

The HRM Monitor

Developments in the HR Profession in the Netherlands

Willem de Lange

Nicole van Dartel

Research group at the HRM Department of Avans University of Applied Sciences ¹
Breda, the Netherlands

Paper for the IX International Workshop on HRM
Seville, Spain
October 30-31 2014

¹ Other participants in the project and authors of the complete report: Erik Woering, Johanna Alberda, Herman van Blitterswijk, Ineke van Kruining, Pieter Schep and Niels Willemsen; members of the Research Group at the HRM Department of Avans University of Applied Sciences.

Summary

The aim of the 'HRM Monitor' was to gain insight into the status of HR in Dutch organizations by examining the development and expectations of HR and the competences of HR professionals. The HR tasks were not considered solely from the perspective of the 'agenda' of HR professionals. We also looked closely at the division of tasks between HR and line management and considered how the work of the HR professional was assessed and whether line management was capable of executing HR tasks in an adequate manner.

The research was conducted by the research group of the HRM Department at Avans University of Applied Sciences. The fieldwork was done by HRM students on internship at various organizations between December 2012 and April 2013. A questionnaire was held among HR professionals (net response: 106), followed by interviews conducted by students with the same professionals (68) and with HR managers (58) and line managers (63). The aim and design of the research are explained in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 addresses the content of the Monitor. It explains the basis upon which the HRM tasks and competences were clustered. The possible roles and position of HRM were then combined into six orientations, which were presented to the respondents.

The main conclusions of the study were as follows.

The task of the HR professional is still very broad. We identified six task clusters: Staffing/Availability, Personnel Development/Employability, Corporate Development, Conditions of Employment, Labour Relations, Personnel Administration, and Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism. HR professionals regularly or often have to perform tasks from all these clusters, except Personnel Administration. The highest scores went to Staffing and Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism. Almost every cluster involved policy as well as operational tasks.

The job of HR managers is also very broad. As one might expect, their tasks relate more to policy and strategy and are less operational in nature. Corporate Development and Labour Relations account for a relatively large percentage of their time.

Another important – and encouraging – conclusion was that line management is aware of the heavy responsibility it bears for personnel management. The HR professional and the line manager each have a role to play. The line manager is a 'people manager' of his team in everyday operations; he is advised and supported by the HR professionals and can rely on them to provide the requisite expertise.

Five competence clusters were defined: Personal Integrity/Credibility, HRM Expertise, Ability to Influence People, Business Knowledge, and Change Management. HR professionals drew on all these competences, which were also visible to others. HR managers were also able to utilize all these competence clusters.

All these competence clusters, particularly Change Management, were expected to continue to be important in the future.

The extensive nature of the HR job was also reflected in the roles. Two pro-active roles were defined in the study: the Development of an HRM Vision and Strategy, and Co-responsibility for the Realization of Change Processes. Three reactive roles were defined: Responding to problems as they cross your path; Support and Assistance (Personnel Care), and Administration and Regulation (Personnel Administration). Finally, the Design

and Delivery of HR Products and Services was added. More than half the respondents were largely in agreement with *all* the role descriptions.

The work of the HR professional, with an average score van 7.5, was generally assessed as positive or very positive. There was scarcely any difference between the assessment by the line management ('the customer'), the HR manager and the HR professional himself. The customers were particularly satisfied with the support received from HR, the sharing of ideas, the cooperation, and the accessibility and availability. This points to a role as a business ally.

The respondents were not asked to assess how the line management fulfilled its people-management tasks, but they were asked if the right conditions were in place for line management to perform these tasks adequately. The greatest stumbling block was time. In addition, the HR professionals and HR managers found the competences of line managers in this area problematic.

The final conclusion is that HR offers added value in many organizations and cannot be missed. Line management both needs and values the support of HR professionals.

1 Introduction

Is there a future for HRM? Critics of the discipline are doubtful. They say, place the responsibility for 'people management' squarely with the line, automate as many of the processes as possible, and outsource the tasks you can't do in-house. Then HR professionals will no longer be needed in organizations. None of this is likely to happen soon, but the discipline is in a state of flux, and dramatic changes are taking place in the tasks of many HR professionals.

A few of the main trends:

- Companies and organizations are having to become more flexible. This is leading to more tractable and more diverse labour relations.
- Dramatic developments are taking place on the labour market. There is plenty of slack in the labour market at present (2013), but an ageing and dejuvenated workforce may lead to shortages in many professions.
- The ever-increasing potential of ICT has prompted many companies to embrace e-HRM systems in recent years. Employee Self Service (ESS) and Management Self Service (MSS) are operational in different areas in many large companies. As a result, responsibility for personnel management is being passed to the line management and – increasingly – to the employees themselves.

It is crucially important to find out what exactly is happening in HRM. What does the HR professional actually do? How is the job evolving? Which competences are needed to do a good job now and in the future²?

² Male pronouns in this report also imply the female equivalent.

The immediate aim of this study was to shed light on the current status of HR by tracing developments and expectations in the field, and by identifying the competences required by HR professionals. The HRM tasks were not considered one-sidedly from the perspective of the 'agenda' of the HR professional; one important area of study was the division of tasks between HR and line management.

The long-term aim is to enable universities of applied sciences in particular to organize their curricula for HRM degree programmes in a way that reflects and anticipates the needs on the ground.

The main research questions:

1. Which HR tasks do HR professionals engage in?
2. How are HR tasks divided between HR professionals and line management?
3. Which competences are applied in the execution of HR tasks?
4. How is the work of the HR professional assessed?
5. Will line management be able to perform HR tasks adequately?

These main questions were split into sub-questions (see Chapter 4).

The research was carried out by the Research Group at the HRM Department at Avans University of Applied Sciences. The fieldwork was done by third-year students on internship. These students first asked an HR professional (in most cases the person who was mentoring them at the company) to fill in a questionnaire online. The questionnaires were then sent to an external research agency for processing. The students received a copy of the completed questionnaire and used it as a basis for the next step, which consisted of an in depth interview with the same HR professional. Afterwards, questions were put to the manager of the HR professional and a line manager (if present). The fieldwork took place between December 2012 and February 2013. The research group performed an analysis and compiled the report in the spring of 2013.

106 of the 131 third-year students worked on this study, and the same number of HR professionals filled in the questionnaire. A total of 68 HR professionals, 63 line managers and 58 HR managers were interviewed.

The study in its present form was carried out only by Avans and will be repeated annually in order to gain a clear picture of the functional development of HR in the longer term. Its scope is substantially expanded in 2014, now four other universities of applied sciences have come on board. In 2015 probably two more universities will participate. The findings will be submitted to LooHRM (the national board of HR Studies), which approves the profile for the educational programme every four years. This constitutes part of the process for gaining funding for curricula.

2 The content of the HRM Monitor

The questions in the online questionnaire and the interviews were based on a literature study carried out by the research group in advance of the fieldwork.

The tasks of HR

The respondents were asked which HR tasks they are engaged in and to what extent. The literature offers various models for charting HR processes and tools. After looking closely at these models, we concluded that, in most companies, HR revolves around the inflow, throughflow and outflow of personnel. The tasks were split into seven clusters for the purposes of the HRM Monitor.

Table 1: HR task clusters

	HR task clusters	Components
1	Staffing/Availability of personnel	Personnel budgets and planning, recruitment & selection, dismissal procedures and social plans
2	Employability /Personnel Development	Introduction and application of competence management, (advising on) appraisal interviews, conducting career and training interviews, management development
3	Corporate Development	Steering reorganizations, cultural change processes and team development, co-defining the corporate strategy
4	Conditions of Employment / Compensation	Drawing up, applying and advising on conditions of employment, remuneration matters
5	Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism	Advising on working conditions, facilitating absenteeism-related counselling, compiling and facilitating risk inventories and evaluations
6	Labour Relations	Consultation with the Works Council, facilitating workplace meetings, conflict mediation and advice, internal communication
7	Personnel Administration	Managing personnel information systems, personnel administration, payroll administration, compiling and reporting personnel data

HR competences

HR professionals must possess certain competences for HR tasks. During the study the HR professionals were asked what kind of competences were required in their job now, and what would be required in the future. They were also asked which competences would increase or diminish in importance in the future.

A research group headed by Dave Ulrich at the University of Michigan has been researching HR competences in corporate settings since 1988 in a large-scale, longitudinal study called *HRCS: Human Resource Competence Survey*. The findings indicate that the competences shift over the years. The HRCS was conducted for the fifth time in 2008 and resulted in a new competency model (Ulrich et al., 2008).



Figure 1: HR competency model

The HR professional needs competences for ‘people issues’ on the one hand and ‘business issues’ on the other. Six roles are defined within these two axes, with a focus on relationships, systems and processes, and organization capabilities (see Figure 1). The two axes must be in equilibrium for the HR professional to work effectively. In plain terms, he must possess both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills.

The HRM Monitor slots in with similar research carried out in the Netherlands by Biemans (2008). The competence clusters are shown in the table below.

Table 2: competence clusters

Cluster	Components
Personal Integrity & Credibility	empathy, acting with integrity
HRM Expertise	expertise in HR tools and processes, applying relevant (HRM) legislation, knowledge of the latest ICT applications (e-HRM)
Ability to Influence People	persuasiveness, negotiation skills, communication skills, leadership (from HRM)
Business Knowledge	understanding the business and the environment, expertise in strategy formation (processes), knowledge of business economics and corporate processes
Change Management	Problem-solving capabilities, process-steering skills, flexibility/adaptability

HR roles, positioning and orientations

The roles and positioning of HR in corporate settings have been extensively researched in recent decades. Ulrich led the way, and Kluijtmans, Paauwe and Boselie have made significant contributions in the Netherlands.

There are various service models for HRM roles and positioning (Kluijtmans, 2008). At one end of the spectrum is the strategic role (e.g., decisions to downsize staff, designing the corporate structure, linking the HR strategy to the corporate strategy). At the other is the operational role, which involves, for example, staff recruitment, drawing up contracts of employment, and processing personnel data.

A clear pattern emerged from the literature study (see the full version of the report). The tactical/operational – strategic dimension was addressed by almost all the authors. We also saw – though less explicitly – a distinction between a more pro-active and a less pro-active approach and differences in levels of operation. Does the HR professional focus on the organization as a whole or a specific part? Does he serve the management or the workers?

We combined several theories and formulated six orientations for the HR departments in the organizations in this study:

1. The development of an HRM vision and strategy;
2. Co-responsibility for the realization of change processes;
3. Responding to all problems that cross one's path;
4. Design and delivery of HR products and services;
5. Assistance and support (personnel care);
6. Administration and regulation (personnel Administration).

HRM and line management

Bos-Nehles et al. (2011) analysed various cases and identified five factors that determine whether line managers could and would be more successful or less successful than HR professionals in the implementation of HR practices.³ These factors were derived from the AMO model (Ability, Motivation and Opportunity) developed by Appelbaum.

1. Competences: line managers must possess HR-related competences (knowledge and skills) to co-implement HR practices.
2. Motivation: line managers must want to implement HR practices.
3. Time: line managers must have time for HR.
4. Support by HR: line managers need good support from HR specialists for implementation and execution.
5. Policy & procedures: line managers need clarity in policy, guidelines and procedures in order to steer the implementation. This relates both to powers and levels of responsibility, and the application of tools.

³ Also called the 'internalization of HR tasks'.

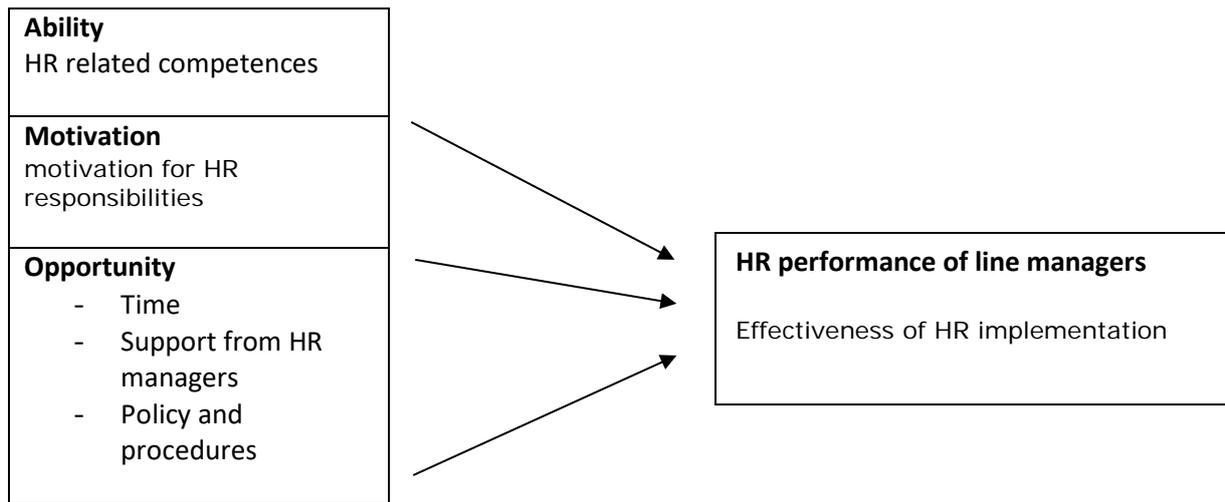


Figure 2: the AMO model

This picture is largely confirmed by other research in this field. Time and competences seemed to be the main obstacles to effective implementation of HRM.

Five statements were presented to the respondents:

1. The line manager is motivated to perform HR tasks (motivation).
2. The line manager has adequate time to perform HR tasks (time).
3. The line manager has enough HR-related competences (knowledge and skills) to perform HR tasks (competences).
4. The line manager gets sufficient support from HR to perform HR tasks (support by HR).
5. There are clear guidelines and procedures that give line managers enough support to perform HR tasks (policy and procedures).

Satisfaction with HR

The respondents were asked to award a score for the HR services. Levels of satisfaction with different areas were further explored in the interviews.

3 Main findings

This chapter presents the main findings of the HRM Monitor. It addresses the following themes:

- 3.1: Time spent on HR tasks and division of tasks between HR and line management
- 3.2: Orientation of HR department
- 3.3: HR competence clusters
- 3.4: Satisfaction with HR services
- 3.5: Success factors for HR implementation by line management
- 3.6: Recent important HR themes

3.1 Time spent on and division of HR tasks

As mentioned in the previous chapter, we identified seven clusters of HR tasks. The HR professionals, the HR managers and the line managers were asked to estimate how much time they spent on each cluster. They could choose from: (almost) never, sometimes, regularly or often. They were also asked to describe the division of tasks between the HR professional and the line manager for each cluster.

We can see in Figure 3 that HR professionals spent most of their time on Staffing/Availability of Personnel (83% of the respondents answered 'regularly' or 'often' for this cluster). Personnel Administration accounted for the least time; however, the majority did say that responsibility for this task rested largely or entirely by themselves. This finding was in line with expectations, as personnel Administration tasks are more likely to be carried out by a P&O administrator than an HR advisor/P&O officer. Even so, 31% of the HR professionals said they regularly or often spent time on Personnel Administration.

Like the HR professionals, the interviewed line managers scored highest for Staffing/Availability of Personnel (79%, regularly and often). HR managers spent less time on this cluster. The lowest scoring clusters were Conditions of Employment for line managers (significantly lower than the other groups), and Personnel Administration for all the groups. The relatively low score for Conditions of Employment might suggest that the tasks are regarded more as the responsibility of HR than line management (see task division between HR and line for further details). HR professionals spent significantly more time than HR managers on Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism.

The scores of the HR managers were significantly higher for Corporate Development (78%, regularly and often) than HR professionals and line managers; they also scored high for Labour Relations (76%). This might be due to the fact that most of the interviewed HR managers bore ultimate responsibility for HR and/or were a member of the management team (90%). Hence, they expected to be busy with corporate development (long-term perspective). These tasks also involved staying in contact with the Executive Board and the Works Council (Labour Relations). The figure below shows the regularly/often percentages for each cluster and each group of respondents.

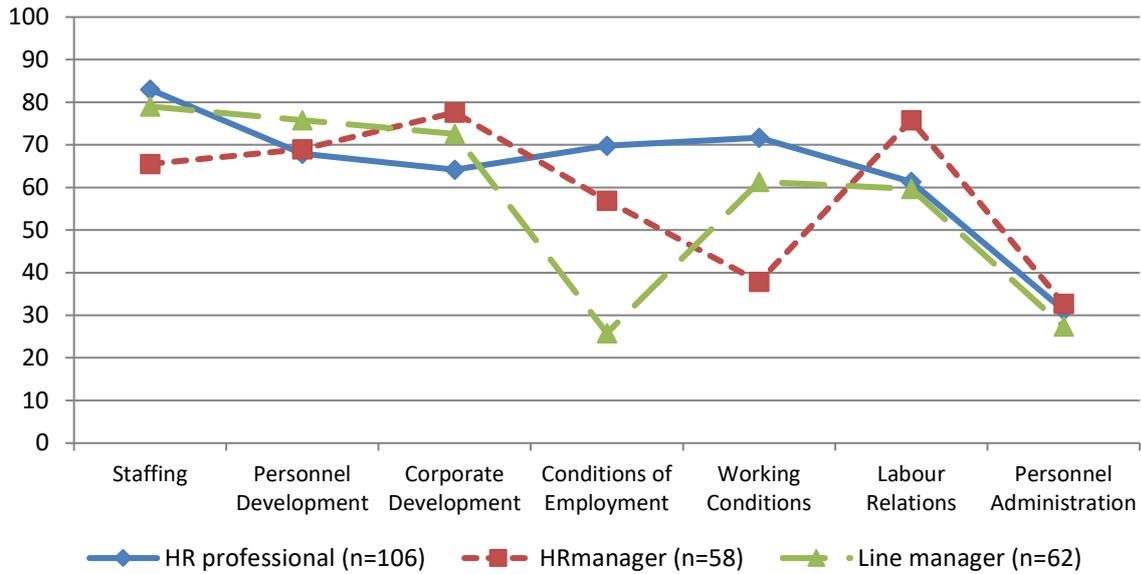


Figure 3: Distribution in percentages for regular/often, showing the time spent by HR professionals, line managers, and HR managers on the task clusters

In the questionnaire and the interviews the respondents were asked to name the task clusters that were largely or entirely implemented by the line. Figures 4 and 5 show respectively the results for the three groups regarding the task clusters implemented largely or entirely by the line, and the task clusters implemented largely or entirely by the HR professionals.

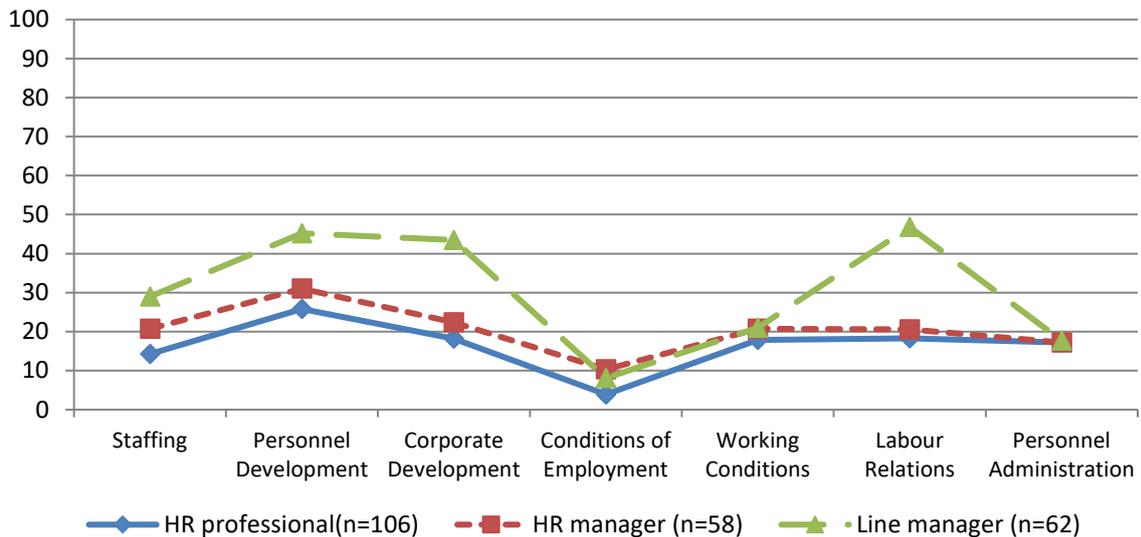


Figure 4: Distribution of tasks in percentages for task clusters implemented largely or entirely by the line, according to the HR professionals, line managers and HR managers

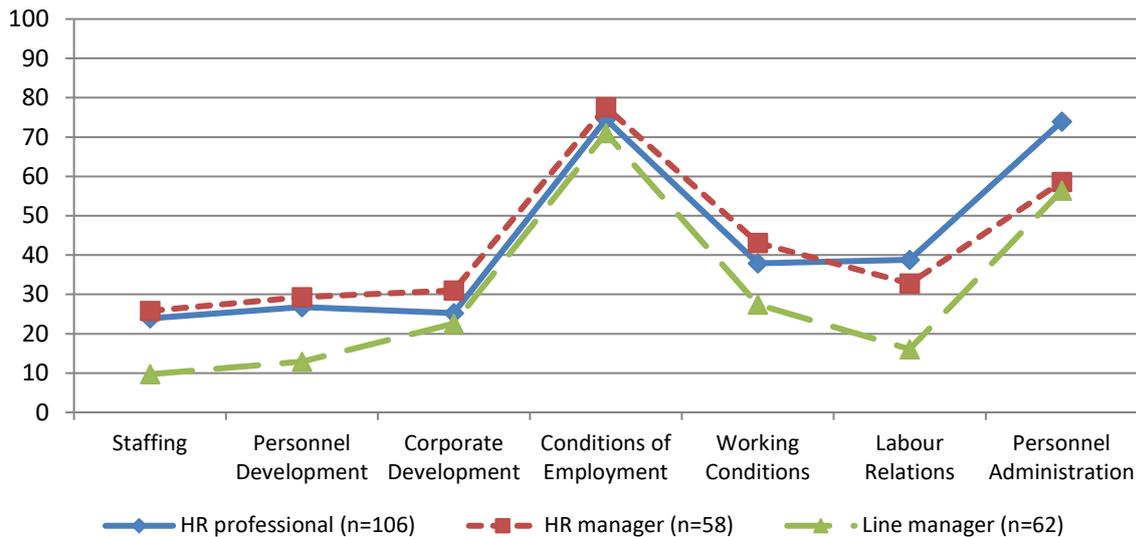


Figure 5: Distribution of tasks in percentages for task clusters implemented largely or entirely by the HR professionals, according to the HR professionals, line managers and HR managers

The line managers said more often than the HR professionals and HR managers that the tasks for Staffing, Personnel Development and Labour Relations rest more with the line. One interviewed line manager said that when it comes to Labour Relations ‘HR only turns up to mediate or advise in conflict situations.’ Figure 4 appears to show an equally large difference for Corporate Development, but many line managers agreed with the HR professionals and managers that these tasks are for both groups. The differences between the groups were not significant.

The responses were closest for Conditions of Employment and Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism. All groups agreed that the line manager is least involved in Conditions of Employment.

Figure 4 shows that the HR professionals are slightly more of the opinion than line managers and the HR managers that HR professionals are more involved than the line in Personnel Administration.

The full report of this research contains an analysis for each task cluster and the division of tasks between HR and the line. The main conclusions are presented in Chapter 4.

3.2 Orientations of the HR departments

The respondents were asked how far the HR department fitted in with the following orientations:

1. Development of an HRM vision and strategy;
2. Co-responsibility for realizing processes of change;
3. Responding to all problems that cross one’s path;
4. Design and delivery of HR products and services;
5. Assistance and support (personnel care);
6. Administration and regulation (personnel Administration).

Orientations 1 and 2 imply a proactive approach with a focus on environment and strategy. The other four are more reactive and operational in nature. Further analysis indicated that the first two were fairly closely connected. The same applied to 3, 5 and 6.

A comparison of the different orientations by the HR professionals, the line managers and the HR managers suggested general agreement on the degree to which they applied to the HR Department (see Figure 6). There was very close agreement among the groups for Responding to problems (3) and Personnel Administration (6). But there were also differences. The HR professionals chose proactive much more often than the line managers and the HR managers. The line managers said more often than the other two groups that the HR department was reactive and administrative in nature.

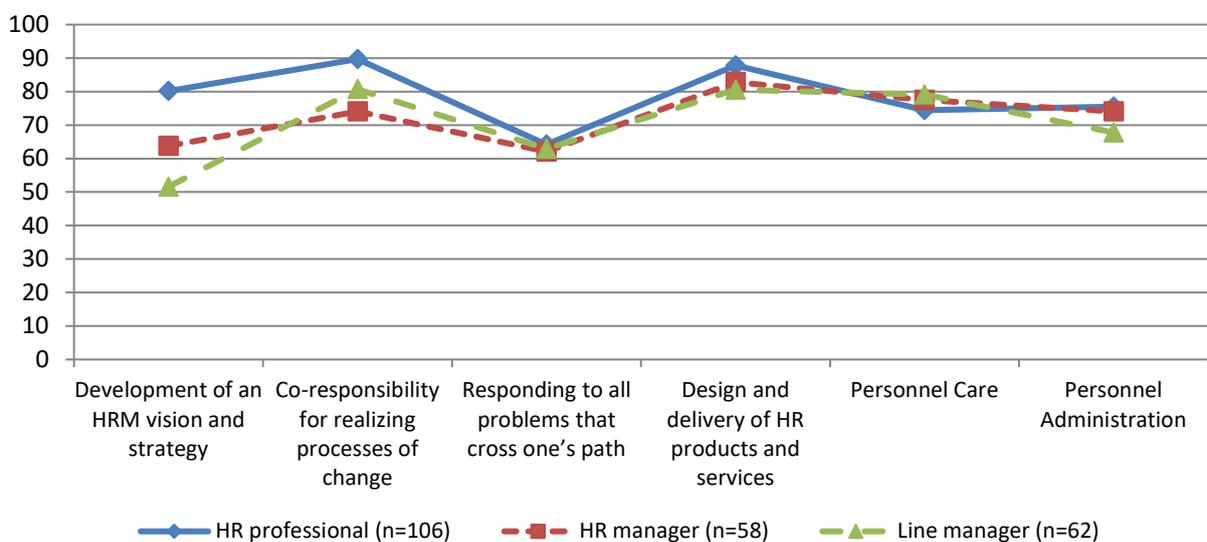


Figure 6: Distribution in percentages for agree/totally agree with the application of six orientations to the HR department, according to the HR professionals, line managers and HR managers

The full report contains an analysis of each orientation.

Expectations regarding the importance of steering in the future

The HR professionals were also asked to express their expectations regarding the relevance of HR in the future (see Figure 7) in relation to the same six orientations. They stressed the growing importance of a proactive HR department and expected the strategic/proactive role – co-responsibility in the realization of processes of change (75%) and the development of an HR vision and strategy (70%) – to be more important in the future. They also expected the administrative role of HR – personnel Administration (36%) and personnel care (27%) – to be less important.

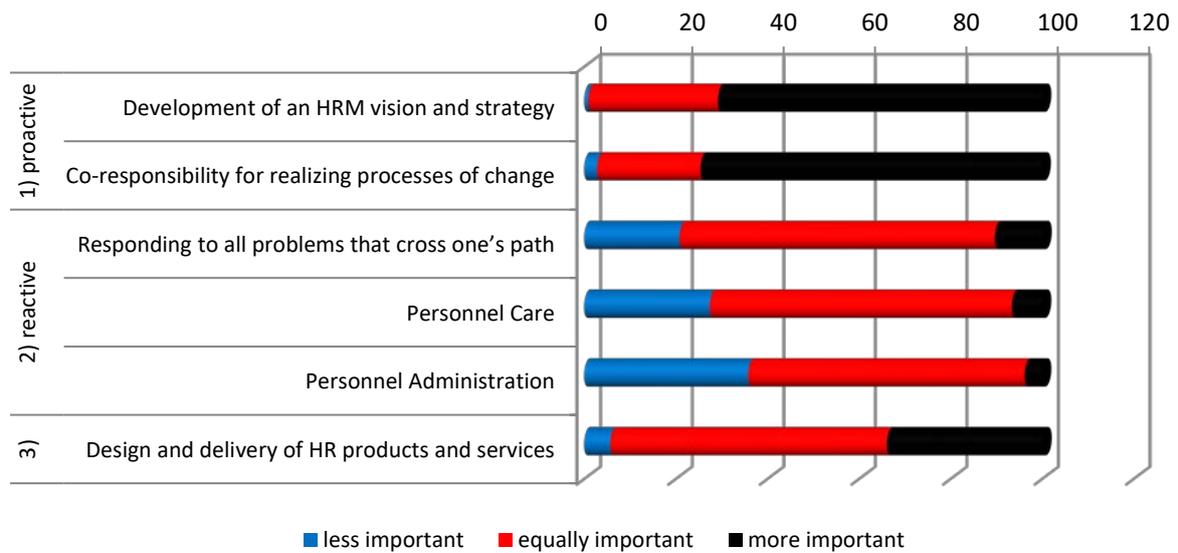


Figure 7: Distribution in percentages for the importance of HR categorizations to HR department, according to the HR professionals (n=106)

3.3 HR competence clusters

The HR professionals were asked in the questionnaire to say how often they had deployed the five different competence clusters in the course of their job. The same question was put to the HR managers during the interviews. The answers of the HR professionals are shown in Table 3 below. The competence cluster that was drawn on most was Personal Integrity. More than a quarter mentioned that sometimes Business Knowledge was required (this cluster had the lowest score of the five).

Table 3: Competence clusters deployed by HR professionals, according to the HR professionals, in percentages (n=106)

	(Almost) never	Sometimes	Regularly	Often
Personal Integrity/ Credibility	0	1.9	20.8	77.4
Change Management	0.9	3.8	46.2	49.1
Business Knowledge	1.9	27.4	42.5	28.3
Ability to influence people	0.9	2.8	40.6	55.7
HRM Expertise	0	7.5	28.3	64.2

The same question was put to the HR managers. Figure 8 shows the responses for 'regularly' and 'often'.

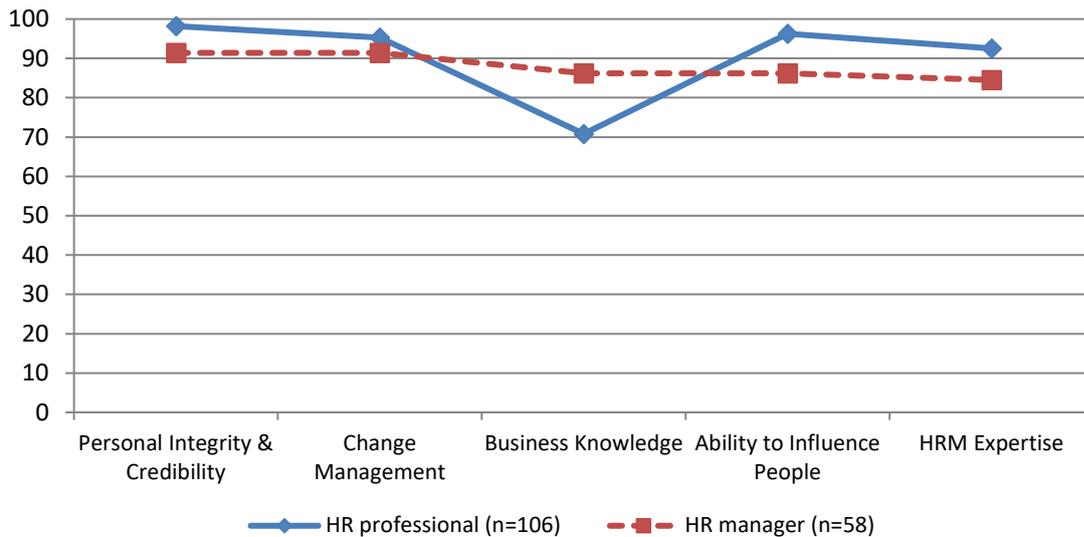


Figure 8: Distribution of 'regularly' and 'often' in percentages for the competence clusters deployed by HR managers and HR professionals

The first conclusion we can draw from this figure is that all five clusters are in strong demand. Secondly, there is a difference in insight between HR professionals and HR managers in two clusters. Apparently the HR professionals deploy Business Knowledge far less than the managers.

The situation is reversed for HRM Expertise, with a significantly stronger response from the HR professionals than the HR managers.

Importance of the competence clusters in the future

The HR professionals were asked to assess the importance of the competence clusters in the future. The results are shown in Figure 9.

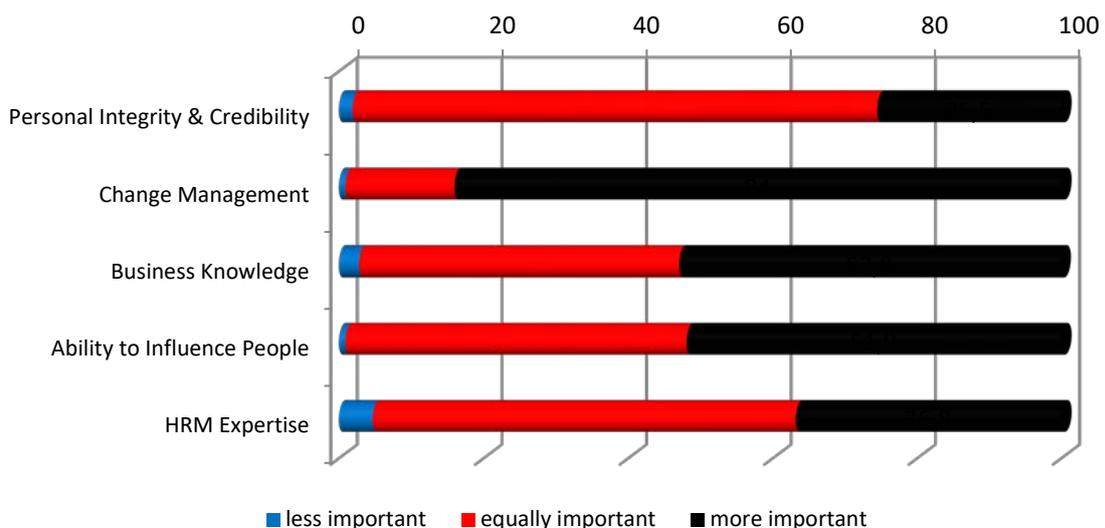


Figure 9: Distribution in percentages for importance of competence clusters in future, according to HR professionals (n=106)

Clearly, the respondents expected an increase rather than a decrease across the entire spectrum. No cluster was expected to diminish in importance by more than 5%, while they were all expected to increase by at least 25%. The greatest increase was expected in Change Management.

Personal Integrity/Credibility is very important now and is expected to continue to be so in the future. This was indicated by no fewer than 73% of the respondents. Personal Integrity topped the list and was therefore regarded as the most important competence cluster for HR.

Visibility of competences

The interviews with the line managers and HR managers also addressed the visibility of competences among the HR professionals (see Figure 10).

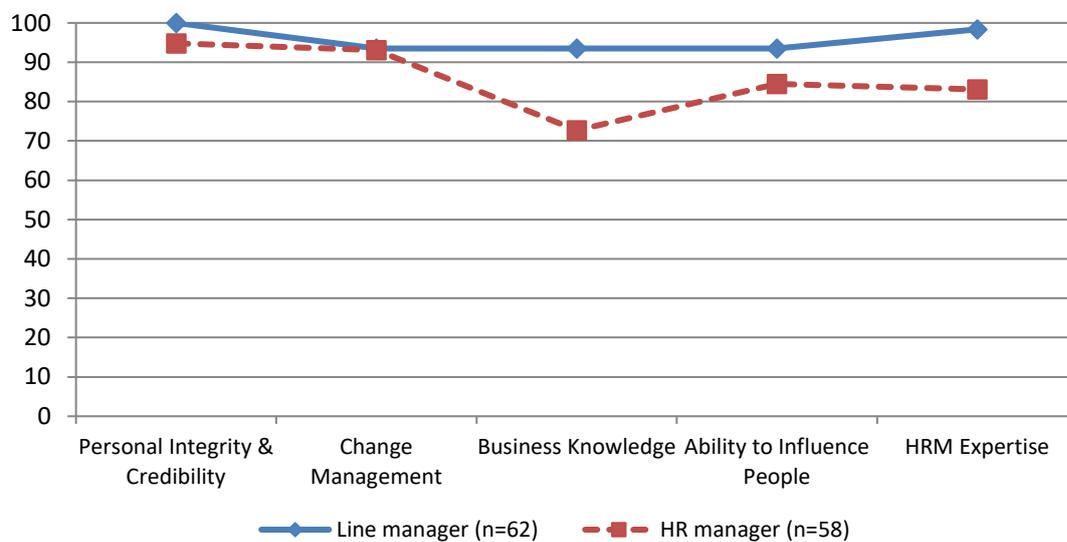


Figure 10: Distribution in percentages of competence clusters which are sufficiently/very visible among HR professionals, according to HR managers and line managers

Intriguingly, the HR managers gave far lower scores than the line managers for the visibility of Business Knowledge.

Not one line manager awarded 'his' HR professional a 'not visible' or an 'almost not visible' for Personal Integrity/Credibility; this cluster was therefore regarded everywhere as sufficiently in evidence.

HR managers and line managers used examples to illustrate their scores for their HR professionals.

- * *Personal Integrity / Credibility*

This cluster was regularly linked to confidentiality and discretion: 'They can get to the core of a conflict and know what to do'.

- * *Change Management*

The cluster was associated mainly with flexibility or the lack thereof.

The negative aspects related to 'rigidity' and 'hiding behind regulations'. Both the line managers and the HR managers pointed out that the HR professional was not the initiator of Change Management but liked to be involved in it and contributed and

cooperated well. One HR manager commented: *'The HR professional clearly has the ability to solve problems, but I am ultimately responsible for steering the process'*.

* *Business Knowledge*

The length of employment in the organization emerged as an important factor. Typical statements: *'(The personnel officer) has been with the company for a long time and understands how things work'*. Or: *'The HR consultant still needs to make the transition from the hospital culture and the business services she is used to. The processes run differently here'*.

* *Ability to influence people*

The line managers in particular linked this competence to concrete skills, such as discussion and advisory skills, discussion techniques, argumentation and persuasiveness: *'Good negotiating skills can totally reverse the course of a dialogue (in the positive sense)'*.

* *HRM Expertise*

Almost all the respondents were positive about the expertise of the HR professional, referring to collective labour agreements, rules and regulations, and the 'HR toolkit'. It was important to them for the professional to stay up to speed with the latest developments in the field: *'New developments are picked up and translated to the organization. Positive and progressive.'*

3.4 Satisfaction with HR services

The respondents indicated on a ten-point scale their satisfaction with the HR services in the organization. The average scores are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Levels of satisfaction with the HR services (expressed as a score) among HR professionals, line managers and HR managers; average, mode, standard deviation and minimum-maximum

	average	Standard deviation	Mode ⁴	min-max
HR professional (n=105)	7.55	0.60	8	6-9
Line manager (n=62)	7.40	0.69	8	6-9
HR manager (n=57)	7.44	0.57	7	6-9

The groups were equally satisfied. No significant differences emerged in relation to the size of the organization or to whether it was profit or non-profit; nor were there significant differences per sector or HR positioning.

HR professionals

Satisfaction with the HR services was also addressed in the interviews. The respondents were asked to name areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The ones most frequently cited (three times or more) by the HR professionals themselves are listed in Table 5.

Table 5: Areas with which the HR professionals were satisfied or dissatisfied (n=67)

Satisfied:	Times cited	Dissatisfied:	Times cited
Fast & good assistance / customer focus	10	Not enough proactive	8
Useful advice	7	Lack of time /workload	7

⁴ The score awarded most.

Contact with co-workers and line managers	6	Communication	5
Position & role	5	Strategic/corporate aspects	4
Accessibility	4	Admin. organization	3
Basic skills / knowledge of HR instruments	3		
Administration in control	3		
Commitment	3		
Concrete knowledge	3		

Customer focus stands out from the rest in this table; HR appears to be a good provider of internal services (accessibility and useful advice also fall into this category). A relatively small number of respondents (8 of the 67) mentioned that HR is not pro-active enough. Seven complained of lack of time.

Line managers

The areas cited most often by the line managers are listed in Table 6.

Table 6: Areas with which line managers are satisfied or dissatisfied (n=62)

Satisfied:	Times cited	Dissatisfied:	Times cited
Services / sparring partner / support	14	Not enough strategic / policy / not enough focus on the longer term	6
Consultation, cooperation HR-line	10	Reactive/passive	5
Accessibility/availability	7	Administration	3
Good advice	6	Accuracy	3
Communication / information services	4	Implementation HR tools (selection & recruitment, re-integration and career counselling)	3
Expertise	3		

Services stands out on this list: almost a quarter of the respondents were satisfied with the HR support. Accessibility and cooperation between HR and the line (being a sparring partner could also fall into this category) were also mentioned frequently. The line managers were less satisfied with the strategic/policy aspects of HR. Proactivity could also be improved.

All in all, satisfaction outweighed dissatisfaction.

HR managers

The areas cited most often by the HR managers (n=57) are listed in Table 7.

Table 7: Areas with which HR managers were satisfied or dissatisfied

Satisfied:	Times cited	Dissatisfied:	Times cited
Support/services/service-orientation	14	Not strategic enough / insufficiently attuned to market developments	7

Customer focus, demand-driven, solution-oriented	10	Not proactive enough	4
Commitment/hard-working	5	Communic. (also e-HRM) to manager	3
Knowledge and expertise	4	HR not enough in the line	3
Commitment	3	Rules & regulations / knowledge of changing conditions of employment	3

The HR managers were also most satisfied with support and services, citing it fourteen times. They were less satisfied with the strategic focus, expressed once as *'not enough attention to market developments'*.

Though the respondents were satisfied with the knowledge and expertise, they also said that HR should be more up to speed with the latest rules and regulations and conditions of employment.

When the results from the different groups – HR professionals, line managers and HR managers – are lined up against one another, service and support clearly score higher than the rest in the satisfaction stakes. This area was cited most by all three groups. HR professionals and line managers agreed that advice was a strong area, but this impression was not shared by the HR managers. They did not, however, express dissatisfaction with it.

All the groups expressed dissatisfaction with the strategic performance of HR and the proactivity of HR professionals.

3.5 The HR tasks of line management

Now we come to line management. The HR professionals, HR managers and line managers were presented with statements on factors that determine whether line managers could or would perform HR tasks.

The figure below gives an overall picture of how the different groups responded. The responses 'agree' and 'strongly agree' are shown in Figure 11 and 'disagree' is shown in Figure 12.

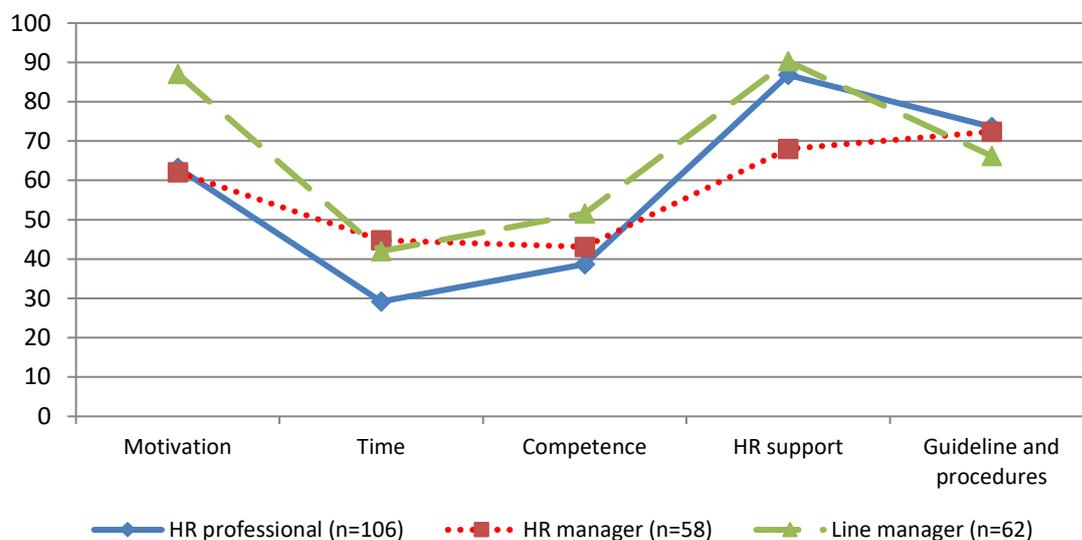


Figure 11: Distributed in percentages, 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses to different statements on the determining factors, according to the HR professionals, line managers and HR managers

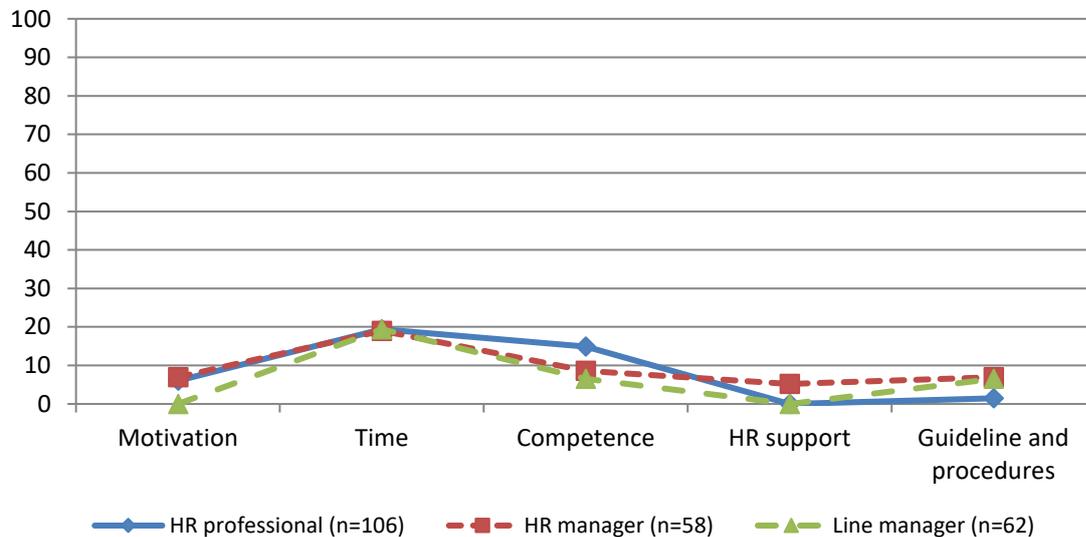


Figure 12: Distribution in percentages, 'disagree' response to the different statements on the determining factors, according to the HR professionals, line managers and HR managers

More than half the HR professionals and HR managers said that the line manager was motivated to perform HR tasks. Not surprisingly, the line managers gave themselves higher scores for 'motivation' than the other two groups. None of the line managers perceived himself as not motivated. The other groups were slightly more critical. Around one third of the HR professionals and HR managers agreed only 'to some extent' with the statement. One or two even disagreed. Eight interviewees were downright negative, saying that the line manager regarded HR tasks as ballast, administrative red tape, or intrusive.

We see a relatively positive self-image – albeit to a lesser extent – for 'competences'. HR managers, in particular, disagreed more frequently with the statement that the line manager has sufficient HR-related competences.

The score for 'time' is striking. Almost one fifth of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the line manager had enough time for HR tasks.

During the interviews many respondents said that line managers have no priorities/time for HR tasks. Others were more subtle, saying, for example: *'Sometimes you need to sound the alarm. If something needs doing, the managers always do it'* or *'It depends on the line manager. Some spend more time on it than others.'*

It is hardly surprising that the HR professionals strongly agreed with the statement that the line manager received enough support from HR, given that the HR professional himself has so much influence in this sphere. The line agreed – even to a significantly greater extent than the HR professionals and managers.

People were less positive about the existence of clear guidelines and procedures.

3.6 Recent important HR themes

The HR professionals were asked in the questionnaire to select the five most important HR themes in their organization at the moment. The results are shown below.

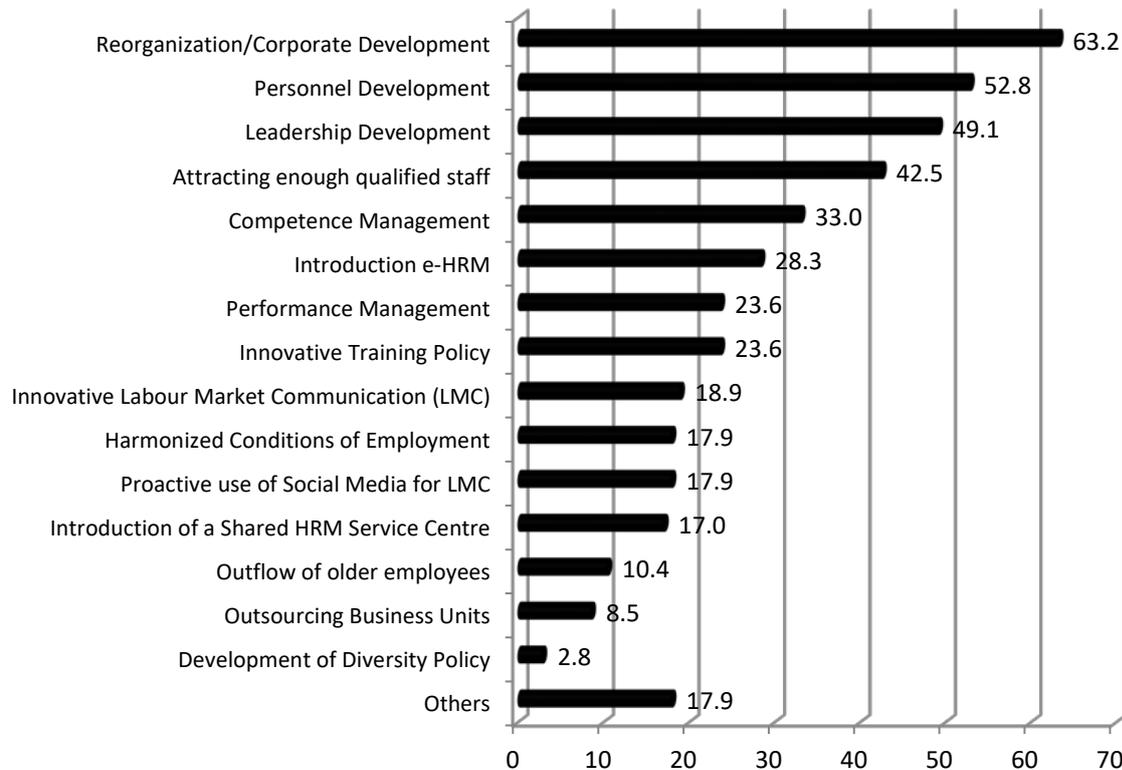


Figure 13: The most important HR themes in the organization according to HR professionals, in percentages ⁵

'Reorganization/Corporate development' is far ahead of the rest. This theme was cited by almost two out of every three HR professionals. The result might be tied in with the fallout from the economic crisis, which has forced countless companies to reorganize. It seems that HR plays an important role in reorganizations and corporate development. There was a notable difference between profit and non-profit organizations. A huge 85% (!) of non-profit organizations cited reorganization/corporate development as a major theme as opposed to 58% of profit organizations.

More than half then cited 'Personnel development' (a typical HR theme). It is good to see attention being paid to this theme, as it will help to promote sustainable employability of personnel. Leadership/management development emerged as another important theme. Given the crisis and the rising unemployment, it was surprising that the 'war on talent' (attracting enough qualified personnel) came fourth, cited by more than 40% of the professionals. A clear difference emerged here between profit and non-profit organizations (49% compared with 26%). This difference was to be expected as attracting qualified personnel is more of a problem for profit enterprises.

⁵ The percentages add up to more than 100 because the respondents could select up to five themes.

At the foot of the list are the low-scorers: 'Diversity policy' and 'Outflow of older workers'. We had expected the outflow of older workers to score higher, given the media coverage. We also expected to see a higher score for 'Proactive deployment of social media for labour market communication'.

There are two other themes where significant differences emerged between profit and non-profit. The introduction of e-HRM was more important to professionals in non-profit organizations (52%) than in profit organizations (22%). The reverse applied to the introduction of shared service centres (22% compared with 4%).

4 Conclusions

In this chapter we use the research findings to answer the research questions we set in Chapter 1. We will conclude with a summary of the main findings.

4.1 Answers to the research questions

The first questions were:

Which HR tasks do HR professionals engage in?

- What are the most important HR themes in the organization at this moment?
- Which clusters of tasks are performed by HR professionals and line managers?
- What is the primary orientation of the HR department? (categorization and role)
- How is this expected to develop?

How are HR tasks divided between the HR professional and the line management?

The tasks of HR

The most significant finding was that the HR job is still very wide; HR professionals are active in many different areas. They 'regularly' or 'often' deploy tasks in all the clusters, apart from Personnel Administration; together, the scores for these two response options were above 60%. The 'top 3' were Staffing, Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism and Conditions of Employment. Personnel Administration was the only exception. In most organizations this falls under a separate department or is outsourced. The ever-increasing use of e-HRM could also be tied in with this finding. Managers and employees can do a lot with MSS and ESS and therefore have less need of the services of an HR professional in this area. That does not, however, alter the fact that Personnel Administration remains an important responsibility for the HR department. The line must always can fall back on HR.

There were policy and operational tasks in almost every cluster. In the Staffing cluster the HR professional was expected to contribute to dismissal procedures, selection, and personnel planning. The contribution to 'Personnel development' related mainly to the interview cycle, throughflow and training.

'Conditions of employment' fell squarely in the domain of the HR professional, who was expected to be up to speed with the latest arrangements, advise on them, and apply them in staff remuneration schemes.

The economic crisis impacted deeply on 'Corporate development'. Several HR professionals had played a role in reorganization programmes. This was the theme that

was mentioned most in this cluster. 'Reorganization and Corporate Development' was by far the most cited answer to the question of what the most important themes were in the organization. Culture change was also mentioned frequently for this cluster and, at a more operational level, the compilation of new job descriptions and job evaluations. 'Labour Relations' at corporate level emerged primarily as the domain of the HR manager, but consultations with Works Council members were mentioned by the other HR professionals. 'Mediating and advising in conflicts' was mentioned frequently in this cluster. We shall return to this later. 'Personnel Administration' was largely an operational task, concerned mainly with matters such as sick leave registration and personnel data.

Division of tasks with the line

The research clearly revealed an awareness among line managers that they share responsibility for personnel management. This finding likewise emerged from the answers to the question on the required preconditions. The line managers said loud and clear that they were motivated to perform HR tasks. The HR professionals and managers shared their conviction, but in more moderate terms.

Based on the activities of the line and what it says about the division of tasks, it appears that shared responsibility for personnel management is indeed being actively assumed. The three groups of respondents agreed on many aspects of the division of tasks; opinions diverged on only a few counts. Staffing, Personnel Development, and Labour Relations were experienced as a line responsibility by the line more than by the HRM-ers. We see this as positive; a line that regards itself as responsible for these matters will have more effect than a line that places responsibility with HR.

It is also encouraging that Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism are predominantly regarded as a shared responsibility. The policy in this area and the way it is implemented must crystallize out at the level of the work floor. Judging from the efforts from the line at this time, it would be fair to say that this is actually happening. But this cluster also demands a strong contribution from HR – which it is indeed receiving.

Conditions of Employment and Personnel Administration come first in the HR task. These call for specialist knowledge that line managers must be able to fall back on. Often, this knowledge – as in the case of dismissal procedures – is of a legal nature.

It may be concluded that HRM lies increasingly 'in the line' with a separate role for the HR professional and the line manager. The line manager is 'people-manager' to his team in everyday operations; the HR professionals advise and support the line, which must, in turn, be able to rely on HR for the requisite expertise.

That is how it looks in theory, and we can conclude on the basis of our research findings that this is also how it works in practice in many organizations. It appears that HR still forms an integral part of many organizations. Line management needs and values the support of the HR professional.

HR as a mediator

According to the theory, HR has surrendered its role as a mediator between management and employees: HR advises the management and has distanced itself more and more from the employees. Caldwell (2003, p. 998) says, "We have given up the role of fair arbiters..." Our findings, however, suggest differently. Many HR professionals and managers cited 'mediating and advising in conflicts' as a task in the Labour Relations

cluster. The fact that line managers also see labour relations as part of their job does nothing to change this role.

HR managers

We have shown that HR managers also have a very wide job, though the emphasis is different compared with the other HR professionals. As expected, the tasks of HR managers relate more to policy and strategy and less to operational matters, involving, for example, Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism and Conditions of Employment. Corporate Development and Labour Relations do, however, account for a relatively large part of their time, though clear differences exist between types of organizations and sectors.

The many roles of HR

The question was about the orientation of the HR department. The analysis exposed a rough division into a proactive and a reactive role. The proactive role was characterized by:

- the development of an HRM vision and strategy;
- co-responsibility for the realization of change processes.

The reactive role was characterized by:

- responding to problems that crossed one's path;
- assistance and support (personnel care);
- administration and regulation (personnel administration).

The design and delivery of HR products and services correlated with both roles.

Two important observations can be made here. First, again, the job is broad. More than half of all respondents agreed (strongly) with *all* the categorizations; with a score of over 60% most of the time. The second was the agreement between the three groups. The only exception related to the proactive role and co-responsibility for processes of change. HR professionals identified more with this role than line managers and – strikingly – also more than HR managers.

HR professionals expected the proactive role of the HR department to become more important in the future and the management role to diminish. Is this wishful thinking?

Deployment of competences

We shall now look at the HR competences by asking the following questions:

Which competences are deployed for the execution of HR tasks?

- Which competences are demanded for the execution of HR tasks?
- How visible are these competences according to HR managers and line managers?
- How important are the competences expected to be in the future?

The first sub-question was put to the HR professional and the HR manager, the second to the HR manager and the line manager.

'Broad' was again the word that emerged first from the analysis: heavy demands were made on all the competence clusters and they were also visible to others. In order to draw some kind of distinction, it was more interesting to look at where the *relatively* low scores lay, rather than the high scores. We looked first at Business Knowledge, described as 'an understanding of the business and the environment, expertise in strategy formation (processes), knowledge of business economics and corporate processes'. The HR professionals themselves said that the demand for this cluster was relatively low. Interestingly, both the line managers and the HR managers said that this cluster was

sufficiently visible. More interestingly still, the line managers said this significantly more often than the HR managers. Are HR managers underestimating their staff? The same question was put to the HR managers in relation to their own job. Not a single cluster ended with a low score. It seems they can deploy all the competences sufficiently.

All the competences were expected to be just as important in the future. The number of respondents who said that a particular competence would be less important was negligible. If the score for the importance of a competence was already very high at that moment, one might reasonably conclude that it would be hard for it to increase, but many respondents claimed otherwise. If we take this as an indication of the competence that will be most in demand in the future, then 'Change Management' springs to the fore. This finding fits in with the much expressed opinion that organizations must constantly innovate in order to survive.

Satisfaction

How is the work of the HR professional assessed?

- What do the line managers ('the HR customers') think about this? What is the opinion of the HR professional himself and of the HR manager?

The findings were positive and very positive. An average score of 7.5 certainly counts as good. There was scarcely any difference between the assessments by the line management ('the customer'), the HR manager and the HR professional. So the latter did not overestimate himself when he awarded a high score to his own services. The customers were particularly satisfied with the support they received from HR, the thought-sharing, the cooperation, and the accessibility and availability. This underlined their role as a business ally. There was room for improvement in policy and strategy, but only a few line managers said this. HR managers also mentioned policy and strategy but again to a limited degree.

And now for the line.

Can line management do the job?

We concluded earlier that line managers are generally willing to assume responsibility for HRM. But can they do the job effectively? Can they fill the role? The research question was:

Will line management be able to carry out HR tasks adequately?

- Can they meet the requirements for the job?

The line managers have already said that they are motivated to assume responsibility in this domain.

The greatest stumbling block is time. Another problem in many organizations is the competences of line managers. The line managers were less convinced of that than the HRM-ers.

The positive assessment for support by HR stands out in the answers to this set of questions. Allowances should be made for the possibility that many socially desirable answers were given as a result of the way the study was conducted. The line managers were questioned via de HR professional, so one may reasonably assume that a good relationship existed between the two. Neither the line manager nor the HR manager would be deeply critical of the HR professional (towards the student conducting the interview).

4.2 Interesting findings

The study did not expose any major breaks in the trend. On the contrary, the findings point more towards an ongoing development. Line management is becoming more important in 'people management', but this does not make HRM superfluous. Managers need and value the support of the HR professional, particularly when it comes to specialized knowledge of conditions of employment and Working Conditions / Safety and Health / Absenteeism.

The trend in personnel management is also continuing – though not unexpectedly. Activities in this cluster are demanding less of the HR professional's time, but they remain primarily his responsibility.

Interestingly, in this research the employees were scarcely mentioned by either the HR professionals or the other respondents. This could suggest, that HR – as argued in much of the literature (see e.g., Kluijtmans, 2008) – is first and foremost for the line: in other words, the HR professional's primary mission is to support line management. We have ascertained that HR still plays a role in the mediation of conflicts between managers (or the company) and the staff. Specialized knowledge (for instance, on conditions of employment and rules and regulations) is important in these scenarios.

One of the most conspicuous findings was the important role played by HR in corporate development and the need for change management competences in that area.

All things considered, we can conclude that the HR professional clearly offers added value.

Literature

Biemans, P. (2008). Veranderingen in het beroepsprofiel van HRM in de praktijk [Changes in the professional profile of HRM in practice]. *Tijdschrift voor HRM*, 11-1, p. 5-31

Bos-Nehles, A., Riemsdijk M. van, & Looise J.K. (2011). Lijnmanagement verantwoordelijk voor HR-implementatie; een uitdaging voor HRM [Line management responsibility for the implementation of HRM]. *Tijdschrift voor HRM*, 14-3, p. 32-45

Caldwell, R. (2003). The Changing Role of Personnel Managers: Old Ambiguities, New Uncertainties. *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 40, 4, p. 983-1004

Kluijtmans, F. (2008). *Van verzorger naar spelverdeler. Over veranderende posities op het HR-speelveld [From carer to key player]* Inaugural lecture. Open Universiteit Nederland

Ulrich, D., Brockbank, W., Johnson, D., Sandholtz, K., & Younger, J. (2008). *HR Competences. Mastery at the intersection of people and business*. Alexandria (Virginia): Society for HRM

Even weggezet

The study in its present form was conducted only by Avans and will be repeated annually with the long-term aim of gaining a clear picture of the functional development of HR in the Netherlands. The scope will be substantially expanded in 2014, when six other universities of applied sciences (Saxion, Inholland, Haagse Hogeschool, Windesheim, Hanzehogeschool Groningen and Hogeschool Utrecht) come on board and provide nationwide coverage.

The findings will be submitted to LooHRM (*Landelijk Overleg Opleidingen HRM*), which approves the profile for the HRM study programme – *Format 2012+, 2016+* etc. – every four years. This constitutes part of the process for gaining funding for future curricula. Many other people assisted with this study besides the students. We would like to thank each of them for their input. We hope that this collaboration between education and the field will bear fruit and lead to the further professionalization of HRM.