

The Roles and Activities of Human Resource Managers: Empirical Results from Estonia based on Ulrich's Human Resource Model

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Abstract

The contribution that human resource management (HRM) functions and human resource (HR) manager roles make in supporting business operations and organizational performance has received wide attention. Less attention has been paid to HR roles and activities, and to the determinants that shape the performance of HR professionals within the organization. The aim of this study is to identify the HR activities and HR manager roles in Estonian organizations based on the Ulrich HR model and analyze the determinants influencing the HRM practices in organizations in strategic and operational terms, and the people and process-oriented dimensions. The results of the study reveal that the role of HR managers and their activities depends on the size of the organization, the people who are responsible for HR activities and the attitudes of top managers towards HRM. The results provide theoretical implications for the context-bound understanding of HR managerial roles and activities and offers practical guidelines for developing effective HR strategies and practices within the organization.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several years, the role of human resource (HR) managers as a key asset in today's organizations has been under intensive discussion (Theriou & Chatzoglou, 2014). There is growing agreement that organizational human resource management (HRM) practices contribute substantially to the organization's financial performance (Jiang et al., 2012), influence employee commitment (Lamba & Choudhary, 2013), innovation performance (Kianto, Sáenz, & Aramburu, 2017) and other HRM performance measures, which then lead to organizational effectiveness (Bell, Lee & Yeung, 2006; Chand, 2010; Vivares-Vergara, Sarache-Castro & Naranjo-Valencia, 2016). Human resources (HR) is also gaining importance, in particular in strategic issues and as an essential source of competitive advantage for each organization (Nasurdin, Ahmad, & Ling, 2015). The study by Hamid (2014) demonstrated the positive influence of strategic HRM practices on the company's performance (Hamid & Souai, 2014). Becker and Gerhart (1996) found that investment in human resource management (HRM) practices influences business performance in a positive way (Chuang, Jackson & Jiang, 2016). Recognizing that HRM systems have a direct impact on a number of outputs (Boyd et al., 2012), it has been claimed that studies of the key impact of management approaches rarely take into account the complexity of organizations, and a more nuanced approach is needed (Chuang, Jackson & Jiang, 2016). In addition, less attention has been paid to HR managers' roles, responsibilities and activities, and the determinants of the performance of HR professionals within the organization.

The role of HRM is changing (Bhatt, 2011; Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; Tummers et al., 2015). Today, HR managers attempt to develop employees and to build structures in order to support business operations as well as to enhance the culture within the organization (Kusumastuti, 2011). Although empirical knowledge has been collected regarding positive relationships between an HR manager's strategic role and diverse outcomes, much less is known about how the strategic role of HR managers is shaped (Yang, Kim, & Kim, 2016). The report of the Estonian Labor Force Survey and the Forecasting System OSKA "A vision of the need for labor and skills" (Rosenblad et al., 2018) stated the growing need for strategic human resource management in organizations. The report claims a large number of companies (including public sector organizations) pay too little attention to the importance of human capital management (Rosenblad, Tilk & Sömer, 2018). The research literature discusses several approaches to HRM and how it is changing and developing. At the same time, relatively little is known about what HRM influences within the organization and how in order to advise team managers who implement the majority of the HR functions. In their study, Antila and Kakkonen (2008) found that the roles of HR managers in the case of international mergers and acquisitions is affected by top and line management support, external and internal factors, by the HR function itself and most of all by factors relating to HR managers themselves. Hence, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how this works in practice. Despite multiple attempts to explain HRM practices, there is limited empirical research to substantiate which determinants influence HRM and HR manager roles.

In the light of the above arguments, the aim of this study is to identify the HR activities and HR manager roles in Estonian organizations based on Ulrich's HR model and to analyze the determinants influencing the HRM practices and HR roles in organizations. Ulrich's HR model is used to explore HR manager roles and activities in Estonian organizations in

strategic and operational terms, and people and process-oriented dimensions. Many researchers have demonstrated that organizations that have changed their HRM have introduced some form of 'Ulrich's HR model' (Kusumastuti, 2011; Yusuf, Fidyawan, & Wekke, 2017) to guide how they focus on the people within the organization, including employees, managers, board members, and others. In particular, Ulrich defined four roles for HR managers. These are strategic partner, head of change, administrative expert and employee champion (Conner & Ulrich, 1996; Kusumastuti, 2011). The current study contributes to the theory by providing an understanding of the mechanism between HRM activities and HR roles as well as proposing a possible approach to improving the HRM system through developing HR strategies and practices in organizations. As the main contribution, this study provides a conceptual clarification of HRM in Estonian organizations, implementing Ulrich's HR model and showing the potential effect of different determinants on the roles of HR managers, and their activities and responsibilities. From a practical perspective, our research can offer guidance for organizational leaders to determine the desired role of their HR managers according to internal and external contexts. This practical implication is useful, as these roles should be fulfilled in order to maximize the effectiveness of HR strategies and practices within the organization.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we introduce the concept of HRM based on Ulrich's HR model. The second section outlines the methods used in the research. The last sections present an analytical overview of current HRM roles and practices in Estonian organizations, the discussion and a general conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Goals of Human Resource Management

The main goal of HRM is to maximize the productivity of companies by optimizing the efficiency and effectiveness of their personnel (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Tepp, 2012). There are different functions in HRM, including recruitment, performance evaluation, employee training, rewarding and motivation, and creating secure job placement (Azadeh & Zarrin, 2016). Ehnert et al. (2015) have defined sustainable HRM as the adoption of HRM strategies and practices that enable financial, social and ecological goals to be achieved, with an impact inside and outside the organization and over a long-term period while controlling for unintended consequences and negative feedback.

HRM is also gaining importance, in particular in strategic issues and as an essential source of competitive advantage for the organization (Ahmad & Salman, 2019). Recognizing that HRM systems have a direct impact on a number of outputs, studies of the key impacts of management approaches nevertheless rarely take into account the complexity of organizations (Boyd et al., 2012), hence, a more nuanced approach is needed (Chuang et al., 2016).

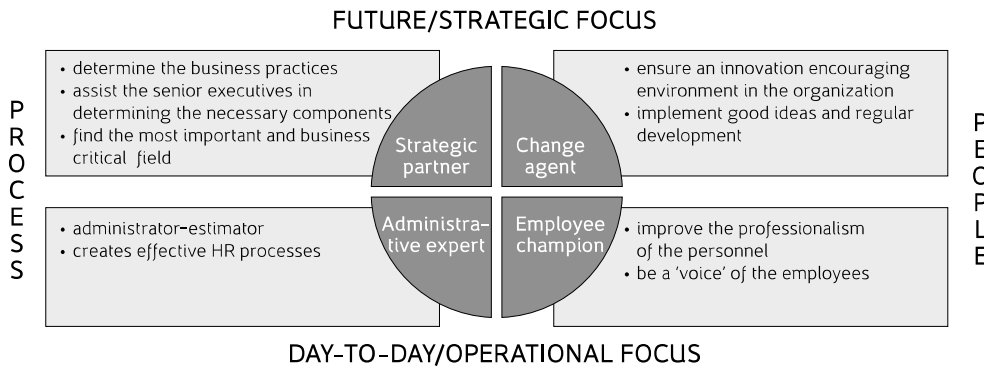
HRM refers to organizational activities that are directed to managing a set of human resources and ensuring that those resources are used to achieve organizational goals (Tiwari & Saxena, 2012). The roles of HR managers include administrative activities such as personnel administration and payroll management and more strategic activities like the management of employee training and career development (Cleveland, Byrne & Cavanagh, 2015). In the HRM literature, many management researchers have stated that in the future, HRM will need to be

proactive and responsive to the organizational and economic environments within which it is embedded (Boudreau & Ziskin, 2011; Cleveland et al., 2015).

2.2. Dave Ulrich's Human Resource Role Model

In terms of a theoretical foundation, the current study is based on Dave Ulrich's HR role model (1996) and explores HR manager's roles in organizations in strategic and operational terms, and the people and process-oriented dimensions (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Dave Ulrich's HR role model



Source: Compiled by author based on Ulrich, 1996

According to Conner and Ulrich (1996), the HR manager is responsible for identifying ways of doing business through the four managerial roles. The HR manager in the role of a *strategic partner* helps managers identify the components they need in order to implement the strategy that would require change (Conner and Ulrich, 1996; Vestberg, 2008; Saidi et al., 2014). The second role of the HR manager is as *head of change*, fulfilled by supporting organizational progress and ability to change. Endless change seems to be the modern routine in an organization and HR managers can support better adaptation to the changing conditions. Successful organizational changes always involve changes in human management practices (Ibid.). The HR manager's role as an *administrative expert* emphasizes the need to influence managers by taking advantage of professional skills (Ibid). The HR manager is also the leader of the staff. This means that he or she acts as an intermediary, bringing the concerns of the employees to the attention of the management, as well as their good ideas and thoughts. In addition, continuous work is needed to improve the professionalism of the personnel; the HR manager should also have a "staff voice" before the management. In the role of an *employee champion*, the HR manager provides training and development opportunities for employees (Conner & Ulrich, 1996; Saidi et al., 2014; Vestberg, 2008).

While Ulrich emphasizes the position of HR manager as a leader and strategic business partner within the organization, this opportunity was limited in the 1980s and is likely to continue to be limited in many organizations because of the lack of power afforded to HR managers. In their study of factors affecting the role of HR managers in international mergers and acquisitions, Antila and Kakkonen (2008) found that HR managers focus on

how to organize their work rather than the potential contribution of HR. It can be claimed that HR managers tend to focus on “operational excellence” (Ulrich et al., 2009, 26 cit Glaister, 2014) at the expense of external strategic issues (Becker et al., 2001 cit. Glaister, 2014). It is known that when companies are mainly focused on profit and turnover, HR managers cannot bring any noticeable added value and nor can they become an authority figure within the organization (Farndale, Scullion & Sparrow, 2010). It is essential to look at the roles of the HR manager as a leader from one angle and as having a very special relationship with the employees from the other; to support other managers within an organization in different processes while at the same time managing their own HR department (Vestberg, 2008). Björkman et al. (2014) suggest that there is a need to study HR practitioners and practices, focusing on the everyday activities that the HR professional engages in within the organization. Based on the above, the first research question is: *What are the roles, activities and responsibilities of HR managers in organizations?*

The study conducted by Karasek (2016) showed that in innovative enterprises the largest role played by the HR department was as employee champion, then administrative expert, change agent and strategic partner (Karasek, 2016). Previous HRM research conducted in Estonian organizations revealed that people responsible for HR perform the role of an administrative expert (Kaarelson & Alas, 2008; Kalda, 2001; Rosenblad et.al., 2018). The current study explores which of the HR manager’s activities and responsibilities enact their roles and what roles HR managers in Estonian organizations perform.

2.3. Determinants of HRM Practices and HR Manager Roles and Activities

There are internal and external factors able to influence HRM. Pearce and Robinson (2002; Genc, 2014) talk about four external forces – economic, political, social and technological. Factors influencing business strategy include national culture and traditions, industry/sector characteristics and legislation/regulation (Genc, 2014). Today’s global economy brings numerous challenges: rapid changes, new technology, consumer trends as well as generational shifts reshaping demands and the business landscape (Bersin, 2015; Bhatt, 2011). Generational and technological changes are driving an evolution of workplace experience both in the physical space and in the tools and machines that will have a major impact on work and the workplace. New technologies in modern life may also increase the potential for harm because they allow people to reach new heights, pace of working life, repetition, and workloads that employees cannot handle alone. In addition, new technologies increase employee productivity and will likely create new types of jobs that are still difficult to predict (Hamidullah, 2018). This will also place new requirements and demands on HRM. In an era of strong competition, to be effective HRM can no longer remain the same, nor can it meet standard practices without change. To remain competitive, we need to regularly develop and implement new and proactive HRM practices. Future HRM will need to adopt an outside-inside approach where the external environment and stakeholders influence what HRM does inside the organization (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

A commonly shared opinion is that the attitude of top management towards HRM defines the role of the people responsible for HR-related issues in the organization. If top management sees HRM issues as important for the company and if they think that HRM can add value to the company, they are more likely to invite the HR manager to join the management team and through that demonstrate the importance of HRM in their organization. If top management

focuses on financial factors rather than HRM, it will cause the HR manager to remain in a non-strategic role (Antila & Kakkonen, 2008). However, there remains a lack of evidence in these areas (Antila & Kakkonen, 2008; Björkmann et al., 2014), and therefore this study explores the top manager's attitudes towards HRM. The study second research question is: *What attitudes and perceptions do top managers hold towards HRM?*

Generally, start-ups and small companies have little or no HR staff. Until a company has 50 to 75 employees, it hardly needs a full-time HR professional; a line manager can usually handle the HR activities (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Since Estonia has a small population and due to its recent historical background, most Estonian companies are relatively small (Kaarelson & Alas, 2008). For that reason, there is often no HR manager and the tasks of personnel/HR management are shared between the managing director and heads of other functions. In companies with less than 50–60 employees, the tasks of the HR manager/specialist are delegated to a person in another position (Kaarelson & Alas, 2008). As companies grow, HR departments and staff also grow (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). The role of line managers as HRM practitioners has attracted some albeit limited research attention (Brewster et al., 2016). The third study question asks *whether the size of an organization shapes HRM and who is responsible for HR-related issues in Estonian organizations?*

When a company operates a single business, it competes by gaining leverage and focus. The role of the HR manager in a single business is to support that focus through its 'people practices'. To respond to changing realities, HR professionals should focus their time, energy, and passion on creating value. Value is defined by the receiver rather than by the giver, so a focus on value means the HR manager must identify the recipient of HR services and prescribe what they receive from insightful HR work (Ulrich, 2007). It is common in the business world in the past decade to be focused on short-term financial results, and the value of a senior manager's contribution is usually only rated on the economic results from a single year. This forces behaviors with a short-term perspective and as a result, the work of HR managers is undervalued (Tepp, 2012). Some companies have fallen prey to the concept of 'clutter trap' (Ulrich, 2007). They create visions, missions, principles, strategies, goals, objectives, value statements, and other well-intended documents, but they are plagued with concept clutter and lack strategic clarity. Organizations with strategic clarity have a clear focus on what they are and what they want to accomplish. All HR development activities from training to coaching to job design should begin with strategy. Although strategy is not static but evolving, HR professionals can ensure that the activities they design and deliver institutionalize strategy (Ulrich, 2007).

Wang & Shyu (2008) found that the alignment between the business and the HRM strategy is a key factor of success for organizations. When the HRM strategy and the business strategy are aligned, the effectiveness of HR practices and organizational performance were better than "those not aligned" according to the contingency perspective. Research involving CEOs and senior managers has tended to focus on perceptions of the importance of HRM and the purportedly low status of HR managers, whereas research involving middle and junior line managers has sought to explore the relationship between line management and HRM, the devolution of HRM responsibilities, and the effects of these on employee outcomes (Björkman et al., 2014).

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

In this exploratory study, the aim is to identify HR activities and HR manager roles in Estonian organizations based on Ulrich's HR model and to analyze the determinants influencing HRM practices and HR roles in organizations. The study attempts to analyze what shapes HRM practices in strategic and operational terms, as well as in regard to people and processes-oriented dimensions. Based on the theory, three research questions were raised:

1. What are the roles, activities and responsibilities of HR managers in organizations?
2. What attitudes and perceptions do top managers hold towards HRM?
3. Does the size of the organization shape HRM and who is responsible for HR-related issues in Estonian organizations?

Based on HRM functions and practices we created a list of HR activities.

Using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, we identified the activities people responsible for HR-related issues engage in. These activities were divided into four HRM roles based on Ulrich's HR model, which has also been used in previous HRM research in Estonia (Kalda 2001; Vestberg, 2008; Laurson, 2009). In line with these studies, we also use Ulrich's HR model as a tool to identify the activities HR managers engage in and the HR roles in Estonian organizations, and analyze what determines HRM practices, roles and activities in organizations.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The study is focused specifically on the perceptions of people responsible for HR-related issues, exploring their attitudes, values, roles, everyday activities and practices in order to explore how their work is organized and how senior managers value it. Data were collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with HR staff. The questionnaire included questions on the activities and responsibilities of people responsible for HR-related issues.

The activities and practices of HR managers were evaluated using a questionnaire with 59 items administered to (n=213) people responsible for HR-related issues in their organizations and studying the business administration curriculum at the Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences. The study surveyed a simple random sample of HR practitioners, line managers and employees from public and private sector organizations. Respondents were found by asking the following question: Who is responsible for HR management in your organization? Data were collected in February 2017 by means of an electronic questionnaire based on Ulrich's HR model (1996). The importance of the survey was highlighted, guaranteeing the anonymous treatment of the information given.

The aim of the questionnaire was to determine who fulfils HR-related activities in the organization and their HR-related responsibilities. We wanted to know how the roles are enacted, questioning the prevailing divide between strategic and operational roles. The questionnaire included questions about HR activities and responsibilities, and how people responsible for HR-related issues are involved in the decision-making process. The division of the responsibilities and activities of HR managers was based on Ulrich's HR model and

according to the following roles of the HR manager: strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert, and employee champion. Respondents to the survey were asked to select from the list which HR activities they performed.

The survey sample includes 59 respondents. The distribution of respondents according to the size of their organization shows that 33.9% of respondents are representatives of large enterprises with more than 250 employees. They are followed by 33.5% of respondents who work in firms with 51 – 250 staff, and 22% who are representatives of organizations with 11 – 50 employees; 6.8% of respondents work in micro enterprises with up to 10 employees, and the same number of respondents failed to answer. The majority of the respondents (69.5%) are employed in the private sector. The number of respondents from the management level was 36.0% – 7 respondents were representatives of top management and 14 of middle management. In terms of positions, 49.2% of the respondents were specialists.

In order to support the assessment of factors influencing HR activities, practices and roles in different organizations, six semi-structured face-to-face interviews with six people responsible for HR-related issues in their organizations were conducted. The sample was formed from organizations with the best practices based on the list of “Estonian Trade-Industry Competitive Level 2018”. A simple random sample was selected from those organizations based on the following criteria: place in the competitive organization list, different sizes and operational fields. The qualitative research addressed the following questions: how are HR activities, goals and practices are realized practically within an organization; how do HR personnel view their position and roles regarding skilled, competent and committed employees (i.e. “employee champion” in Ulrich’s HR model); how they deliver efficient HR practices (i.e. “administrative experts”); their capacity for change in terms of individual behavior, communication and organizational culture (i.e. “change agents”) and how they deliver business results (i.e. “strategic partners”) in the organization. The interviews were conducted in the Estonian language. Each interview with people responsible for HR-related issues lasted for an average of one hour and was recorded. All interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed. The interviews include the following information on the HR managers:

- Background information about the interviewee
- HR manager’s activities and responsibilities
- What issues top managers are concerned about when contacting the HR manager?

Content analysis was applied to analyze the interviews based on Ulrich’s HR model. The author of the article read the transcribed material repeatedly and highlighted the activities that various personnel managers perform.

4. Results

The data reveal key issues in the roles and activities of HR managers in Estonian organizations. The results will be presented as follows: first, the main results from the questionnaire covering the activities of employees responsible for HR-related issues and how these activities relate to different HR roles and the size of the organization. Second, the main findings are presented from the interviews with employees responsible for HR-related issues working in organizations with the best HRM practices. Only in approximately 20% of cases did the respondents mention that the owners or their assistants (secretary, assistant, administrator or office manager; or managing director or owner; or accountant) are responsible for HR

matters (Table 1). The majority of the respondents answered that in their enterprises, personnel specialists and human resource managers are responsible for HRM.

Table 1. Responses to the question “Who is responsible for human resource management in your organization?”

| | The number of responses | % of responses |
|--|-------------------------|----------------|
| Director of Human Resources or Head of Personnel Division (HR Architect, HR Designer, HRM Partner) | 19 | 32.2 |
| Personnel or staff specialist | 15 | 25.4 |
| HRM activities are divided between people working in different positions | 14 | 23.7 |
| Secretary, Assistant, Administrator or Office Manager | 5 | 8.5 |
| Managing Director or Owner | 6 | 10.2 |

Source: Author’s calculations

Question 2 in the questionnaire contained HR activities and responsibilities in the organization. HR activities were classified based on Ulrich’s HR role model. The rest of the answers were divided (as a percentage of 59 respondents), as shown in Table 2. Resulting from the survey, the most widely spread responsibilities of HR employees were as follows: recruitment and selection of employees (86.4% of respondents); personnel management and personnel administration (84.7% of respondents); compilation of personnel documents (83.1%), and industrial relations (employment contracts, labour law) (81.4% of respondents). A low percent of respondents stated that the people responsible for HR-related issues deal with talent management in their organization. Only in 32.2% of organizations do HR people deal with that topic. Low response rates were also found regarding such responsibilities as preparing the business plan (25.4%) and identifying how to do business (16.9%). All the activities which were rated low are part of the HR role “strategic partner”.

Table 2. Activities of people responsible for HR-related issues and their connection with Ulrich's HR model

| Activities and responsibilities | No. of res- ponses | % of res- ponses | Ulrich's HR role, the activity is connected with |
|---|-----------------------|---------------------|--|
| Recruitment and selection | 51 | 86.4 | head of change |
| Recruitment and selection | 51 | 86.4 | head of change |
| Personnel management and personnel administration | 50 | 84.7 | field expert |
| Compiling personnel documents | 49 | 83.1 | field expert |
| Industrial Relations (employment contracts, labor law) | 48 | 81.4 | field expert |
| On-boarding | 41 | 69.5 | head of change |
| Identifying training needs and organizing training | 37 | 62.7 | employee champion |
| Workforce planning and budgeting | 35 | 59.3 | head of change |
| Designing the working environment (relationships within the organization, psychological work environment) | 33 | 55.9 | strategic partner |
| Remuneration and motivation | 32 | 54.2 | head of change |
| Organizational culture design | 31 | 52.5 | strategic partner |
| Organization and accounting for working time | 30 | 50.8 | field expert |
| Organizing joint events | 30 | 50.8 | employee champion |
| Communicating the organization's strategic goals to employees | 27 | 45.8 | employee champion |
| Internal communication | 27 | 45.8 | employee champion |
| Helping managers identify the components needed to implement a strategy that would require change | 26 | 44.1 | head of change |
| Health promotion (health behaviors, pro-healthy lifestyles) | 26 | 44.1 | employee champion |
| Working Environment (physical work environment, rooms and tools) | 24 | 40.7 | employee champion |
| Providing and developing IT solutions for HRM | 21 | 35.6 | field expert |
| Talent and succession management | 19 | 32.2 | strategic partner |
| Preparation of business plan | 15 | 25.4 | strategic partner |
| Identifying ways to do business | 10 | 16.9 | strategic partner |

Source: Author's calculations

Based on the results, we can see links between the activities to be performed and the position of employees responsible for HR-related issues (Table 3). The findings indicate that people responsible for HR-related issues act in all four roles but the activities most mentioned by employees responsible for HR issues are "personnel management and personnel administration", "compiling personnel documents" and "industrial relations (employment contracts, labor law)" which are the activities of an expert in this field. The majority of the respondents answered that the employees responsible for HR-related issues primarily deal with "recruitment and selection" (86.4% or 51 respondents). In detail this means that 30.5% of all those 86.4% are from organizations where the role of HR is fulfilled by the "HR Director or HR Manager (HR Architect, HR Designer, HRM Partner);" 20.3% were from the organizations where the role of HR manager is fulfilled by people working in different positions ("personnel work and management are divided between people working in different positions") and the same share were from enterprises where HR activities are the responsibility of a "personnel or staff specialist". The study also revealed that in organizations where HR

activities were fulfilled by a “*personnel or staff specialist*”, only 40% of respondents said that they are responsible for the development of organizational culture. The response ratio was higher in organizations where HRM activities were fulfilled by a “*director of human resources or head of human resources*” (14 respondents out of 19). A high response rate was also found in organizations where the “*managing director or owner*” deals with HRM activities – 4 out of 6 respondents gave positive answers.

Table 3. Links between the activities to be performed and the position of people responsible for HR-relates issues, % of responses

| HR activities | Director of Human Resources or Head of Human Resources | Personnel work and management are divided between people working in different positions | Personnel or staff specialist | Secretary, Assistant, Administrator or Office Manager | Managing Director or Owner |
|---|--|---|-------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Identifying ways to do business | 1.7 | 6.8 | 3.4 | 0.0 | 5.1 |
| Helping managers identify the components needed to implement a strategy that would require change | 20.3 | 11.9 | 6.8 | 1.7 | 3.4 |
| Providing and developing IT solutions for HRM | 15.3 | 8.5 | 8.5 | 0.0 | 3.4 |
| Identifying training needs and organizing training | 25.4 | 10.2 | 16.9 | 5.1 | 5.1 |
| Recruitment and selection | 30.5 | 20.3 | 20.3 | 8.5 | 6.8 |
| Communicating the organization's strategic goals to | 15.3 | 8.5 | 13.6 | 1.7 | 6.8 |
| Organizational culture design | 23.7 | 8.5 | 10.2 | 3.4 | 6.8 |
| On-boarding | 22.0 | 16.9 | 18.6 | 6.8 | 5.1 |
| Workforce planning and budgeting | 20.3 | 11.9 | 16.9 | 3.4 | 6.8 |
| Industrial Relations (employment contracts, labor law) | 27.1 | 18.6 | 22.0 | 6.8 | 6.8 |
| Organization and accounting of working time | 13.6 | 15.3 | 15.3 | 5.1 | 1.7 |
| Personnel management and personnel administration | 27.1 | 22.0 | 23.7 | 6.8 | 5.1 |
| Compilation of personnel documents | 25.4 | 20.3 | 23.7 | 8.5 | 5.1 |
| Preparing the business plan | 6.8 | 1.7 | 8.5 | 1.7 | 6.8 |
| Talent and succession management | 11.9 | 6.8 | 10.2 | 0.0 | 3.4 |
| Remuneration and motivation | 20.3 | 11.9 | 13.6 | 3.4 | 5.1 |
| Designing the working environment (relationships within the organization, psychological work environment) | 15.3 | 15.3 | 15.3 | 3.4 | 6.8 |
| Working Environment (physical work environment, rooms and tools) | 11.9 | 10.2 | 6.8 | 5.1 | 6.8 |
| Health promotion (health behaviors, pro-healthy lifestyles) | 16.9 | 5.1 | 16.9 | 1.7 | 3.4 |
| Internal communication | 11.9 | 11.9 | 10.2 | 5.1% | 6.8 |
| Organizing joint events | 16.9 | 13.6 | 11.9 | 6.8 | 1.7 |

Source: Author's compilation

The questions concerning internal communication activities provided interesting results. The highest response rates were in organizations where the HR activities are fulfilled by the “*managing director or owner*” (4 of 6 respondents) and by a “*secretary, assistant, administrator or office manager*” (3 of 5 respondents). Only 36.8% of the responses (7 of 19 answers) were from organizations where people responsible for HR-related issues were the “*director of human resources or head of human resources*” (Table 3).

Based on our results, there is a significant association between the type of people responsible for HR-related issues and the development of a healthy internal culture. There was greater response rate to question 2.19 in organizations where HR is handled by a “*personnel or staff specialist*” than from other groups. Therefore, if HR activities are the responsibility of a “*secretary, assistant, administrator or office manager*” the activities indicative of the HR role “strategic partner” occurred to a minor extent.

Based on Ulrich’s HR model, we can claim that “strategic partner” is main role of HR managers in the organizations where the “*director of human resources or head of human resources*” fulfils HR activities. We found that in organizations where HR activities were fulfilled by a “*personnel or staff specialist*”, only 40% of respondents said that their HR is responsible for the development of the organizational culture. The response rate was higher in organizations where HR activities were fulfilled by a “*director of human resources or head of human resources*.” A high response rate was also evident in organizations where the “*managing director or owner*” deals with HR activities. Based on Table 3, it can be stated that the majority of respondents answered that their HR employees deal with recruitment and selection (86.4%). This means that 30.5% of those (86.4%) are from organizations where HR activities are fulfilled by “*director of human resources or head of human resources*.” A similar share (20.3%) of answers were from organizations where HR activities are fulfilled by a “*personnel or staff specialist*” and from the organizations where “*personnel work and management are divided between people working in different positions*.”

To find out whether the HR activities depended on the size of the organization cross-tables and chi-square tests were used. A chi-square test of independence determines whether there is an association between variables (i.e. whether variables are independent or related). The organizations are divided to three categories on the basis of size as follows:

Category 1: < 51 employees

Category 2: 51 – 250 employees

Category 3: > 250 employees

The results of the test where the variables are not independent of each other and where there is a statistical relationship between the variables are presented below (Table 4-6).

Based on the results, there is a significant association between size of organization and involvement in the development of IT solutions for HR ($\chi^2(2)=12.0$, $p=0.002$).

Table 4. Association between organization size and “involvement in the development of IT solutions for HR”, % of responses

| | | Providing and developing IT solutions for HRM management, % of responses | | % of responses |
|----------------------|----------|--|------|----------------|
| | | No | Yes | |
| Size of organization | < 51 | 27.2 | 1.7 | 28,8 |
| | 51 - 250 | 20.3 | 10.2 | 30.6 |
| | > 250 | 16.9 | 23.7 | 40.6 |
| Total | | 64.4 | 35.6 | 100 |

Chi-Square Tests

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 12.000 ^a | 2 | 0.002 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 13.701 | 2 | 0.001 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 11.789 | 1 | 0.001 |
| N of Valid Cases | 59 | | |

Notes: a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.05.

Source: Author's calculations

The bigger the organization, the greater the involvement of HR in developing IT solutions for HR people in the organization. Since the p-value is lower than the chosen significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), we can reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is an association between the size of the organization and involvement in “creating a business plan (in staff-related sections)”. Based on the results, a significant association was found between the size of the organization and the involvement of HR people in developing the business plan ($\chi^2(2)=7.318$, $p=0.026$). Based on the results, a significant association was found between the size of the organization and the quality of work people responsible for HR-related issues provide on the topic of “identifying the components needed to implement the strategy” ($\chi^2(2)=7.318$, $p=0.026$).

Table 5. Dependence of the size of the organization and HR activity “Preparing the business plan”, % of responses

| | | Preparing the business plan, % of responses | | % of responses |
|----------------------|----------|---|------|----------------|
| | | No | Yes | |
| Size of organization | < 51 | 13.6 | 15.3 | 28.8 |
| | 51 - 250 | 18.6 | 11.7 | 30.5 |
| | > 250 | 8.5 | 32.2 | 40.7 |
| Total | | 40.7 | 59.3 | 100 |

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Chi-Square Tests

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 7.318 ^a | 2 | 0.026 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 7.600 | 2 | 0.022 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 3.468 | 1 | 0.063 |
| N of Valid Cases | 59 | | |

Note: a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.92.

Source: Author's calculations

Since the p-value is less than the chosen significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), we can conclude that there is an association between the size of the organization and involvement in “preparing the business plan”. Based on the results, there is a significant association between size of organization and the involvement of HR in developing the business plan ($\chi^2 (2)=7.318$, $p=0.026$).

Table 6. Dependence of the size of organization and HR activity “helping managers identify the components needed to implement a strategy that would require change”, % of responses

| | | Helping managers identify the components needed to implement a strategy that would require change. % of responses | | % of responses |
|----------------------|----------|---|------|----------------|
| | | No | Yes | |
| Size of organization | < 51 | 13.6 | 15.3 | 28.9 |
| | 51 - 250 | 25.4 | 5.1 | 30.5 |
| | > 250 | 23.7 | 16.9 | 40.6 |
| Total | | 62.7 | 37.3 | 100 |

Chi-Square Tests

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 5.251 ^a | 2 | 0.072 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 5.606 | 2 | 0.061 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .271 | 1 | 0.602 |
| N of Valid Cases | 59 | | |

Notes: a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.34.

Source: Author's calculations

Based on the results, there is a significant association between the size of the organization and the quality of the work HR provides on the topic of “helping managers identify the components needed to implement a strategy that would require change” ($\chi^2 (2)=7.318$, $p=0.026$).

Based on the results of the survey, a strong relationship was found between the employee responsible for HR-related issues and the activities that should be fulfilled by HR. The study also found a correlation between the size of the organization and HR areas of responsibility. Content analysis was used to analyze the interviews (Table 7). Every effort was made to protect privacy, confidentiality, and the anonymity of the individuals and organizations participating in the study.

Table 7. Themes from each interview based the answers of the interviewees

| The size of the organization and profile | People responsible for HR-related issues | Existence of an HRM strategy | HR activities fulfilled by people responsible for HR-related issues | HR role |
|--|--|------------------------------|--|--|
| HR 1 >250 Private sector | HR Director and five HR Partners assisted by Employment Relations Department, Career Center, HR Academy. | Yes, In written form. | Implementing the overall HRM strategy. Communicating the organization's strategic goals to employees Internal communication Helping managers identify the components needed to implement a strategy that would require change Talent and succession management Preparing the business plan Identifying ways to do business | strategic partner, head of chance |
| HR 2 >250 Public sector | Personnel department assisted by division managers. | Yes. In written form. | Personnel placement, wage setting, training. | field expert, employee champion |
| HR 3 51 – 250 Public sector | Assistant to the board | Yes. In written form. | Personnel management and personnel administration Compiling personnel documents Industrial Relations (employment contracts, labor law) | field expert |
| HR 4 51 – 250 Private sector | HR Manager | Yes. In written form | Personnel management and personnel administration Compiling personnel documents Industrial Relations (employment contracts, labor law) Recruitment and selection Working Environment | field expert, head of change, employee champion |
| HB 1 < 51 Private sector | The Head of Business | No. | Recruitment and selection, remuneration and motivation, Health promotion (health behaviors, pro-healthy lifestyles) | head of change, employee champion, |
| HB 2 < 51 Private sector | Heads of department and Head of Business | Yes. In written form. | Identifying training needs and organizing training Designing the working environment (relationships within the organization, mental work environment) Remuneration and motivation Communicating the organization's strategic goals to employees Talent and succession management Preparing the business plan Identifying ways to do business | employee champion, head of change, strategic partner |

Source: Author's calculations

Based on the interviews it seems that the people responsible for HR-related issues in an assistant position mainly engage in activities that are in the roles of an *expert* and *employee champion*. If HR activities are the responsibilities of the “*HR director or HR partner*” the person performs the roles “*strategic partner*” and “*head of change*”. An *HR Manager* in a medium-sized organization seems to engage in the roles *expert*, *head of change* and *employee*

champion. In small organizations, where the people responsible for HR-related issues were head of department or head of business, their activities engaged in the roles *employee champion*, *head of change* and *strategic partner*. The *head of business* in a small organization engaged in the roles “*employee champion*” and “*head of change*”.

The results from the study revealed that that in most of the organizations who have best practices, HRM focuses on people and values them. The interviewees mentioned that:

HB 1 ‘In the current labor market situation, it is very important to keep your employees. I do everything I can so they feel comfortable.’

HB 2 ‘If necessary, I personally support them if they have problems at work or at home.’

It can be pointed out that in small organizations where HR activities are the responsibility of the top managers, a personal approach is possible since it is easier to stay in contact with all the employees.

The data from the interviews revealed that the roles that are essential for employees responsible for HR include being a leader and key collaborator. This was reported by three interviewees, as follows:

HR 1 ‘HR partner is responsible for ensuring that all staff processes and strategies are implemented in the division he/she supports. He/she is the main partner for the division manager.’

HB 1 ‘His work is to create efficient work organization, to identify the needs of employees, and to shape the company’s face through the employees.’

HB 2 ‘I am dealing with the development of the employees. I plan employee training. I motivate them.’

The expectation of fulfilling the role of strategic human resource management (SHRM) was viewed in two different main categories – the existence of a personnel strategy and involvement in making strategic decisions. In the studied organizations, people responsible for HR-related issues seem to be involved at the strategic level. The answers to the question “what topics does the senior manager discuss with HR employees” were as follows:

HR 1 ‘Leaders are the key collaborators for the HR Director and HR partners who work closely with each other, and the HR partner is generally familiar with all the important issues.’

HR 2 ‘For example, if a senior manager has a project and goals where people are needed, he will contact the HR manager.’

HR 3 ‘As far as salaries are concerned, the manager asks me for advice. This is also the reason why we cannot talk about doing HR work because labor turnover is low and there is no classic model in this house.’

HR 4 ‘Oh, there are a lot of reasons and topics for discussion! But mostly with the desire to get advice or information about the problem.’

All interviewees mentioned the importance of the HRM strategy. Although in one small organization the strategy is not in written form, the leader values the existence of strategic goals and this is reflected in his activities.

HB 1 ‘There is no HRM strategy directly, but we follow the fact that the employee knows what to work for. There are certain standards and principles that an employee has to keep

in mind. For example, the employee and the organization (company) must contribute equally to the goals of the other party.”

One interviewee replied that they had a strategy in written form but because the organization is creative, the written principles are not important. In the investigated organizations, HR activities were related to the general management system. Most of the interviewees stated that in their organizations an HRM strategy exists in written form and it guides the HRM activities in the organization. Based on our results, it is possible to claim that the investigated organizations are aware of HRM. Managers attitudes shape what activities are priorities and this shapes the roles of the people responsible for HR-related issues. Using interviews, we identified common HR activities in Estonian organizations and the determinants that shape the roles of the HR managers. In addition, we wanted more information to support the data gathered by the questionnaire. Based on the results of the interviews, it can be said that if the people responsible for HR-related issues are in higher positions, their role was seen as a “strategic partner” and “head of change”. These findings support the fact that a relationship was found between the employee responsible for HR-related issues and the activities that should be fulfilled by HR people.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to identify the role and activities of people responsible for HR-related issues in Estonian organizations. We used Ulrich’s HR model to explore the roles and activities of HR managers in Estonian organizations in strategic and operational terms, and across people and processes-oriented dimensions.

To achieve the aim of the study, three research questions were addressed. *An answer to the first research question allows us to identify the roles, activities and responsibilities of HR managers in organizations.*

The findings indicate that people responsible for HR-related issues in Estonia perform all of the roles of Ulrich’s model. However, organizations where the HR manager is considered a strategic partner formed a smaller portion of the sample. In organizations where HR activities are the responsibility of the Head of Business, the activities of HR managers also involved strategic tasks. This result supports the idea of Antila and Kakkonen (2008) that a senior manager’s understanding of HRM determines whether HR people are involved at a strategic level. HR specialists tend to focus on traditional administrative tasks (Boglind et al., 2011; Meijerink, Bondarouk & Looise, 2013) and are excluded from decision-making (Parry and Tyson, 2007 cit Glaister, 2014). According to research by Kaarelson and Alas (2002), only 33% of Estonian HR managers were involved at the highest level of decision-making. The results of the current study revealed that HR still does not play a full role as a strategic partner. This was mainly seen in the way HR only provides critical input for strategy as required. These decisions then play a crucial role in the effective implementation of employee management practices in their organization (Sikora & Ferris, 2014). Ulrich does not assume that the HR manager will create a strategy for the organization – that is the duty of the senior executives. It is important, however, for HR people to be part of the management board (Ulrich, 1998). Khan suggests that having the necessary skills to be a business partner is strongly related to the role of HR managers in all activities to do with strategy (Khan, 2014).

In the role of *expert in the field*, it is critical to utilize professional skills in order to influence senior managers to stop regarding the HR manager purely as an administrator. Unavoidably, the remaining routine tasks include many challenges. It is necessary to find ways to perform various personnel tasks faster, more efficiently and/or more cost-effectively while retaining or improving levels of quality. Furthermore, in addition to saving resources, such an efficiency-oriented expert role will increase the importance of the HR manager, among other things functioning as a 'door-opener' and a strategic partner to the senior managers (Ulrich, 1998). Our survey revealed that offering new technical solutions to improve HRM is among the tasks of half of the HR staff, and same amount of respondents are involved in the decision-making process of that area.

Shaping the working environment (relationships in the organization, psychological work environment) is one of the activities of the role as *employee champion*. The findings indicate that shaping the working environment (relationships in the organization, psychological work environment) is one of the responsibilities of more than half of the HR people surveyed. The same amount of people responsible for HR-related issues are mostly responsible for managing work time. Promoting health, healthy behavior and healthy lifestyles are activities for HR people in the role of *personnel or staff specialist*. Our study revealed that activities for more than half of HR employees include shaping the psychological work environment. Information and communication relates to the role of HR managers being a *leader for the employees*.

The results of our study indicated that the most prevalent role of HR managers in the organizations we studied is the role of an *expert in the field*. The major tasks of HR people include preparing and completing personnel documents and managing personnel data and personnel accounts. While Ulrich underlines that such a role should not be dominated by a bureaucratic approach, in our study, the most frequent observation was that of performing activities pertaining to bureaucracy.

The second research question was about the attitudes and perceptions of top managers towards HRM. Based on the results of the interviews, we can say that in organizations where HR activities are the responsibility of the Head of Business, the activities of HR managers also involved strategic tasks. This result supports the idea of Antila and Kakkonen (2008) that a senior manager's understanding of HRM determines whether HR people are involved at the strategic level. Overall, however, it is suggested that HR people tend to play a strategic role in larger organizations.

This led us to the third research question which focuses on how the size of the organization and who is responsible for HR-related issues in the organizations influences HRM. The results of this study are in line with a previous study conducted by Tiwari and Saxena (2012) regarding HRM practices that are affected by external and internal factors, such as the size of the organization, the position of people responsible for HR-related activities and the operational field of the organization. Overall, however, it is suggested that HR people tend to play a strategic role in larger organizations. Poór et al. (2011, 2019) have also confirmed that the bigger the company, the stronger the position and strategic role of HR.

The findings of our survey confirmed that in small companies, HR activities are the responsibility of people from different positions. Usually, HR activities are the responsibility of *heads of department* and *head of business*. One previous study conducted by Boudreau and Lawler (2009) discovered the role of the HR manager as a strategic partner is essential within the organization. This study found that HR is a strategic position in larger

organizations and in cases where the people responsible for HR-related issues are the managing directors or heads of department.

Although the evidence is not clear cut, it does appear that the most common responsibilities of HR people in Estonian organizations are recruitment and selection, personnel management and personnel administration, compiling personnel documents and industrial relations (employment contracts, labor law). A surprisingly low percentage of respondents answered that people responsible for HR-related issues deal with talent management. The results demonstrate that HR activities and responsibilities vary depending on the organization size and the position of the people responsible for HR-related issues.

6. Conclusion

The contribution of human resource management (HRM) functions and the roles of human resource (HR) managers in supporting business operations and organizational performance has received wide attention. Less attention has been paid to HR roles and activities, and to the determinants shaping the performance of HR professionals within the organization. The purpose of this paper was to identify HR activities and the roles of HR managers in Estonian organizations based on Ulrich's HR model and to analyze the determinants influencing HRM practices and HR roles in organizations. We used Ulrich's HR model to explore the roles and activities of HR managers in Estonian organizations in strategic and operational terms, and the relevant people and process-oriented dimensions. The study surveyed a random sample of HR practitioners, line managers and employees from public and private sector organizations.

The findings indicate that people responsible for HR-related issues in Estonia perform all of the roles in Ulrich's HR model. However, organizations where the HR manager is considered a strategic partner formed a smaller portion of the sample. The results of the study reveal that the role of HR managers and their activities depend on the size of the organization and on the people responsible for HR activities. The author used Ulrich's HR model to suggest novel research approaches to shed new light on several open questions within the HRM field. Factors that affect the activities of HR managers were observed through four HR roles. In this study, we described HRM practices in Estonian organizations. Based on the results of the study, it can be argued that determinants shaping the roles and activities of HR managers are the size of the organization, the position of the people responsible for HR-related issues and the attitudes of the top management towards HRM. The main contribution of the study is in providing conceptual clarification of the roles and activities of HR managers and complements our understanding of what shapes HRM management.

The present study has limitations that also need to be addressed. First, there are methodological limitations. As it is known that HRM is specific and unique for each organization and sector, the results from the current study cannot be generalized to all Estonian organizations, and so a more heterogeneous sample and a case study approach are needed in the future. In addition, adopting a face-to-face interview methodology also introduces a potential interview bias. A small number of interviewees as well as a small number of questionnaire respondents means a small sample overall. Therefore, further research with a larger number of respondents, including senior managers, must be conducted.

Furthermore the quantitative data was self-reported, which may be affected by information bias and recall bias, especially in relation to reporting delicate issues.

This study was not designed for the results to be generalized to all organizations in Estonia. However, the results are likely to be applicable for many organizations that operate in Estonia. The article identified a common need to improve the understanding and the contribution of the role and practices of HRM in a selected sample of Estonian organizations, suggesting that while there may be some variation in terms of size and sector in the application of HRM roles and practices, there is a need for further development of the mechanism for linking HR strategy and business performance as an essential prerequisite for knowledge organizations. While we cannot take over the human resource management practices of other organizations, knowing the determinants and their impact on HRM is necessary when making choices based on the organization's needs. Furthermore, the methodological approach adopted in this study can also be used in studies in other countries.

As its main contribution, this study provides a conceptual clarification of human resource management (HRM) in Estonian organizations, complementing Ulrich's HR model and showing the potential effect of different determinants on HRM activities and responsibilities. Further investigation should be realized with more factors and with a larger sample. Furthermore, organizations in different countries should also be compared. We suggest that our article contributes to HRM literature in two ways. The results of the current study provide theoretical implications for the context-bound understanding of the roles and activities of HR managers, and offers practical guidelines for developing effective HR strategies and practices within the organization.

In future, it would be essential to replicate the current topic in a longitudinal study in order to track changes in HR roles and competencies. Future research into this issue will provide a deeper insight into exactly how the development of technology and other changes reshape and redefine HR roles and activities and professional competencies.

Further research should consider other essential aspects of HRM, such as the development of e-HRM and which factors affecting the effective implementation of HRM in the organization at different stages of HRM, such as operational, relational and transformational phases.

The current study made a scientific contribution to the literature in regard to roles and activities in HR within organizations, analyzing them according to Ulrich's HR model. Another clear theme to emerge from the results of the study is the devolution of HR tasks to (line) managers and other personnel in micro and small enterprises, who have a positive attitude, but maybe lack the required skills, knowledge and professional competencies in the field of HRM.

Based on the results of the study, the importance of the adoption of a more strategic role for HR people should be emphasized. The findings indicate that positive attitudes and strong leadership on the part of employers are key to ensuring that HRM can make a better contribution. The study may also offer a positive contribution to meet the immediate and future challenging context of the organization by introducing a more systematic approach and recommendations for the strategic role of HR through careful planning, positive attitudes, and support, training, and follow-up.

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