



HR as Strategic Partner

How to make it happen

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Andreas Jansson
Alexander Rozenbachs

Supervisor: Jan Lindvall

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to gain deeper knowledge in what hindering and enabling factors are influencing HR functions in becoming a strategic partner. This due to the existing disparity between research agreement of an urgent need to include HR as strategic partner and the struggle in make it happen.

Design/methodology/approach – A literature review was conducted resulting in a framework summarizing existing research on the topic including four themes; involvement; role balance, mindset and competence and communication. The authors then collected empirical evidence consisting in profound interviews with 8 senior HR professionals to outline specific hindering and enabling factors when HR trying to reach a strategic partnership.

Findings – Even if earlier research claim that the strategic process of HR have not progressed significantly our results shows that some organizations in our sample have come a long way in the integration of strategic HR partners. Even though the application of strategic partnership is different in the different organizations studied, we can see that the framework provided common themes that contain important, interrelated, factors influencing HR in becoming strategic business partners. The ability to incorporate and translate people into business strategy at all hierarchical levels is outlined as the most critical factor. HR should not stand alone, it should be incorporated as a natural part of business strategy, where management is equally responsible to meet the human capital aspects as any other aspect of business strategy.

Research limitations/implications – The concept of a partnership includes two parts. When only conducting interviews with HR professionals, the authors of this thesis is limited to draw conclusions based on one-sided experiences of the factors influencing the ability to form a partnership. With multiple interviews conducted our research does not facilitate the possibility to generalize the findings of HR business partnership in a generic manner. This because authors are constrained of the interviews personal experience and opinions.

Originality/value – For HR to reach a strategic partner role this research shifts the focus away from change needed only within the boundaries of the HR function. Instead a more holistic approach to the problem (including business and top management) is needed to facilitate a strategic partnership with the HR function.

Keywords – HR function, Strategic Partnership, Strategic Involvement, Holistic View, Decisiveness

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With this thesis we end an era, an era of 17 years of studies. Now we look forward to face new challenges as alumni at Uppsala University.

Uppsala 27 May 2016

Andreas Jansson

Alexander Rozenbachs

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1. Introduction

Organizational researchers have long recognized the need for top managers to diagnose, respond to, and even anticipate economic, political, and cultural events that have actual or potential effects on organizations (e.g., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Thompson, 1967). The dramatic demographic shift and globalization of business is forcing contemporary organizations to increase their focus on human capital as a key element in strategic planning and execution. Industries are argued to highlight the fact that the most important asset are no longer the properties or machines, it is the immaterial resources. Already in the 90's Swedish authors with considerable expertise highlighted that larger part of company values were tied to intangible assets such as intellectual capital (Sveiby 1997; Roos, Roos, Sveiby, Edvinsson & Dragonetti 1998). Already then it was argued that companies had squeezed their hard assets to a limit where little could be gained by further trimming of hard assets. The future road to growth and long-term competitiveness lays in the capabilities, intangible assets and intellectual capital of companies (Sveiby 1997; Roos et. al. 1998).

Researchers (Porter, 1985, Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Barney and Wright, 1998) and practitioners have long maintained that the human resource function plays an important role in firm performance. Most corporate annual reports boldly state that the firm's people are its most important asset. However, despite these widely held beliefs many organization decisions suggest a relative low priority of both the human resources in firms as well as the Human Resource department (Barney and Wright, 1998). Since the beginning of the 1980s research have found new interest in the aspects of human resources that can at a strategic level have economically significant effects on a firm's bottom line. A number of writers, including Bowen and Ostroff (2004) and Wall and Wood (2005) have commented that, along with the research that has established a connection between the content of HR practices and organizational performance, more explanation is required about the processes that underpin the link. Although integrating human resource functions in strategic decision making is a popular normative directive according to Bennett (1998) there is only a few published studies address the capabilities needed for HR in such integration. Resting on the reality that human capital and how it is organized are becoming increasingly pivotal to organizational effectiveness, the case for HR being a strategic partner is becoming stronger. And during the

last decade we have seen an increased call for HR expertise in senior business management teams and HR becoming directly involved in major business decisions.

To be successful in creating and maintaining a long term competitive advantage in the dynamic conditions of contemporary business environment, researchers agree that it is a necessity to look upon HR as an strategic partner (Rasmusen & Ulrich, 2015; Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015) and Lawler and Mohrman, 2003, Sheehan et al, 2016). However, as Boudreau and Lawler (2009) states:

“It is one thing to say that HR should be a strategic partner, it is quite another thing to define what that looks like and what it takes to make it happen.”

(Boudreau & Lawler, 2009, p. 15).

The argument in research is that the transformation from a traditional administrative function to a strategic partner has not been smooth, nor is it complete. Lawler (2011, p. 171), reflects on the strategic progress of the HR professional for the 50th Anniversary edition of Human Resource Management, stated that “ my research and experience tells me that for the last 20 years or so, HR has not progressed significantly in terms of its strategic role in corporations”. Boudreau and Ramstad complements the picture of a struggling HR function by stating the process of the Human Resource department becoming a strategic partner seem to have hit a wall, not being able to be the strategically significant and miss to focus and help improve strategic decisions wherever they are made (Boudreau & Ramstad 2002, 2005). And despite numerous research publications showing what HR could do to gain a higher strategic significance, research shows that practitioners are still, several years later, struggling to gain strategic involvement and influence. With this in mind, it is of interest to conduct research covering the underlying hindering and enabling factors for HR functions to becoming strategic partner in contemporary organizations.

1.1 Aim and Research Question

There have been few empirical studies covering the hindering and enabling factors in becoming a strategic partner. Most research tend to vision a utopian state of strategic HR

missing to show what factors that impact the road to get there, leaving an important gap in research that has to be filled (Bennet, 1998; Reilly et al., 2007, Welbourne, 2012). Therefore this paper will, based on a literature review on existing research in this field, provide a framework that summarizes four themes argued to impact HR functions capability to become a strategic partner. With this framework together with interviews with senior HR professionals, this thesis aim to provide a deeper understanding of what underlying factors influencing HR functions to become strategic partners. This thesis research question is thereby formulated accordingly:

- What hindering and enabling factors does an HR function experience when trying to reach a strategic partnership?

2. Literature Review

The literature review is first outlining the concept of strategic HR, its partnership and how it is referred to in this thesis. Secondly it goes into detail on four themes building a framework and explores factors influencing strategic HR partnership based on previous research and literature. Finally the framework is summarized with a visualization and explanation of the complete framework.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, research (Porter, 1985; Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Barney & Wright, 1998) have found a new interest in human resources as a strategic lever that can have economically significant effects on an organization's bottom line. In addition, the positive relationship between high involvement work practices and outcomes for the organization is now becoming more and better established (Macky and Boxall, 2008; Searle et al., 2011). Summarized by Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015), the shift in recent years practice has been characterized by four general waves; Administrative wave of HR, HR practices wave, HR strategy wave and HR and context wave. Below you find a short description of the transformation waves.

Wave:	Traditional HR function	Administrative wave of HR	HR practice wave	Strategic wave	HR and context wave
Characterized by:	Administrative Function	Administrative Function	Inside-out approach	HR practices aligned with business strategy	Connecting HR to the broader business context
	Maintenance mode	Strong focus on regulatory compliance	Starts designing innovative HR practices	A partner in developing business strategy	Outside-in approach
	Transactional tasks	Pushing HR responsibilities to line management	Customization of HR practices	Extended collaboration with business management	Challenging Business management
	Reactive			Relationship building skills	Analytical skills Proactive

Table 1: *HR transformation waves (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015)*

2.1 Strategic HR - what does it mean in 2016?

Strategy as a concept

In research Storey (1992, 28-29) argues that a strategic role could be distinguished “by its focus on environmental scanning, forward planning, integration of the business plan and alignment with business needs”. Further Johnson, Scholes & Whittington (2008) argue that strategic decision-making is about the long term and should try to achieve advantage for the organization and is concerned with the scope of an organization's activities, matching these to the environment and/or stretching the resources and competencies. Boudreau and Ramstad's (2005), and Rasmusen and Ulrich's (2015) research advocates an outside view of the firm and its context to create long-term value for stakeholders. In summary in this thesis we define strategic activities with some prominent characteristics; forward planning, alignment between business resources and business goals (efficiency); and, matching context and environment to business practice (effectiveness).

HR and strategy

We advocate that HR is supposed to be a partner in dialogue at all levels in companies where decisions regarding strategy are being taken or acted upon. This means that no matter if it is the business overall strategy being formulated or strategic execution at a lower hierarchical level at a business unit or division, we argue that the HR function is able to be part of the decision making process by adding another perspective and dimension, complementing other decision makers. As this should lead to better decision making, more efficient organizations and long term competitive advantages it is strange that so little is known about hindering factors, as research argue (Boudreau & Lawler, 2009) that practice is far from adopting this. This thesis draws on Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) and Lawler and Mohrman (2003) ideas of HR as an influential partner in strategy formulation, the sections below focus on the factors argued to increase HRs ability in becoming just that, a partner that challenge business departments to include an HR perspective to reinforced strategic decision making. Since intellectual capital and human resources are becoming a more prominent part of firm's assets and resources the need for a capability, in all levels of management, that can conceptualize and understand the role of human capital within organizations. When excluding HR in strategically important issues or the process and crafting of business strategy, businesses risk

missing out on important insights, possibilities and constraints, thus leading to be both costly and resulting in failing to maintain competitive advantage (Barney & Wright, 1998).

Partnership

Research by Worley, Hitchen and Ross (1995) states that HR has had the opportunity to seize a strategically influential role, however, it has not been taken. Worley et. al. (1995) argues that HR professionals must start grasping these opportunities. If they are not appearing HR professionals should then partner together with other functions such as finance, marketing or operations to enable a partnership that together can formulate strategy (Ulrich, Brockbank & Johnson 2009). According to Lawler and Mohrman (2003) there are three categories of involvement that can exist between HR professionals and strategy. These three categories define to which degree HR professionals are involved in the strategic process of the organization. The three categories are further explained in table 2 below;

Implementation only	Input and implementation	Full strategic partner
Minimal Strategic Involvement	Indirect role in strategy crafting	Full Membership as Strategic Executive
Responding to Business Strategy	Provides Information	Planning, Developing & Implementation of Strategy
Aligning Practice with Strategy	Implements Business Strategy with Functional Strategy	Proactive
Reactive		

Table 2: *Categories of involvement (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003)*

The first category of involvement concerns only implementation and is characterized by a reactive and executing view of strategy. The second is input and implementation, thus making HR an indirect developer of strategy. Finally the third level of involvement implies full strategic partnership where HR is fully integrated in the proactive strategic work. This regards HR as being a member of the strategy executive planning team. HR is in this category fully and directly involved in the development and implementation of business strategy. However, according to Lawler and Mohrman (2003) more than 50 percent of organizations their studies are still in the first two categories of involvement. They claim that a common reason of failure in reaching the third stage is not because of poor thinking, but rather because poor implementation.

One of the most influential researchers on the topic of HR as strategic partner is Dave Ulrich. (See Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Beatty, 2001; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). In recent writings (e.g. Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) the authors distinguishes rather simplistic when categorizing 'strategic HR' as opposed to 'transactional' HR activities. A complementing view of the strategic HR role is provided in Ulrich's later writings (2009; 2015) as the concept have come to incorporate the change agent responsibility as well as the broader term "HR leader". The HR leader is described as one professional who is credible within both the HR function and to those outside it. The ability to see beyond the boundaries of the HR function is also argued as defining for contemporary HR professionals according to Caldwell (2008). Both Caldwell and Ulrich argues for that an inside out-approach to HR professionals is necessary to reach an strategic role that have the ability to react and formulate decision support that have direct impact on business performance. As the outside (stakeholders and customers) demand is changing faster, HR cannot limit themselves by only looking with an inward lens. This due to the fact that dynamic conditions are becoming the new norm for organizations (Jiao et al, 2013). Thereby, as the HR function have the potential to make a substantial contribution when organizations are facing environmental dynamism and these are becoming characteristics of daily business, combined research argues that HR should have a permanent role as strategic partner (Gunnigle, 2013).

However, Ulrich (2015) and Caldwell (2008) argue very descriptively with goal scenarios. Their research do unfortunately lack a clear link to practical implementation, what it is that enables organizations to reach the scenarios and how to bridge existing organizations into the future. The lack of practical linkage is something highlighted in research by Prichard (2010) and Lemmelgard (2009).

2.2 Becoming a strategic partner - Four themes

The following section is covering four themes including enabling and hindering factors that organizations need to consider in regards to HR business partnership. The themes are split into two categories; internal and external. The internal themes are considering the inward looking factors regarding the setup of the HR function. The themes regarded as internal are: Mindset and Competence; and Role Balance. The external themes regard HRs approach and

interplay with its external context as strategic partner. The external factors are: Involvement; and Communication.

2.2.1 Involvement

The first concept regards the HR functions involvement. HR's involvement in formulation of business strategy has shown to be higher in high performing firms (ex. Wright, McMahan, McCormick and Sherman 1998; Barney & Wright 1998). It can be divided into two parts: involvement in top management, on a high hierarchical level, and involvement in business, referring to HR's involvement in the operations and business management.

Involvement in top management

The strategic value of HR involvement in all stages and aspects of the decision-making process has long been argued for in the HRM literature (See Bennett et al., 1998). Buyens and De Vos (2001) have stressed the importance of HR's involvement across the full range of decision-making stages, including early involvement in strategy formulation. Kelly and Gennard (2007), drawing on interviews with HR, finance and marketing directors, established the importance of including HR executive in the formal and informal discussions held by the group of senior executives who make key strategic decisions in organizations. The principal aims of the senior executive group discussions are to formulate the organization's business strategy; monitor, review and, if necessary, amend the strategy in the light of changes in the organization's internal and external environment; and, finally, to oversee the financial performance of the organization. These senior executive discussions drive the business decisions made in organizations that ultimately steer the organization's performance. The earlier the HR executive is involved in these decision making forums, the greater the potential to have an effect on organizational strategy and performance (Buyens and De Vos, 2001). Confirming the impact of HR involvement in senior decision-making arenas, Welbourne and Cyr (1999) have empirically established the positive effects of having an HR executive as part of the top management team on two measures of firm performance – long-term stock price and earnings performance. As noted above, there is now a greater expectation that HR executives will be included in decision-making forums (Kramar, 2012) and their presence in these arenas increases the likelihood that HR executives are able to elevate HRM priorities in order to affect organizational performance. It could be argued, however, that the mere presence of an HR executive may not be enough to create a shared understanding of HRM priorities. As noted previously, actors in key decision-making groups,

at times, represent competing interests and vie with others to have their individual agenda heard. An HR executive who is politically skilled is therefore more likely to have influence in decision-making discussions. Treadway et al. (2013) draw from Ferris et al. (2007) to describe political skill as being reflective of an interrelated set of social competencies.

Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) argue for the importance of a unified commitment from the top management group for HR initiatives. The authors explain that when decisions are taken about the introduction and implementation of new HR practices, the support of the chief executive and other senior executives is critical. To gain such support, however, is not assured according to Pritchard (2010) her discussion of the transition to a strategic HR partner identity until HR professionals have socially constructed a strategic identity legitimizing that HR can improve business performance. This is important as it contributes to developing a shared understanding of the meaning of what the HR strategic partnership can accomplish in terms of enhanced organizational performance.

Involvement in business

Research (Harris et al. 2011) states that HR functions have started to ask the questions that really matter to business. Moving from analyzing historical data and transactional information. This is one step in the process regarding HR-functions involvement in analytics. However, what it refers to, to be the most important aspect is the modeling process of what analytics is to be done. Not much can be gained if HR lacks business understanding and how HR connects to overall business performance.

Rasmussen and Ulrich (2015) find that HR-practice and interventions are not only about analytics but is highly impacted by different opinions and point of views. Sheehan et al. (2015) underscores that the importance of legitimate authority of the HR function is enabled by a higher political skill level, and thus leading HR functions to have a greater strategic involvement and impact. Rasmussen and Ulrich (2015) continues by raising the importance of combining qualitative data, intuition and experience, but perhaps most paramount, co-creation and coherency with stakeholder to connect HR-decision-support with business and business challenges (Rasmussen & Ulrich 2015).

To become a trustworthy advisor to business management, Prichard (2010) underlines two factors that HR-professionals need. One is to know their individual or client and how to sell to that individual and build a personal relationship. The second starts with trust building, by delivering on the small things. Without a quality on simple tasks management will not trust HR-partners with bigger involvement in more strategic tasks (Prichard 2010).

One way to become involved in business that is presented by Rasmussen and Ulrich (2015) who suggest that HR need deep, predicting analytics integrated in an end-to-end process through the whole business to create and sustain a partnership. Angrave et. al. (Angrave, Charlwood, Kirkpatric, Lawrence & Stuart 2015) argue that HR need to have a strategic understanding of how organizations human recourses can elevate business performance, then be able to convert it into something unique to its organization, thus gaining a competitive advantage. Another view is presented by Prichard (2010) who argues that the involvement as strategic partner, that enables HR-partners to fill a gap, works as a balancing influence with (not an HR-role) an HR identity. When being a strategic partner, HR managers argue to have more time to focus on a strategic dialogue and thus being able to understand business and what actions are to be taken to reach a strategic goal, or be able to better counsel management with important insights seen from an HR perspective (Prichard 2010).

Internalization

According to Sheehan and Scafidi (2005) the devolution of HRM responsibilities to the line function represents a further important feature of strategic HR integration in the organization. Although there is evidence of increased line involvement in the management of human resources, there is still some resistance to the uptake of HR responsibilities at the line level (Currie and Procter, 2001). Hope-Hailey et al. (1997) have found that responsibilities differ according to the specific HRM area. In line with this Currie and Procter (2001) and Sheehan and Scafidi (2005) have suggested that rather than a devolution of responsibilities, a shared responsibility between HR and line managers is preferable as strategic initiatives have better chance to anchor in such setting.

2.2.2 Mindset and Competence

Mindset

HR professionals have historically spent too little time on strategic HR activities. A traditional mindset is often focused on transactional and basic activities. Contrary, a strategic HR mindset is more focused on organizational transformations. Research is stating that the mindset of contemporary HR functions is very transactional by its nature and culture (Becton & Schraeder 2009). There is a tendency that this focus is leading HR down a path of basic activities that are pulling away from value creation, and hinders HR from being viewed as a strategic resource. The simplistic and transactional mindset is hindering HR from reaching a strategic role in organizations, which is why they need to change to a more suiting mindset for a strategic partner. HR functions tend to get stuck in what Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) refers to as the administrative wave of HR. To reach beyond the administrative roles, the change in mindset can enable HR to become more involved and comfortable with using managerial tools and techniques, and thereby becoming more consultative towards its business (Barney & Wright 1998; Becton & Schraeder 2009). One of these tools is HR analytics and its connection to overall business performance.

Competence

Further, there is a relationship between HR's business competence and strategic partners involvement. Kahn et. al. (2014) have found that HR's strategic role in management teams are stronger the more HR professionals can connect human capital to the business strategy. Despite this, research (Becton & Schraeder, 2009) states that one of the most frequent hinders, limiting HR professionals to become strategic is HR's "strong focus on administration" and an inability to measure its direct impact on business performance. This connection between HR activities and business is referred to as the HC-bridge as part of the logic within Boudreau and Ramstad's LAMP-framework presented in research from 2005. Logic in this case is referring to the connection between how HR initiatives can leverage overall business performance. Other authors claim that HR needs competence in analytics to be able to underpin the link of HR-activities and impact on business strategy (e.g. Becker & Huselid, 2006; Angrave et. al., 2015; Levenson, 2005; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015). It can be seen that more successful companies are able to use analytics to link HR to organizational strategy and performance. In research published by Boudreau and Ramstad (2002; 2005) they highlight that the evolution of strategic HR activities and measurement will require a sound

“decision science” for human capital. HR functions need to model itself more closely against decision-based functions like finance and marketing, the measurement systems need to be designed to direct key decision makers to focus on relevant information. However, the competence needed by HR professionals is not to be statistical expert, rather to have analytical literacy. Becker and Huselid (2006) and Harris et. al. (2011) argue that HR professionals have to know how to ask the right questions and understand the analytics well enough to use its conclusions and give advice to management on those indicator

Becker and Huselid (2006) are using the book “Moneyball” as an example of what HR professionals must do. This ties both the competence and mindset together. HR need to use valid data to understand what matters for firm performance, and understand which HR activities will matter for successful strategic execution and business performance (Becker & Huselid 2006, p.278-279). Angrave and colleagues (Angrave et. al., 2015) underscores that in the transformation in becoming strategic, and using data driven analysis, HR professionals are the ones with the competence to understand what analytics and measures to be used to avoid wrongful conclusions and misunderstanding. Harris et. al. (2011) describes it as a path to analytic maturity. HR needs to report what happened in an unbiased manner. Followed by a diagnosis of why something happened or whatever issues may exist. Then address these issues with plans to solve the root cause. From that, develop the competence to predict what might or should happen (Harris et. al., 2011).

2.2.3 Role Balance

The theme role balance is based on a logic that the HR partner role requires a split focus on both short- and long-term time frames, as well as a compromising between transactional and strategic activities. Thus, it will discuss the role balance of HR partners in regards to time perspective and the different characteristics and priorities of the strategic and administrative roles.

In the words of Henry Mintzberg (1987), ”strategies are both plans for the future and patterns from the past”, there is a clear change of time perspective when a strategic view in opposite to a transactional practice. Truss and colleagues (Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles & Zaleska, 2002) sets forward planning as one of four factors distinguishing strategic positions possibly taken by HR. Many researchers argue that there is a forward looking, anticipative and planning dimension of being strategic (e.g. Mintzberg, 1987; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

In Ulrich and Dulebohn's (2015) strategic waves (seen in figure 1), and Lawler and Mohrman's (2003) three categories of HR involvement there is also a dimension of time, which changes depending the category. However, Harris et. al. (2011) are raising a concern, when doing predictions and looking at future needs, it is important to have the right time frame (Harris et al., 2011).

It is underscored by Barney and Wright (1998) that there is a tendency within HR, (such as in many other business functions), to struggle with a tradeoff between meeting short- and long-term goals. The need to meet short-term goal are often hard enough, and HR professionals are thus struggling to have time to focus on activities or issues with longer and thereby also often with more strategic character (Barney & Wright, 1998). Adding to this, some research find that many of HR management's challenges actually can be found in traditional transactional and administrative practices (ex. Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Gates & Langevin, 2010). This hindrance raises the importance of what Pritchard (2010) writes: delivering on the "small things" is a facilitator for HR to become a partner to business.

Balance between strategic HR and "bread and butter"

According to Sheehan et. al. (2016) the opportunity to make an effective contribution during dynamic periods is diminished by the inability to manage additional strategic role requirements alongside traditional administrative expectations. The HR professional can thereby experience role conflicts when balancing strategic management and employee expectations or administrative work tasks (Sheehan et. al., 2016). HR professionals who have integrated the roles find that there is simply not enough time to complete all responsibilities, effectively the HR professional becomes overloaded. Role overload is an issue raised by many other researchers as well, some are; Lemmergaard (2009); and, Aldrich et. al. (2015); who echoes the concern that the urgent and immediate nature of the administrative compliance and service-oriented activities tends to occupy the capacity needed for HR professionals to attend to more ambiguous and long-term strategic activities. The comment is made that HR executives who have integrated the roles find that there is simply not enough time to complete all responsibilities. Good strategic partnership is enabled when "old generalists' activities" are lifted off of the shoulders of HR managers, enabling them to focus, feel free, and be motivated by a broader management role with an HR identity (Prichard, 2010). This role balance can clearly become a hindrance for HRBPs if they are overwhelmed with administrative tasks.

Even if there has been a substantial commentary on the range of roles that the HR professional should now be developing (Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich et. al., 2009; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) Caldwell (2003) and Welch and Welch (2012) argue, that the research should now turn to considering how these roles are enacted and act in a state of balance such that the HR professional can maintain the credibility required to be a strategic decision maker in times of change. This, which is something in contrasting to other research from Lawler et al. (2004) and Ulrich's simplistic and normative view on the strategic HR professional of someone who exclusively should focus on the strategic issues, leaving traditional transactional task to outsourced resources or being streamlined due to efficiencies within the HR function.

2.2.4 Communication

As covered above, many authors claim that HR need to use data and analytics as a way to persuade strategy executives (e.g. Angrave et. al., 2015; Casico & Boudreau, 2010; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Becker & Huselid, 2006). Despite the "isolated" importance of analytics it most often needs to be conveyed with the right communication (Welbourne, 2015). In a (classic) comparison to finance and marketing, HR faces a challenge to provide metrics and communicate measures with the same strategic connection as the other two (Sheehan et. al., 2016).

Welbourne (2015) writes that the metrics and insights from the analytics made or enabled by HR has to be conveyed in a way that triggers emotions, insights, understandings and opens new perspectives for strategic dialogue among management. For decision makers the accounting systems are powerful hence they provide a decision framework for the accounting data, a framework that guides and enhances the quality of decisions that affect financial capital. Most of these decisions are made by leaders who are outside of the accounting department. Thus, HR functions will never provide measures that are viewed equally significant as long as they solemnly focus on the activities or benefits of the HR function or programs. HR has traditionally focused on reporting non-financial measurements. It regards such things that financial accounting fail to elevate, or it can show the effect of certain actions quicker than financial reporting would (Ittner & Larcker, 2003). However, according to Ittner and Larcker (2003), too few companies succeed in utilizing the full benefits on non-financial measurements. They argue that most organizations fail to identify, analyze and act

on the right measures, as well as failing to link cause-and-effect or the non-financial measures to the desired financial outcome and strategy (Ittner & Larcker, 2003). To be strategically significant HR professionals must focus on, and communicate its value with precision to be able to improve decisions making with regards to a combined business and HR context (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2002; 2005).

Sheehan et al. (2014), in their analysis of the sources of power of the HR function, reinforce the importance of developing a shared understanding of the meaning of HRM with the top management group. Drawing from Hardy's (1996) dimensions of power, Sheehan et. al. (2014) explain that the power of meaning refers to the capacity to legitimize interests through the management of meaning, using symbols, rituals and language to make initiatives appear legitimate, desirable, rational and inevitable. Importantly they add that the proposed value of HRM involvement within formal and informal decision-making processes, or process power, is often contingent on the power of meaning that is assigned to HR professionals by other managers or generated by the HR professional themselves.

2.3 Summary of literature review, aim and structure

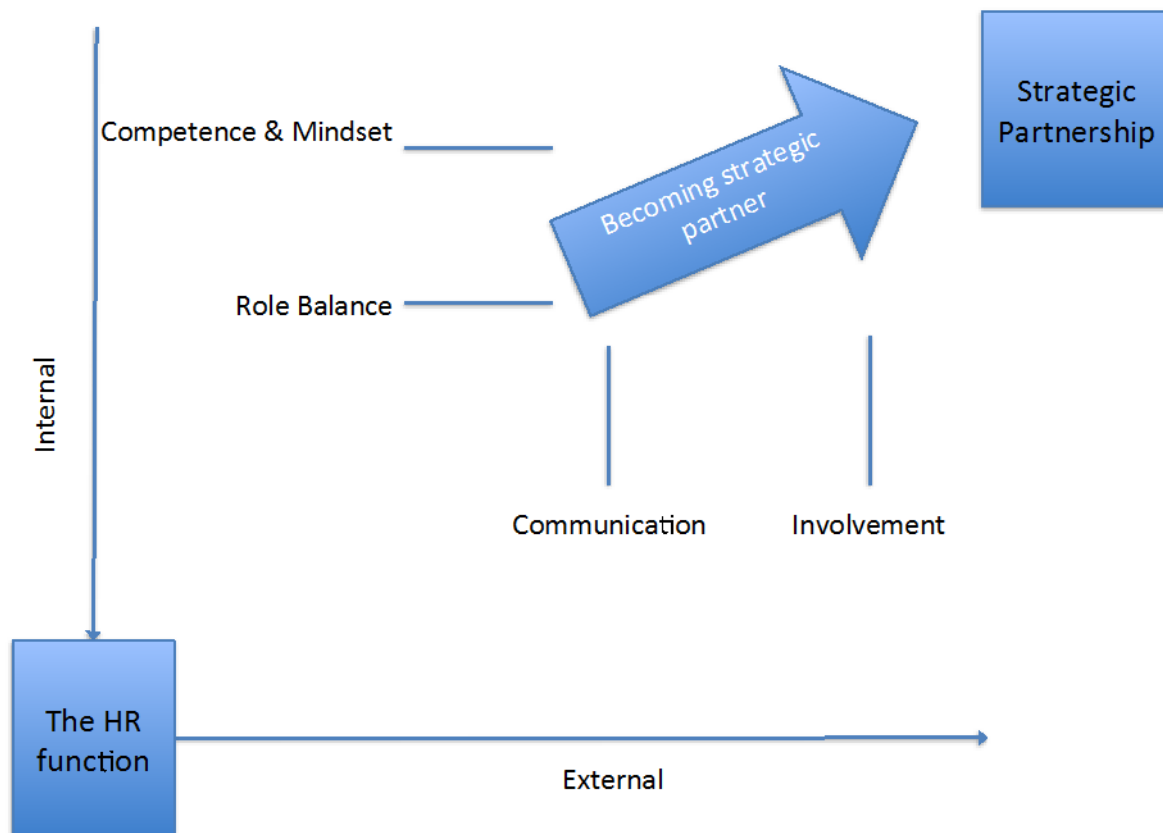


Figure 1: *Theoretical framework*

To summarize this thesis literature review, aim and structure, a graphical explanation is presented in the figure above. For HR to become a strategic partner within the organization, existing research argue for a change in HR professional's competence and mindset as well as balancing their administrative and strategic HR role. We categorize these themes as inward looking factors, something for HR to change within the function itself. These themes are placed on the y-axis. The other themes, Communication and Involvement are placed on the x-axis as these factors both go beyond the boundaries of the HR function. This meaning that they include a degree of cooperation with other parts of the organization to result in a strategic partnership. The HR professionals experience in transforming from an administrative function to strategic partner will then contribute to the analysis and our ability to draw conclusions on what enabling and hindering factors exists when HR functions are becoming a strategic partner.

3. Method

3.1 Choice of method

Based on the nature of the problem, the authors of this thesis have taken an exploratory study approach. This because the authors sought to find new insights to what enabling and hindering factors exists when HR tries to become a strategic partner. Also, due to previous research has outlined this as problematic in contemporary organizations we wish to clarify why this is and understand underlying factors to explain this phenomenon. To gain deeper knowledge and start the mapping of how strategic involvement is fulfilled a multiple case study with detailed interviews with practitioners was chosen. As our research context is based on social interactions both within and outside of the HR function we argue in line with Renstam and Wästerfors (2015) that a qualitative study is preferable. By this, our purpose was to go beyond visionary research that is prominent in the field of strategic HR research. The method ties on to the need for a more practice based understanding of the phenomenon, argued for in (Pritchard, 2010; Welbourne, 2012).

Even if our choice of method facilitated an analysis and conclusions of the hinders and enabling factors of HR becoming a strategic partner, there is of course some limitations. First, our empirical evidence is based on eight individuals' experiences. Thereby, the authors of this thesis have faced a need to determine distinctions between the reality and personal opinion. This factor was thereby eliminated by interviewing HR professionals in various industries without any personal relation, independent of each other. This increased our ability to find common factors in our empirical evidence, contributing to conclude on unbiased similarities. In addition, as the study is performed in a social context this makes it hard to repeat. Thus, choosing specific themes to discuss have increased the possibility to find common ground during the interviews, resulting in a focused analysis. Deep interviews was argued favorable to answer the research question although less favorable for a regarding generic result. However, this was not the aim of this study and the chosen method could thereby be argued valid and appropriate.

Every interview was recorded after the interview object had given their approval, this to limit the risk of losing valuable information and capture the right formulations. Before citing interviewees a transcription was sent to the interview objects for approval. This to limit

misconceptions as the answers has been interpreted by us as writers. The approval from the interview objectives also gave us a second chance to clarify unclear formulations about the HR professionals' organization structure, their view on strategic HR and their experience in strategic issues. To address privacy and integrity issues we have decided to keep, and informed all interviewees, that all data collected through interviews and face-to-face communication will be treated anonymous. To avoid bias and "sought answers" we as interviewers and authors have avoided phrasing leading questions, eliciting certain answers from the interviewees.

The authors of this study have continuously changed direction when findings of new data from literature, or interviews occurred. Hence, the study has emerged in a progressive dialogue between theoretical assumptions and empirical findings (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). We believe that this benefitted our ability to analyze and draw conclusions as it also facilitated a learning process. This was important, as both of the authors had limited experience within the field of research.

Moreover, consideration was taken so that the theory section suited the information gathered from the qualitative interviews, meaning some changes were also made after the primary-data collection. For example: this flexibility is also one of the advantages with a research that follow an exploratory research method (Saunders et. al., 2009, p. 140). Every interview was recorded after the interview object had given their approval. This to limit the risk of losing valuable information and capture the right formulations. As our interviews were conducted in Swedish, being the native tongue of all interviewees, the translated citations had to be approved. Before citing interviewees a transcription was sent to the interview objects for approval of, this to limit misconceptions as the answers have been interpreted and translated by us as writers. The approval from the interview objectives also gave us a second chance to clarify unclear formulations about the HR professionals' organization structure, their view on strategic HR and their experience in strategic issues. To address privacy and integrity issues we have decided to keep, and informed all interviewees, that all data collected through interviews and face-to-face communication will be treated anonymous. To avoid bias and "sought answers" we as interviewers and authors have avoided to phrase leading questions, eliciting certain answers from the interviewees.

3.2 Sample

To outline key factors and hindrances for HR functions in becoming strategic the sample had to contain HR professionals that work every day in the HR function. As research (Becker & Huselid, 2006) defines strategic activities to include a variety of activities (e.g. recruiting, learning and development and workforce planning) we aimed to have a diversity of HR professionals in our sample. This variety was argued to contribute to a broad sample not limiting the role or activities defined as strategic, not limited by role, industry or size. This helps to avoid bias of what we as authors perceive as roles and activities within the HR function to have an influence on strategic decision-making. However, as research commonly states (Barney & Wright, 1998; Lawler & Boudreau, 2009; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015) that administrative HR is not to be part of the strategic decision making process, we did not seek for HR practitioners working with transactional back office roles for our sample. Thus, having a heterogeneous sample is twofold. First, it contributes with unbiased commonalities but has also been a challenge the focus and common ground in the analysis. The contextual setting has proved to be challenging when determine what hindering and enabling factors that are common.

Due to limited access to a variety of HR functions we used a network-sampling technique to initiate contact with organizations and their HR functions. By contacting organizations, stating our reasons, thus the aim of the study, the organizations directed us to whom they believed could answer our questions most appropriately. For our study this could be seen as problematic sampling due to the fact that self-selection of interviewees that agreed to be interviewed might be HR professionals from functions that to a large extent already are included in strategic decision making process. Thus, this may contribute to our understanding of what key factors that enable HR functions to be included in strategic decisions, our sampling technique may thereby limit our ability to draw conclusions regarding possible hindering factors. However, by asking specific questions regarding hindrances we can capture the experience from professionals facing them right now, or who have faced and overcome them historically.

In addition, the majority of our sample consisted of HR professionals who are working outside of top management. We need to consider this when analyzing the empirical findings in regards to involvement in top management in our theoretical framework. As only one, (the

Vice President HR), were part of top management, our result is limited to the interviewees perception of HRs involvement and work with top management. However, as most are highly involved and close to HR representatives of top management, they have second hand information, and can reflect over how HRs involvement is affecting their work.

Further, the sample in this study contains only HR professionals, motivated by the fact that those in the social system, which in this case constitutes of HR functions, are the ones who have most insights and “knows it best” according to Halvorsen and Andersson (1992). However, when discussing power structures between HR functions, business departments and management this might be a limitation as information only constitutes of the HR professional's perspective. The reader thereby need to keep in mind that the results of the study is based on a hermeneutic epistemology where an understanding for the interview objectives and the way they perceive their reality is aimed and presented for (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999).

Below the interview objects are presented in a table:

Title	Industry	Interview type	Date	Length
Head of Workforce Planning and Analytics BU/GF	Information & Telecom	In person	20160323	90 min
HR Manager, Leadership & Talent Development	Energy	In person	20160330	90 min
Head of Workforce Planning	Banking & Financial Services	In person	20160421	90 min
HR Performance & Reporting Partner	Power generation, transmission and distribution	In person	20160414	90 min
Head of Talent Management	Mobile, Broadband and Broadcast	In person	20160421	90 min
Vice President HR	Household appliances	In person	20160509	90 min
HR Business Partner	Consultancy	In person	20160516	90 min
Head of Talent Management	Banking & Financial Services	In person	20160421	90 min

Table 3: *Interview objects*

3.3 Theoretical Framework

When searching for the term “Strategic HR” in google-scholar and business source premier the search engines through back almost 940 000 respectively 4 061 results. This shows that strategic HR is a broad theme in HRM research with different meaning over time, and thereby we had to focus our research. We focused our research by filtering by making a distinction of the visionary research stating the benefits of HR as a business partner and research addressing the road to get there. However, the second type of research was scarce in number, underscoring the theoretical gap.

In this thesis, the theory is made up of two main sections. First, a theoretical base that outlines what this thesis regards as HR’s role in organizations strategic decision-making. This acts as a foundation for the second part; a more narrow theoretical framework, consisting of four themes, aiming to outline key hindering and enabling factors influencing HR’s possibility to become strategic partner. The theoretical framework in this thesis is based on secondary information in form of published research and sector specific literature. The authors of this thesis have continuously changed direction when findings emerged from literature, or interviews occurred. Hence, the study has emerged in a progressive dialogue between theoretical assumptions and empirical findings (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). We believe that this benefitted our ability to analyze and draw conclusions as it also facilitated a learning process. This was important as both of the authors had limited experience within this specific field of HR research. Because the theoretical framework has such great emphasis in the thesis, it is important to clarify that the framework is based on the authors’ perceptions and interpretation of literature. Thereby the framework is untested but still based on literature from well-known researcher within the field (e.g. Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2002, 2015; and Lawler & Mohrman, 2003) specifically customized for this study.

Thereby, the authors had an open approach to what interviewees outlined as crucial in becoming strategic partners. This resulted in a continuous consideration to how the theory section applied to the empirical findings. This facilitated an open-minded theoretical framework not limiting our ability to conduct a relevant analysis. This flexibility is also one of the advantages with a research that follow an exploratory research method (Saunders et. al., 2009, p. 140).

Our four major themes in strategic HR research are involvement, time perspective, competence and mindset, and finally communication. A critic could be raised towards the framework being positive, as a result of existing literature being positive and lacking a view of critical practical implications. When scanning for research we have considered that theory can be divided into two main areas: empirical and normative theory (Bakka, Fivelsdal & Lindkvist, 2009). Social science and economic theory is often prescriptive and do often contain statement regarding what should be avoided, what is undesirable, unfavorable or inappropriate. The purposes of these theories are not only scientifically, but they are also aiming to be drivers of beliefs and motivation in practice, which tilts theory into being more normative. When using Ulrich and colleagues (1997, 2005, 2015) research as cornerstones for this thesis theoretical framework we are aware of the critiques that have been directed to the normative character of this research (e.g. Pritchard 2010, Lemmergaard, 2009). In the light of this critique, the framework includes a broad set of perspectives from different researcher to better anchor it to previous research. We thereby believed it would help build credibility and applicability to both research and practice.

The selection of these four fundamental factors in our framework was also based on advice from our supervisor and opinions from influential practitioners in the area, as well as a senior lecturer's advice, in order to increase the validity of this study. Influential practitioners are in this thesis the interview objectives, which, due to this thesis exploratory approach, were used to define both the term "strategic HR" and "strategic HR activities" during the interviews. In summary, the themes to define "Strategic HR" were chosen partly by distinguishing common themes in research by a literature review and partly with help from practitioners and thesis supervisor. The division into the four factors was made in order to create comprehensiveness, and together they reflect the concept of Strategic HR partnership. Thereby the theoretical framework presented in our theory section was a helpful tool in order to intercept our interview objectives experiences in transforming an HR function to have more strategic influence. The four themes should not be evaluated separately, but instead the collected experience of all parts could be interchanged. The reason for this is that all four themes are interconnected as argued by research (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

3.4 Interview Guides

In order to have the opportunity to investigate, analyze and draw conclusions on what key factors or hinders HR functions experiencing in becoming a strategic partner we needed to ask a mix of open and specific questions. We thereby choose a qualitative method in semi-structured interviews. The semi structured interview guide gave us the opportunity to ask follow up questions, direct examples of involvement in strategic issues and clarifications when the interview objectives explanations to key factors and hindrances were vague. The interview guides (attached as appendix 1) was constructed in the same way in every interview and was sent to the interview object a few days before the date of interview, this was done to enable the object to prepare which helped improve the quality of the interviews as the answers where more accurate and well-reasoned.

3.4.1 Personal background and context of HR function

Following Kvale's (1997) step-by-step process in how to perform a qualitative study, an interview guide was created as a tool for keeping the direction of the interview and also to make sure that all main themes (outlined in the section above) were covered during the interview. In addition, the guide ensured that the same sets of questions were asked to all respondents, making the analysis of the results easier. This is argued to increase the validity of the research (Patton, 1990). Since the interview objects have different personal experience regarding factors such as: strategic HR activities; different industries size; and structure of their HR function, the first part of our interview guide was formulated with open questions to be able to point out what "strategic HR" means to their HR function and to them as HR professionals. The interview guide started with open background questions, a good way to start an interview according to Lundahl and Skärvad (1999) as it gets the interviewees comfortable in the interview setting. According to Bryman and Bell (2007) starting with descriptive questions gives the interview object a chance to contextualize their HR functions setting based on industry, company size and priorities of their specific HR function. Asking the interview objects about the priorities in their company's HR function gave us insights to the characteristics of everyday HR work in our respondents' specific HR functions. This helped translating the transformation waves of HR based on research of Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) into the respondent's specific context. A necessary translation that helped us to determine in which specific wave the HR professionals experienced hinders in having a strategic influence.

3.4.2 HR and strategy

Questions 4-7 aimed to define both what the HR professionals saw as strategic HR and to clarify what the HR function's role is in the process of executing or even be a part of formulating strategy. These questions draw on a wider discussion regarding strategy and whether HR have the ability to influence and shape strategy contrasted to solemnly focusing on executing aggregated business strategy with aligned HR strategies and activities (Boudreau & Lawler, 2009).

3.4.3 Four key themes in becoming strategic in HR

Involvement

Question 8-11 covered the aspect of the HR functions legitimacy in the organization. Legitimacy is argued by Pritchard (2010) to be one major hindering factor for HR to become strategic; thereby this struggle is highlighted in this section of questions. As the relationship between HR and business is argued to be a key factor in the transition to become a strategic contributor (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Beatty, 2001; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) the questions aimed to clarify the cooperation between HR and how they adapt their activities to businesses' needs. It thereby also included questions aiming to answer if HR professionals experience that their perspective is valuable to top management and business departments in strategic decision-making. As research (Buyens & De Vos, 2001) argues for how an influential HR director can help facilitate the transformation to a more strategic HR function, question 10 especially aimed to clarify why HR directors have, or have not influence within the organization. The questions also aimed to create a discussion of the political aspects of strategy formulation cover in research by Sheehan et. al. (2016).

Mindset and Competence

This section contains questions that aimed to outline what competences and change of mindset is needed or is hindering HR functions to transform into a strategic one. This questions were mirroring the debate in research of HR being stuck in a transactional and short term mindset (Becton & Schraeder, 2009; Harris et. al., 2011) In addition, question 18 was building on opposing voices research that points critique to HR of becoming too business minded when adapting to an inside out approach and critique presented by Pritchard (2010)

of the too normative and “best practice”- approach to “Strategic HR” in research by Ulrich and colleagues (1997, 2001, 2015). Since so much of the literature emphasize a lack of analytical skill (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) and a lack of logic of HR analytics (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005), question 20-23 aimed to capture HR professionals examples of HR logic and analytics.

Role Balance

Long term and forward-looking focus on activities is argued (Mintzberg, 1987; Storey, 1992; Truss et. al., 2002; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015) to be a common denomination in strategic HR (e.g. predictive analysis, workforce planning, and proactive instead of reactive HR activities). This set of questions thereby helped determine which activities the respondents saw having a long term focus and which ones was argued to be more administrative and traditional. As Pritchard (2010) discusses how administrative tasks limits HR professionals to become more engaged in strategic issues, question 15 aims to outline how HR functions allocate their resources between tactical, administrative tasks and strategic initiatives.

Communication

In question 24-27 the authors aimed to capture Welbourne (2015) and Sheehan et. al.s’ (2014, 2016) argument for how important communication is to facilitate a partnership. We specifically aimed to outline barriers in communication and the relation between HR activities translated to financial and non-financial measure and metrics. The concept of storytelling, emphasized by Welbourne (2015) to facilitate a better understanding among management for what HR can contribute with in form of strategic input was continuously asked as a sub-question to question 26.

4. Empirical Evidence

4.1 HR and strategy according to HR professionals

In our discussions with HR professionals regarding their view on HR relation to strategy the majority described their HR function to play a small part in the actual formulation of business strategy. Instead, they experienced their role as executing. Their main priority is to support the business departments in executing business according to the strategy determined in top management. However, what is included in the term support seem to have a diverse meaning to our sample. To the majority the term support meant an alignment of HR activities and aggregated business strategy, which is in line with early definition of strategic HR research (e.g., Barney & Wright, 1998). In terms of involvement, these HR professionals are limited to the first category of strategic involvement presented by Lawler and Mohrman (2003). Thus, to some HR professionals in our sample, the support consisted of actually influencing strategy formulation at both top management forums and business management. These influential HR professionals often referred to an existing or incipient partnership between HR and the business department of their organization. These two views of strategic HR, executing and influencing business will help to highlight both enabling and hindering factors for an HR perspective that contributes to reinforce strategic decision making.

4.2 Involvement

Involvement in Top Management

Business understanding

As many important strategic decisions are made by top management, it is argued by research that an HR dimension or perspective should be taken into consideration as early in the strategy formulation process as possible (Barney & Wright, 1998). In organizations that argue to have HR partners with a strong voice within top management, HR professionals outlined one major factor to why this is; HR executives have an understanding of the business. HR executives ability to link HRs value added to aggregate business targets is argued to create a legitimacy in top management, something enhancing HR's ability to influence strategic decision making. A majority of the HR executives that was argued to have

an influential position within top management had a background working in the core business of the organization.

Different challenges, different strategic partners for top management

Even if all organizations interviewed had an HR executive represented in top management, a majority did not state that an actual seat at the table is a determining factor for HR to have a strategic impact. The organizations where HR executives were argued to have a strong influence on top management were organizations that also were undergoing specific internal transformations where human resources were the natural partners of the change process. A clear example of such change process was Workforce Planning (WFP). By outlining competence gaps, training needs or recruitment activities, HR professionals have the ability to amend the strategy in the light of changes in the organization's internal and external environment. In activities like WFP the unified commitment from the top management groups for HR initiatives was increased, a commitment argued by Guest & Bos-Nehles (2013) as a key for increased strategic impact from HR. For many of our interviewed HR professionals an aggregated group level WFP initiative have facilitated a socially constructed identity of a function which can deliver valuable support and a shared understanding between HR functions and top management. This relationship further enables the partnership with an understanding that HR and top management can work together. WFP thereby a catalyst for HR functions to build a bridge into the island of strategy impact within top management. Something that is argued by Pritchard (2010) to be one example of key activities that speed up the process of reaching an influential position.

Even if WFP is a ticket for HR professionals to ride the strategy train, our results do not imply that a strategic activity alone, like WFP, enables a continuous integration of an HR perspective in top management. This result, showing an on-off relationship, complement the view of *full strategic partner* (Lawler & Mohrman, 2003) as something impermanent, as a high level of involvement could not be determined as static. Our result states that the flexibility for top management when choosing the best partners for the specific change process is valued higher than the solemn value of having a highly involved HR executive as a consistent strategic partner. It also shows that many firms are yet to understand the value of having an integrated people perspective in all strategic issues.

Personality

“It is always a question of personality whether you are influential or not in top management”

Head of Workforce Planning

The fact that some HR executives were argued to have a strong position within top management was according to some HR professionals a result of the HR executives' personality more than a historical positive experience of HR as a strategic influence. One interviewee said:

“The degree of involvement for our HR executive depends on a very personal relation between CEO, CFO and HR executive. They have been working close in other companies and they know each other well. This is resulting in a strong confidence in HR from top management”.

Head of Talent Management

Thereby we question if top management actually endorse the link between higher performing firms and HR involvement as outlined in research by Wright, McMahan, McCormick & Sherman (1998) and Barney & Wright (1998). HR's impact on strategy can then not arguably be stronger than the HR executives' political skill, e.g. skills based on the capacity to understand social interactions; interpersonal influence and the capacity to adapt behavior to situational requirements (Ferris et. al., 2007).

Involvement in Business

Business Partner with split vision

To limit the risk that a central HR function works in a silo, almost every organization interviewed has generalists called HR Business Partners (HRBP). A successful example of an HRBP was described as someone who holds the hand of business management and constantly questions how the potential actions and mindset will affect business from an HR perspective. This is an example of an organization that has come to Ulrich and Dulebohn's (2015) fourth

wave, HR and context. The foundation of this partnership is based on a widely accepted outside-in approach of HR, where all HR initiatives are based on a dialogue between HRBPs and business management. Thus, to limit the risk of HRBPs becoming too decentralized, solely focusing on local business problems leading to short-term focused tactical tasks, the interviewees outlined a split vision of HRBP as key. The split vision refers to the capability to align a long term and holistic view of the firm's aggregated HR and business strategy to the local challenges. To grasp such split vision, the role of HRBP was split between working with certain central HR initiatives and working close to business management in day-to-day operations:

“We have slimmed the organization which have forced us to work in another way, closer to the business departments. The large central HR functions do not exist anymore so most of us have a split role [...] this helps us get a grip of what HR initiatives that works and what's not”

HR Manager, Leadership & Talent Development

Internalization of strategic HR activities

Another successful example of strategic partnership was outlined in our interview with the HR function within an Information and Telecom company. The HRBP in this organization managed to influence business management to change their recruitment strategy in order to be able to succeed in a specific market. HRBP managed to produce simple HR analytics showing data on time-to-fill connected to cost to hire in a critical competence group, which led to a change in one of their site strategies. This example proves that HR can produce valuable decision support for strategic business decisions and thereby pave the way for HRBP to participate in similar discussions over time. As a result, the next time site strategy were a matter for discussion, the business management themselves included the HR perspective without the HRBP being physically present at the meeting. The HRBP argued that this was a victory for her in becoming a strategic partner. The result of her initial introduction of an HR perspective in the discussion was according to her an example of internalization of a strategic HR perspective in business management. Rather than dividing HR responsibilities between business management and HR the internalization is an example of an existing partnership. Something argued by Currie and Procter (2001) to be favorable over devolution of responsibilities. In some research (Ulrich, 1997), it is argued that business

management is to take responsibility for easier administrative HR tasks. However, our results prove one case of internalization of actual strategic HR initiatives as a result of successful partnership. Our findings above stands in contrast to the research arguing for a resistance to uptake HR responsibilities at line level (Currie & Procter, 2001).

Expectation discrepancy

Even if top management agreed that HR should have a strategic relationship to business management in most organizations, HR professionals experienced a barrier in becoming a strategic partner to mid-level management. The explanations to why this barrier existed were many, but most of the HR professionals outlined weak business acumen among HRBP and the fact that there was no single definition to what a business partner role consisted of. As well with limited expectation from business this was clearly something that hindered HR professionals to transform into a strategic business partner. However, most of the HR professionals did not blame the business management for limiting the evolvement of a more strategic partnership. Instead many of them proved to be self-critical to the way their HR functions had failed in the transformation.

“The expectation from the business is for HR to be someone that takes care of problems that managers don’t think they have time for. This increases the risk of HR being a garbage dump!”

Head of Talent Management

“Our HR business partner role is very much based on the personality and competence of the individual. If a HRBP is good at labour law, then she will end up helping business with issues regarding this... another might be specialized in recruitment”

Head of Talent Management

To offset the discrepancy of partnership expectations, the majority of HR professionals believed that the change is a shared responsibility between HR and mid-level management. However, the self-critique among HR professionals consisted of the fact that it is not up to business to understand what HR can deliver in form of strategic decision support. Instead, it is up to HR to make clear that HR can provide other value then bread and butter in form of

transactional activities. A common belief amongst our interviewees is that HR needs to take the first step in developing the partnership into a strategic one. However, the majority of HR professionals in our sample believe that their function is missing the right competence or mindset.

4.3 Mindset and Competence

Mindset

The revelation outside and inside of the HR function

When discussing the question of mindset it became apparent that this issue is twofold. The perception of HR in the different companies interviewed can be divided into two groups: the ones who have met and worked with HRBPs; and the ones who have not. Of those who have not worked with HRBPs the perception is that HR is one function working in a silo, with one HR-agenda separated from the business. In cases where managers have worked with HRBPs they have a different view and mindset and the organization recognizes the competence and decision input they could get from HR.

It is too often that the interaction between HR and the organization is too transactional, lacking business sense and mindset. This is both a result of the basic need for a working core administrative function, but also a common mindset issue. In cases where HR is reaching for a more strategic role, one interviewee put forward a fact that is somehow speaking for the situation in many companies. He asked the question: why do HR have to proof themselves on the basic “bread and butter” deliveries, he continued, no one would question an IT manager’s strategic ability because someone’s computer isn’t working properly. So why question HR on their strategic ability because salary payments or time reporting isn’t working properly. However paramount it is that the “bread and butter” is working, it is an activity or issue separate from the strategic HR partner. It is apparent that the perception that HR is suppose to deliver what the business asks for, and no more or less, is a mindset-hindrance for HR to have an unchallenged transition into a strategic role.

We have seen that there is a change needed in the mindset of the receiving part, but even more important, the sender, the HR function, need to step up to the challenge and change their own mindset. In all of our interviews HR practitioners have raised the issue of HR functions working with transactional traditional activities being destructively inward looking

and self-micromanaging. This is an example of what Becton and Schraeder (2009) referred to as HR being stuck in an administrative mindset. One HR partner believed that this is a result of that many individuals within the HR function have been working in back office roles their whole careers, resulting in that the majority of people working within HR functions are never getting the chance to develop an outside-in mindset. Something that is argued by Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) to be crucial if HR is to reach a strategic partnership. In addition to the fact that HR functions themselves fosters an administrative mindset, another HR practitioner lifted the Swedish school system as negative factor by educating students to become more of social workers then business partners. Another interviewee said:

“HR is not a department that should work as curators or psychologists. It is not my job to please someone, I’m here to challenge”.

HR Manager, Leadership & Talent Development

The same HR partner underscored that it is up to HR professionals themselves to decide on how they legitimize HR’s role in organizations. We have found that it is a shared belief among our interviewees that it is to a high degree up the HR professionals themselves to understand that HR has a place in organizations where they can contribute to the future success of that company.

In the view of our theoretical framework, and our interviewees’, big shared service center functions are running the risk of focusing on the wrong matters, thus failing to adopt a mindset with an outside in focus. In our study we have not met anyone who did not look at the future potential of strategic HR with enthusiasm. However, they raised a concern that many HR functions are, like referred to in research by Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015), unwilling and disinclined to face the change that strategic HR partnership means. One interviewee phrased the common perception:

“The big shared service functions are risking to develop something of a self-fulfillment culture, and it may not be the small details that will make a difference for the business manager. There is a high risk that HR is becoming too inward looking, and with that there is a great risk of losing the focus on why we are here; To drive business!”

HR Manager, Leadership & Talent Development

We want to highlight that the transformation in becoming a strategic partner goes way beyond the boundaries of the HR function. If organizations are to develop HR functions with the ability to elevate strategic decisions and outcomes, organizations need to embrace the transformation with a holistic approach.

So, if the aspect of mindset is such important factor for HR to become a strategic partner what is actually included in the mindset? To us, the change of mindset could be described by two examples. In the organizations that only reach the first or second level of involvement covered in Lawler and Mohrman (2003) the HR perspective was not valued continuously. There was no natural continuity of including HR in strategic decision-making. The partnership was made on the terms of the “receiver”, not shared, nor HR’s. Thus, we strongly believe it should be based on mutual terms, as the business goals are a common cause.

Mindset of Top management

Our result has also shown that it is not only the mindset of the HR function and the receiving part that is an important enabler for a strategic transition. Even if HRBPs have to have a strong mind and focus, another factor that have been addressed during our interviews is the mindset of top management. As well as it is an important factor regarding involvement, the mindset of top management trickles down in the organization and is critical in many cases for the mindset in the whole HR function, as well as how the function is being viewed in the rest of the firm. In the cases where the transformation was most prominent and successful, it was top management who were the driving forces for the transformation. Big changes require time and effort, especially since it needs to change the mindset and culture of a whole, or at least parts of an entire organization. In this case top management had a clear goal for what the transformation would lead to. They did not just leave it to some assigned HRBPs or strategists to change the mindset and practice of the whole HR department. Instead they made it mandatory for all working within HR to go through training to increase their competence within business understanding and analytics. This is not just a way to equip HR professionals with the skills and tools they need to interact with business and be a support in strategic decisions. The training did as well drive and nudge a shift in culture and mindset within the whole HR department. This is crucial as the solemn mindset of top management is to little use if the organization is unable to adopt it, and the training was in this case one way to facilitate and cement the same mindset in the whole HR function.

Competence

Connection to financial implications

In accordance with theory (ex. Angrave et.al. 2015, Boudreau & Ramstad 2005), all interviewees put forward a concern that HR need the competence to be able to show with help of analytics, the contribution HR can make to a firm's performance. It is paramount that HRBPs have the competence required and expected of someone who is part of a management team. All of our interviews have given the same result, the HR functions has too few individuals with this competence. In all of the organizations interviewed there were some sort of strategic or management HR partner, but in many cases they were too few. However, when asked about the dialogue partners had with management it was rare that financial impact was lifted as a matter of discussion. Even if HR partners are on the march forward, on interviewee raised the matter of analytical ability and the ability to connect HR analytics to financial outcomes in the following way:

”If HR is supposed to be and maintain the strategic partner role we are trying to justify in management teams, we also have to be able to, with analytics, show the economic gains and values for whatever decision we are trying to justify and push through.”

HR Performance & Reporting Partner

Analytical skills

IT-system competence is a base skill that everyone in today's organization needs to have. However, as both research and practice shows, people working with HR are for the more part not doing it because they are interested in IT-solutions or analytics. There is a natural barrier that has to be broken. One interviewee stated that they had an almost perfect data warehouse, enabling their HR function to withdraw data in a standardized format from an aggregation of hundreds of local HR-systems. However, there were no interest or knowledge on how to use it and neither any interest nor curiosity in wanting to learn the system or the potential it holds. And thus the result was a technological halt within the HR function. In this case “Simplification”, one of three centrally decided strategic focuses for HR, enabled a well-functioning IT systems and were held as a high priority. However, the practicing HR function

we met, (except from the one interviewee) did not have the skill or competence to utilize its benefits. He personally said it had two sides:

“So you could either outsource the administrative tasks, but as a matter of fact, we could perhaps just buy a system that would do it for us. It’s all about the financials, the anchorage in business and the maturity of the organization. But hey, to be really honest, there is a ‘tomorrow’ coming, and we in HR need to face it as well as everyone else.”

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Business understanding as a competence

Rasmussen and Ulrich (2015) state that HR analytics in successful cases will be separated from the HR function. What they are referring to is that HR analytics and strategic HR has to have an end-to-end perspective, just like other functions working with strategic and analytical work tasks. Our interview results regarding this have varied, some believe that HR have to have a competence regarding its systems and administrative practice, while others are separating HR as strategic business partners from what is the classic HR function. While the more part of our interviewees are showing a trend to educate and elevate individuals from within the HR function some consider that the business competence and mindset of those individuals are not enough. The most prominent competence that HR partners are sought to have has shown to be business understanding and business logic in a combination with competence from behavioral science. However, from our interviews it is clear that these HR professionals are rare and companies are competing with each other to attract those few with the right mindset and competence. When we asked a company, who has a highly involved and influential HR executive, why she were so influential and had such a strong impact on the top management they explained that she (the business partner) understood the business and its operations, she could talk business and connect it to HR. This is something similar to the logic and HC-bridge in Boudreau and Ramstad’s (2004) LAMP-framework.

“The HR function has transformed a lot under the past years – as part of a very focused HR transformation. It takes a lot of effort for a traditional HR function to transform into a business partnering HR function with a consultative approach. The priorities have been clear and have a given place on our agenda – it is all about understanding the business and what role we can play in supporting the development of it. A number of mandatory trainings have been set for the HR function which have given us a better understanding of the business and the financials - something that enables us to better meet and discuss strategic priorities with the business.”

Head of Workforce Planning & Analytics BU/GF

Our study has strengthened the view that HR holds the potential to connect the people aspect to business financials. However, as research states (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Angrave et. al., 2015; Levenson, 2005; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015), the study have shown that HR departments are in broad application, still lacking the competence to link people aspects with analytics to business financials, rephrased as missing the logic. The reactions from interviewees have varied dependent on what type of analytics being discussed. Some embrace both simpler KPI reports with business connection to convey the logic and are as well speaking highly of the need and potential of big data analytics. The most obvious example of HRBPs using valid data to understand which HR activities will matter for firm performance and resulting in a clear logic for business managers was found in the Telecom/Broadcasting firm:

“One example of the logic you are talking about could be when we are able to understand the cost of the workforce in the different phases of the product life cycle. Understanding the workforce needs when it comes to competence, complexity, specialization and locations through the different phases of a product development and being able to pair this with a solid understanding of cost implications gives us the ability to use fact based decision making. Really understanding the needs and being able to use facts, data to get the bigger picture of implications of decisions makes a big difference. These type of analysis gives a whole set of new information and insights that can lead to sound business decisions and actions.

Head of Workforce Planning and Analytics BU/GF

In this case HRBPs are part of the modeling of analytics and metrics, and can thereby limit the risk for business management to draw wrongful conclusions, in line with Angrave and colleagues (2015). This analysis includes unbiased historical data and a predictive feature that Harris et. al. (2011) underlines as paramount for HRBPs to facilitate and grasp a strategic value. In this case, HRBPs analysis have a strong connection to business logic and human capital, something that theory (Kahn et. al., 2014; Becker & Huselid, 2006) argues strengthens the HRBPs legitimacy and consultative role as strategic influencer.

4.4 Role Balance

Time perspective in activities

We could see a clear discrepancy between how time perspective is referred to in literature to how it facilitates the minds of our interviewees. As a result of business structure, the strategic time frame for the HR professional's work tasks were often set by higher management as the more part of our study objects were international and large corporations. One interviewee exemplified their HR function's time perspective as a cycle of activities that needed to be done as a routine wise practice, without being transactional. In parallel to this, other activities were carried out, activities with strategic goals that were given by higher management. Thus these activities being of strategic character it only reaches the first stage of strategic involvement, being reactive and on-demand. working with transactional activities. However, when asked about what strategic meant, all interviewees had a clear long-term time perspective to the concept. One interviewee had a holistic approach to one of her HR department's most important strategic activities. When exemplified, the HR manager underscored that they as HR partners need to have a time perspective in mind when enacting with operational management, and sometimes even remind management of what short and long term outcomes they will reach with different initiatives.

“Leadership and talent management are two of our top priorities. It is important as we need to be able to meet tomorrow's challenges and secure the succession necessary for the growth and development of the company”.

Head of Workforce Planning and Analytics BU/GF

Trade-off, role overload, and complement rather than “move from”

The theoretical framework has shown us that the shift in time perspective is underlined in the transformation on becoming strategic, and especially strategic partner. We have seen that different companies are at different stages on the road to transforming. Some with only one or a few individuals working with a longer time-frame, and others with multiple individuals working with split roles with both short transactional and longer more strategic aligned activities. In contrast to some critique, our findings in general suggests that there is no opposition between having a transactional and short-term focus and a longer strategic time frame. In our interviews we have found that many HR functions find that their reliability working with longer time frames often is based on their ability to deliver quality on short time frame, transactional and “hygiene factor” activities. Thus, some have raised concerns of having split roles, something that already has been lifted in the theoretical framework. However, split roles are as well connected to other parts of the theoretical framework, mainly involvement in business and competence that split roles often facilitates an understanding of the business. But, theory (e.g. Pritchard, 2010), as well as our interviewees have raised concerns of role-overload, as we can see that there is a need for HR professionals working with a long time-frame, it does not exclude HR functions to continue delivering its expected “bread and butter” with high quality. In a slight deviation from theory, we have found that HR functions are not “moving from” transactional based and short time frames, but rather complements traditional HR with strategic and analytical HR practitioners that are adding another layer to the HR departments. Something alike, but not the same as what can be found in Rasmussen and Ulrich’s (2015) research, that the analytical HR should be lifted out of the HR function and put in a cross sectional holistic analytics function.

4.5 Communication

Finding common meaning using financial language

When the HR professionals were asked about how important communication is for HR to transform into a strategic partner role, they often described communication skills as a fundamental. Communication was argued to be a critical skill regardless of the hierarchical context in which HR sought strategic influence. This was three dimensional in relation to business, top management and other business functions. However, to become a trustworthy strategic partner in the organizations, the HR professionals did see a challenge in triggering

insights among business management that can foster new perspectives for strategic change. As argued in research (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005), financial information and metrics provides logic guidance for business towards what actions to be taken. The most successful decision support based on analytics that HR professional could produce was the HR business cases that clearly used a financial language conveying the insights in a format understandable by the receiver. Thus, many interviewees struggled to validate the connection between HR initiatives and firm performance. Due to these vague connections these HR business cases was in an early stage of development. One example of HR business cases was when HR presented alternative recruitment strategies for business management. In this example, cost saving became the symbol that Sheehan et. al. (2014) argue to enhance HRs capacity to use the power of meaning. To business management, cost saving as a symbol legitimized interests making HR initiatives appear legitimate, desirable, rational and inevitable. In this stage, HR is argued successful when using a combinative approach of HR data and financial information as a rational decision framework. Even if research argue for an increased use of non-financial metrics as decision support (Ittner & Larcker, (2003), our results shows that the relationship between HR and business management have not matured enough to solely use non-financial measures to build a rational decision support.

HR becomes “story seller”

In an interview with an HR professional responsible for HR reporting to management and business areas, a key factor for him was to focus the communicated metrics and analysis by reducing the amount of data pushed out to the organization. In this case, HR by themselves decided what *story* to include in the report and did not always deliver what was requested by business management.

“When I became responsible for the human KPI report it consisted of 10-12 slides, now it is only 5 slides which is the same slides that are delivered to all management teams... We don’t give the business what they want, we give them what they need”

HR Performance & Reporting Partner

By limiting the amount of metrics in the report HR not only became a storyteller with their chosen data, by giving the business management what they needed they also became a “story seller”. The partnership thereby includes a selling perspective when HR moves away from

being just a provider of data into challenging businesses needs with HR analytics. What is highlighted in the citation above is a good example of how HR have changed from a provider of a multitude of different tailor-made time consuming “on-demand” reports without questions to become a nudger who uses its expertise to communicate critical measures in a common manner to everyone affected. The interviewee’s experience was that this report had increased understanding for an open and new perspective for strategic dialogue among management per se and HR. According to HR professionals this is something new to HR as they now start questioning business needs and dare to make their own analysis of the business environment and produce material that they think create long term value for the organization. Take the example of diversity. A central HR initiative in many of the organizations in the sample was to increase the diversity (in our cases increase representation of women) at one production site. Based on historical data on recruitment and retainment of women the HRBPs presented an estimation of when, in future time, the organization’s blue-collar workforce would reach gender equality. According to the numbers presented, gender equality would be reached in 50 years if the site only recruited women. Of course, this triggered emotional reactions in the management team who realized that the real problem was not recruitment but rather retainment. Emotion is evoked and crucial as argued by Welbourne (2015) to initiate the needed action. With compelling data, the HR professionals conveyed the real problem.

4.6 Summary of Empirical Evidence

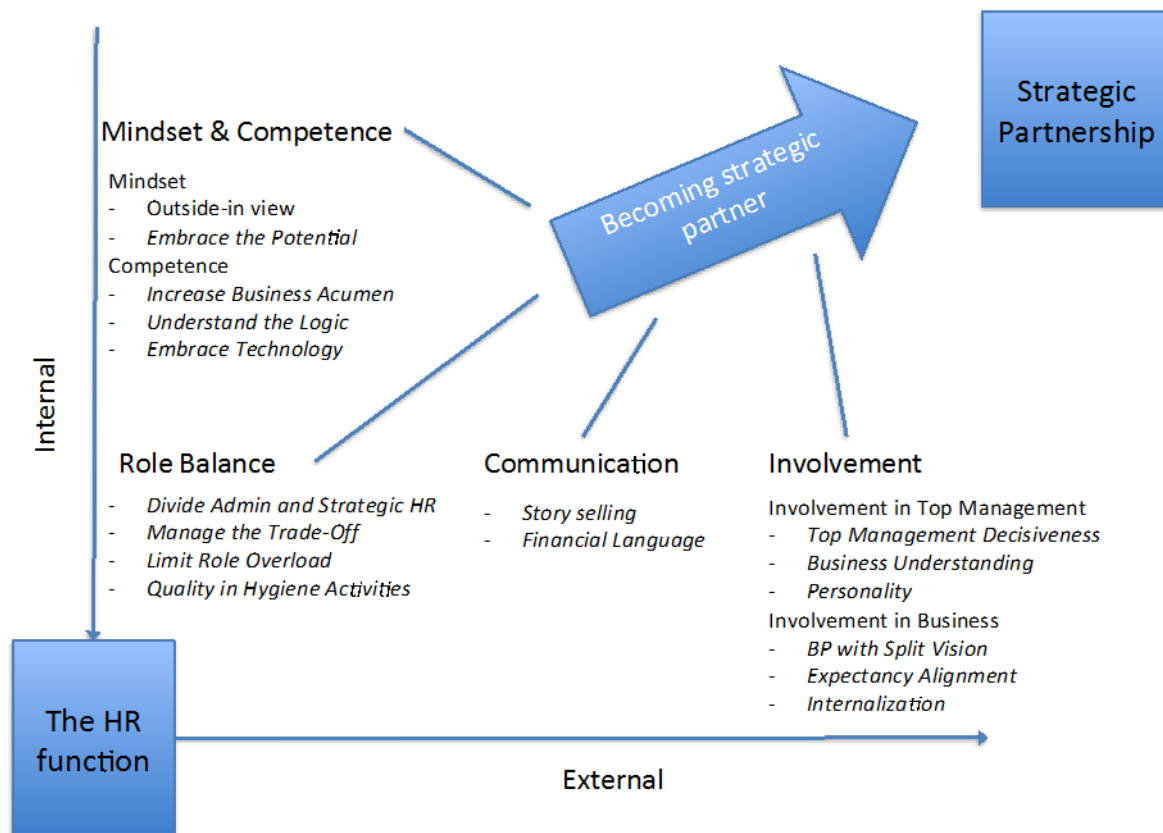


Figure 2: Summary of hindering and enabling factors in becoming strategic partner

In figure 2 the most influential factors found in the empirical study are summarized under each theme. This is the common picture painted by the interviewees of the hindering and enabling factors influencing the development of a strategic partnership. This means that the cases with a high degree of strategic involvement contributes with guidance and the cases with lower involvement contributes with possible barriers.

At our starting point we had a bias understanding that the drivers of this transformation laid within the boundaries of the HR function. Thus, during the interviews with HR professionals it became clear that what we thought was internal processes of change in our framework also came to include a collaboration between HR and the rest of the organization. For example, take the aspect of mindset. The change in mindset at the HR function must go hand in hand with a change in mindset of both top- and business management, this is something we found in the most successful cases. In summary, our results show that the degree of maturity at all

hierarchical levels must be high if HR is going to complement their administrative role and grasp a strategic role within organizations. With the enlightening that this adoption requires a certain maturity within the organization as a whole it would be of value, but outside the scope of this thesis, to research the maturity processes for the strategic HR partnership from a holistic business perspective. The degree of maturity is arguably impacted by the underlying factors in each theme. Thus, with the forerunners in our sample showing a high level of top management commitment and involvement, the factors are impacted by the top management's decisiveness. Thereby, our empirical findings argue that the level of top management decisiveness is the single most influencing factor, working as both an enabler and a hindrance for strategic HR partnership.

5. Discussion

First, even though the literature review that our theoretical framework is based upon, at first appeared to show clear distinctions between key themes and factors enabling a strategic HR business partnership, our empirical evidence have given us further insight and realization that there is a strong interplay and interdependence between all the themes in the framework. It became clear during the interviews that role balance, involvement, competence and communication are closely linked to each other. In the cases where the HR functions could be described as having a higher strategic involvement, top management commitment and decisiveness was prominent. We believe that this lays a foundation of the strategic partnership of HR. Just like if any other prioritized topic in top management results in an organizational focus on lower hierarchical levels, top management needs to be convinced of how the HR perspective contribute to better strategic decision making. Top management decisiveness is thereby a catalyst in changing the mindset among HR executive and HR professionals. However, with the result of our study, we ask ourselves if the existing HR practitioners are the ones who should take on the role as strategic partners. As business acumen and a business driven mindset is needed to shape a strategic partnership together with business. This also ties back to the separation of administrative HR and HR as business partners. We argue that HRPBs are more strongly connected to business management then to the HR function as administrative center. Just like the CFO and business controlling are more connected to management and business then financial reporting, HRBPs are using the basic administration of HR to drive business in the same way as CFOs and business controllers are using accounting.

During the interviews it became clear that the partnership is dependent on the organization, its nature, context, business setup, model, product type. This implies that we cannot find factors leading to a best practice, however, we can outline the different approaches taken by some forerunners in our sample. Compare their approach to one another. We like to discuss the factor or concept of analysis. It is interesting how many researcher that are underlining the importance of analytics to facilitate a strategic partnership, when our findings indicate that the analytics are just a small part of what contributes to the strategic influence of HR. Even if almost all interviewees underline a lack of analytical competence within the HR functions, the majority could not give concrete examples of how HR analytics might facilitate the strategic partnership. Our perception is that HR analytics is more a product of strategic

partnership than a driver for legitimacy as strategic partner. According to our study, analytics may not be as highly valued in top management and strategic forums as proclaimed. In these forums it is gut feeling, charisma, storytelling and specialist expertise that drives impact and facilitates legitimacy.

Existing literature tend to have an inward focus on what HR professionals need to develop (e.g. competence and relational skills) to facilitate a transformation into becoming a strategic partner. Our lens where thereby shaped by this common underlying tone in research which influenced our research focus. However, the interviews tended to indicate more. It is more of a common responsibility to understand and advocate the importance of HR as business partners. If research wants to highlight how to facilitate a strategic partnership, it must shift focus to a holistic organizational perspective, including both top management and business role in the transformation. HR as a strategic partner is thereby not at one function mission.

Based on the fact described above, that HR functions needs help from external forces to reach partnership, HR are thereby dependent on aggregated objectives within the organizations. In the worst case, there was a distinction between HR and other objectives in the company. This took the form of a prioritization issue where shareholder values were set as the highest priority. As a result, the people perspective was given less room in the strategic discussion, and later actions. The company delivered on short-term shareholder value, but in time the HR perspective caught up and the company later had to put a lot more resources into HR initiatives. In the more successful cases the HR perspective were integrated in all strategic discussions. HR was given mandate to judge the level of strategic involvement needed in different situations to succeed in company goals. No chief executive alone can possess the expertise needed to see all aspects of an issue at the right level of granularity. However, they can be held responsible for the outcomes. This requires chief executives to integrate experts, strategic partners, as decision support and advisors. To tackle the dynamics of contemporary business climate, executives need to be responsive to all factors affecting business long-term performance. In this context, human capital is becoming a more paramount factor for competitive advantage, thus making it crucial that a strategic HR partnership is permanent, just like any other partnership.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to go beyond the visionary research, prominent within the field today, and thereby contribute to what factors enables and hinders HR reaching a strategic partnership. With numerous factors all influencing each other, there is one overarching factor that is the most critical one. It can be summarized as management decisiveness. This refers to the will, commitment and ability to incorporate and translate people into business strategy at all hierarchical levels. HR should not stand alone, it should be incorporated as a natural part of business strategy, where management is equally responsible to meet the human capital aspects as any other aspect of business strategy. This calls for a broader research lens than the research published so far within this field tend to have.

6.1 Future research

Future research need to gain a complete view of organizations as the majority of factors indicates to impact and be impacted by organizational components outside of the HR function. This field of research has mostly been studied from one actor's side (HR perspective), as it refers to a partnership it should be complemented with the counterpart (top and business management) to gain an understanding of how to make strategic HR partnership happen in contemporary organizations.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Can you tell us about your background and role within the HR function today?
2. What are your HR function's two main priorities?
 - Why do you prioritize these specific tasks?
3. Do you see potential in some other activities that can create value for the organisation in the future?
 - Why do you think this activities will add future value to the organisation?

HR and strategy

4. How do you define Strategic HR?
5. What does strategic HR mean to your HR function?
 - Activities?
 - Processes?
 - Tasks?
6. What is the relation between aggregate business strategy and HR strategy in your organisation?
7. What role do your HR function have in formulation of the organisations aggregated business strategy?
 - What factors enables your HR function to have influence on aggregated business strategy?
 - What factors hinders your HR function to have influence on aggregated business strategy?

Involvement

8. How do you experience HRs role within the organisation?
 - Formally?
 - Informally?

9. According to you, is the HR perspective valued by;
- Top management?
 - Business department?
 - Other group functions?
10. Do you believe that your HR-director have an influential position in your organisation?
- In top management?
 - In business departments?
 - If she/he have influence, what is the explanation to that? If not, why?
11. How would you describe your HR functions relation to your business departments?
- Does business see you as administrators or partners?
 - How do you see your own role in relation to business departments?

Role Balance

12. What time perspective do you have on the HR activities you work with?
- Long- or short term?
13. What is characterizing for the different activities that are;
- Short term?
 - Long term?
14. The forward looking perspective is common when conceptualizing strategic HR, especially when it comes to decision making. Can you give an example of how on some HR activities or processes that enhance long term decision making?
15. How do you balance your service provider role with activities having more long term strategic impact on the organisation?

Mindset and Competence

16. How have your role changed during your time in HR?
17. How have your department's view on value adding activities performed by HR changed during your time in HR?
18. Is becoming a more strategic function a only good thing according to you?
- Is there opposing views on this transformation into a more strategic function?
19. What learning activities have your HR function taken part in to enhance your business knowledge?
- Is this learning mandatory or optional?

20. Lack of analytical skills is argued in research to be hindering for HR functions to become more strategic, do you agree?

- If yes, what is done within your HR function to develop your analytical skills?

21. What metrics and reports (that you produce) are used for continuous monitoring and analysis of the organisations performance?

- Internally at your HR function?
- In other departments?

22. Are analyses from the HR-function requested by the organisation?

- From management?
- From business departments?
- If they are not requested, why is that do you think?

23. Big data HR analytics is a term that gets more attention in theory and practice. This due to the increased amount and ability to store and track data.

- How do you work with data analysis within your HR function?
- What potential do you see in using big data analytics in HR?
- What factors are limiting you in the use of big data HR analytics?

Communication

24. How do you communicate the value of your HR activities?

- To top management?
- To business departments?

25. When are you as an HR professional experiencing barriers when communicating from your HR perspective?

- In relation to business department?
- In relation to top management?

26. Is there an understanding outside the HR function for the logic in your reports, analyses and metrics?

- If this understanding exists, what is this?
- How do you work to increase the logic in business departments and top management?

27. Is there an understanding outside the HR function for the relationship between your input and HR activities and bottom line result?

- If understanding exist, why is that?
- If understanding don't exist, why is that?