and Phillips (2019) advocated for considering these three levels together, previous studies have not empirically examined their interplay. We adopted a holistic approach spanning from the individual to the institution through the organization,

confirming the importance of an integrative theoretical perspective. This approach complements other more focused streams of literature, such as research on HRM, and emphasizes the benefits of a transdisciplinary perspective in studying social phenomena and how actors engage with them. Furthermore, our findings confirm the need to act across these three domains to achieve meaningful change and highlight the critical role of the role-shaping capacity in facilitating this change.

Third, our results underscore the centrality of two critical factors for driving genuine change and filling the gap between academia and practice. On the one hand, competence, encompassing both technical proficiency and behavioral aptitude, is essential. HR professionals cannot simply improvise; rather, the credibility and effectiveness of their function hinge on the solidity of their technical expertise, their capacity to leverage technological opportunities, and their ability to design, implement, and manage HR processes and tools (e.g. Ehnert, 2009; Aust *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, HR professionals who have successfully retained their pivotal role in organizational value creation have exhibited a remarkable capacity to leverage their networks and tap into organizational and professional communities as well as local contexts.

Managerial implications

Our study contributes several relevant managerial implications. To address the gaps between theory and practice in HR management, tailored training and development programs are essential to equip HR professionals with both the theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary for their roles. Enhancing the prestige and perception of HR professionals also involves demonstrating tangible impacts and successes, which can be highlighted through case studies or industry recognitions.

Additionally, collaboration with professional associations and networks can provide continuous learning opportunities, skill development, and professional networking. These engagements help HR professionals stay abreast of best practices and emerging trends, fostering a collaborative and innovative HR community. This necessity, although evident in theory, often eludes practical realizations. Our findings suggest that despite good intentions, many HR professionals may be overly idealistic or may lack the background to effectively manage the complexities of modern work relationships and organizational contexts. Similarly, our results suggest that HR work in modern workplaces requires emotional intelligence, courage, adaptability in ambiguous contexts, and perseverance.

Finally, HR professionals may recognize the importance of employee engagement in driving business success, collaborating with various department heads to implement cross-functional initiatives aimed at fostering a more inclusive and collaborative work culture. Through effective communication and relationship-building, HR professionals can harness the expertise and support of colleagues from different departments, thereby maximizing the impact of their initiatives and reinforcing their position as a catalyst for positive change within the organization. Moreover, these adept HR practitioners demonstrate a keen awareness of stakeholders beyond the traditional boundaries of the organization. An example would be an HR director who spearheads initiatives to promote eco-friendly practices within the workplace in response to growing societal concerns about environmental sustainability. By engaging with local environmental organizations, government agencies, and community groups, HR leaders can not only garner valuable insights and resources but also earn broader support and recognition for their efforts, enhancing the credibility of the HR function and strengthening its influence in driving meaningful change both within and beyond the organization.

The competence and legitimacy of HR professionals are central to guiding the transformation of work towards more sustainable models. However, a *new* way of working cannot materialize without first establishing a *new* kind of HR.

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