

O Partner, Where Art Thou? A Critical Discursive Analysis of HR Managers' Struggle for Legitimacy

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This study of HRM in an Australian insurance firm applies a critical discursive perspective to examine HR managers' attempts to position themselves as Human Resources Business Partners. Analyzing semi-structured interviews, we aim to provide a situated understanding of HR managers' experiences as they sought to become accepted as co-equal partners by line management. Our findings draw attention to the gap between prescriptive accounts of HR Business Partnering and the tensions and legitimacy struggles HR managers face when adopting their new roles. We show the impact of line management's resistance to HRM and the concomitant need for HR managers to legitimate their position in a new way. The introduction of an organizational culture survey, in particular, supplemented discursive attempts to promote the change amongst line managers and constituted a key driver in the process. Our study contributes to the study of HRM change by showing how the shift to an HRM business partnership model can be a precarious accomplishment: (1) enacted through the interweaving of discursive and socio-material practices, and (2) subject to the constraints of existing organisational power/knowledge relations.

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Introduction

As several commentators have noted, the field of HR practice has been shaped by an ongoing struggle for legitimacy and power (Legge, 1995; Wright, 2008). HR professionals have had difficulty establishing themselves as significant contributors to organizational outcomes, facing trust issues particularly in their relations with line managers and top management. Against this background, the Human Resources Business Partner (HRBP) model can be seen as an effort to ‘overcome personnel management’s poor reputation by promoting a vision of HR specialists as more closely aligned to the strategic imperatives of the firm’ (Wright, 2008, p. 1067). HR professionals are positioned as ‘strategic partners’ of management, leaving daily execution of HR practices to line managers themselves (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich, Allen, & Brockbank, 2009; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). In the literature, the success of this HRM role change is seen as reliant on HR managers’ competencies in developing effective HR-line management relations, allowing them to be perceived as ‘legitimate’ in the eyes of their management clients (Becker, Huselid, & Ulrich, 2001; Brandl & Pohler, 2010; CIPD, 2004; Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2012).

However, although there is no shortage of prescriptive frameworks on HR Business Partnering, there has been ‘little exploration’ of what the new role of HR ‘Business Partner’ means for those ‘performing it’ (Caldwell & Storey, 2007, p. 31). Critically oriented scholars in particular have suggested that research should recognise the ‘tensions and difficulties’ posed by the ‘emerging orthodoxy of business partnering’ (Keegan & Francis, 2010, p. 895); as well as examine more closely the power relations shaping HR managers’ work (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Vickers & Fox, 2010). This involves considering roles such as ‘strategic partner’ or ‘change agent’ as discursive constructs and examining how these are enacted, contested and legitimated in practice (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Mueller & Carter, 2005).

Following the above calls, this paper offers a contribution to the critical discursive study of HRM in practice, focusing on HR managers’ experiences of positioning themselves as business partners during one firm’s attempt to institute the HRBP model. Based on analysis of twenty in-depth interviews with HR and line managers in an Australian insurance firm, we seek to: (1) explore the tensions accompanying their role transition towards HRBP, (2) develop a better understanding

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3 of how institutionalized power relations influence HR managers' experience and
4 legitimation of the HRBP role. In doing so, we shed light on the gap between
5 prescriptive accounts of the influential HRBP discourse and the legitimacy struggles,
6 translation efforts and power relations that shape and constrain HRBP – line
7 management relations.
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11 The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: First, we outline the
12 theoretical framework guiding the study and review the relevant literature. Second,
13 we introduce the case study and explain methods of data collection and analysis.
14 Third and fourth, we present and discuss our findings, highlighting limitations and
15 implications for future research. Finally, we offer a conclusion, which synthesizes our
16 contribution to the HRM literature.
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22 **Theoretical background and literature review**

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25 The critical discursive perspective is particularly appropriate for shedding light on
26 HRM issues currently neglected or masked by what critics describe as the normative
27 and consensus-oriented perspective in the study of HRM, which assumes that the
28 interests of HR professionals, line management and employees can be aligned in the
29 development of high performance organizations (Francis, 2006; Janssens & Steyaert,
30 2009; Steyaert & Janssens, 1999; Watson, 2004). As Keegan and Francis (2010, p.
31 874) note, amidst the general focus on demonstrating HRM-performance outcomes,
32 'critical reflection on what the redesign of HR work means for ... the definition of
33 legitimate HR work activities, and relationships with employees and line managers, is
34 lacking in most writing on the transformation of HR work.'
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42 In this study, we consider HR Business Partnership as a discursive
43 legitimation project which is always in the process of *becoming* (Chia, 1995),
44 manifested in the ongoing struggle of HR professionals to become accepted as
45 'legitimate' agents within their institutions (Evans & Novicevic, 2010). Importantly,
46 as Hardy and Thomas (2015) note, the discursive is not simply about immaterial
47 concepts and ideas but is also a form of materiality and practice, a view that has long
48 been held by actor-network theorists (Law, 1992). Drawing from both actor-network
49 theory (Latour, 1991; Law, 1992) and recent organisational discourse studies (Hardy
50 & Thomas, 2015; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2011), we argue that discursive practices
51 do not merely represent reality but both socially and materially contribute to its
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constitution – they have ‘constructive’ or ‘performative’ effects (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 6). We understand discourses as socially approved ways of constructing a topic, which influence ‘individuals’ experiences or subjectivity, and their ability to think, speak and act, resulting in material effects in the form of practices and interactions’ (Hardy & Phillips, 2004, p. 301). While acknowledging the varieties of discourse theoretical approaches (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Grant & Iedema, 2005), we characterize our approach as:

- grounded in empirical examples, that, in our case illustrate HR managers’ *discursive positioning* (i.e. the social construction of the HRBP role) and patterns of the prevailing organizational context as a discursive ‘regime’ (Foucault, 1980) shaping the participants’ experiences of HR business partnership;
- sensitive to the way in which HRBP change is linked to linguistic and material forms of *translation* (i.e. attending to power/knowledge effects in the participants’ talk and the organisation’s material practices).

HR managers’ legitimacy struggles and the HR Business Partnership Discourse

Commentary on HRM has frequently identified the precarious standing of Personnel/HR managers in organisations (Harley & Hardy, 2004; Legge, 1978, 1995; Storey, 1987; Wright, 2008). This ongoing struggle for legitimacy has prompted efforts to reform what has been termed the ‘poor cousin’ of the managerial professions (Wright, 2008).

Ulrich’s book *Human Resource Champions* (1997) can be seen as one of the most influential attempts to invigorate HRM, prompting a large number of organisations world-wide to adopt the so-called HR Business Partner (HRBP) model (e.g. RBS, UK Department of Work and Pensions, Vodafone, Royal Mail, Nestlé) (Brearley, 2006; Caldwell & Storey, 2007; CIPD, 2004). The prescriptive academic and professional discourse of HRBP incorporates the following assumptions:

- that HR Business Partnering contributes to the development of high performance organisations;

- that HR managers become strategic partners to managers in the business, effectively transitioning towards an internal consultancy role;
- that line managers at different levels should take more responsibility for implementing HRM practices, whilst being supported in this task by their HRBPs.

At present, the HRBP discourse is prominent within the field of HR practice and organisational transitions to the HRBP model are increasingly common as a number of studies indicate (Caldwell, 2003; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Wright, 2008). Nonetheless, there remains ‘a significant gap in our understanding of HR practitioners’ experiences of such transitions’ (Pritchard, 2009, p. 177). This involves, in particular, the constraints and tensions that HR managers face when seeking to establish themselves as partners to line management (Pritchard, 2009; Sheehan, De Cieri, Greenwood, & Van Buren, 2014). While Ulrich (1997) encouraged the concurrent development of four roles (strategic partner, change agent, employee champion, administrative expert), some authors have begun to question whether HR professionals are able to successfully enact these roles in combination (Pritchard, 2009; Sheehan et al., 2014). The employee champion and administrative expert roles appear to be often downplayed in the HRBP role construct given the move away from generalist work towards strategic partnership and increased outsourcing of transactional tasks (Caldwell, 2008; Keegan & Francis, 2010). The reduced importance of the employee champion role, in particular, has raised criticism as to whether HR professionals can maintain integrity and credibility if their focus is primarily on ingratiating themselves with senior and line management clients (Aldrich, Dietz, Clark, & Hamilton, 2014; Kochan, 2004).

In addition, and in spite of the increased emphasis on managerial interests in the HRBP discourse, line managers seem to frequently resist the changes involved in the HRBP model (CIPD, 2004; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006; Sheehan et al., 2014), thus further undermining the credibility of the HRBP project. For instance, in a study with HRM and top management executives across 13 organizations in Australia, Sheehan et al. (2014) found that HRM change initiatives were met with ‘cynicism about HRM, reduced respect for the HRM role... and resistance to communication with HRM professionals’ (Sheehan et al., 2014, p. 125), raising the question whether HR managers can practically fulfil the role expectations tied to the HRBP model.

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Studies within the normative HRM-performance paradigm advocate that HR professionals address resistance issues through demonstrating of a set of core competencies that help to develop trusting relationships with clients (Ulrich et al., 2012). However, such competency-based models ignore the powerful influence of context which may pose limitations on HRM change (Caldwell, 2008; Truss, Gratton, Hope Hailey, Stiles, & Zaleska, 2002). For instance, Truss et al.'s (2002) study of HRM at Citibank found that low prioritization of people management at an institutional level can undermine the HR function's ambitions to operate in a more strategic way. However, what remains less well understood is how such shared and taken-for-granted views about the value of HRM affect HR managers' scope to establish themselves (and become accepted) in their new roles, which is the topic to which we contribute here. In the following, we explain in more detail the analytical tools and research questions guiding the study, before turning to the presentation of our findings.

Exploring HR Business Partnering through the lens of discursive positioning

The discursive dimension of HR work has received increasing attention in the literature since Townley's (1993, 1994) ground-breaking work and has been applied to HRM in cross-sectional studies (Keegan & Francis, 2010; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003) organisational case studies in manufacturing (Francis, 2002, 2003, 2007; Francis & Sinclair, 2003) and services (Francis, 2006; Francis & D'Annunzio-Green, 2005). In this study, we draw specifically on discursive positioning theory to study HR managers' efforts to establish themselves as HRBPs in an Australian insurance firm. Discursive positioning theory explains how individuals are positioned relative to each other through discursive claims that promote, reinforce and/or challenge what is deemed as legitimate and acceptable in a particular context (Bisel & Barge, 2011). These discursive claims, or 'legitimacy judgments' (Tost, 2011), are embedded in wider 'power/knowledge' (Foucault, 1980) relations and influence how practitioners experience their roles and relationships with others.

Particularly relevant for the purposes of our study is the distinction between first and second-order positioning (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1990). In 'first-order positioning' individuals locate themselves and others discursively, i.e. 'they enact identities and relationships which may or may not be taken up by other organizational members' (Bisel & Barge, 2011, p. 261). For instance, in an HRM context, top

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3 management may produce first-order positions by inviting HR managers to identify
4 with and through specific statements that regulate what is seen as a 'good' (i.e.
5 legitimate) HR business partner (e.g. strategic, business-focused). While HR
6 managers might respond with another first-order positioning by endorsing these
7 statements, they might also call into question the positions conferred on them. This
8 may involve reflecting critically on managerial formulations of their role, pointing out
9 existing contradictions and tensions, and/or or displaying subtle forms of 'dis-
10 identification' with conferred positions, expressed by cynicism, irony, and/or
11 detachment (Thomas, 2009). In discursive positioning theory, all of these acts are
12 referred to as second-order positioning, i.e. instances where individuals engage in
13 meta-conversations about their roles that involve a distancing from first-order
14 positions.
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18 The lens of discursive positioning differs from conventional role theory
19 wherein individuals speak from singular and fixed positions prescribed by role
20 expectations, and from those interpretations of Foucault's work that see subjects as
21 totally determined and regulated by the disciplinary effects of discourse (Simpson &
22 Carrol, 2008). It promotes a non-essentialist conception of identity that retains scope
23 for individual 'identity work' (Alvesson & Willmot, 2002), i.e. the ways in which
24 practitioners take up or resist the positions made available to them in discourses.
25 However, as discourses are never 'never completely cohesive and devoid of internal
26 tensions' (Hardy & Phillips, 2004, p. 304), this also brings into view the tensions that
27 practitioners' experience at the interstices of various subject positions and legitimacy
28 judgments (Tost, 2011). Building on these theoretical ideas, our study seeks to
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45 *RQ1: What tensions and legitimacy struggles do HR managers experience in*
46 *seeking to position themselves as 'business partners' at InsuCo?*
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51 ***Exploring the legitimation of the HRBP role within the 'power of the system'***

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53 The claiming of discursive subject positions is never a neutral act, but a political
54 move within wider organisational 'power/knowledge' relations (Gherardi & Nicolini,
55 2002). Building on Foucault (1979, 1980), Hardy (1996) describes this
56 institutionalized form of power ('the power of the system') as a discursive regime that
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3 lies 'in the unconscious acceptance of the values, traditions, cultures and structures of
4 a given institution' among its members (Hardy, 1996, p. S8). In the context of HRM
5 change, the power of the system both enables and constrains HR managers' positions
6 and forms the 'backdrop' against which any efforts to mobilize change take place
7 (Hardy, 1996, p. S8). Hardy and Phillips (2004) express the dynamics of this
8 relationship as follows:
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15 Discourse and power are mutually constitutive...the power dynamics that characterize a
16 particular context determine, at least partially, how and why certain actors are able to
17 influence the processes of textual production and consumption that result in new texts that
18 transform, modify or reinforce discourses. In other words, discourse shapes relations of power
19 while relations of power shape who influences discourse over time in what way. (Hardy &
20 Phillips, 2004, p. 299)
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22 While discursive studies in HRM have begun to shed light on the verbal accounts of
23 HR and line managers as markers of change discourse (e.g. Francis, 2006; Keegan &
24 Francis, 2010; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003), the material dimension of discourse has
25 received less attention in the literature. In this paper, we thus adopt a multi-modal
26 view of discourse that recognises how objects created for HRM purposes (in our case,
27 an organisational culture survey) are discursively inscribed and imbued with power
28 effects. In order to better understand how these power effects are achieved, we draw
29 on actor-network theory, a perspective that has long combined an interest in discourse
30 with attention to the material (Grant & Iedema, 2005). Actor-network theory treats
31 discursive practices 'as ordering attempts', thus highlighting how systemic power is
32 always in the making, 'performed, embodied and told in different materials' (Law,
33 1994, p. 95). As seen in Vickers and Fox (2005, 2010) HR managers, as well as other
34 HRM objects and processes, are involved in these ordering attempts in ways that seek
35 to 'translate' interests and achieve enrolment of other actors in their cause (Callon,
36 1986; Callon & Law, 1982). This perspective allows us to consider how the HRBP
37 discourse is undergoing 'translation' geared towards making the change towards
38 HRBP legitimate and durable, and how the organizational context in which HR
39 managers operate affects these efforts. From this, we develop our second research
40 question:
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55 *RQ2: How do organisational power/knowledge relations shape the*
56 *participants' experience and legitimation of the HRBP role?*
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Research Design

In spite of the growing popularity of the HRBP approach in international HRM, few studies have examined the experiences of HR managers in transitioning to an HRBP role *in situ* (Caldwell & Storey, 2007; Pritchard, 2009). In this paper, we draw on the findings of a qualitative study that examined HR and line managers' talk about HRM practice in the context of an organization's transition to the HRBP model. In the following sections, we first offer background information on the research setting, before outlining our methods of data collection and analysis.

Research context

The empirical data for this paper are derived from a qualitative study conducted at InsuCo Australia (pseudonym). InsuCo Australia forms part of the multi-national insurance corporation InsuCo Group, a large general insurer that employs more than 10,000 staff worldwide. Several years prior to the research, InsuCo's executive leadership had decided to create a shared services structure, which centralized most of the corporate service functions (i.e. Finance, Marketing, Human Resources). The shift towards the HRBP model followed the restructure which relocated all the internal service departments in central head office. From this location, HR staff were expected to respond as a single team of about seventy staff to requests from the various business units, rather than as a number of smaller teams located within a specific business unit.

The strategic positioning and structure of the department was broadly consistent with Ulrich's (1997) recommendations for HRBP implementation, i.e. (i) transactional tasks including general employee queries were allocated to an in-house service centre; (ii) HR generalists were positioned as strategic business partners, the main point of contact for line managers; (iii) supported by HR specialists in areas such as Learning & Development and Communication; and (iv) line managers were expected to take on greater responsibility for HRM practices.

The strategic imperative for the HRBP model was to develop InsuCo Australia as a 'high performance organization' which, guided by a shared HR service plan, involved three phases (see Figure 1). In phase 1 of the transition, the strategic re-positioning of the HR function was developed and carried out, while phase 2 of the transition brought the introduction of new HRM systems and programs designed to

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3 promote cultural integration across the 17 corporate divisions. These included a more
4 centralized and integrated performance management system, leadership development
5 programs and, importantly, the introduction of an organizational culture survey. The
6 latter constituted a key part of the 'high performance organization' strategic initiative
7 and was designed to identify and raise issues of low employee engagement on an
8 annual basis.
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13 The fieldwork for this study coincided with phase 3 of the transition, the
14 embedding of new HRM practices in the various corporate divisions. During this
15 phase, line managers were increasingly expected to pick up day-to-day responsibility
16 for so-called '*people issues*' (#20, line manager) while partnering with HRBPs in the
17 strategic development of their teams. This was met with resistance by line managers
18 who, as we will see, frequently opted to exclude HRBPs from their business practice.
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23 HR staff explained this resistance in the context of historical and taken-for-
24 granted beliefs about HR and its low value in a highly bottom-line driven cultural
25 environment. InsuCo's long-standing managerial priorities revolved around the
26 achievement of hard financial targets. Performance management systems had
27 traditionally measured and rewarded managers based on these targets and only
28 recently had 'softer' people development measures been incorporated into these
29 systems. Thus, navigating a discursive regime where financial performance and
30 people development were considered as opposing priorities, constituted a key
31 challenge for HR practitioners.
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38 In this context, the implementation of the organisational culture survey, along
39 with employee engagement measures, provided an important lever for change. Line
40 managers saw the bottom-line logic of monitoring employee engagement and,
41 although it corralled them into becoming more aware of 'people issues', they could
42 now see the value of doing so. By operating this set of measures, HRM as a team was
43 acting in a way perceived to be consistent with the bottom-line culture of InsuCo,
44 where 'profitability' came 'first' (#2, HRBP).
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50 51 ***Data collection***

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53 Empirical materials for this paper were collected in 2009, framed by an 'exemplifying
54 qualitative case' approach (Bryman, 2008, p. 56), which sought to explore HR
55 practitioners' changing roles in detail in a specific organisational context. The data
56 included twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews, organisational documents and
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3 field notes from HR workshops designed to develop line managers as the facilitators
4 of the high performance organization. Organizational documents (e.g. HR strategy
5 documents, organisational culture survey documentation, leadership development
6 brochures) and field notes were used as secondary data to provide contextual detail,
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8 augment evidence from the interviews, and develop an understanding of the recent
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10 organizational history informing the participants' perspectives. We noted a broad
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12 consistency between the rhetoric of HR documentary evidence and the participants'
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14 accounts in terms of (1) the strategic rationale of the HRBP model, i.e. its contribution
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16 to a 'high performance organisation', (2) the revised role of InsuCo leaders as
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18 implementers of HRM practices, and (3) HR managers' new role as 'strategic
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20 partners' and 'cultural change' agents (e.g. *'we set ourselves up as partners to work
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22 with the business and the key part of our role is to drive cultural change' (#4)*).

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24 Our primary source of data was fifteen interviews with HR managers (ten with
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26 HR Business Partners, five with HR Learning & Development and Communications
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28 specialists) and five interviews with their clients (three first line and two senior
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30 managers from different business units) (see Table 1). An approach combining
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32 snowball (Minichiello, 1990) and theoretical sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994)
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34 informed the choice of participants for subsequent interviews with managerial clients
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36 which were designed to check and corroborate emerging themes and perspectives.

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38 All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews
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40 lasted 1-2 hours each and included open-ended questions about the participant's role,
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42 key working relationships, challenges experienced and questions about the
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44 organisational context. Follow-up email correspondence with participants was used
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46 to discuss emerging findings, check potential biases and explore rival explanations
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48 (Kvale, 1996). Participants thus played an active role in the co-construction of
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50 findings and helped increase the face validity of the final report.

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55 **Data analysis**

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57 The data was analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model of data
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59 analysis, recognising the relevance of a theoretical framework prior to analysis, while
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3 at the same time remaining responsive to themes emerging from the data. Following
4 an initial inductive reading of the interview transcripts, we agreed on the segments
5 that gave insight into the tensions and legitimacy struggles HR managers' experienced
6 in transitioning to their new roles (RQ1). In the first stage of analysis, we followed
7 Talja (1999, p. 8) in: (1) searching for different meanings and subject positions in
8 each of the participant's accounts; (2) identifying 'repeatedly occurring descriptions,
9 explanations, and arguments, in different participants' talk', and (3) identifying 'the
10 basic assumptions and starting points which underlie a particular way of talking about
11 a phenomenon'. Cycling back and forth between research questions, data and theory,
12 we eventually focused the analysis more specifically on HR managers' discursive
13 positioning within the framework of the new business partner discourse and the
14 'legitimacy judgments' (Tost, 2011) from line managers they encountered in doing so,
15 about their work and credibility. Then, in a final stage of analysis, we examined the
16 specific nature of InsuCo as a (discursively shaped) context of practice (RQ2). We
17 identified the presence of two powerful organisational discourses, which we have
18 labelled the 'bottom-line' discourse and the 'high performance organization'
19 discourse (see table 2). In presenting HR managers' discursive positioning, we will
20 refer to these as a backdrop against which the tensions and legitimacy struggles of HR
21 managers can be evaluated.
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Findings

In this section, we focus our presentation on three subject positions promoted by the HRM executive (HRBP as service providers, HRBPs as strategic partners, and HRBPs as change agents) and examine the tensions and legitimacy struggles HR managers experienced in positioning themselves in this way. In doing so, we also shed light on the link to InsuCo's power/knowledge relations that shaped HR managers' experience and legitimation of the HRBP role.

HRBPs as service providers – HRBPs as servants for the business

The EGM [Executive General Manager HR] is positioning us [HR business partners] to be a service provider for the business; so to coach the managers in their parts of the business and help them work with their people. (#9, HRBP)

The 'service provider' role was one of the key subject positions promoted by the HRM leadership and tied in with the broader aim of '*working towards a more customer focused delivery model*' by placing greater emphasis on '*the needs of our businesses*' (HR strategy documents). Thus, the re-organisation of InsuCo's HR function to a shared service model brought greater emphasis on HRBPs supporting business success, consistent with central tenets of the HRBP model (Ulrich, 1997; 2005). Becoming a HRBP meant subscribing to this rhetoric and yet, tensions surfaced when HR managers reflected more deeply on this formulation of their role. As expressed in the following account, HRBPs struggled to establish equal relations of partnership with line managers.

We are a servant to them in a way, that's the way it is. They are our customers, they are our internal customers. Now there's nothing wrong with that. That's absolutely appropriate, **it just depends on the company as to how that is demonstrated** [emphasis added], how it plays out in reality though. Whether that's treated as a respectful kind of customer relationship or whether there's more a kind of, 'Get to it and this is what we want you to do. We don't care if you don't think this is a good idea, you do what we want.' (#6, HRBP)

This meta-talk about the service provider role (an example of second-order positioning) was typical of HR managers' discourse in describing their interactions

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3 with line managers. The participant's comment highlights the mismatch between the
4 normative ideal of the HRBP's service provider role, which came from a position of
5 strength, and the way participants experienced this role at InsuCo. HR staff frequently
6 described how line managers used top-down, directive language in interacting with
7 them, thus asserting a 'master-servant' dynamic, rather than engaging in 'respectful'
8 client-customer relationships. While HR managers recognized this dynamic, they
9 rarely questioned the underlying logic of a power differential between HR and the
10 line, pointing instead to the organisational context that shaped '*how it plays out in*
11 *reality*' (#6). This was indicative of the 'normalizing' power (Foucault, 1977) and
12 dominance of the *bottom-line discourse* at InsuCo (see table 1). The decision about
13 what was deemed relevant and 'legitimate' (Hardy, 1996) rested clearly in the hands
14 of the business:
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25 I encourage HR to continuously build their shared service. But I think they [HRBPs] always
26 have to put themselves out there to say, okay well you're paying my bills, so here I am
27 showing you the value for money. (#16, senior manager)
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30 They [HRBPs] should put themselves in the shoes of consultancy. We're paying a lot of
31 money to support an HR function. Add the value to the business. If that was outsourced they'd
32 be under pretty significant scrutiny in terms of return. (#17, senior manager)
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36 As the previous quotes show, line managers' co-opted the service provider talk to
37 assert a power asymmetry in their relations with HRBPs. This occurred with reference
38 to a broader logic that attributed a superior role to the line, given their more 'direct'
39 contribution to the company's economic outputs. This power differential appeared to
40 be a shared taken-for-granted and unquestionable 'truth' at InsuCo, which HR staff
41 had internalized:
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48 We don't have...we don't bring in money and that's a big thing in this organisation ...we're a
49 cost. That makes a big difference. (#8, HRBP)
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52 HR, along with other support functions, was seen as a '*cost centre*' that needed to
53 earn legitimate status by showing '*value for money*'. The previous quotes reveal how
54 power relations were constituted through discursive (self / other) positioning within
55 InsuCo's broader discursive regime. HRBPs were constituted as subjects under severe
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3 legitimacy pressure that relied on being accepted by line managers as value-adding
4 service providers. Line managers, on the other hand, were constituted as customers
5 who determined what constituted value in the dominant *bottom-line discourse*. We
6 now move to HR managers' 'strategic partner' role and the mechanisms of discursive
7 positioning surrounding this role.
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11 12 13 *HRBPs as strategic partners – HRBPs as outsiders* 14

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18 We set ourselves up as business partners to work with the business, help the business to
19 manage their people better and get most out of their people. (#5, HRBP)
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23 As in the above instance of (first-order) positioning, HRBPs' claims to partnership
24 emphasized a more strategic supporting role designed to assist line managers in the
25 management of their teams. This involved a role expectation that HRBPs would
26 suggest ways in which employee performance and productivity could be increased.
27 Simultaneously, a range of 'people' responsibilities that had previously been carried
28 out by HR managers (e.g. administrative tasks around new employees, development
29 plans) were devolved to line managers. While this shift formed part of how HRM
30 leadership had positioned HR managers, HR managers' experiences of adopting
31 strategic partner roles revealed, again, tensions in their relations with line managers.
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35 As one HRBP explained:
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41 You'll find you won't know anything that's going on in the business until you get a grievance.
42 So if someone makes a complaint that they have been unfairly treated, then you find out
43 what's going on. Otherwise, when you try and understand what's happening with their
44 business, they are either not telling you the truth or they are saying that everything's fine.
45 **They don't trust you to be a business partner.** [emphasis added] (#6, HRBP)
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49 Reflective accounts such as these stood in stark contrast to the partnership rhetoric
50 promoted in HR strategy documents that emphasized 'two-way collaboration' and the
51 existence of 'strong interfaces with managers across the business'. HRBPs called
52 these tenets of the normative HRBP discourse into question: their second-order
53 positioning showed that they effectively experienced (and co-constructed) themselves
54 in a position of 'outsiders' who were excluded from daily business practice.
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3 While, on the surface, line managers' resistance could be explained as a lack
4 of trust in the competence of HRBPs, our analysis points towards the way this was
5 linked to InsuCo's prevailing power/knowledge relations. What line managers
6 questioned on a more fundamental level was the status of HR within InsuCo's
7 bottom-line driven culture.
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12 HR is the most time-consuming of all the activities that we do. It absolutely flies in the face of
13 our business, it distracts me from the *real stuff* [emphasis added] that I want to do.' (#18, line
14 manager)
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17 A lot of the times you're concentrated more on business and hitting your targets and KPIs and
18 sometimes...HR on [a scale between] 1-10 with 10 being priority and 1 being your lowest
19 priority, HR is a 1 without a doubt because they don't...you don't perceive them to add value
20 to your business. (#19, line manager)
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23 As in the above comments, line managers perceived the shift in HR-Line management
24 relations primarily as an increase in their workload and a '*distraction*' that took their
25 focus away from managerial priorities – i.e. the delivery of financial targets. Line
26 managers did not construct HR issues as an integral aspect of their business'
27 performance, which in turn meant that HRBPs were positioned as outsiders rather
28 than as '*value-adding*' partners. This outsider status was reinforced by constructions
29 of HR as '*soft*' in their approach to employee relations issues.
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37 Some businesses don't want HR to know anything about the business. So that that way they
38 can't get involved and they don't make their lives miserable, because ... if your view is that
39 they [HR] are soft when it comes to employees, then you don't always want them hearing
40 every conversation. (#17, senior manager)
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43 In accounts such as these, HRBPs were excluded from strategic conversations and
44 decision-making in the business because of their presumed close alignment with
45 employees. Ironically, while this view may have stemmed from the roles HR
46 managers had adopted before the transition to the HRBP model, HRBPs current
47 discursive positioning showed that they strongly distanced themselves from the '*soft*'
48 employee advocate position.
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55 We don't order the cake anymore, we're not the complaints department. You know that old
56 fashioned HR fluffy... 'they're the nice people, go and talk to them, they're the advocates of
57 employees.' Well, we're not, you know. (#2, HRBP)
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3 As in Keegan and Francis (2010), the ‘employee champion’ role is here depicted as
4 weak, ineffectual and archaic. HRBPs sought to align themselves more closely with
5 line managers, even though this was rarely reciprocated. Only one of the HRBPs
6 called this stance into question.
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12 Sometimes employees want to download on a HR person. ... And part of me sort of thinks
13 'okay, people should still be able to catch up with us when they want to. (#1, HRBP)
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16 This comment subtly challenged the relegation of employee queries to the new in-
17 house ‘service centre’ that had accompanied the HRBP transition. However, amidst
18 the prevailing HRBP discourse, this was a rare humanist counterpoint. We now turn
19 to the third, and final, discursive positioning of HR managers’ as change agents.
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23 ***HRBPs as change agents – HRBPs as agents of the system*** 24

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28 The key part of our role is to influence line managers and drive cultural change.
29 (#4, HRBP)
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31 In an organisational context where ‘financial performance’ and ‘people issues’ were
32 ranked differently in the order of discourse, a central focus for HRBPs was the
33 ‘influencing’ of line managers to alter their perspectives on HRM issues. HRBPs were
34 positioned as change agents in line with broader organizational change efforts towards
35 a ‘customer-focused’ (and thus business-focused) delivery model (HR strategy
36 documents). One aspect of this change agency role was the ‘management of meaning’
37 (Sheehan et al., 2014) in ways that were consistent with line manager’s discursive
38 norms:
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47 You want to put it in their language if you can. So if you're trying to sell an idea, you sell it
48 through the business impact for example. (#10, HRBP)
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51 Ultimately, you know, we're not a charity, it's for profit, and we have to show them
52 [managers] that a support service can actually have an impact on the bottom line as well by
53 lifting their performance and getting them to be as effective as possible in what they do. (#12,
54 HR Manager)
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Claims like these were linked in the intertextual chain to the *high performance organization discourse* that InsuCo's top management was promoting (see table 1). HR texts (e.g. business plans, brochures for line managers, leadership workshop presentations) continuously referred to the '*high performance organization*' as a shared aspirational objective and presented HRM as an indispensable activity for achieving such higher forms of productivity.

Legitimation was however a complex process that was not only achieved through linguistic choices but also, through the establishment of new HR systems and processes that were linked to the *high performance organization discourse*. In particular, we focus our discussion here on an organizational culture survey (introduced two years prior to the research) that played a key role in shifting HR-line management power relations. This survey annually measured staff engagement levels and thus, effectively, the quality of line managers' treatment of their staff. Low staff engagement was here constituted as a 'cultural problem' which gave HRBPs leverage in exercising influence over line managers.

All of a sudden there were indicators floating around saying 'well, your people aren't happy, your absenteeism is high, your turnover is appalling. I wonder why?' So that was an element to show them that they needed to look at their people and that we could help them. (#7, HRBP)

In actor-network theory terms, the organizational culture survey could be seen as translating a previously intangible problem, expressed in anecdotal ways ('*people aren't happy*'), into 'hard' measurable data. Such indicators could then be read by line managers as bottom-line performance problems, driving them to seek help from HRBPs and build joint solutions.

Managers kept saying 'I still don't see how this is going to impact on my team's performance'. And that's why the organizational culture survey has been great for us. Now we can say 'according to your team's engagement results, you need to pick up your game.' (#12, HR Manager)

The survey results created a new form of competition amongst line managers, expressed through 'indicators' that named and scored observable patterns of behaviour, which became part of their conversations. The line managers' behaviour

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3 was going to be made publicly visible from year to year through this surveillance
4 device. As one line manager put it:
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8 And I think in all honesty one of the things requiring us to execute these things [people
9 development] in the business now is the fact that people can see what's happening in your
10 team. (#16, senior manager)
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12 The durability and visibility of the new discourse made the change harder to resist and
13 the most likely way line managers could get better at reducing absenteeism, for
14 instance, was to consult their HR manager. However, some reflective accounts of HR
15 managers still signalled tensions surrounding this role:
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21 There has been a lot of effort 'selling' this stuff to the business. The logic goes, 'if I can
22 quantify that... if I measure every little aspect of it, as we do in insurance, then it counts as
23 something'. So that's what we have been trying to do. But the truth is, it doesn't always work,
24 particularly when you are dealing with people. So where does that leave us? (#11, HR
25 Manager)
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28 This participant's comment called into question the integrity of HR professionals in
29 implementing changes that were adhering to the prevailing bottom-line logic. While
30 translation practices had bolstered HRBP's position at InsuCo, clearly, HRBPs
31 perceived blindspots in a discursive regime where '*only what gets measured gets*
32 *done*'. HRM translation practices, including the organisational culture survey, could
33 be seen as playing a role in reproducing existing power/knowledge relations, thus
34 raising the question whether HRPBs had, inadvertently, become agents of the system.
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41 **Discussion, limitations and implications for future research**

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44 The HRBP model has been hailed as an approach that more tightly couples HR
45 professionals' work with organizational performance and, in doing so, provides
46 renewed legitimacy for the HR profession as a whole (Butteriss, 1998; Ulrich, 1997;
47 Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). This is meant to be achieved, primarily, via the
48 competencies of HR professionals and their ability to make initiatives appear
49 'legitimate, rational and desirable' (Hardy, 1996, p. S8). The critical discursive
50 perspective adopted in this paper (drawing from discourse and actor-network theory)
51 leads us to question this individualist, competency-based view and add a more
52 *systemic* layer of understanding to the study of HRM change.
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Our findings suggest that shared taken-for-granted meanings at an institutional level – which (following Hardy, 1996) we call the power of the system – about the importance of people issues generally, and the effectiveness of HRM specifically, delimit HR managers’ influence to alter their professional identity as called for by the HRBP model. We identified three roles (previously promoted by the HRM executive), which HR managers talked about when discussing their efforts to develop partnership relations with line managers (service provider, strategic partner, change agent). However, rather than seeing these as fixed positions as is common in conventional role analysis (Simpson & Carrol, 2008), we examined these roles as discursive constructs and shed light on the legitimacy struggles surrounding them. HR Managers were able to comment reflexively on the subject positions that had been conferred on them, and in doing so, revealed tensions between normative accounts and their experiences of the HRBP role at InsuCo. Their reflections about being effectively considered as ‘servants’ and ‘outsiders’, in particular, called into question their scope as a single actor in constituting themselves as legitimate business partners.

Similar to the findings of Truss et al. (2002), our participants’ accounts highlight the complexity of changing the HR role in an environment where managerial priorities are seen to conflict with HRM. InsuCo HR managers struggled influencing line managers to accept their newly designated roles and identities. As in Pritchard’s study (2009), these difficulties were understood, by HR staff, as issues arising from the attitudes and behaviours of line managers, seen as ‘resistant’ to the consideration of ‘people issues’ within the prevailing bottom-line discourse (*‘They’re not interested in people’s stories as much as they are in numbers, bottom line.’* (#12)). HR managers effectively found themselves kept at a distance, operating at the outskirts of line managers’ teams, with little means of adopting the service provider and strategic partner roles.

These findings about the response of line managers are consistent with survey results highlighting little enthusiasm among line managers in Australian organisations regarding the re-distribution of HRM responsibilities (Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006). While this may be explained, in part, through line managers’ perceived increase in workload (Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006), it was also linked to ‘managerial biases’, including views of HR ‘soft’ and HR as ‘servant of the business’ (Sheehan et al., 2014, p. 127). Our findings shed light on ways in which such views form part of wider organizational ‘power/knowledge’ relations in which the HR function was

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classed as a ‘*cost centre*’ adding little value to the firm’s operations. Line managers effectively questioned the competence of HRBPs to act in ways that were consistent with the logic of the prevailing bottom-line discourse and thus resisted positioning themselves as equal partners to HR.

To navigate the ‘role conflict’ they experienced (Sheehan et al., 2014), HR managers in our study did not actively resist but, rather, they simultaneously identified and ‘dis-identified’ (Thomas, 2009) with the conferred positions. This meant adopting the subject positions promoted by the HRM executive, while also frequently identifying as victims of a system that attributed little value to HRM. However, from this dejected stance, HR managers played little more than a ‘conformist innovator’ role (Legge, 1995), lacking ‘a degree of independence and willingness to challenge the business’ (Aldrich et al., 2014, p. 123). As in previous studies examining the shift to HR Business Partnering (Keegan & Francis, 2010; Pritchard, 2009), managerial interests were foregrounded, while the employee advocacy role was sidelined in the ‘quest’ to gain line management commitment and approval.

Despite HR managers’ difficulties in enrolling line managers in partnership relations, our findings highlight an increase in HR manager’s influence on line managers in the change agency role. However, rather than attributing this solely to HR managers’ individual efforts and competencies, we see this shift as a result of systemic actor-network effects: in particular, the use of the organizational culture survey at the insistence of top management with the expertise of HRM and the data accumulated over two years which, at a certain point, gave it credibility. Changes to HR-line management power relations were achieved through several steps of ‘translation’ (Callon, 1986): i.e. the culture survey became an unavoidable annual event making visible line managers’ deficits in building and retaining an engaged workforce; line managers were required to attend leadership development workshops to interpret the data and recognise their deficits; and, HR managers were positioned as indispensable partners for the resolution of the problem of low employee engagement.

Importantly, these practices were connected and promoted via the *high performance organization discourse*, which provided a counterpoint to the prevailing *bottom-line discourse* (by challenging the devaluing of ‘people issues’), while simultaneously supporting it (by reinforcing the strategic imperative of economic outputs). Thus, in many respects, HR managers could be seen as ‘translating’ their

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3 agenda through discursive practices and socio-material devices in ways that played to
4 InsuCo's prevailing 'power of the system' (Hardy, 1996).
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7 8 *Limitations and implications for future research*

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10 A number of aspects limit the transferability of our findings and provide opportunities
11 for future research. First, the study examined HR Business Partnering relations in one
12 organisation and mainly from the perspective of HR managers. While interviews with
13 participants from InsuCo's first line (n = 380) and senior management population (n =
14 100) were used to corroborate emerging themes, we did not seek a statistically
15 representative sample of line managers. Also, we did not have access to interview
16 data of a longitudinal nature that would have allowed us to conduct a before and after
17 analysis of the events involved in the transition to the HRBP model. While a more
18 detailed assessment of the timeline of events was beyond the scope of our analysis,
19 we focused our account on the organizational culture survey, which had been
20 identified by HR practitioners as a tool central to the transition.
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28 In spite of the above limitations, the interview data offered unique insight into
29 the experiences of HR managers with the transition to HRBP at an early stage of
30 implementation. Two areas of future research emerge in particular: Firstly, the study's
31 findings point towards the importance of considering how generalized perceptions
32 about the legitimacy of the HR function, grounded in organisational power/knowledge
33 relations, affect the quality of HR-line management relationships. Rather than seeing
34 issues of trust and credibility between HR and line managers in purely interpersonal
35 terms, future research would thus benefit from considering the organizational
36 backdrop against which efforts to mobilize changes to HR-line management relations
37 take place. Secondly, our study's findings suggest that there is a greater need to
38 understand the interweaving of the discursive and the material in HRM change. While
39 the management of meaning has been recognised as a means to shape relations of
40 power in HRM (Ferris, 1991; Galang & Ferris, 1997; Sheehan et al., 2014), the way
41 in which linguistic and material practices work together to induce change within
42 broader power/knowledge relations is still poorly understood. Performance
43 management systems, culture surveys, and presentations in leadership workshops are
44 all discursively shaped tools that help make changes durable. For instance, the use of
45 the culture survey device at InsuCo was effective because of the way it 'translated'
46 the value of good employee relations into bottom-line values already legitimate within
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3 the prevailing power of the system. Given the inductive nature of our study, future
4 research could extend our findings by applying this form of critical discursive
5 analysis to HRM change efforts in a greater variety of settings.
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9 **Conclusion**

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11 The InsuCo case shows that HRM change generally, and the transition towards HR
12 Business Partnership specifically, is subject to and an effect of organisational
13 power/knowledge relations. HR managers' attempts to establish themselves as
14 business partners do not occur in a vacuum; rather, HR managers 'translate' their
15 roles within a context characterized by the power effects of taken-for-granted
16 assumptions, values and beliefs embedded in their organizations. These translation
17 efforts can be seen as responses to the longstanding challenge of HRM to demonstrate
18 impact on business performance, thereby achieving a more legitimate standing within
19 organizations (Legge, 1995; Mueller & Carter, 2005; Wright, 2008). However, while
20 the mainstream HRM literature views this as a matter of tightening the HRM-
21 performance link (e.g. Butteriss, 1998; Ulrich, 1997), our findings suggest that
22 delivering performance and value is a legitimation process located within previously
23 institutionalised power relations.
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26 Building on this insight, our study casts doubt on the power of HR managers
27 in making HR Business Partnership work as a single professional group, relying
28 solely on their personal competencies. At the heart of the HRBP model is the notion
29 that HR and line managers work together in collaborative partnership to accomplish
30 the overarching goal of improved organizational performance. This unitarist framing
31 requires both HR and line managers to adopt new roles. However, the InsuCo case
32 highlights the propensities towards heightened role conflict – and the legitimacy
33 struggles – that this framing of HR work engenders. In this, our study's findings
34 support Caldwell's (2003, p. 1003) call for caution that 'Ulrich's prescriptive vision
35 may promise more than HR professionals can ever really deliver.' The ongoing
36 project of 'becoming a partner' is, effectively, a function of the conditions of
37 possibility in which HR managers operate. However, the InsuCo case also shows that
38 *multiple actors* and their *discursive and material translation tactics* can concertedly
39 bring about HRM change. We therefore encourage practitioners and educators to look
40 beyond the idealized partnership rhetoric that informs current HRM literature and
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critically examine the ways in which HR business partnership is discursively and socio-materially accomplished in practice.

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Table 1 Research participants

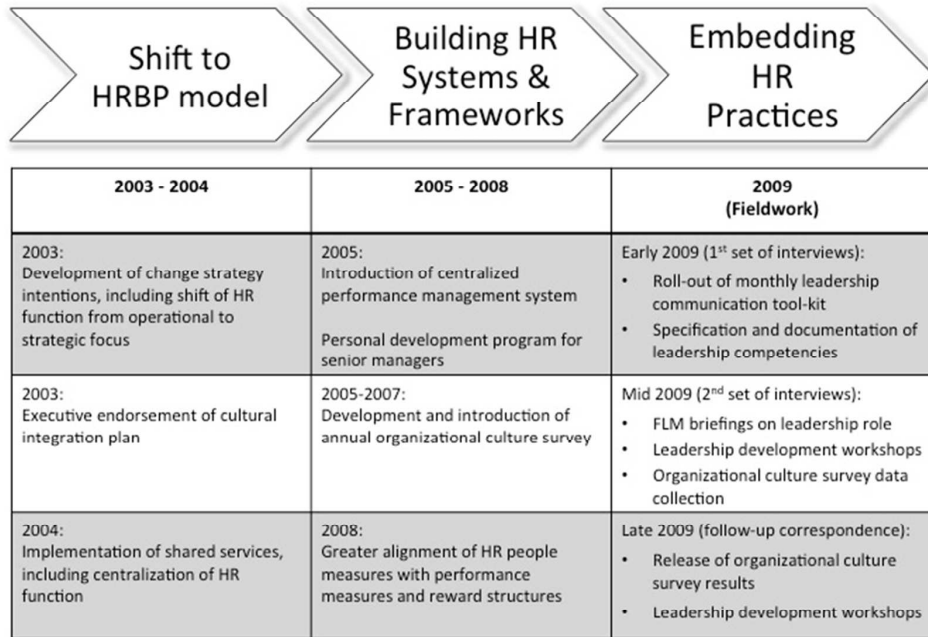
<i>Code</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Tenure with organisation</i>	<i>Tenure with Role</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
#1	Senior HR Business Partner	5-6	3-4	55-60	M
#2	Senior HR Business Partner	18-19	3-4	55-60	F
#3	Senior HR Business Partner	3-4	2-3	30-35	F
#4	Senior HR Business Partner	1-2	1-2	30-35	F
#5	Senior HR Business Partner	2-3	2-3	40-45	M
#6	HR Business Partner	2-3	2-3	35-40	F
#7	HR Business Partner	2-3	<1	30-35	F
#8	HR Business Partner	<1	<1	25-30	F
#9	HR Business Partner	2-3	2-3	25-30	M
#10	HR Business Partner	<1	<1	50-55	F
#11	HR Manager, Learning & Development	2-3	2-3	40-45	M
#12	HR Manager, Learning & Development	6-7	2-3	40-45	M
#13	HR Manager, Talent & Workforce Planning	<1	<1	35-40	F
#14	HR Manager, Leadership & Performance	3-4	3-4	45-50	M
#15	HR Manager, Internal Communications	<1	<1	30-35	F
#16	Senior Manager Corporate Customers	2-3	2-3	40-45	M
#17	Senior Manager Regional Operations	3-4	3-4	50-55	M
#18	Workers Compensation Business Manager	8-9	3-4	45-50	F
#19	Team Leader, Claims Services	2-3	2-3	35-40	M
#20	Assistant Claims Manager	7-8	2-3	35-40	M

Table 2 Organizational power/knowledge relations

Discourse	Sample Quotes
<p data-bbox="280 398 485 421">'Bottom-line discourse'</p> <p data-bbox="280 434 539 703">This discourse constitutes and frames managerial priorities about where effort should be expended and acts to devalue HRM as a 'soft' domain of practice. It is structured around core concepts such as 'profitability', 'financial performance', 'showing value', 'key performance indicators', 'hard targets', and 'business acumen'</p>	<p data-bbox="564 398 1235 515"><i>InsuCo is a traditional company, it's been around a long time, it's notorious for making money very well, and we make money because we are very interested in profitability first, that's our goal in life, because if you don't make money, then the business goes down the shredder. So I've been here a long time and they (managers) haven't spent a lot of effort on other things other than making money. (#2)</i></p> <p data-bbox="564 528 1235 595"><i>In the context of InsuCo the focus has always been historically on the bottom line. And let's not forget that that's part of our success. Financial performance of the business is and should be the number 1 priority. (#17)</i></p> <p data-bbox="564 609 1235 680"><i>When you're talking about us, you're talking about an organisation that is run by accountants. They're not interested in people's stories as much as they are in numbers, bottom line. (#12)</i></p>
<p data-bbox="280 766 485 810">'High performance organization discourse'</p> <p data-bbox="280 824 539 1115">This discourse promotes the view that InsuCo can achieve higher levels of performance through a cultural transformation that is supported by HRM practices. It is structured around concepts such as 'cultural alignment', 'increasing employee engagement', 'innovation', 'people development', 'business needs' and 'continuous improvement'</p>	<p data-bbox="564 766 1235 882"><i>The initiatives that support our strategic imperative of becoming a High Performance Organisation are fundamentally about generating and sustaining performance based on engagement. The performance of our people has to be world class. People need to know they are valued and feel that they are appropriately rewarded for their efforts. (HR strategy documentation)</i></p> <p data-bbox="564 896 1235 985"><i>The largest bulk of what we do is actually supporting our managers to be more effective in their roles and to drive their teams to high performance. ...If we're aiming for continuously having the competitive edge ... than we always need to be looking for how to do things better. (#12)</i></p> <p data-bbox="564 999 1235 1115"><i>If we have a culture where performance feedback is given, where recognition is given, where processes are reviewed on an annual, quarterly, whatever basis, where innovation is encouraged, if we have a culture that is like that, support the achievement of the business goals, it's then going to lead to obviously better outcomes for InsuCo. (#15)</i></p>

Figure:

Figure 1 HRBP Change Process at InsuCo



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