

HR Business Partnering

Partnering construction between HR Business Partners, HR
Partners and Line Managers

A Case Study at SKF

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Abstract

Over the last decades, interest has increased enormously in HR Business Partnering. Recent critics have stated that the partnering between HR and business is not clearly defined and is subject to different expectations and interpretations. Referring to the reviewed literature for this study, there is a lack of theoretical perspectives on partnering construction between the participants. Taking this criticism as a starting point, this paper takes a social constructionism perspective to explore how HR Business Partnering is constructed. The study is conducted as a single case study at the company SKF and addresses HR Business Partnering construction. In this context, the research problem is that the elements of relationships and cooperation between participants are unclear and ignored within the HR restructuring project at SKF. Subsequently, the research purpose of this paper is to study the expectations and descriptions of the participants, who are HR Business Partners, HR Partners and Line Managers. My findings present that partnering between HR and business is addressed on two levels. First, the organisation merely develops partnering through structures and written documents. Secondly, participants construct partnering on an informal level through relationships, networks and agreements. Hence, partnering construction is not only a matter of clear defined documents, it also requires considering participant's informal approaches in order to improve the construction of HR Business Partnering.

Keywords: HR Business Partnering, HR Business Partners, Social construction, Partnering, Relationships

TABLE OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	1
CONTEXTUALISATION.....	2
RESEARCH PROBLEM.....	3
RESEARCH PURPOSE AND QUESTION.....	4
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
HR BUSINESS PARTNERING MODEL.....	5
<i>Relationships</i>	6
<i>Competencies</i>	7
<i>Problems with the HR Business Partnering Model</i>	8
DISCUSSION ABOUT THE SELECTED THEORIES.....	10
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	11
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM.....	11
<i>Conversational practices</i>	11
<i>Relational practices</i>	12
<i>Social constructionism as a practical theory</i>	13
PARTNERING.....	13
<i>Definitions of partnering</i>	14
<i>Types of partnering</i>	16
<i>Partnering concepts</i>	17
METHODOLOGY	18
INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS.....	19
EMPIRICAL DATA.....	19
<i>Primary data - interviews</i>	19
<i>Secondary data</i>	21
EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	21
CREDIBILITY, ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS.....	22
FINDINGS	23
FORMAL CONSTRUCTION OF PARTNERING.....	24
<i>Partnering structure at SKF</i>	24
<i>Job role descriptions</i>	25
INFORMAL CONSTRUCTION OF PARTNERING.....	27
<i>Cooperation</i>	27
<i>Communication</i>	29
<i>Coordination</i>	30
<i>Competencies</i>	32
<i>Expectations</i>	33
DISCUSSION	36
FORMAL VS. INFORMAL PARTNERING CONSTRUCTION.....	36
PARTNERING CONCEPTS.....	38
<i>The participants</i>	42
CONCLUSION	43
FINAL REMARKS – IMPLICATIONS FOR SKF	45
APPENDIX	51

Introduction

This study deals with the construction of partnering between HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers at the organisation AB SKF headquartered in Gothenburg, Sweden, hereinafter known as SKF. In the year 2008 SKF introduced the HR Optimisation project and is since then in the process of restructuring the HR Organisation. Since the 1990's many advocates have argued for a change towards effectiveness and efficiency in HR work (e.g. Ulrich 1997). The change in global economic patterns, changing organisational structures and changing business models emphasizes employee competence and people management strategies as elements for competitive advantage (Ulrich, 1997; McQuaid and Christy, 1999; Ulrich et al., 2009). The main argument is that competitive advantage requires cost reductions and a greater focus on customization. The reorganization of HR aims to achieve the objectives of the business by supporting with expertise and competence in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness. It is argued that HR Business Partnering is a value-adding model to the business performance that works efficiently and strategically (Ulrich, 1997; Lawler III and Mohrman, 20003; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Armstrong, 2006a). The overall goal of partnering is to make HR better accessible to the business by increasing its focus on customization, connectivity, and flexibility.

While most of the reviewed literature on HR Business Partnering deals with ideas to implement the HR model based on business partnering (Ulrich, 1997) there is not much literature dealing with the issue of how partnering is constructed between HR and business. The understanding of the individual relationships and cooperation, i.e. how they work together and how they share responsibility, (McQuaid and Christy, 1999; Svensson and Nilsson, 2008) is not discussed in the HR literature. In order to explore how HR Business Partnering is constructed between the participants, I use social constructionism as my lens to apply three concepts of partnering – cooperation, communication, and coordination. The reorganization of the HR function – for example, the creation of partnering – means that cooperation, communication and coordination become important elements for the social life between HR and business. Referring to the publication of “The Social Construction of Reality” by Berger and Luckmann in 1966, I construct the study on the belief that partnering

cannot be explored without studying social constructionism – both as a theory and a methodological perspective.

Contextualisation

SKF is a leading global supplier of products, solutions and services within rolling bearings, seals, mechatronics, services and lubrication systems. The organisation was established in 1907 and, according to the annual report 2012, employs 46,775 employees. The SKF business is organized into three business areas: Industrial Market, Strategic Industries; Industrial Market, Regional Sales and Service; and Automotive. Each business area serves a global market, focusing on its specific customer segments. There are seven staff units at SKF. The HR staff unit is called Group People and Business Excellence and employs around 650 employees worldwide. SKF classifies its business into three business areas with each of them having an own HR Business Partner in order to manage the international agenda. Undoubtedly, SKF is an interesting organisation to be studied due to its multinational culture and global HR structure. The company is in the phase of a HR reorganisation, which includes the restructuring of its HR Business Partnering field and therefore provides an interesting case for this study.

The HR Optimization project at SKF is an attempt to find the balance between service level, cost and time. The service level optimization process includes activities such as more efficient administration, investing in competences, centralising transactional services and streamlining processes. The reason for the HR restructuring was caused by an overall organisational change of the business model, which implies a change in the HR model. In the past, SKF faced a globally unaligned and uncoordinated HR structure. It might be the complex matrix structure at SKF that enabled countries to more or less set up their own processes and policies serving the local requirements. The challenge today and part of the optimization project is to align and coordinate processes globally in a better way. If the organisation is going to have a boundary less way of managing people, competence, experience, knowledge, and talent management, then HR needs to have processes that are cross-country borders. The change that is needed includes coordinated and streamlined processes. Another challenge is to deepen the expertise and change the roles from generalist roles to more specialised roles. Consequently HR roles and responsibilities are changed, adjusted and added. With the introduction of the HR Optimisation project two new roles emerged – the HR Business Partners and HR Partners. For the reason of practicality, and

based on the role descriptions used at SKF, I use the terms HR Business Partner and HR Partner for my research study. The responsibilities of the role are to partner with the business and to improve the people management support in a way that meets the business requirements. The overall purpose of the HR Optimization process is to better meet the needs of SKF from a people management and strategy perspective by reducing administration, investing in competences, centralising transactional services and streamlining processes. For these reasons, at this point of time, SKF and its changing environment is suitable for my study, which aims to investigate the construction of HR Business Partnering.

Research problem

The reason to start the study is based on two different problems, which can be combined due to my study. First, the research problem is based on the facts that previous research has not studied HR Business Partnering from a social constructionism perspective discussing interpersonal relationships and relational activities. In this context, researchers and practitioners need to go beyond and question how partnering is constructed in social life. Much has been written on HR Business Partnering, but the idea of involving HR Business Partners and Line Managers equally as well as considering them as social individuals who impact the partnering area, has not been sufficiently discussed. The idea to study how partnering is constructed from a social constructionism perspective can give insights to the second research problem, the practical problem at SKF, which is found in the management and the implementation of HR Business Partnering at SKF. The partnering area is not supervised and assessed so far. As a result, the factors that construct partnering between HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers on an informal level are not communicated, not defined so far. Thus, Additionally, the organisation does not provide any instructions and guidelines for Line Managers on how to do people management and how to participate in HR Business Partnering. In times of the reorganisation, People Management is the responsibility of Line Managers and to some extent connected to HR Management. So far, the challenge how these two strands can connect effectively and efficiently is not explicitly discussed and assessed by the organisation.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of the research is to explore how HR Business Partnering is constructed from a social constructionist perspective by making a study of different expectations and descriptions from the viewpoint of HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers.

The research question is:

How is HR Business Partnering constructed at SKF?

To help answering the question from the social constructionist and partnering perspective additional sub-questions are:

- How do HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers define HR Business Partnering?
- What are the expectations on partnering construction by the participants?

Since I am interested in how HR Business Partner, HR Partners, and Line Managers construct partnering, an area which is relatively unexplored, I prefer a qualitative study with an explorative focus which allows me to get in-depth information and study the phenomenon with a free mind (Yin, 2003). Through the lens of social constructionism I use my own interpretation in order to understand different ways of partnering construction in society and in the field of HR. As explained by Ulrich (1997), theorists of HR Business Partnering should have a sociological perspective in order to study how people work together within an organisation, and mostly therefore allow surprises or unexpected connections.

My paper follows the structure illustrated in the following model:

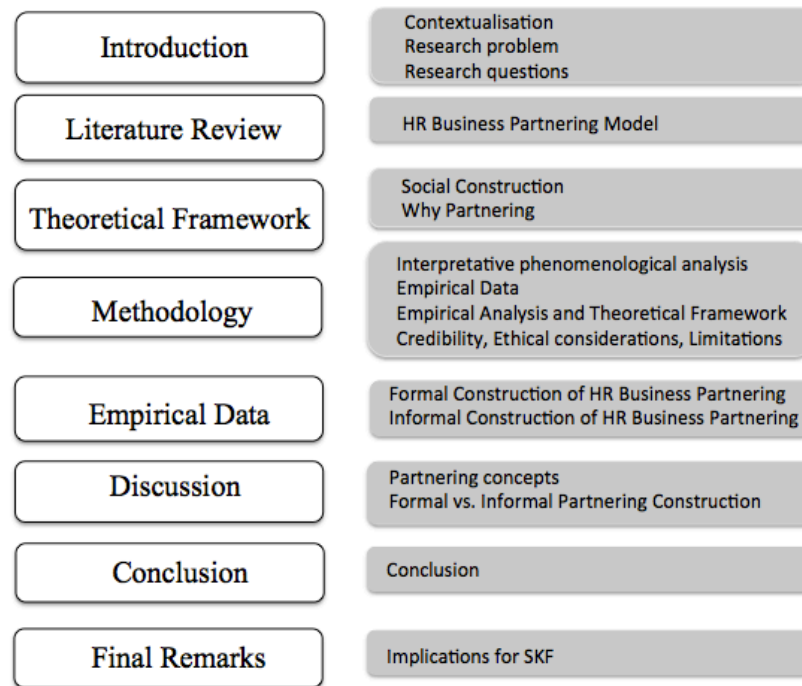


Figure 1: Thesis structure

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the literature review on HR Business Partnering, in particular the model introduced by Ulrich in 1997. My focus is on how the literature describes the relationships between HR professionals in a business partner role and Line Managers. Further, I study the competencies according to Ulrich and Brockbank and Armstrong in order to address how individuals are viewed to be capable to construct HR Business Partnering with each other. Previous literatures describe problems with the HR Business Partnering model, which I outline further to show that the model should not be taken for granted.

HR Business Partnering Model

HR Business Partnering is a re-think of what HR is for and how HR value is used to increase the performance of the business. The purpose of HR Business Partnering is to achieve the objectives of the business by supporting with their expertise and competence in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness (Ulrich, 1997). The key participants doing HR Business Partnering are HR Business Partners and Line Managers. The goal of HR Business Partners is to work less with administration and free up the time for strategic work tasks (Boglund, Hällstén and Thilander, 2011). Ulrich (1997) presents a four role model (strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion, change agent) in which every role adds value to

the business. Subsequently, all HR professionals are business partners as they improve the value to the business. Particularly the HR strategic partners have the responsibility to build a strong partnering with the Line Managers in order to encourage them to share responsibility to identify HR practices that accomplish business strategy (Ulrich, 1997). In line, but also to some extent contradictory to Ulrich, Armstrong developed four roles - business partner, change agent, internal consultant, service delivery - and argues that these can be either proactive, reactive or both (Armstrong, 2006b; Armstrong, 2009). On a strategic level HR professionals take a proactive role and as such act as business partners. Though, in some situations they play mainly a reactive role in which HR professionals provide merely a service to meet the demands. Armstrong (2006b) claims that the term business partner may not be generally accepted but it is universal believed that HR professionals in a business partner role have to be strategic (Armstrong, 2006a). Lawler III and Mohrman (2003) argue that the HR strategic partner role evolves out of the business partner role. HR professionals act as a business partner by developing systems and practices to ensure that employees have the needed competencies. It is a service and advice role concerning organisational development, change management and the alignment between HR systems and business operations (Lawler III and Mohrman, 2003). The business partner role becomes more effective the more proactive business partners become by addressing business needs (Lawler III and Mohrman, 2003). One of their main responsibilities is to translate business strategy into people implication. In line with Ulrich and Armstrong, Lawler III and Mohrman (2003) state that the strategic HR role helps the organisation to develop its strategy and to drive business performance by being a contributor to strategic planning and change management as well as leading the development of the human capital.

Relationships

Business partner has become the term of choice for HR professionals who help accomplish business goals and clarify the responsibility within the partnering with the Line Managers. The main message by Ulrich (1997) is that cooperation between HR Business Partners and Line Managers is the foundation for a competitive organisation. Line Managers and HR Business Partners work as participants to ensure that a strategic HR planning process occurs that creates an organisation to meet business requirements. Armstrong (2006b) agrees with Ulrich that the cooperation between HR practitioners and Line Managers is based on a shared responsibility for the success of the company to ensure the continuous development and implementation of the business strategy. The purpose is to build trustful relationship between

the participants and work closely together. Within this partnering HR Business Partners should be proactive, anticipating requirements, identifying problems and producing innovative solutions to Line Managers (Armstrong, 2006a). According to Ulrich (1997) partnering breaks down the barriers between line and staff as both parties working together toward common goals based on mutual trust and commitment. Both parties bring in unique competencies to their joint tasks aiming to achieve combined skills. Together they work towards resolving misconceptions of HR, building relationships of trust, focusing on deliverables, prioritizing capabilities and creating an action plan for delivering them (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Creating a common ground by combining various perspectives is one of the advantageous affects of partnering.

The responsibility to construct partnering is shared among the participants. In order to act in a business partner role, the academic and the practical viewpoints agree that certain competencies such as business knowledge, interpersonal skills, HR experience, and strategic thinking are necessary. According to Ulrich (1997) Line Manager's responsibility in the partnering process is to involve HR Business Partners and HR Partners in people decisions and show the willingness to cooperate. Line Manager's responsibility is to turn strategy into action and meet the business needs. By doing so they have to ensure that every HR plan has an organisational action plan for implementation (ibid.). According to Lawler III and Mohrman (2003) HR Business Partners rely on the Line Managers to implement many of the HR practices. As claimed by the authors, Line Managers have to constantly question HR practices to evaluate priorities. One of their responsibilities for HR is to approve and execute HR decisions. Line Managers constantly need to express what they want HR to accomplish (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). It is both participants' responsibility to find a common ground based on commitment, trust and respect to achieve a common goal (Ulrich, 1997).

Competencies

As the HR function aims to be involved in business decisions, new competencies are required (Lawler III and Mohrman, 2003). According to Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) HR has its own set of competencies with which business partners maximise the value they add to the partnering with the business. The first category is strategic contribution, which includes culture management, fast change, strategic decision-making, and market-driven connectivity. The category personal credibility includes the subsets interpersonal skills and communication skills. HR Business Partners must be able to design and deliver basic and innovative HR

practices. The traditional tools for HR, which belong to the category of HR delivery are staffing, training and development, organisation design, performance management, HR measurement and legal compliance (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Further, the authors discuss that business knowledge is claimed to not have a very high influence on business performance. Though, HR Business Partners assume that understanding the company they serve and the industry they function in is important in order to be partners to the business. This category breaks down into knowledge of the value chain, knowledge of the firm's value proposition and labour knowledge (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005).

According to Armstrong (2006a) personal credibility is essential and includes maintaining relationships based on trust and identifying oneself with the company's values. The ability to manage change is important to drive change by diagnosing problems, setting leadership agendas, solving problems and implementing goals. HR Business Partners should have the ability to manage culture by identifying the culture required to meet the company's business strategy and encourage employees to behave with the desired culture. The delivery of human resource practices includes delivering innovative HR practices. The competence to understand the business is helpful for HR matters concerning strategy, organisation, competitors, operations and finance (Armstrong, 2006a).

The reviewed literature about HR Business Partnering does not address the competencies of Line Managers on how to do partnering. The competencies required for Line Managers are merely described in terms of how he or she is responsible for people management, such as communicating effectively, using people's strengths, being calm and consistent, dealing with problems effectively, engaging team members and developing trust of their employees (Ulrich, 1997). According to Ulrich (1997) the task of the Line Managers is to turn HR strategy into action and meet the business needs. However, some researchers claim that Line Managers take proactively part in constructing partnering, managing conflict and solving problems (e.g. Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Armstrong, 2006), but they do not explain how it can be done from a Line Manager's perspective.

Problems with the HR Business Partnering Model

The HR Business Partner Model designed by Ulrich has been around 10 years now. There has been criticism that the model does not work in practice as it gives too much space to misinterpretations. One in four managers say that the HR Business Partner Model is

ineffective (Ulrich, 2008). Though, it is not sure if this is due to the HR Business Partner model or the implementation strategy of the organisations. Ulrich presents a model, but also emphasizes that there is no one best practice (Ulrich, 1997). The successfulness of the model most likely depends on the organisational context, the people that drive the model and the willingness of the Line Managers and executive management to participate.

Roebuck (2010) argues that the HR Business Partner model is not implemented properly in many organisations. One of the reasons might be that there is a general lack in understanding from HR what Line Managers do. Therefore the author argues that HR uses rather 'assumed' needs than a 'real' need and consequently delivers HR practices that the line manager neither wants nor needs (ibid.). According to Roebuck (2010) HR Business Partners have not improved the organisational performance and the satisfaction of CEO's. There are many factors why this is so. Firstly, there is a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of HR Business Partners and Line Managers. Secondly, there is a frequent lack of alignment between operational and strategic objectives. What the line manager requires is not always what the organisation needs (Roebuck, 2010). Referring to this, the communication and the boundary of who is taking responsibility for what is the real challenge with any kind of model. Subsequently the level of communication is the key for successful partnering.

According to Ulrich and Brockbank (2010) the unavoidable failures in the application of the HR Business Partner Model is primarily based on the competences of the HR Business Partner performing the work of a HR Business Partner as well as the willingness of the line manager to accept the role. The authors state that 20% of HR professionals will probably never be able to adapt to the full business partner role as some HR professionals cannot perform the work of a business partner and cannot link their day-to-day work to business results (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2010). Being a business partner requires HR professionals to have new knowledge, skills and add significant value to customer business results. Some may not make the shift to business partners because of personal interests that prevent them from engaging in the business partner role. Some HR practitioners may want to be business partners but simply do not know how to proceed. Such people need to understand the frameworks, knowledge, and competencies that are necessary to grow into the business partner role (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2010). In addition to the HR professional's credibility, ability and willingness to make HR Business Partnering successful, some Line Managers might have problems accepting HR Business Partners as contributors to business agendas

(due to limited perspective on the changing nature of the business, lack of HR knowledge or due to past bad experiences).

Discussion about the Selected Theories

The following theories presented are based on the social constructionism thoughts (see Berger and Luckmann, 1966; McNamee, 2004; Hosking and McNamee, 2006) and theoretical ideas on partnering. In order to explore how partnering is constructed between people, I use a social perspective on partnering. The process of social construction is a way to engage with people and use conversation and talk as activities to create meaning of the world together (Grace, 1987; McNamee, 2004). Constructionism between people is developed by relationships and exists in people's activities of everyday practices and at the level of everyday conversations (Gergen, 2009). In order to emphasise, social constructionist claim that people are individualists, who behave in the world according to their subjectivity and interpretation of the world. When people join together, they become social individualist and construct a shared reality that is relevant and has meaning for them. In this context, I view HR Business Partnering as a process of relational practices that emerge within relationships (McNamee, 2004, Hosking and McNamee, 2006) and include people into dialogue (Grace, 1987). According to my understanding, "*partnering is a mind-set*" Douglas (2009) and hence a process of social constructionists, who act according to own interpretation and subjectivity. These theoretical thoughts imply approaches to answer the research question:

How is HR Business Partnering constructed at SKF?

My way of looking at the theories is that there exist a number of various definitions and assumptions in the reviewed literature about partnering, which are clearly discussed in the following section 'Why Partnering'. The results I draw from the theoretical thoughts is that three partnering concepts exist, which are *cooperation*, *communication*, and *coordination*, which are influenced by the theoretical thoughts of Grey (1989), McQuaid and Christy (1999), Svensson and Nilsson (2008), Douglas (2009), and others. These concepts imply that partnering is a process that is constructed by people and different elements. The discoveries of these elements are subject of this study and connect to how the partnering concepts are used and implemented in the organisation with focus on HR Business Partnering.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents the theoretical thoughts of social constructionism by discussing conversational and relational practices. By doing so I refer to the publication “The social construction of reality” by Berger and Luckmann in 1966, and use the ideas about social constructionism according to McNamee (2004) and Hosking and McNamee (2006). The description of constructionism provides a perspective to further discuss partnering concepts as presented by Grey (1989), McQuaid and Christy (1999), Svensson and Nilsson (2008), Douglas (2009), and others.

Social Constructionism

The literature presents different ideas on what social constructionism is. Some call it a movement, others a position, a theory, a theoretical orientation, an approach. In general, psychologists remain unsure of its position. The review on different literature visualises that the social constructionist positions are grounded on different targets and movements. The publication of Berger and Luckmann’s study in 1966 describes social construction as a label that symbolises a sequence of activities. These have been influenced, changed, and developed by other movements such as philosophy, psychology, social studies of science, ethnomethodology, feminism, post structuralism, etc. (see Burr, 1995).

Conversational practices

McNamee (2004) presents social construction within a variety of social and institutional contexts including psychotherapy, organisations, etc. The author’s work focuses on appreciative dialogic transformation. According to McNamee (2006) social construction is a way to engage with and make sense of the world that includes others into dialogue. Social constructionists aim to be open to conversations and invite themselves in discourses. By doing so, they aim to be open to different views on practice and construct meaning together in a relationship established through conversation, cooperation and coordinated activities (McNamee, 2009 and Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Grace (1987), another social construction theorist, explains social construction as a product that is created in the coordination of linguistic activities among people. The author argues that realities and relations are constructed by language and conversation. McNamee (2004) notes in regard that when people are open to the relational coherence, the reality around is or should not be one way. Similar to Grace’s (1987) argumentation, Hosking and McNamee (2006) argue that the behaviour of interactions between people is constructed by language and in conversations.

Realities, which are socially constructed by relational practices, are hence products of dialogues.

The focus on dialogue and conversation can embrace cooperation rather than rivalry. According to Grace (1987) an on-going conversation can create multiple possibilities and eliminate conflicts in relationships. Cooperation is an integral aspect in the social construction literature. In addition, McNamee (2004) argues that people make use of cooperation in order to construct reality and only more individuals can control cooperation. Cooperation is the process of more participants involved in order to create a commonly accepted meaning of reality. *“We might not always agree on the meaning of an action, a situation, or a relationship, but whatever meaning we construct is always an emergent byproduct of what we do together”* (McNamee, 2004). Social constructionists argue that relational practices are found in relationships and cooperation developed by the coordination of activities through conversations and talk.

Relational practices

Hosking and McNamee (2006) introduce the concept of relational practices in order to argue for the production of social realities. Relational practices are those processes that make the world as it seems (Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Social construction encourages people to reflect upon the relational practices rather than to prescribe certain specific organisational designs or to organise practices. Burr (1995) argues from a psychologist perspective and claims that social constructs are the by-products of countless human choices. A major focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. The social construction of reality is an on-going, dynamic process that is reproduced by people acting on their interpretations and their knowledge of it (ibid.). Actions can take place in any given context and regardless of what is being related with what, the term interaction can embrace all relational possibilities. Hosking and McNamee (2006) discuss that relational practices are somehow connected to expectations. Forms in expectations can be understood as a relationally habituated response to what has existed before, and that practices and behaviours are actions in relation to previous situations (McNamee, 2004; Hosking and McNamee, 2006). The authors present the example of dancing, more precisely of following the steps of a ‘dance’, such as the ‘waltz’ or ‘salsa’ where people expect the dance partner to not only know their own steps, but to also anticipate the other partner’s steps (Hosking and McNamee, 2006).

The literature on social construction presents the importance of discussing the various beliefs, meanings, and values of people in a group (Grace, 1987; McNamee, 2004; Hosking and McNamee 2006). Grace (1987) argues that the effort to clarify variances improves the establishment of relationships that recognise and value differences rather than relationships that deny differences. In regard, Hosking and McNamee (2006) add that if appreciative relationships are established, the participants have further resources available for connecting each other and understanding how others might respond or operate in particular situations. As McNamee (2004) claims, the mutual discovery of dissonances in values, commitments and meanings can lead to frustrations for future engagements.

Social constructionism as a practical theory

Social constructionism encourages people to be aware that discourses construct relational practice with one another. Hosking and McNamee (2006) present a view of social constructionism as a practical theory. McNamee (2004) and Hosking and McNamee (2006) claim that social construction is not a theory that proposes particular techniques or methods for practices, on the contrary it is more a general orientation to engage with the world that focuses on dialogue and gives new meaning to practice. According to the authors, constructionism itself does not indicate specific techniques or methods, but as a practical theory (Gergen, 2009), it exists in people's activities of everyday practices and at the level of everyday conversations. According to McNamee (2004) and Gergen (2009), the meaning of social construction is actively coordinated by people in their on-going activities. The authors view social construction as a theory about meaning, and in particular, about meaning as a relational practice. Social construction offers a relational discourse as meaningful action that always emerges within relationships. Further, social constructionists urge to attend the relational practices of participants in identifying what becomes real, true, and good. In order to attend relational practices in different situations it requires constant flexibility from those participants involved in order to perform together relationships and cooperation, and hence a lived reality (McNamee, 2004; Hosking and McNamee, 2006; Gergen, 2009)

Partnering

The natures of partnering, particularly organisational partnering are shifting due to changing global economic patterns, changing organisational structures and changing business models (Svensson and Nilsson, 2008). Many case studies of organisational partnering exist, however,

the more general theoretical basis for understanding and analysing its development remains poorly developed. Organisational partnering approaches have gained acknowledgement and support from across the organisational field, including a variety of stakeholders. HR Business Partnering, as one type of organisational partnering, is a focus on the organisational agenda nowadays. The value adding approach of human resource management (see Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) encourages the focus on the partnering between HR and business, particularly HR Business Partners and Line Managers.

Within human resource management the purpose for the growth of partnering is to achieve business results. This type of partnering leads to accountability to influence overall efficiency and effectiveness considering that the partnering is carefully designed and operated. Partnering, for instance, is centred on working with people – on building relationships through influence or advice, that is, through logic and rationality. But the question is which logic and rationality? And who gets to decide? People are involved in the process of creating partnering, creating activity, and thus creating what will count as good, as bad, as right, and as wrong.

Definitions of partnering

The previous literature offer no commonly accepted definition of partnering. Researchers and practitioners embrace different conceptualisations and emphasise diverse aspects of the concept (Guest and Peccei, 2001). In this context, there is an unlimited range of partnering activities as the “*methods for carrying out such partnering are limited only by the imagination*” (Lyon and Hamlin, 1991). The term partnering covers differing concepts and practices and is used to describe a variety of partnering relationship elements in various situations and positions. Although the use of the term partnering appears to indicate its rules of commitment, i.e. how the players involved are expected to behave in their relationship with one another (Tomlinson, 2005). Further Tomlinson (2005) argues that most conceptualisations indicate cooperatively arranged relationships among the partners. Other researchers argue for similar concepts of partnering, implying cooperative organisational connections in which the partners are engaged in a continuous communicative process (Philips and Lawrence, 2003). This section reflects on general and organisationally oriented definitions of partnering in the context of organisational development and transformation. Brinkerhoff (2002) states that partnering is promoted as a solution to reach competitive advantage. The author defines partnering as:

Partnering is a dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labour based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner.

(Brinkerhoff, 2002)

Frege (1999) presents one type of partnering as social partnering and discusses the cooperation between different partners at the workplace. The author considers the hierarchical structure of organisations and emphasizes that partnering is characterized by informal networks and bargaining arrangements. Hence, it more or less consists of an unstructured cooperation between people. Structured cooperation, on the other hand, appears rather common in partnering between public and private organisations (McQuaid and Christy, 1999). One type of definition of constructed partnering is the arrangement of practicality, designed to share risks in a process of attaining a jointly desired outcome (ibid.). These collaborative connections allow the partners to identify and engage in solving problems, together plan projects and use infrastructure while sharing risks, costs, benefits, resources and responsibilities (ibid.). Schemer and Schmid (2007) provide a multi-dimensional interpretation of partnering that highlights the role and meaning of power in developing and implementing a partnering between public and private organisations. The authors consider that getting a full understanding of a partnering requires clarifying complex political processes embedded in ideologies of partnering.

Taking on an organisational perspective, the literature states that partnering causes a collaborative advantage achievable by a group or an organisation (Vangen and Huxham, 2003) through cooperation. This means that people work or act together for mutual benefits (Holland, 1984). Similarly, another definition is that organisational partnering is the process of people working together towards the objectives of the business and supporting the business with their knowledge and competence (Andersson, 2006; Douglas, 2009; Svensson and Nilsson, 2008). “*Partnering is a process and a mind-set*” (Douglas, 2009), however, the researcher argues that this has limited conceptual value. Organisational partnering, in this context, can be grounded on the concept of relationship networks (Zolkiewski and Turnbull, 2005). In this context, the authors argue that a variety of partners in the network of relationships surrounding an organisation can have an impact on an organisation’s strategy. Hence, partnering represents a particular expression of organisational cooperation.

Types of partnering

The organisational literature that analyses the types of organisational partnering usually classify them into three major categories: a) what the partnering is aiming for, i.e. its purpose and whether it is strategically driven (e.g. Svensson and Nilsson, 2008; Tomlinson, 2005), b) who is involved, i.e. the key partners and the construction of their relationship in the partnering (e.g. McQuaid, 2000), and c) how the activities are performed, i.e. the implementation processes (e.g. Grey, 1989; Roberts and Bradley, 1991).

a) What is partnering aimed for?

Purpose

The purpose of entering into partnering may be to gain extra business value, to create cooperation and achieve better results for the partners. According to Svensson and Nilsson (2008) partnering is a problem-solving concept, which aims to identify problems, develop new solution and to promote social innovation and change. The implied purpose of the partnering is also important. These may be to improve effectiveness and efficiency, and to influence one of the partners to support activities. Differences in focus between partners are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although conflicts between goals are common and it is critical for each partnering to be clear about its priorities (Tomlinson, 2005).

The underlying basis of the partnering might be a high level of mutual trust and commitment that develops over time and is underlined by a mutual belief in the positive outcomes for both partners, i.e. partnering is shaped by expectations of an exchange. Further, there might be an expectation that the partnering will continue even if its focus changes over time, i.e. the partnering process may be seen as almost an end in itself (McQuaid, 2000).

b) Who is involved?

Key participants

The second dimension of partnering considers the key participants. According to Svensson and Nilsson (2008) the potential that partnering offers is encompassed by the drive, energy and ability to take action that stems from the commitment of participants who become participants. One concern to define the key participants is the range of participants. It is important to identify the types of participants and the way to contribute to partnering (McQuaid, 2000). For example, the role of the HR Business Partner and Line Manager is

critical in partnering for improving the customer's performance, but the form of this contribution may vary according to people's perceptions and expectations.

Another field for studying key participants and their relationships in partnering are the different levels of partnering types, which may vary from formal legal arrangements to informal agreements and networks (Frege, 1999; McQuaid and Christy, 1999). Besides the formal relationships, there are often informal networks between people in the organisations such as when it comes to the relationship between HR Business Partners and Line Managers. The communication behaviour of the participants, such as the communication quality, and the extent of information sharing between participants in goal setting (Mohr and Spekman, 1994) are also critical aspects in shaping the form of partnering. These informal structures can have a major impact upon the process of partnering by influencing decision-making procedures.

c) How are the activities performed?

Implementation process

The third dimension of partnering addresses the implementation processes and involves the participants. The core idea of how partnering is done is shaped by the main thoughts about who does what, who provides resources and who controls them. Hence, how partnering activities and practices are constructed can be seen as the outcome of processes and relationships between the participants.

Partnering concepts

Cooperation

Grey (1989) describes cooperation as “*a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can practically explore their differences and search for solutions.*”

Roberts and Bradley (1991) construct a definition of cooperation as an interactive process having a shared purpose, agreed-upon rules, joint decision-making, and a temporary structure. In this context stakeholders are the partners with an interest in a common problem. Each literature that has been reviewed defines cooperation as a problem solving approach (e.g. Grey, 1989; Roberts and Bradley, 1991). In this context, cooperation is a concept to solve problems, where stakeholders understand the potential advantages of working together. Solving problems involves developing cooperative strategies that improve the benefit for participants (Jamal and Gretz, 1995). Jamal and Getz (1995) outline five key characteristics

of the cooperation process, which are: joint decision-making process; shared responsibility; the stakeholders are independent; and communication.

Communication

Communication is a behavioural characteristic, which includes attributes of partnering and certain communication behaviours, such as information sharing between the participants. The authors assume that more successful partnering is expected to be achieved by a higher level of communication quality, higher level of commitment, coordination and trust, more information sharing between participants and more participation in planning and goal setting (Mohr and Spekman, 1994). In line with Mohr and Spekman (1994), Svensson and Nilsson (2008) define partnering as a problem-solving concept closely linked to actions, which aim to identify problems and develop new solutions. The authors emphasize the importance of communication in order to develop, implement and maintain partnering. Commitment and trust, for example, are behavioural characteristics, which influence the partnering process between participants. Different partners show different levels of commitment and motivation as well as different views of objectives and tasks. Subsequently, the communication of different ideas and approaches is critical in relationships (Mohr and Spekman, 1994).

Coordination

According to Ulrich, coordination is a managerial function in which different activities of the business are adjusted and interlinked (Ulrich, 1997). In terms of HR Business Partnering, various HR processes and practices are coordinated (ibid.). In regard, Svensson and Nilsson (2008) note that coordination is a concept connected to relationships, which relational activities. Generally, coordination of activities is often linked to conversations in which the participants listen, anticipate and respond to each other ideas and actions. Coordination among relationships is possible if the participants are committed to stay engaged with one another and meet each other's requirements (ibid.).

METHODOLOGY

Social constructionism, discussed above as a theoretical perspective, is also a methodological perspective that is related with interpreting reality. Therefore it is logic to use the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which enables me to constantly interpret and make sense of my data. Further, this section presents the primary and secondary sources I use

for my study and discusses how I connect the empirical analysis with the theoretical framework.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach to data analysis, introduced by Jonathan Smith and his colleagues in the mid-1990s. The central focus of IPA is the understanding of people's lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their experiences. IPA has its theoretical origins in hermeneutics and is one of the key ideas from Heidegger (1982) noting that human beings are always perceptive, time-based and in relation to situations and circumstances. He emphasizes the situated and interpretative quality of knowledge of reality. Dey (1993) notes that IPA analysis always involves interpretation, and interpretation is the responsibility of the analyst to develop a meaningful explanation. This is in line with the social constructionist perspective that researchers are constantly interpreting and acting within a social context (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Through the lens of social constructionism, I interpret how HR Business Partnering is constructed by the relational practices and relationships of HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers. By studying how people are constructing partnering I use a subjective and interpretative way of looking at reality. The most suitable data collection method for IPA are in-depth and semi-structured interviews, which I apply to collect my empirical data.

Empirical data

In order to study how partnering is constructed between Line Managers, HR Business Partners and HR Partners; I use a qualitative research method (Dey, 1993). I am guided by an interpretative paradigm studying the social construction of meaning and following the belief that HR Business Partnering is constructed by subjective perception. The core of qualitative analysis lies in describing phenomena, classifying it, and considering how my theoretical and empirical analysis inter-relate (Dey, 1993). The study was conducted for four months, from February to May 2013. During this period I spent almost all workdays at SKF, which allowed me to increase acquaintance with employees and managers and hence guarantee access to potentially rich data.

Primary data - interviews

To achieve my research purpose I used semi-structured interviews as I had two main objectives to collect information: on the one hand, I want to know the partner's perspective

on the issue, and, on the other hand, I also want to know whether the partner can confirm insights and information I already held about HR Business Partnering (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler, 2005). I decide to use the semi-structured interviews because I am not interested in the whole life story, but rather a specific aspect of it (Yin, 2003). The interviews follow a set of opened questions in order to create space for discussion. The interviews are thus structured because the questions are focused on what I am interested in investigating. I conduct the interviews with three focus groups: HR Business Partners, HR Partners and Line Managers. My selection of the interviews is based on voluntary participation.

A total of 17 in-depth interviews were conducted with HR Business Partners and HR Partners. The interviews are carried out via face-to-face and telephone and occupied between 40 and 60 minutes of conversation. 17 of the 20 volunteers I contacted were willing to participate. The respondents are from Belgium, China, Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, and United States, and represent different business areas, business units and group functions. Further, the participants consist of HR Business Partners responsible for the business areas (Industrial Market, Strategic Industries, Industrial Market, Regional Sales and Service, and Automotive), the business units (divided among the business areas) as well as Group Staff (separated into seven staff functions such as Purchasing, Finance and Corporate Development, People and Business Excellence, etc.), and HR Partners on a local level. The purpose of the interviews is to study the key factors that make HR Business Partnering successful and unsuccessful as perceived by the HR Business Partners and HR Partners. The questions focus on the cooperation with Line Managers and the expectations to perform the role of a HR Business Partner and HR Partner. The second part of the interviews focus on the struggles with the role and suggestions for improvements.

The data for the second group is collected by ten interviews with Line Managers. The interviews were conducted via face-to-face and telephone and took approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The respondent group include three Line Managers cooperating with HR Business Partners on a business unit level and seven Line Managers cooperating with HR Business Partner on a local level. The respondents are from China, Italy, France, Germany, Singapore, Sweden and United States. The questions focus on expectations, cooperation with HR Business Partners and HR Partners, and general understanding of the HR Business Partnering concept.

Social construction is combined with the interpretative terminology and thus during the entire study I am in a social context constantly interpreting. During my interviews, I became close to the investigation because I myself participated in the interview situation. In order to provide the same conditions, I chose to conduct the interviews at SKF meeting rooms. I believe that I impact the responses through my presence and my questions, but that this interaction is unavoidable since the interviews were conducted in an artificial situation relative to everyday life. The challenge is to not let my opinions affect the completed interviews, because I am aware that I am not objective. This is in line with the interpretative phenomenological analysis, as I study HR Business Partnering that occurs between HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers. According to Smith, Flower and Larkin (2009) the analysis aims to offer insights into how people, in a given context, make sense of a given phenomenon, which relate to experiences of personal meaning to construct social life. I try to discover the interviewee's perceptions and expectations on HR Business Partnering, in which I as an interviewer cause an impact on the stories told (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009).

Secondary data

In order to describe how partnering is constructed at SKF, I use documents, which are designed for the HR community in order to share information about the HR optimization process. Hereby I study how HR Business Partnering is approached today. The documents consist of updated Power Point Presentation presented and communicated internally. The documents are not specifically on HR Business Partnering only, but also include information about other HR functions and the HR optimization processes.

Empirical analysis and theoretical framework

The purpose of my study is to explore how HR Business Partnering is constructed by studying different explanations and expectations of Line Managers, HR Business Partners and HR Partners. Therefore, I base my investigation on an inductive approach, which indicates that the purpose is not to confirm or reject a hypothesis based on theory, but to have an explorative approach that does not take guidance from theory when analysing the data (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Nonetheless, since I want to organize the empirical data based on partnering concepts, the study can be referred to as semi-inductive. The empirical data provides information about how partnering is constructed from organisational and people perspectives. The data is collected at a time of organisational change, which enables me to

reflect on the situation and present suggestions for improvement to explore the partnering area between HR and business. In order to understand my empirical data from a theoretical perspective, I use my theoretical framework and make those analytical interpretive.

In order to organize the empirical data I apply a thematic analysis as methodology and designed a classification system (Dey, 1993) - starting by generating initial codes of the transcribed material (e.g. "Relationship management"), continuing with dividing the codes into categories in order to identify patterns (e.g. "communication is important"), and next relating categories with each other and uncover core ideas (Dey, 1993). Each category expresses a set of criteria and the data within each category can then be compared and interrelated (Dey, 1993). The data is compared in order to find similarities and differences among HR Business Partner, HR Partner, and Line Manager's stories, which results in two core themes: Informal partnering construction and Formal partnering construction. These results are then interpreted by using the theoretical ideas of social construction and then applying the conceptualisations of partnering. While I use social constructionism as the foundation for the research design and for the structure of results, the concepts of partnering serve as an analysing tool when understanding and interpreting the results.

Credibility, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations

The case study is of qualitative nature, thus not measurable and quantifiable. Each research study is different and can be validated in different ways shaped by the perspectives and context of the researchers (Smith, 2008). Especially judgements of validity for qualitative research are not easy to agree on. Evaluating the validity of research implicates judgement about how well the research is designed, and whether the findings can be regarded as reliable and valuable. According to Smith (2008) one solution to judge the validity of qualitative research is to agree on common criteria. People have different perspectives on whether a research study is valid and can lead to credibility. In order to increase the credibility of my research study I describe the conditions and considerations for the period of investigation.

The Research Council (2010) has designed six key principles of ethical research to be addressed in social science research. One of the principles is that research should be designed, reviewed and processed in order to ensure integrity, quality and transparency. The second point discusses the involvement of research participants about the purpose, method,

and use of the research, as well as possible risks involved. The third point discusses the confidentiality of information provided, which must be handled trustworthily. Confidentiality means that the researcher ensures that personal information is not disseminated. According to the Research Council (2010), all participants must be protected from harm and violence, meaning that participation is followed voluntarily. In order to provide information the researcher must respect the anonymity of the respondents if desired; thus the quotes I included cannot be identified. Based on my prior understanding the research problem is one specific to the company, and hence will be treated with confidentiality. No information will be published, which the company does not want to disclose. As the research study is conducted in the phase of restructuring and change, it is important to consider that this might be a sensitive topic for people involved. This process could influence interviews with the selected research population.

The distribution of the interviews in this research is to some extent essential, but the main emphasis is on the meaning of the people's responses, which is part of the interpretative phenomenological basis I use. This analysis approach enables me to discover different interpretations of reality. The recordings of the interviews are only used for the purpose of this research study, have only been listened to by me and are deleted at the completion of the research study. I decided to record the interviews in order to concentrate on the respondent instead of focusing on writing notes. By making notes I could have missed important parts in the interviewees' descriptions, which are critical for a comprehensive understanding of how HR Business Partnering is constructed. A limitation of this method is that I do not have data on accounts of activities, i.e. no observations of activities were carried out, which is what most social constructionism researchers use for analysis. Instead the semi-structured interviews were aiming to bring more detailed results regarding how HR Business Partnering could look like through the stories of HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers own examples and explanations.

FINDINGS

The empirical data was collected by organisational documents, which provide an understanding of how the organisation describes and expects HR Business Partnering to function. The documents provide a structural way of describing the partnering area between HR and business. The job role descriptions, in regard, outline information about how HR

Business Partners and HR Partners should act and take responsibility from an organisational perspective. Further, the empirical data was collected by semi-structured interviews with HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers. The interview results provide information about the actual way of doing HR Business Partnering and address the research question how partnering is constructed at SKF by considering expectations and descriptions of the participants.

Formal Construction of Partnering

This section discusses the partnering concept between Line Managers, HR Business Partners and HR Partners as described in the formal documents at SKF, such as Power Point Presentations and job role descriptions. Hereby I refer to the ‘status quo’ of HR Business Partnering, i.e. the state in which partnering is formally constructed at the time of investigation. The job role descriptions are used to understand the requirements set from an organisational perspective.

Partnering structure at SKF

In order to meet the business requirements, when it comes to people implication, SKF’s new structure to manage employees consists of People Management and HR Management. The organisation describes that People Management is the responsibility of Line Managers and includes organisational development, leaderships, performance development, competence development, training, communication and change etc. However, when explicitly looking at partnering, there is no information found about how Line Managers are expected to partner with HR. Further, HR Management is the responsibility of the HR Organisation to design, develop and deliver processes, competencies, tools and IT systems to the Line Managers (see Appendix I). The basic structure of HR Management is based on three areas – shared services, expertise and partnering. The HR Organisation acts according to two dimensions, Country (i.e. the different geographical areas) and Group (i.e. the different staff functions). Respectively, shared services, expertise and partnering exist on a Country level and Group level. Since my focus is on the construction of partnering, on a Country level HR Partners manage partnering and deliver HR processes, competencies, tools and IT systems to the local Line Managers (see Appendix II). Depending on the size of the country, HR Partner coexist with shared service centres and experts, which means that they are able to participate more in the business partnering role. In a smaller country HR Partners still maintain a generalist role, which means that they do a little bit of every HR issue. The HR Partner is responsible to

provide service and answer requests on a daily basis. Local Line Managers are then responsible to manage their employees. Partnering on a Group level is managed by HR Partners who support Line Management teams for the staff functions on a global level (see Appendix II).

HR Business Partners belong to the business (see Appendix II), but also have a dotted reporting line into the HR Organisation (see Appendix III). Consequently, HR Business Partners to some extent also belong to the HR Community. Their responsibilities are to support and cooperate with the management teams on a Business Area and International Business Area level. The purpose of partnering is to support international Line Managers to manage their employees. Partnering occurs on a global level and is constructed to evaluate and manage desired solutions for the Line Managers. From an international Line Manager perspective the HR Business Partner is the link to HR. All in all, the two strands, People Management and Line Management, are connected and display the area where HR Business Partnering becomes relevant. After collecting data I conclude that the formal level does not provide instructions on how the process of partnering occurs, i.e. who takes initiative for what action and who takes what responsibilities.

Job role descriptions

My focus is on the construction of partnering between HR and business. SKF developed job role descriptions to explain and describe the responsibilities for HR Business Partnering. With focus on how to do partnering between HR and business, job role descriptions exist for HR Business Partners and HR Partners. Though, there are no documents, which define and clarify the responsibilities and tasks for Line Managers to participate in HR Business Partnering.

The term HR Business Partner is assigned to those who translate the people management's needs and expectations when it comes to people implications, from the organisation towards the HR organisation to make sure that they support whatever is needed from a people management perspective. The HR Business Partner is represented on two levels, respectively on a Business Area and on an International Business Area level (see Appendix III). These two levels differ slightly to the strategic workload and the decision making power. HR Business Partners belong to the business, as their responsibility is to support the business from a strategic HR perspective and design processes with a global viewpoint. Additionally,

HR Business Partners also belong to the HR community, as one of their responsibilities is to guarantee that the HR Organisation meets the business needs. According to the job role description (see table 1) the HR Business Partner has a merely proactive role and is expected to act as a change agent in the business. In this respect they have one leg in the HR community and one leg in the business. The following table presents the job role descriptions for the HR Business Partner:

Job Role	Description
HR Business Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributes to the development of the business strategy • Provides direction and directly supports achievement of business strategy within the business area • Responsible for how work is coordinated in the business or country according to the HR organisation structure • Develops and implements the People management strategy • Builds strong relationships with business managers • Coaches international managers in people management • Drives the HR strategy towards the business • Orders HR requirements for business from group and or country • Works with the local country organisation • Manages expectations & desired solutions from business to create the requested agenda

Table 1: Job role descriptions as presented by SKF

Source: SKF Power Point Presentation, HR Roles and Responsibilities

The second role participating in partnering is the HR Partner belonging to the HR Organisation. There are two roles for the HR Partner. Group Staff HR Partners work more on a global level supporting management teams cross culturally, but also have a close connection to local HR. In comparison to the HR Business Partner described above, the Group Staff HR Partners have a lesser strategic responsibility and is expected to provide HR service on a daily basis to international managers and employees in the staff functions (see table 2). Referring to the job role description the HR Partner is responsible to provide effective HR services on a daily basis to local managers and employees.

Job Role	Description
HR Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the achievement of business strategies • Establishes good relationships with people managers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaches managers in people management when necessary • Responds to employee enquiries and provides pre determined standard answers or solutions • Can demonstrate & explain HR strategy to people managers • Provides first class HR services on a daily basis to local managers & employees • Processes standard HR transactions that require manual intervention • Manages and updates HR Data • Responsible to deliver requested services to the HR & line organisation • Ensures HR activity meets the requirements of the business
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Table 2: Job role descriptions as presented by SKF

Source: SKF Power Point Presentation, HR Roles and Responsibilities

Informal Construction of Partnering

The interview data provide an understanding of how partnering is constructed between HR Business Partners, HR Partners and Line Managers. By using the classification system (Dey, 1993), starting by generating initial codes of the transcribed material, and dividing the codes in order to identify patterns, I found the categories ‘cooperation’, ‘coordination’, ‘communication’, ‘competencies’, and ‘expectations’. The study is based on the sub-question what expectations the participants have on HR Business Partnering and, unpredictably, I find that the interviewees present patterns of expectations. Therefore, expectations are subject to both, the research question and findings. However, I use the category ‘expectations’ found in the empirical data to further discuss how HR Business Partnering is constructed by explicitly studying the requirements and needs of each individual, i.e. his or her expectations.

Cooperation

The HR Business Partner and HR Partner agree that how cooperation functions is very dependent on personal relationships. The respondents say that the underlying pre condition for cooperation is the acceptance of Line Managers to work together with HR Business Partners and HR Partners. Some key words found in the interview results are ‘soft relationship management’ and ‘mutual trust’. One HR Partner states that when it comes to soft skills “...you have to have the trust with Line Managers so that you can influence them” (HR Partner15). The relationship with Line Managers is considered very important among the respondents, and the outcome is very dependent on people engagement and the attitude towards the relationship.

“The relationship with Line Managers is very important to us. If we don’t have a good relationship with them they will not listen to us.” (HR Business Partner8)

Additionally some respondents mention that ‘building network’, ‘gaining credibility’, and ‘achieving acceptance’ influence cooperation. One of the HR Partners states he tries to get out in the organisation to spend some time with the people as “...it allows you to get feedback, the closer you are to the real activities in the business, the more revealing the feedback gets and how the organisation works” (HR Partner17). Thus, cooperation involves engagement and willingness to get involved. Also, HR Business Partners and HR Partners view some barriers to cooperate. HR Partners claim that their roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined and do not outline what is required and expected from them. Some of the respondents are not sure about how to handle certain situations and merely rely on themselves as a tool.

“I don’t know the expectations...I struggle with what my responsibility and work assignment is...I am trying to figure my role out and I try to find the right way to work with my managers.” (HR Partner13)

Also, some respondents state that there exist a lot of grey zones between the work tasks between HR Business Partners and HR Partners. A few respondents think it is necessary to clarify the responsibility areas by setting limits. For example, if both HR Business Partners and HR Partners sit in the same country, then the HR Business Partner is very close to the local happenings and might easily interfere in the HR Partners work tasks and responsibilities.

The category cooperation is a central aspect for Line Managers when working together for the purpose of partnering. The opinions about cooperation are quite mixed, as some Line Managers are very satisfied with their HR support, whereas others do not really have an opinion about HR, and do not involve the HR Business Partner or HR Partner in business discussions. A few managers, merely on an international level, state that they see HR involved in the management team and strategy development. Other Line Managers, merely on a local level, view the cooperation with HR as a back office support function and a problem solver.

“Working with HR is very important especially now as we try to do more with less people...So I think making sure that the HR team is part of the management team and involved is very important.” (Line Manager2)

“I don’t know much about HR Partners. I only need this business partner when it comes to job postings and when we have the regular salary review.” (Line Manager8)

Among some of the respondent’s answers I find the key words ‘mutual cooperation responsibility’ and ‘shared goals’. Meaning that some Line Managers understand cooperation as something they share responsibility with HR in order to achieve a desired outcome based on a high level of trust where the “...*HR Business Partner is a dependable and honest partner*” (Line Manager9).

Communication

Communication is considered as a key concept when it comes to building relationships and working together towards a common objective. The key terms found among the answers by HR Business Partners and HR Partners are ‘communication responsibility’ and ‘communication development’. Sharing knowledge about the HR structure, explaining the requirements and clarifying responsibilities are considered communication tasks for HR Business Partners and HR Partners. One HR Partner says:

“I think it is hard for the manager to know what HR person to contact...all in all I think we are not really good in communicating with the managers on who to contact and when.” (HR Partner17)

Generally, communication enables to inform about the strategy and overall targets. The sharing of practices and information influences relationships and clarifies expectations and different viewpoints. The remark given by one HR Partner is that HR needs to communicate their expectations to Line Managers and also to be aware of what SKF expects from both participants. The problem is that the participants “...*don’t have anything written, so we don’t have anything that I can give to the managers...If I say something and my HR colleagues say something different about what we expect then we don’t have a common picture on what we expect on cooperation.*” (HR Partner14). Most of the Line Managers mention that they wish

for improvements in the communication process with HR. The key terms shared among the respondents are ‘better communication’, ‘better information exchange’, and ‘more sharing’. Generally, Line Managers note that HR and business is too isolated from each other and they claim that HR needs to take the responsibility to act proactively.

“I think we could do more sharing of information and learn about each other. I don’t feel that HR is doing a good job to communicate in our language, so that we understand what to do, what our responsibilities are and where to get what information.” (Line Manager5)

Among the responses, there is a difference in how international Line Managers and local Line Managers perceive HR Business Partners and HR Partners. Line Managers on an international level are aware about the HR Business Partnering concept, whereas some Line Managers on a local level might not understand the difference between different HR roles and hence cannot understand the HR Business Partnering concept. Insufficient communication and information sharing might cause this lack of knowledge. For some, the HR Business Partnering concept is unfamiliar as one respondent says:

“What is the difference between HR and HR Business Partner? I am not familiar with the HR Business Partners. I have one HR person who I contact.” (Line Manager3)

Coordination

Coordination is a central topic when exploring how partnering is constructed. Two key terms are found among the respondents, which are ‘common processes’ and ‘process transparency’. Connected to the HR Optimisation process at SKF, a few of the HR Business Partners mention that the aim is to create cohesive HR service and aligning HR processes worldwide in order to act the same and eliminate different perceptions of the role. One example of how incoordination influences the work of HR Partners is:

“I do things by heart, right or wrong, but I think it would be very professional if all the community would do it in a certain way. You are merely use yourself as a tool than relying on the procedures and processes in this area.” (HR Partner13)

The challenge today is that unaligned HR processes and different HR systems can influence Line Managers' approach towards people management in a negative manner. Some respondents feel that he or she has to do the same things several times, such as "...sometimes I have to do things for the global HR and some things for my local HR" (Line Manager7). Coordination needs to be addressed by HR and achieved within the HR Organization as it influences the way Line Managers manage their people. One HR Business Partner says:

"As an international manager the way you have to do people management depends on the country you work with. The processes are not aligned cross borders, the systems are not the same and that makes it very complicated as a manager to handle that."
(HR Business Partner6)

The perception about coordination differs according to the position, the country, the operating unit and the cross-cultural responsibility of the Line Manager. Local Line Managers view less challenges with coordination as they know their local HR and manage their employees mostly according to one set of standards, processes and policies. Line Managers on an international level complain more about coordination when it comes to HR processes, tools and relationships. They claim that there is no global coordination, especially Line Managers who manage employees in different countries face difficulties when it comes to managing their people. International Line Managers argue that processes are not aligned, unorganised and they are uncertain about what is required and expected from them. Some Line Managers feel that they have no overview about what is going on and where. Additionally, unaligned processes are very time consuming for the Line Managers and results in dissatisfaction. Almost all Line Managers mention that the coordination between HR systems and processes needs to be improved. All in all, the satisfaction from all respondents is not very high when it comes to coordination.

"We have to go through many steps to get things done, I wish it is more streamlined. Sometimes I don't know who to contact...I want one message that comes through and eliminate waste in layers, so we can do a better job." (Line Manager 4)

"For me a benefit would be a supplier of simpler systems that goes through the whole organization. I really ask myself why HR cannot drag it out of the system themselves. They can't because these systems don't talk to each other" (Line Manager 9)

Competencies

Roles and responsibilities between HR Business Partners and HR Partners differ, and therefore the competencies for each role might vary as well. However, both respondent groups present almost the same aspects, though the extent of involvement and workload might be unlike. The key terms found among the answers are ‘strategic thinking’, ‘HR knowledge’, ‘managerial skills’, ‘coaching skills’, and interpersonal skills such as ‘strong relation ability’ and ‘communication’. Additionally, the key terms ‘business understanding’, ‘organisational development’ and ‘change management’ are required to perform effective partnering. HR Business Partners and HR Partners are generally aware of the fact that they need to understand the business in order to know where the business is struggling and where more sophisticated areas are needed. One HR Partner explains three capability perspectives:

“From a business capability point of view you have to have a commercial awareness and understand the business. From a HR capability perspective, you have to understand how managers and employees deal with each other and struggle sometimes. We need to get the basics in HR right, such as knowledge and basic tools. And from a consulting viewpoint on HR you need to understand how to become a trusted advisor for the people and how you can impact and influence the business.”
(HR Partner 15)

Line Managers refer to HR competencies as the important driver when constructing partnering. They merely reflect on HR when it comes to working together and constructing partnering than upon themselves. Some of the Line Managers see a direct connection between their work and HR competencies. The key terms of competencies found are ‘organisational change’, ‘business understanding’, ‘influencing skills’, and ‘interaction’. Most of the Line Managers state that the right competencies are important in order to understand their requirements and help to deliver solutions. According to some Line Managers’ perceptions HR needs to have the competence to be involved in strategic development and do less administrative work so HR can focus on building good relationships with the people in the organisation. Line Manager² gives one best practice example that HR needs to understand the business environment:

“They contribute to the strategy of the people, and for this reason it is important that they understand the environment we function in...if they don’t have that understanding it can be a big risk for us.” (Line Manager2)

The competencies required for Line Managers to do People Management and act as a partner with HR are not mentioned. Just a few HR Partners mention that it is the mind-set, the willingness and the acceptance, which is required as a competence from Line Managers to include and involve HR Business Partners and HR Partners. As expressed by some HR Partners he or she faces challenges to get involved in the decision-making processes of the Line Manager. Most of the participants claim that the first step of the Line Managers is to show willingness to work with HR.

Expectations

Expectations on how partnering should function and add value to the business differ according to the HR Business Partners, HR Partners and the Line Managers. Though, some expectations are very similar, such as those on proactivity and initiative to take action. Almost all of the respondents say that they are not certain about who has the responsibility to take initiative in what kind of situations. Line Managers express that they would like HR to be more proactive and be the initiator for certain people management issues.

“One aspect is how proactive or passive, reactive HR can be and the manager. Who has the responsibility to take initiative in some instances? There I think we have a gap in expectations me as a manager and HR as an organization.” (Line Manager5)

Although, it is not clear for HR Business Partners and HR Partners that they are expected to be the proactive player to initiate action. Many of the HR Partners claim that they cannot find defined roles anywhere that clearly states what they are supposed to do. As one respondents puts it: *“... you are supposed to be the supporting and coaching person to the manager, or you are supposed to be the driving person that drives processes and acts proactive to the manager. I wish this could be more clear so we don’t have different expectations on partnering.” (HR Partner13)*. This gap of expectation on proactivity and initiative can be the result of undefined responsibilities and roles. From a Line Manager’s perspective they expect support in people management and have expectations in *“...challenging the manager in a*

new way of thinking, in challenging the status quo, proposing organisational projects, new organisational ways to handle situations that are maybe difficult” (Line Manager6). Some respondents mention that they are uncertain about their responsibilities and view HR as the solution to clarify what they are expected to do. Additionally they have high expectations on the speed of HR service delivery. One Line Manager expresses dissatisfaction with how fast decisions can be made for people management issues. In terms of speed it seems for Line Managers that there is a lot of red tape in hiring and people issues. Merely he or she are aware that this is part of the business decisions, but Line Managers claim that HR needs to improve in speed. Thus, another gap in expectation found in the responses is the speed to deliver service. Sometimes it might not be possible for HR to deliver faster, i.e. *“HR can’t do faster due to certain policies and procedures due to country specific issues and a lot of administration”* (HR Business Partner1). HR respondents mention that the time to deliver HR depends in many cases on the country specific regulations and laws.

Clear roles and responsibilities

Line Managers as well as HR Business Partners and HR Partners expect more clearly defined roles and responsibilities in order to know what is expected from them. Most of them claim that job descriptions other than those rolled out in the taxonomy are needed which *“...clarifies what is required from you, what is expected and also it is not enough to have them in a document. We need to be sure to live them. How can we?”* (HR Business Partner11). It seems that all respondents agree that there are no clear defined responsibilities for how to do partnering. They claim that they would like to know from an organisational perspective what is expected from them and if there are guidelines for specific actions. Line Managers, for instance, would like to have some guidance on how they are supposed to do people management. If responsibilities and roles would be clear, then it would be clear to the participants who needs to be proactive in which situations and who has the responsibility to take initiative for which actions.

“Sometimes I don’t know what they expect from me. So it is hard to know if I do my job in the right way.” (Line Manager1)

Communication

Almost all respondents think that improving the communication among the different interfaces is important. Their expectation is to improve the exchange of information,

knowledge and practices. For some of the respondents it is critical to understand who is doing what and where. Communication about responsibilities and roles can contribute to enhance the construction of partnering. Those Line Managers, who mentioned that he or she has a regular contact with his or her HR Partner, seemed the most satisfied. When both parties have expectations on how partnering should be constructed, and there is no communication about these expectations, this might result in a dissatisfactory result of partnering.

“We need a clearer communication in roles between my manager and me, because partnering is something that I and my manager do together. We need to focus on exchanging viewpoints and expectations.” (HR Partner13)

Clear decision-making centre

According to HR Business Partners and HR Partners, partnering is not efficient enough due to a non-existing decision centre. Some claim that it is not clear enough who takes and makes decisions. The expectation is to be able to follow and act according to one frame of responsibilities. Clear decision making processes and communication determine the way HR processes are aligned and coordinated. Unaligned processes affect Line Manager’s time and approaches towards HR. Therefore, Line Managers as well express an expectation to work on streamlined processes:

“It feels HR needs to coordinate a little bit more efficiently, so I don’t go my own way.” (Line Manager9)

“Now we are losing stupid time...Sometimes it is very difficult to know who takes the decisions.” (HR Business Partner4)

Work tasks

The international Line Managers show a quite good understanding about the HR Business Partnering concept and expect HR Business Partners to be a part of the management team. Different expectations exist when it comes to the work tasks of HR Partners. A few local Line Managers merely view them as problem solvers and do not need to show willingness to accept them as a business partner. Line Manager 3, for example, thinks that HR does not need to be involved and is more of a reactive person, who solves day-to-day issues since *“...HR things take too much time and I lose time to do my work”* (Line Manager3). This can be

challenging when HR Partners try to become involved in decision-making processes. HR Partners view themselves as a role with strategic capabilities and want to be accepted as a strategic partner with who the Line Manager can approach People Management issues together. This gap in expectation on HR Partners' work tasks exists merely on local level. Nonetheless, there exist also good case examples as one HR Partner notes:

“My managers learn to understand that they should involve me and that I know about the business. It is important that they ask me for advice, so we can prevent problems before they happen.” (HR Partner15)

DISCUSSION

The underlying assumption for the following discussion is that the participants of the study are social individuals who come together and construct relationships and relational activities (McNamee, 2004) i.e. in the process of HR Business Partnering. The actual practice is not as coherent as the idea of HR Business Partnering described in the previous literature (e.g. Ulrich, 1997; Armstrong, 2005). By using the lens of social constructionism and applying the concepts of partnering concepts and my own interpretation, I question the rhetoric of HR Business Partnering and get closer to the actual construction of partnering. The research data indicates that partnering between HR and business is designed on formal and constructed on informal level. The two core themes that emerged from the thematic analysis are: **Informal partnering construction vs. formal partnering construction**. Related to my research question how participants construct HR Business Partnering, I found that the participants explain partnering different, as well that the expectations about HR Business Partnering could look very unlike. Line Managers provide mainly different explanations than HR Business Partners and HR Partners. This was not depending on how the participants understand HR Business Partnering, but rather the difference was if the participant's responsibilities and work tasks were clear or unclear and if expectations were similar or dissimilar.

Formal vs. Informal Partnering Construction

HR Business Partnering at SKF shows characteristics of structured partnering, which is defined in the literature as a concept of formal arrangements and structured processes to achieve cooperatively desired outcomes (McQuaid and Christy, 1999). Partnering between

HR Business Partners, HR Partners and Line Managers aims to achieve desired outcomes by following certain processes, tools and practices. The empirical data shows that SKF uses a political aspect of partnering by its formal organisational requirements on how to construct partnering (e.g. job role description) and hence shows structural and instrumental elements to approach HR Business Partnering. For the future, SKF aims on a formal level to achieve organised coordination, transparent relationship networks, and improved communication between HR and business. In order to argue from a social constructionism perspective people reflect upon the relational practices rather than prescribing certain specific organisational designs or organising practices (McNamee, 2004; Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Subsequently, the formal or structural level does not indicate how partnering between HR and business is constructed on an informal level. The informal level is characterised by unstructured partnering, in which informal networks and relationships exist (Frege, 1999). According to the interview results, the cooperation between HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers is based on something undefined and invisible for the outside contemplator.

The construction of partnering between HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers can be viewed as a connection between People Management, HR Management and the business. The implementation of People Management is the responsibility of Line Managers (e.g. employee processes, employee tools) and HR Management is the responsibility of the HR Community (see Appendix I). Partnering construction exists on formal and informal level. In order to construct partnering, Line Managers, HR Business Partners and HR Partners need to know who owns work tasks, who takes responsibility, and who controls them. The organisation provides documents in order to define job role descriptions on a formal level. On an informal level these formal requirements might or cannot always be followed. The reason why job role descriptions are considered unclear, as HR Partner 16 says: *“We need different job roles descriptions, the ones in the taxonomy are too fluffy and don’t really connect to reality”*, might be due to the reason that partnering is a concept not possible to define in documents. My research shows that SKF nowadays focuses on the formal level developing documents and expecting these documents to work in practice. Though, an informal level exists and the participants show awareness of it. Figure 2 shows that there is an imbalance between the formal and informal level and according to my findings the informal level is where the actual partnering construction in real life is happening.

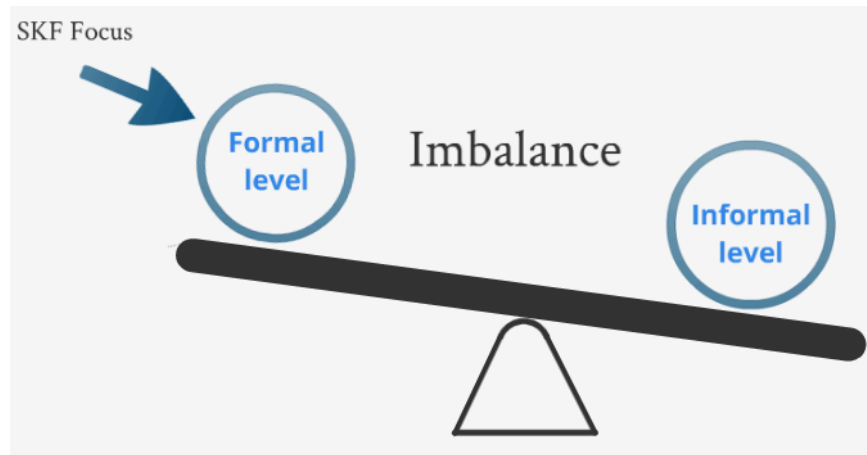


Figure 2: Imbalance between formal and informal level

Partnering construction is a complex structure developed by meaningful action, which is always emerging with relationships (Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Subsequently, there is much more behind the partnering construction between people than it can be grasped by written documents such as the job role descriptions. These, as presented by the company (see table 1 and 2) not present a deeper understanding of how to do partnering. Though, they present necessary guidelines for HR Business Partners and HR Partners.

Partnering concepts

In this section I discuss the practical examples found in the findings from a social constructionism perspective (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1966; McNamee, 2004; Hosking and McNamee, 2006). The theoretical ideas about partnering present three partnering concepts, which I find as well in my empirical findings: *cooperation*, *communication*, and *coordination* (e.g. Grey, 1989; Jamal and Getz, 1995; Svensson and Nilsson, 2008). The concepts are types of relationships and indicate how HR Business Partnering is constructed, i.e. in a social context where participants meet and work together. Additionally I find in my empirical data two additional ideas, which are relevant for HR Business Partnering: *competencies* and *expectations*. In order to understand how HR Business Partnering is constructed I need to understand how social constructionism influences people's actions and determines the way we perceive things. Since I use a social constructionism perspective I cannot just understand HR Business Partnering according to formal instructions and documents, but I strive to understand the relational practices and interactions between the participants, thus the informal level.

What is real to a HR Business Partner may not be real to a Line Manager. We can interpret this point about the differences that exist between the participants in partnering construction in many different ways. We might take the point that the domain of partners is different according to cooperation. Grey (1989) views cooperation as a process through which participants who see different aspects of a problem can practically explore their differences and search for solutions. Though, I think that it is not that easy to practically explore differences and search for solutions as suggested by Grey (1989). The process behind partnering construction is much more complex and considers a deeper study about how the concepts, i.e. cooperation, are applied on an informal level:

“The actual road is built by trust. Trust gives you the power to influence them.” (HR Business Partner9)

It seems that trust provides one example of how cooperation is applied in practice. Trust is not something that can be developed by written documents or job roles descriptions. It is more an invisible and powerful connector between two participants. The ability and competences to build trust is very personal dependent and there are no shared solutions for how to do so. In this context it is crucial to remind that it is both participants' responsibility to find a common ground based on commitment, trust and respect to achieve a common goal (Ulrich, 1997). Employees in a business partner role need to own certain competencies, such as personal credibility (Armstrong, 2006a), which is essential and includes maintaining relationships based on trust in order to share relational practices.

In this context, the participants construct partnering through dialogue and conversation and hence create relational activities and thus make sense of HR Business Partnering. (McNamee, 2004). One HR Partner notes *“...there are improvements to make in how we communicate and that we must be better in it.”* (HR Partner15). As communication is a key for partnering to share knowledge and information (Svensson and Nilsson, 2008), partnering construction has not reached its fullest potential yet, since communication needs to be improved. As Svensson and Nilsson (2008) note that the coordination of activities *“are often linked to conversations in which the participants listen, anticipate, respond to each other”*. By listening, anticipating, and responding to each other, the participants are expected to develop coordinated activities through conversation and talk (McNamee, 2004). On the contrary, the

findings present a rather different approach to coordination, which is more connected to streamlining processes and systems. Though, I think that these two approaches, on the one hand a social and on the other hand a technical approach, can be connected by assuming that the social activities which aim to meet certain HR standards are dependent on how the technical activities are developed and designed. The quality of HR processes and tools determine the way that HR Business Partners and HR Partners are able to provide information and determine their actions when it comes to cooperate with Line Managers to meet certain HR requirements. As stated in the next quote, good coordination can be viewed when only one country is involved, since the participants can follow only one set of standards, policies and processes: *“In one country I can see that coordination works fine. In another country I can also see that coordination works fine. The problem is that the coordination between these two countries does not work fine.”* (HR Business Partner1)

Almost all respondents mention expectations for HR Business Partnering based on their own understanding, perceptions and needs. Social constructionists interpret expectations as relationally adapted responses to what has existed before and hence are activities in relation to earlier situations (McNamee, 2004; Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Mostly, expectations mentioned by the respondents were connected to suggestions for improvements and thus provide an understanding how the foundation for HR Business Partnering is constructed. The following quote shows that undefined roles exist and people demand that the organisation sets certain standards and develops clear responsibilities.

“It is not very clear actually what role I have and what role the manager has. Sometimes I make up my own and I think it would be very professional to have something given by SKF.” (HR Partner13)

Secondly, differences between the participants occur due to their competencies. The literature review shows similar approaches to competencies as found in the interview results, i.e. personal credibility, business understanding, strategic thinking, and HR understanding. The right competencies are an important element in order to answer the question how HR Business Partnering is constructed. As Ulrich and Brockbank (2010) note that not all HR professionals in a business partner role might suit the job tasks and responsibilities to work strategically and meet the business objectives. The discussion merely focuses on the competencies for HR Business Partner and HR Partners, as there is no competencies found

for Line Managers. This might be due to the reason that previous researchers have not investigated how Line Managers could contribute and be involved in HR Business Partnering. The reasons that the empirical findings also give no insight into competencies for Line Managers can be due to the fact that so far the organisation has not addressed the issue of the Line Managers' involvement in HR Business Partnering. According to my interpretation SKF mainly looks at partnering from a HR perspective, i.e. an inside-out view, and has not considered the customer perspective, i.e. an outside-in view, yet.

By applying the social constructionist perspective when designing the study and organizing the results, I found that the participants construct partnering through cooperation (i.e. trust and mutual commitment), communication (share knowledge and information), coordination, (develop involved decision making), competencies (personal credibility, business knowledge, HR understanding, etc.) and expectations (needs, requirements, suggestions for improvements). In order to demonstrate how the partnering concepts connect with relational activities, I developed a model based on my interpretation of the empirical findings and partnering theories:



Figure 3: HR Business Partnering construction concepts

My results show that the participants have different understandings and strategies of acting in relationships and to work with relational practices. According to my findings I interpret that each participant acts socially and in relation with other participants to construct partnering. The meaning that each participant contributes to the construction is the result of individual experiences and expectations (McNamee, 2004; Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Within the social context, I note that participants, being social individualists, define their own way of constructing partnering (see figure 3). How come it is possible for HR Business Partners, HR

Partners, and Line Managers to interact according to different ways and still argue they are part of the same construction? These ideas involve in the HR Business Partnering model introduced by Ulrich: the expectation on HR to create a business value adding function through partnering with Line Management. The objective of HR Business Partnering might be aligned, but how to reach the objective is more or less open for interpretation and depending on the informal level, such as relationships and relational activities between the participants.

The participants

The purpose of including different participants was to compare how partnering is constructed by the participant's perceptions and expectations. According to the findings, Line Managers have different perceptions and expectations than HR participants. However, one shared idea is that SKF needs to provide better-defined documents describing responsibilities, requirements, and expectations for the partnering area between HR and business. I interpret that the participants feel more comfortable to talk about construction on a formal level. That could be due to the reason that they are not consciously aware of an informal level or that the informal level is much harder to explain and refer to. When expressing expectations and suggestions for improvements, none of the respondents suggest ideas about how the organisation could support them on the informal level.

HR Business Partners and HR Partners should not be viewed as a "*back-office support*" as expressed by one Line Manager, because then HR is not perceived as a partner, but merely as a support function. But as Ulrich (1997) notes, the participants are partners who share the responsibility to find a common ground based on commitment, trust and respect to achieve a common goal. Hence, in the case at SKF, partnering construction does not exist when HRBPs, HR Partners, and Line Manager don't contribute to create relationships and accept the other part as an equal partner. Equality in this matter is another important element of partnering construction, because partnering should happen on a level where both parties have the ability and strength to speak up to each other to achieve a common goal together (e.g. Ulrich 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Svensson and Nilsson, 2005). Reflecting on my empirical findings I can find that some HR Business Partners and HR Partners might see struggles for when to reject work tasks demanded by Line Managers.

“Sometimes I feel that I am not doing the work I should do. And again I have to make clear to my manager that what he wants is not what I am supposed to do...but this is very difficult sometimes, so then I end up doing it anyway.” (HR Business Partner7)

A few of the HR Business Partners and HR Partners say that he or she decides merely according to their own perceptions and ideas on how to do partnering. In general, I have the impression that this is a commonly accepted approach of how to do HR Business Partnering. Line Managers are more and more expected to participate in HR Business Partnering, especially in the role of the people manager. This puts additional workloads and requires additional competences from Line Managers to be involved proactively in people management. So far there are not many instructions provided by SKF for Line Managers on what is expected from them and how are they supposed to be involved. This is one explanation why a rather informal construction of partnering could be found among the participants. Most of the Line Managers think that he or she needs formal guidelines and expectations on how to do People Management. If the organisation starts to involve the customer perspective in terms of how to do partnering, differences in expectations might get resolved.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the current challenges of HR Business Partnering at SKF and the construction of partnering between HR and business from a social constructionist perspective. The results demonstrate that partnering construction is done in daily work life when individuals come together, i.e. through relational activities and relationships. Considering the research question how HR Business Partnering is constructed at SKF my results indicate that a gap in partnering construction exists: HR Business Partnering is developed on a formal level (e.g. documents), but that the actual construction of partnering is done on an informal level. The interview results show elements of social partnering in which informal networks, undefined arrangements, and unstructured coordination exists between the participants. HR Business Partnering on an informal level is constructed by cooperation, communication, and coordination between HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers. Additionally competencies, and expectations expressed by the participants contribute to the construction of partnering and hence should be considered by the

organisation. In order to reduce the gap between the formal and informal level, SKF might have to find other means to improve the partnering area rather than relying on documents.

On a more informal level, HR Business Partners and HR Partners have to be proactive and include Line Managers as part of HR Business Partnering processes to achieve the business results. My results indicate that Line Management has not been considered enough by SKF yet in the construction process of HR Business Partnering. The focus should not only be on HR, but also on how Line Managers can be included and take responsibility for People Management. The existing connection between HR Management and People Management indicates that Line Managers are part of HR Business Partnering. The attitude from Line Managers is critical in order to actively participate and accept HR as an equal partner to achieve a common business objective. All things considered, partnering construction is a complex process that happens on a deeper level than some academics explore. The HR Business Partner model, for instance, introduced by Ulrich does not sufficiently discuss the partnering area between HR and business. The model does not describe HR Business Partnering construction deeply enough from an informal level, i.e. the relational construction perspective. Additionally, the model does not provide enough explanation of relational practices and interpersonal activities and its impact on how individuals cooperate.

My suggestion for future research is to explicitly study the involvement of Line Management in HR Business Partnering. The focus could be on what competencies are needed in order to construct HR Business Partnering and what expectations organisations have on Line Managers to construct partnering. In the discussion section I shortly comment on equality within partnering construction. In this context, another suggestion for future research is to study the hierarchical relationships between HR and business, and how power relations influence relationships and relational activities. Last, but not least another interesting area of HR Business Partnering construction is to study the impact of the organisational environment on informal partnering between HR and business. The organisational culture, strategy and structure might affect and determine participant's relationships and relational activities to construct partnering. My research study includes data from one organisation and presents a single case study. Future research could focus on a comparison between organisations with similar organisational environments and possibly find a best-fit approach for how partnering is constructed on an informal level.

FINAL REMARKS – IMPLICATIONS FOR SKF

Based on my research, I would like to add some final remarks for the organisation. The partnering area between HR and business is so far not controlled and supervised. My first recommendation is to open space for meeting arenas and facilitate the discussion between HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers. Documents are a necessary requirements to have in order to provide guidelines and instructions, but will not ensure that what is required formally is actually lived in practice on an informal level. Increased communication and face-to-face meetings might create better personal relationships and enhance the process to build trust and commitment.

My second recommendation to improve and enhance HR cooperation, coordination and communication between HR Business Partner, HR Partners, and Line Managers is to implement assessments. Important to note is that the assessments should not be seen as another formal requirements, but actually enable the participants to exchange how they live HR Business Partnering in practice. By assessing Line Managers the organisation receives information about his or her expectations and suggestions for improvements. It could provide an understanding about the Line Managers perceptions and viewpoints on the cooperation with HR Business Partners and HR Partners. Additionally the involvement by conducting assessments shows the Line Managers that they are included and share responsibility for HR Business Partnering. The implementation of assessments on HR Business Partners and HR Partners could show if requirements and responsibilities of the job role are met. It is important that the right person with the right competencies has the right job. Additionally, it could serve to provide information about his or her expectation and suggestions for improvements. The assessment could also function in a way to find out if job role requirements and competencies are met with the person who does the job. The participant of the assessment should choose if he or she wants to do the assessment anonymously since the goal is to get a general view on the perception and expectation of HR Business Partnering.

My third recommendation is to develop and implement surveys addressing on the one hand HR Business Partners and HR Partners and on the other hand Line Managers. The analysis of such a survey can provide information about what, for instance, the Line Manager requests from HR and match this information with what is collected form the HR Business Partner and HR Partner. The analysis could also show if there are gaps in expectations between the

participants when it comes to cooperation, coordination and communication. If expectations are considered 'wrong', according to organisational measurements and standards, then certain trainings for either Line Managers or HR Business Partner and HR Partners is necessary. For example, if the Line Manager's expectation is considered 'wrong' then the responsible HR Business Partner or HR Partner needs to increase coaching and find solutions on how to improve the situation. The focus should not only be on the HR Business Partner and HR Partner, sometimes the Line Manager in a people manager role might need training as well, such as leadership training, etc. One suggestion for trainings where HR Business Partners, HR Partners, and Line Managers come together can be role-plays where the participants view the roles from different perspectives. The surveys should not be anonymously and only be available to the respective HR Business Partner, Line Manager and supervising manager.

My fourth recommendation is to improve the formal level when it comes to develop and implement guidelines and instructions for Line Managers. So far SKF does not provide documents on what is expected and required from the Line Managers in a people manager role according to SKF standard. As discussed before Line Managers are to some extent connected with HR Management and therefore need to understand that they are part of HR Business Partnering. These documents will enable to include Line Managers on a formal level and provide an understanding of the responsibilities and competencies necessary in order to manage employees efficient and effective. But again, this is a structural approach to improve HR Business Partnering. The actual partnering construction is happening on an informal level and hence requires that the first, second, and third recommendations are considered.

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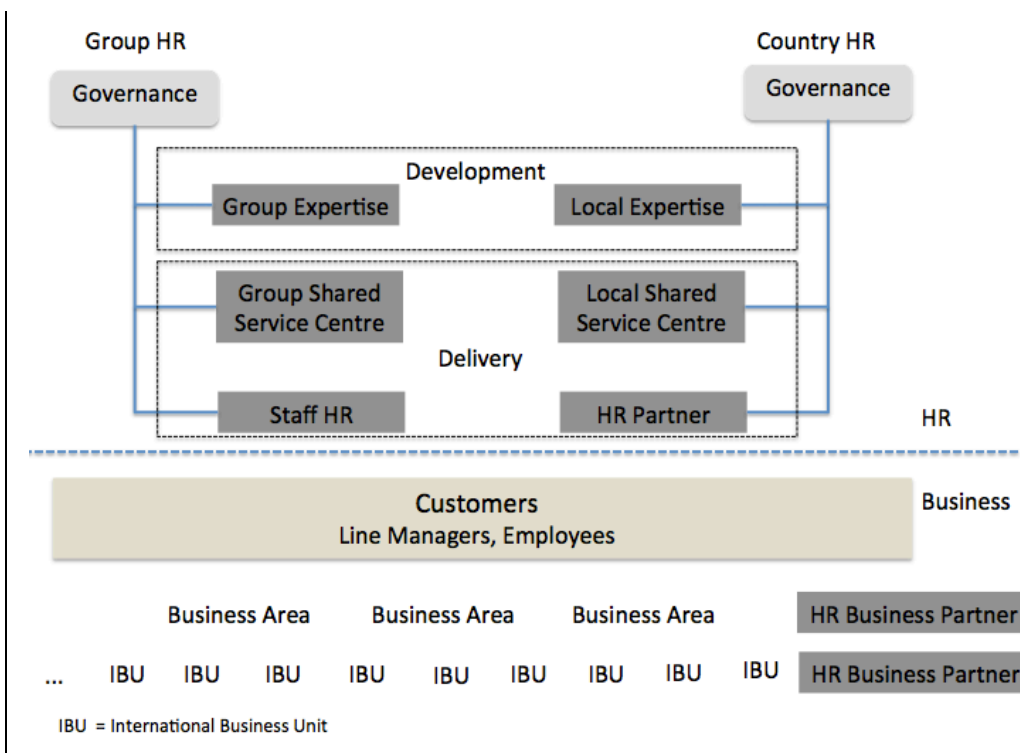
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APPENDIX

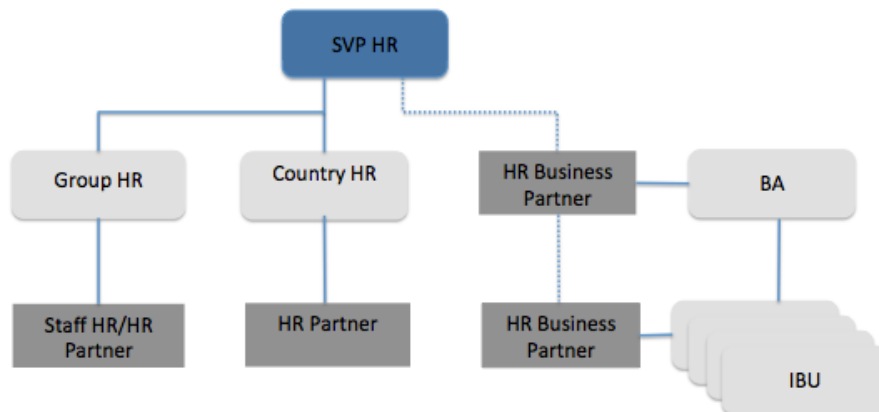
Appendix I: Responsibilities



Appendix II: HR Organisation – two dimensions



Appendix III: HR Community



Appendix IV: Job role description

HR Business Partner:

- Contributes to the development of the business strategy
- Provides direction and directly supports achievement of business strategy within the business area or international business
- Responsible for how work is coordinated in the business or country according to the HR organisation structure designed by group
- Develops Implements the People management strategy
- Builds strong relationships with business managers
- Coaches international managers in people management
- Acts as change agent in the business area
- Drives the HR strategy towards the business (demonstrates and explains) and ensures effective & efficient implementation
- Orders HR requirements for business from group and or country
- Works with the local country organisation to ensure HR solutions best meet the needs of SKF
- Manages expectations & desired solutions coming from business to create the requested agenda
- Evaluates HR deliveries, policies & practices & makes recommendations for improvements/new needs

HR Partner:

- Supports the achievement of business strategies within the operating units in the country
- Establishes good relationships with people managers
- Coaches managers in people management when necessary
- Establishes and maintains HR Self Service offerings that are high quality and cost effective

- Responds to employee enquiries and provides pre determined standard answers or solutions
- Can demonstrate and explain the HR strategy towards people managers
- Provides first class HR services on a daily basis to local managers & employees
- Processes high volume standard HR transactions that require manual intervention, undertaken in a centre serving multiple business units and/or geographies
- Manages and updates HR Data
- Responsible to deliver requested & required services to the HR & line organisation
- Ensures HR activity meets the requirements of the business

Appendix V: Interview guide for HR Business Partners and HR Partners

Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your involvement will enable me to better understand HR Business Partnering according to your responsibilities and expectations.

The objectives of this research are to investigate

- the responsibilities of HR Business Partnering
- the competencies which contribute to the performance of HR Business Partnering
- the relationship with other participants
- the expectations on HR Business Partnering

The interview should take less than an hour. I will be taping the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments if that is okay for you? Although I will be taking some notes during the session.

All responses will be kept confidential and I will ensure that any information I include in my report does not identify you as a respondent. Remember, you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to and you may end the interview at any time.

Are there any questions about what I have just explained?

Are you willing to participate in this interview?

Your name

Your organisation

Signature

Date

Interview Guide

GENERAL

1. What does HR Business Partnering mean for you and what are its objectives?
2. Tell me about your daily work practices and key responsibilities!
3. Considering your daily work practices, how important are things such as strategic work? Administrative work?

COOPERATION

4. Referring to cooperation, how do you see the cooperation with other HR Business Partners/HR Partners functioning today? What are the changes you would like to see?
5. How is your relationship with Line Managers and how is your cooperation functioning?

COMPETENCIES

6. In your view, what are the core competencies a person should bring to perform the role of a HR Business Partner/HR Partner? Please name 3 to 5 competencies.
7. What additional skill, knowledge, etc, would help you to perform your work even more successful?

IMPROVEMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

8. What are the struggles with your role and what are your suggestions for improvements?
9. Do you see your role enriched by the changes of the HR structure at SKF?

ALIGNMENT WITH BUSINESS STRATEGY

10. When considering the SKF business strategy, how well do you think are your practices and competencies aligned and match the business requirements?

SKF's BUSINESS STRATEGY for achieving long-term profitable growth and attaining financial targets includes:

- keeping a clear and dedicated customer focus
- strengthening the product portfolio through greater investment in R&D and through acquisitions
- developing new products, solutions and services based on innovative technology, which helps to achieve a better environmental performance
- creating and capturing more value by applying the SKF platform and segment approach
- focusing on rapidly expanding segments and regions
- using Business Excellence to improve efficiency in the business and to reduce capital tied up
- attracting, retaining and developing the right people
- developing and protecting the SKF brand.

11. In your mind, how do your daily work practices contribute to the overall business success?

Is there anything more you would like to add?

I'll be analysing the information you and others gave me. I will submit a report to the organisation in three months. I'll be happy to send you a copy to review at that time, if you are interested.

Thank you for your time.

Appendix VI: Interview Guide for Line Managers

Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your involvement will enable me to better understand your expectation on HR Business Partnering.

The objectives of this research are to investigate

- the cooperation and relationship with HR Business Partnering
- the key factors that make HR Business Partnering successful or unsuccessful
- the expectations on HR Business Partnering

The interview should last less than 30 minutes. I will be taping the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments if that is okay for you? Although I will be taking some notes during the session.

All responses will be kept confidential and I will ensure that any information I include in my report does not identify you as a respondent. Remember, you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to and you may end the interview at any time.

Are there any questions about what I have just explained?

Are you willing to participate in this interview?

Your name

Your organisation

Signature

Date

Interview Guide

Questions

1. What is your view on the services delivered from HR?
2. What are the 3 areas/activities that you see is extra valuable in the services delivery from HR?
3. Talking specific about what we in HR call Business Partner (sounding broad in people questions, translating business needs in to people implications...just to give some examples). How important is that to you?
4. Think about this HR Business Partnering part. What improvements would you like to see in the future?
5. If you would give input on a way to measure the services delivered from HR. How would you measure that?

Is there anything more you would like to add?

I'll be analysing the information you and others gave me. I will submit a report to the organisation in three months. I'll be happy to send you a copy to review at that time, if you are interested.

Thank you for your time.