



**Exploring the HR Role and Professionalisation:
HR Practitioners as Aspirant Professionals?**

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DECLARATION

'Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award'.

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the contemporary human resource (HR) professional role and HR professionalism based on the experiences and the understandings of HR practitioners, while at the same time seeks to define how fields such as HR aim to secure professional recognition of their field. Based on a neo-Weberian perspective, which stresses the efforts made by occupational communities to achieve professional status, the focus is on making sense of HR's professional project; what characterises it, and how it should be conceptualised. Literature on the sociology of the professions, relevant literature on HR and primary-sourced data undertaken with HR practitioners, form the triangular axis upon which this project unfolds. The broadly phenomenological approach informed the planning and execution of an exploratory inquest which allowed a deep level of knowledge and understanding of the experience, perceptions and insights of HR practitioners. The in-depth discussions gave room for reflection and contemplation of some of the deeper and more abstract concepts concerning the HR "profession" and how they make sense of them. Using a five-theme framework, which was derived from the literature for the purposes of framing and guiding the research process, the thesis makes three related contributions to the existing literature. First, the application of the five-theme framework provides new insights into the nature of the HR role and HR professionalism, as well as understanding HR professional identity. Second, in line with the neo-Weberian focus on efforts by occupations to professionalise, the thesis offers an original and distinctive way of considering HR as an "organisational" professional project. Third, perceiving HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals offers an original, new and insightful way of thinking about members of occupations that wish to be viewed as professions, such as HR, that are characterised by a process of professionalisation and are *aspiring* to professional status, without the prerequisite that their field will ever be professionalised in the conventional manner.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEO	Chief executive officer
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CPD	Continuing professional development
HR	Human resources
HRM	Human resource management
IPM	Institute of Personnel Management
IR	Industrial relations
MIS	Management information system
NHS	National Health Service
OD	Organisational development
SHRM	Strategic human resource management
WWA	Welfare Workers' Association

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background, contribution and rationale

This research study investigates the contemporary role of the human resource (HR) practitioner through the lens of professionalism as experienced and understood by HR practitioners themselves. It explores HR practitioners' perspectives and understandings of the professional aspect attached to their role, while at the same time achieving a better understanding of how HR, as an occupation, aims to secure professional status as a field. In doing so, the research makes three related contributions to existing academic knowledge. First, it provides some important new insights into the nature of the HR professional role and HR professionalism, as well as understanding HR professional identity. Second, based on a neo-Weberian perspective, which is concerned with the efforts of occupations to professionalise, the research points to the value of understanding HR as an "organisational" professional project. The third contribution of the research concerns the perceiving of HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals based on the way they enact their role and respond to the call of HR being considered a profession. This offers an original and insightful way of thinking about occupations, like HR, that are characterised by a process of professionalisation and are *aspiring* to professional status. At the same time it does not assume that they will necessarily ever be successfully professionalised in the manner of conventional professional fields, which have over time come to be accepted as established, traditional professions.

The research is in line with calls for more studies of professions and professional projects in "emerging" professional fields, particularly those in organisational settings (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Brock and Saks, 2016; Švarc, 2016). Efforts by groups to achieve professional status in their respective fields have long been observed in modern societies, with the rise of the service class and greater job specialisation (Perkin, 1989). It is timely to study the professionalisation process of occupations because new and emerging professions are increasingly being observed, especially within organisational settings, demanding their share of autonomy, status, control and freedom to operate within their own set of boundaries, altering and shaping the professional domain (Crook, 2008; Massey, 2010; Evetts, 2014; Butler and Collins, 2016). This makes the sociology of professions an exciting area of study. A greater number of perspectives on the essence of professional work have arisen; and more so

now, than in previous years, the idea has become even more complex and diverse. Despite the greater ambiguity in describing professionalism, less defined professional boundaries, weakened control over occupations and the scepticism and caution expressed about the quality of the actual professional practice, the idea of professionalisation is increasingly appealing to groups of occupations due to the promise and prospect of better status and rewards (Noordegraf, 2007; Evetts, 2012a; Noordegraaf, 2015).

A view has been expressed that the study of professions has been in decline, with the study of knowledge and expertise having taken its place (Gorman and Sandefur 2011). However, the study of professions is more current now than ever, with an increasing interest from sociologists in the subject, proven by the array of literature over the last 25 years, given the changes in the nature of professional work and its transnational and international dimensions (Evetts, 2011b; Adams, 2015; Spence, Carter, Belal, Husillos, Dambrin, and Archel, 2016). Even if professionalism appears in altered forms, redefined and restructured (Noordegraf, 2007; Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2016), attempts to explore and understand it should not be abandoned (Delattre and Ocler, 2012).

One of the main aspects of the research agenda around professions concerns the interest in how they operate in organisational settings and the nature of “organisational professions” (Evetts, 2013; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2015; Butler and Collins, 2016; Paton and Hodgson, 2016). Through the example of the HR field, one which is increasingly termed as a “profession”, but is not necessarily perceived as such, it is possible to better understand occupations that are in the process of professionalisation, particularly in organisational settings. The professional institute for HR in the UK, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), has been keen to promote HR as a “profession” and its practitioners as “professionals” (CIPD, 2015b).

Existing studies of HR have referred to it as an “emerging new managerial profession” (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016), an “aspiring profession” (Ardagh, 2007) or as part of the “aspiring professional project” of management that has made the most progress when it comes to professionalisation (Bolton and Muzio, 2008:283). It is clear that a professionalisation process of some kind has been underway for some time

(Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Pohler and Willness, 2014). However, although research on HR professional identity exists, and provides important insights into HR professionalism (Pritchard, 2010; Pritchard and Symon, 2011; Pritchard and Fear, 2015), there has been a call for more studies of HR as a professional project (Pohler and Willness, 2014). This research inquiry, based on in-depth data collected from HR practitioners themselves, is in line with such a call.

This study has a triangular axis based on the sociology of the professions, the literature on HR and the primary research fieldwork. Bringing together the first two informed a research enquiry that aims to understand the role of those working in the HR field through the lens of professionalism. During the course of the research the notions of a “profession”, being “professional”, acting with “professionalism” and “professionalisation” are explored. There is a particular focus on understanding HR as a “professional project”, based on a neo-Weberian perspective. The research involves an effort to understand the professional status, if any, associated with HR practitioners, in relation to the issues and tensions, dilemmas and challenges, attitudes and attributes arising in their roles. It is undertaken by means of a phenomenological inquiry, involving the development of an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions and reflections of HR practitioners, and how they make sense of them.

1.2 Research objectives

The research inquiry was guided by four research objectives – see figure 1.1. The first research objective is to explore HR practitioners’ perception of how they understand their “professional” role and the nature of their professional identity. There has been a growing interest in the nature of HR roles and how HR practitioners deal with varying expectations while remaining valuable contributors (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Caldwell, 2008; Caldwell, 2010; Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson and Younger, 2007; Ulrich and Duleboh, 2015), as well as understanding the extent and nature of their “professional” standing (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Wright, 2008; Keegan and Francis, 2010). Moreover, the CIPD has been keen to project the role of the HR practitioner as a professional as part of its efforts to promote HR as a profession (CIPD, 2015b). Therefore, drawing on research among HR practitioners, this study aims to understand the nature of the HR professional role and HR professional identity.

Figure 1.1. – Research objectives

Research objectives	
1.	To investigate how HR practitioners experience and understand their role as professionals, how they consider themselves as being involved in professional work and what this means for their professional identity.
2.	Drawing on the experiences of HR practitioners, and how they make sense of them, to investigate both their sense of professionalism and HR's efforts to secure professional status for its practice.
3.	Given the efforts of the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) to promote HR as a professional occupation, to draw on HR practitioners' experiences as a means of exploring the nature, features and value of the HR professional project.
4.	Using this study of how HR practitioners respond to HR professionalisation and how they understand themselves as "professionals", to explore their role as <i>aspirant</i> professionals and through this to consider the implications for the nature of HR as a profession.

The second objective of the research is to investigate the nature of HR professionalism, connected to the efforts of the HR community to secure professional status for its practice. The existing literature points to a number of issues which potentially undermine the claim HR practitioners make to professional status, such as a lack of visibility and the effects of a negative reputation (Legge, 2005; Guest and Bryson, 2009; Alfes, Shantz and Truss, 2012). There are often difficulties and misconceptions which exist about their expected "professional" contribution, which is mainly understood in organisational terms (Caldwell, 2003, Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Keegan and Francis, 2010). The CIPD shows a preference for Ulrich's models (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), which are thought to guarantee an all-rounded thinking performer with the relevant professional behaviour. However, some of the ambiguities and mistrust about the value of HR are carried over in new business-partnering models which leave HR practitioners having to work in multiple ways to tackle old problems and meet new challenges (Wright, 2008). Inhibitors, such as a lack of trust and credibility, limited authority and discretion, and even low self-esteem, may negatively

affect the status of HR (Legge, 1995; Hallier and Summers, 2011; Pritchard and Symon, 2011). Another potential difficulty concerns the view that HR's professional status is better secured by focusing on ethical and social concerns, rather than a narrow business agenda (Kochan, 2004; Kochan, 2007; Marchington, 2015). An important aspect of the research, therefore, is to use this study of HR practitioners to explore what HR professionalism means, how it operates and the obstacles to professionalisation.

In line with the neo-Weberian approach mentioned above, the third research objective is to investigate HR as professional project, given the CIPD's efforts to promote it as a professional occupation. The literature shows that the rise of professions is often a result of organised efforts by occupations to create an area of mystified, codified knowledge to create the necessary closure to yield desired remuneration and status of its members, by transforming their resources in order to achieve social and professional closure and control (Goode, 1969; Larson, 1977; Macdonald, 1995; Saks, 2012; Evetts, 2014; Saks, 2016). Efforts by institutes such as the CIPD to project the field of HR as a "professional" area is thought by some to be a clear project to professionalise the HR field (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Guest and Bryson, 2009; Pohler and Willness, 2014). Drawing on the experiences, perceptions and reflections of HR practitioners will offer a better understanding of the nature of the HR professional project and its main elements.

The fourth objective is to use this study of HR practitioners to explore how HR practitioners experience and reflect on their roles, how they understand themselves as "professionals", based on the way they operate within the context of HR professionalisation, and consider the implications for the nature of HR as a profession. Increasing attention has been given to understanding "new" and "emerging" professions, particularly in organisational settings, or for managerial occupations (Evetts, 2006a; Adams, 2015; Švarc, 2016; Brock and Saks, 2016). They often mimic the characteristics of established professions and try to capture the benefits of achieving an esteemed position in society (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2011; Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011). There has been an increase in the number of occupations that are termed, or project themselves as, "professions" (Crook, 2008; Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009). Yet, while occupations might aspire to professional status, the success of their projects cannot be guaranteed (Timmons, 2011; Butler, Chillias and Muir, 2012; McCann, Granter, Hyde and Hassard, 2013; Maestriperi, 2016). This recognises that

HR is characterised by a process of professionalisation, *aspiring* to professional status, but without any guarantee of it being successful, or indeed needing to be a success, in the sense of HR becoming accepted as a profession in the conventional sense.

Understanding how HR practitioners respond to the call for HR professionalisation leads to the idea of *aspirant* professionals. The value of examining the nature and behaviour of *aspirant* professionals opens up the way to understanding how members of occupations that aspire to professional status undertake their role as “professionals”.

1.3. Structure of the thesis

The triangular axis upon which the research study is based explores two areas of relevant literature. The literature review on the sociology of professions (chapter two) brings to the surface conceptual difficulties in defining a profession and sets out the neo-Weberian approach which guides the research. However, certain common elements among the approaches can be identified, which are found in professions no matter what the underlying sociological perspective; these being professional ethics, expert knowledge, trust and professional identity. Furthermore, the issues and challenges affecting contemporary professions, especially those referring to commercialisation of professional standards, exploitation of expertise, and credentialism are discussed, as well as the changing notion of professionalism and new ways of understanding contemporary professions.

The literature review on HR (chapter three) investigates the HR role, and the challenges and difficulties people in it face. The issues surrounding HR practitioner’s work are not helped by the numerous models developed, all claiming the best structure for HR roles in organisations. Even though the HR role is projected by the CIPD as a profession, bringing HR to the foreground praises the HR role but also pressurises it in terms of performance and proof of contribution, leaving a lot of scepticism as to whether HR work, given its traditional low status, can be considered as being within a professional domain.

The purpose of the fieldwork was to go to the “source”, by exploring the experiences and understandings of practitioners themselves about their role and the nature of the HR professionalism and HR as a “profession”. No hypothesis was set prior to the field research, but rather an exploratory, *heuristic*, non-positivistic stance was adopted throughout the process, based on a phenomenological approach. Although the research

was exploratory in nature, its planning and execution were inspired by the existing literature on the sociology of professions and HR. This enabled the creation of a five-theme framework, based on ethics, trust, status, knowledge and expertise and professional identity, which provided a means of organising the research process and analysing the data. Details of the conceptual framework, which guided the research process, are provided towards the end of chapter three. The research contains both inductive and deductive elements, upon which the exploratory enquiry, methodological strategy and fieldwork were set – see chapter four.

Since the main standpoint of the research does not start from the assumption that HR is a “profession”, or that HR practitioners are “professionals”, but rather explores the possibility of these notions, the theoretical paradigm needed to remain in the ontological sphere of philosophy; recognising the dynamic element of professionalisation in the HR field and its potential evolution into *becoming* a professional discipline. In-depth data were gathered through discussions with experienced HR practitioners in the form of semi-structured interviews that provided the situational circumstances for the participants to unfold their experiences and perspectives on a multitude of relevant subjects. The discussions concerned issues such as career choices, training, commitment, difficulties, challenges, ethical dilemmas, values, morals, the CIPD’s influence on the HR role and notions of altruism and professionalism. As practitioners narrated their experiences, it was observed how the different subjects are interlinked with, and influence, one another.

Following on from the methodology, the research findings are presented, analysed and interpreted in two groups. First, chapter five concerns the role of the HR professional and how it is enacted. Second, chapter six deals with issues around HR professional identity. The findings explore practitioners’ experiences, perceptions and understandings of their roles, jobs, careers and the field of HR in general. As well as highlighting the positive aspects of working in the HR field, practitioners point to the elements and circumstances that create tensions and difficulties in enacting the role, and meeting organisational demands; while also projecting the methods they use to overcome tensions, difficulties and dilemmas in order to achieve their HR and business goals. Different perceptions of the contemporary HR role emerge, as well as different attributes of HR practitioners, as a result of the participants’ career experiences and activities. Overall, though, the research findings highlight the pragmatic standpoint of

those in HR roles. Their extensive experience is a major factor in the way that they handle their work, project themselves and gain the all-important trust needed to promote HR's professional standing. The potential for HR to move in a professional direction is apparent, but there are also doubts about the necessity of striving for such status. Furthermore, exploring practitioners' perceptions and understandings about the professional aspect of their work, and how they deal with potentially contradictory issues, offers insights into the nature of the HR role. It enriches the understanding of how they make sense of a position that demands as much commitment to the workforce as to higher management, let alone a commitment to the HR field as a "profession", and the responsibility of acting in a "professional" manner, while ensuring that their activities contribute to the organisation's growth and survival.

Following on from the chapters concerning the research findings, the discussion chapter (chapter seven) returns to the five-theme framework to show how the outcomes relate to, and help build on, relevant existing literature when it comes to understanding the nature of the HR professional role and HR professionalism. Furthermore, it develops the original contribution, which concerns understanding HR as an "organisational" professional project and the role of its members as *aspirant* professionals, based on the way they respond to HR professionalisation. As a result, the research provides a better understanding of the idea of an HR "profession", through the experiences and perceptions of HR practitioners in relation to their own roles and field of work. Moreover, it offers a new way of thinking about occupations that are aiming to professionalise their respective fields. It is thought that in order to understand professionalism, and professionalisation for that matter, it is necessary to study those occupations that remain "at the margins" and the multiple reasons that might explain this (Butler, Chillas and Muhr, 2012).

Therefore, by exploring practitioners' experiences in a field that is increasingly termed a "profession", as HR is, but has not necessarily become one, in the conventional sense, this research offers another dimension in understanding the efforts of new and emerging professions to claim professional status. In particular, the findings show that there is an alternative approach, that of occupations which aspire to professional status (Bolton and Muzio, 2008), but have not necessarily reached an end-point of professional legitimacy, or indeed ever will do so, and its members may operate as aspirant professionals as a response to the professionalisation of their field. The idea of *aspirant*

professionals highlights the dynamic environment in which practitioners operate, in particular one of striving to become respected professionals, by modelling the characteristics of members of existing professions; while the occupation they belong to remains in a dynamic state, striving to become a profession, by mimicking the characteristics of existing professions. Therefore, *aspirant* professionals operating within this dynamic state strive, in their own specific ways, to become respected professionals, demonstrating the characteristics and behaviours of professionals, based on both their personal understandings of “professional image” and calls from the surrounding environment. Finally, the conclusion (chapter eight) summarises the main research findings, examines how the research objectives were addressed and highlights the distinctive and original contribution of the research study. So, *aspirant* professionals, influenced by market forces and responding to external business and organisational needs, adapt their knowledge and expertise to suit these influences and demonstrate their field specific characteristics. The idea of *aspirant* professionals opens up both the possibility of exploring other occupational fields where members may share similar circumstances with those in the HR field and also considering the prospect of viewing occupational fields under professionalisation as *aspirant* professions.

2. Professions, professionalism and professionalisation

2.1 Introduction

Since this research is aimed at capturing the role of HR practitioners under the prism of professionalism, and how they operate as *aspirant* professionals, responding to the call for an HR “profession”, it is imperative to understand professionalism as a notion and all that is associated with it. As revealed through the analysis of the literature, it is hard to define what “professionalism” and “profession” mean in a normative, descriptive sense, and are best explained under different sociological perspectives, each of which give a different explanation as to the reasons for the rise of professions and the purpose they serve. However, although there are different perspectives on understanding professional work, there are a series of elements common within all perspectives. The commonly identifiable characteristics, even if they exist in varied degrees, are the attributes built up over the years as the professional ideal recognisable nowadays, ones to which occupations aspire to when aiming for professionalisation. Professional ethics, expert knowledge, trust, and professional identity are chosen to be analysed since they are the most essential in every professional transaction, and because, without them, professional service would be problematic.

Having these common attributes in mind, the analysis of professions and professionalism then moves on to view their contemporary forms. Political factors have led to changes in professional work, giving rise to issues such as the commercialisation of professional standards, credentialism and the power professions can have using expertise as a means of exploitation and social control, which all can affect, alter or threaten professional identity. Such contemporary issues and challenges associated with professionalism, and the picture they paint of the contemporary professional, together with the common elements found in established professions, constitute a guiding tool further on in the research. This is particularly important in influencing any aspiring professions that are wishing to create their professional mark. As a result, there is a particular focus on professionalisation, how members of occupations respond to professionalisation and how occupations like HR aspire to achieve professional standing, which makes the neo-Weberian approach particularly useful.

2.2 Professions and professionalism

The definition of professionalism is one that appears without *katalepsis*, a term philosophers have for explaining something that has a definite grasp of meaning. Professionalism is an ambiguous, complex and slippery concept, and remains ‘a frustratingly under-specified area’ (Young and Muller, 2014:3). The rather loose way in which the terms “professional” and “professionalism” have often been used complicates efforts by sociologists and others to conceptualise them appropriately (Evetts, 2003a), but efforts cannot be avoided (Friedson, 2014). As the literature has evolved it has highlighted various ambiguities, misconceptions and attempts at re-interpretation and re-definition (Liljegren, 2012; Friedson, 2014; Brock and Saks, 2016). On the one hand, this has enriched our understanding of professions and what it means to be a professional, and has opened up new possibilities when it comes to recognising different forms of professions. On the other hand, however, given the claim that ‘in practice, professionalism is often ambiguous, plural, dynamic, and complex’ (McGivern, Currie, Ferlie, Fitzgerald and Waring, 2015:412), this only adds to the difficulties in comprehending what makes professional occupations distinctive.

2.2.1 Conceptualising professions and professionalism

Professions are perceived as distinct from occupations (Young and Muller, 2014), and although it has been claimed that the two can no longer be considered separately (Gorman and Sandefur, 2011), the field of the sociology of professions is being continuously researched (Liljegren, 2012; Liu, 2014; Adams, 2015). Millerson (1964), pinpoints three reasons why conceptualising the notion of professionalism is difficult: first, a semantic difficulty associated with the actual meaning of the word; second, difficulties in structuring particular characteristics; and third, and perhaps most importantly, the lack of consideration given to the ever evolving and dynamic nature of professionalism. These reasons are apparent in more recent studies of professions and professionalism, pointing to their continuing relevance (Evetts, 2003a; Brock and Saks, 2016; Butler and Collins, 2016). The way a profession is defined often relates to how the purpose of professionalism is viewed. Acknowledging these continuing difficulties when it comes to explaining what professional occupations are, and what professionalism means, Butler and Collins point out that ‘the body of writing gathered under the label of “professions” exhibits considerable diversity, both in its approach and in its core orientations’ (2016:50).

As Millerson (1964) firstly points out, the definition of professionalism can take numerous meanings depending on the purpose it serves. The notion of professionalism is mainly associated with the role of professionals who carry the knowledge and expertise to deal with a problem, by providing a solution meant to be of a high standard (Friedson, 2001). Typically, a professional is thought to have undertaken advanced learning in order to prove the acquisition of skills and knowledge gained through successful completion of controlled assessments (Macdonald, 1995; Laffin and Entwistle, 2000). The professional is meant to be a skilled expert who applies knowledge to the service of others and is 'traditionally held in high esteem' (Illich, Zola, McKnight, Caplan and Shaiken, 1977: 9). From an idealistic perspective, according to Talcott Parsons, professionalism should be viewed as an ideology, a set of rules, yet more a set of principles, which ideally should never be compromised or commercialised (Turner, 1999; Dingwall, 2014; Liu, 2014).

Writers have endeavoured to define professionalism: Goode (1969) shapes the idea of professionalism by setting the theoretical limits of professionalisation in order to understand how professions rise to become what they are by the forces of society; Scott differentiates between the professional and the bureaucrat (1969:82), treating them as opposing institutional forms (Davies, 2014); while, for Brante (1990) and Torstendahl (1990), all explanations of professionalism and professionalisation are rooted in sociological aspects of occupations and ought to be placed within the era they reflect (Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990; Friedson, 2014). Burrage (1990a) explains that although writers on professions - by discussing all professions collectively - acknowledge their existence as separate types of occupations, this only places them in a historical context, whereas it is essential to view them within societal terms as well. Some definitions of professionalism place value on knowledge, others place it on the function professions have, others highlight the importance of status and control; while others attempt to give a more descriptive definition (MacDonald, 1995; MacDonald, 2006; Liu, 2014).

This raises the question of whether it is possible to identify the characteristics of professional occupations. This links with Millerson's (1964) second point concerning the difficulties of giving a precise definition for professionalism, and especially trying to distinguish between professions and non-professions, or professions and occupations, using a descriptive model (MacDonald, 1995). Initially, writers sought out to identify

distinctive characteristics of professions through a taxonomic or traits approach, thought to be evident in respected, established professions such as medicine, law, architecture and engineering (Muzio, Brock and Suddaby, 2013; Cain, 2014; Evetts, 2014; Saks, 2016). This traditional approach uses established professions as a benchmark against which other occupations are compared (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Hickson and Thomas, 1969). However, attempts to define a profession through a list of characteristics thought to be exhibited by a profession often seem incomplete, either because the characteristics deriving from existing professions are occupation-specific, because the emphasis shifts from the occupational to the human attributes (Millerson, 1964; Elliot, 1972), or because a traits approach ignores power structures (Johnson, 1972; Illich *et al.*, 1977; Mungham and Thomas, 2014). Despite the difficulties of defining, and describing the characteristics of, a profession (Saks, 2012; Ackroyd, 2016), it is not necessary to abandon such attempts altogether. Some argue that an effort should be made to specify the features which act as a common denominator in a professional occupation (Brante, 2010 cited in Saks, 2012; Cain, 2014).

Despite acknowledging these on-going difficulties in conceptualising professionalism, a semantic difficulty concerning how it is defined and a difficulty in specifying particular characteristics of professions (Millerson, 1964; Saks, 2012; Saks, 2016), there are certain common elements that established professions demonstrate or are present in the efforts of occupations, and their members, to secure professional status. Irrespective of how professions are formed, and the reasons why they form, four elements – ethical standards, expert knowledge, trust and professional identity – seem to be of central importance, both in established and new and emerging professions, although perhaps to varying degrees (Durkheim 1957; Illich *et al.*, 1977; Larson, 1977; Turner, 1999; Friedson, 2001; Saks, 2012; Dingwall, 2014).

2.2.2 Professional ethics

First of all, professional ethics are important on the basis that, informed by a notion of altruism, in an idealistic way professionals are expected to act in a way that has the client's best interest in mind (Scott and Seglow, 2007, Beaton, 2010). While professional ethics are seen to derive from general ethical considerations, as developed by philosophers over the centuries, they are nonetheless considered to be distinct (Banks, 2004). Professional ethics are special since they provide a foundation for professions to flourish in the public eye (Koehn, 1994); while the lack of such ethics

can result not only in unethical behaviour by professionals, but also in fraudulent behaviour and damage to business (Trung, 2016). There is an association between ethics and altruism, a term first used by August Comte in 1851, coming from an Italian or Latin source, loosely meaning ‘for the others’ (Scott and Seglow, 2007). Altruism, the opposite of egoism, is widely accepted as the idea of promoting the interests of others and holds that there is an ethical obligation that individuals act in a way that benefits others. As such, one could say that altruism is an obligation of a professional as denoted by his or her professional ethical standards (Scott and Seglow, 2007).

However, the ‘assumption of good intentions’ is not enough to guarantee a professional practice (Friedson, 2001:214). Attention has focused on ‘the way intentions are translated into action in various professions’, and this seems to become the form of ethics in professionalism (Friedson, 2001:214); even if association with ethical behaviour is far from the true meaning of ethics in the pure philosophical sense of Aristotle’s ethics or even Durkheim’s professional ethics (Friedson, 2001). Codes of practice have become prominent ways in which professional institutes try to promote ethical values and behaviours among their members. Professionals are often required to abide by such codes, around which professions and the work of their members are organised (Lunt, 2008). Ethical codes of practice are designed to promote particular behaviours, often based on principles of ‘respect, competence, responsibility and integrity’, the abstract nature of which can ‘give them a distance from the professional practice that they are intended to regulate’ (Lunt, 2008:79).

Professional ethics, in the form of ethical codes of practice, have a dual function: on the one hand to provide professionals with a behavioural guide; and on the other hand to regulate the outcome of professional services in order to match what clients are expecting to receive from a professional (Lunt, 2008). The problem with professional codes of ethics is that ethical values are often embedded in one’s deeper being, meaning that professionals are not necessarily faced with straightforward choices when having to deal with an issue (Tay and Fraser, 2010). There is some evidence that, guided by personal beliefs, professionals can abandon ‘at least partially, their professional ethical standards when faced with ethical dilemmas’ (Gunz and Gunz, 2007:873). Therefore, professional ethics are understood as behaviours characterised by underlined principles of honesty, responsibility, integrity, respect and altruism, principles which, even if abstract or aspirational, become part of professionals’ code of ethical conduct.

2.2.3 Expert knowledge

In addition to professional ethics and ethical codes of practice, common to all efforts to provide meaningful definitions and characteristics of professions and professionalism is the core element of knowledge; a body of knowledge, a curriculum, organised around a specific field (Winch, 2014), even if this knowledge is contested, challenged or altered in form (Švarc, 2016). The claim to expertise, to codified and tested knowledge, is common ground in all definitions and descriptions of professional occupations (Johnson, 1972; Abbott, 1988; Ilich, *et al.*, 1977; Friedson, 2001; Švarc, 2016). Specialist knowledge is what makes professions distinct from occupations, since acquiring it gives the distinct level of practice a professional is meant to offer. Professional knowledge goes beyond technique and skill and ‘depends crucially on the ability to use systematic knowledge to inform practical judgment and action’ (Winch, 2014:52); a judgement that needs to be informed by knowledge more extensively and externally verifiable than the specific situation being judged (Shalem, 2014). The core reason for a profession’s existence is the presence and development of specialised expert knowledge which requires a high level of skill and extensive practice to acquire (Eraut, 1994; Young and Muller, 2014; Winch, 2014); therefore it is, perhaps, the most important element in professionalism, at least in the traditional sense.

Promoting specialist knowledge is considered to be an important component of professionalisation projects, marked by the efforts of occupations using knowledge to secure professional-level curricula (Guile, 2014). Where the boundaries of knowledge are unclear, or in the absence of appropriate and specific knowledge frameworks, professional projects can be unsuccessful (Butler and Collins, 2016). Some have highlighted the extent to which specialist professional expertise has penetrated organisations, and become integral to the creation of knowledge-based firms (Argyris; 2003; Argyris, 2004; Von Nordenflycht, 2010).

When it comes to acquiring knowledge, there is often a focus on the role of professional development activities (Ericsson, Perez, Eccles, Lang, Baker, Bransford, Vanlehn, and Ward, 2009). Professional development arrangements are generally based on principles of training for the transfer of knowledge (Winch, 2014); however, expertise assumes another higher level of knowledge awareness which goes beyond a set syllabus (Hammond, McClelland, and Mumpower, 1980; Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987; Clark, 2008; Young and Muller, 2014). The analysis of what constitutes knowledge and

expertise, and how they should be understood, has been much debated (Mieg, 2001; Derry, 2014; Kotzee, 2014), and rooted in philosophical debates which constitute a subject area in its own right (Young and Muller, 2014). There are separate specific theories relating to what is expected of professional knowledge holders which characterise the profile of a professional expert, while ‘the difference in emphasis between the terms “knowledge” and “expertise” has resisted easy resolution’ (Young and Muller, 2014:6).

The power of expert knowledge and of language embedded in knowledge is considered by some to be vital to the development of a profession (MacDonald, 2006; Power, 2011). At times this has even created public fears concerning the possibility of professional groups joining together in an organised conspiracy, holding ‘mysterious powers...by the virtue of their command of professional knowledge’ (Corfield, 1995:2). According to writers with a Foucauldian influence, professions arise from the dominance of powerful knowledge structures where discourse is used to define, create and implement the activities of knowledge, with this seeming to permeate the idea of professionalism right from the start; from ‘certifying and credentialing’ the members of a profession, all the way to knowledge itself that is used as an obstacle and barrier to exclude others, and thus, achieve intellectual, financial and social dominance (MacDonald, 1995:184). Within the power of knowledge, Foucault’s ideas work on a micro-level where professional knowledge legitimises and strengthens itself (MacKinnon, 2000) – see section 2.3.1. As Foucault explains, this power extends to a psychological *and* a sociological base to justify the emergence of disciplinary control, which at a greater societal level enhances forms of knowledge that become the productive forms, in a way that rejects traditional Marxist approaches to understanding power (Foucault, 1994; 2002).

While Foucauldians place a special emphasis on the role of knowledge, as a means of constructing and expressing power relations, the promotion of, and control over, specialist expertise is more widely recognised as underpinning professionalisation efforts (Butler and Collins, 2016). Professional expertise is knowledge “picked” by aspiring professionals to form curricula, it is re-contextualised in workplace practices, linking theory with practice, for the sake of an aspiring professional domain (Guile, 2014). For a number of reasons, however, Švarc argues that the concept of knowledge and the concept of a profession have evolved in such ‘diverse directions that it is

necessary and scientifically sound to separate them' (2016:405). One is that the 'technocratic type of scientific knowledge' that used to be the main feature of a knowledge worker is no longer needed in new and emerging forms of professionalism; and moreover, 'professions themselves seem to be in the midst of a transition towards new conceptual structures and normative canons whose final consequences still remain undetermined' (Švarc, 2016:405). Therefore it is understood that the expert knowledge holder makes claim to a body of knowledge, skills and intuition within a specialist area, which is codified and tested, but also contested and improved by the knowledge holder who uses this knowledge in ways that benefit the recipients of his or her professional service (the client).

2.2.4 Trust

Trust is a key element that sustains the client-professional relationship since it is 'the essence of professionalism and its most necessary component—that around which all the other hallmarks of professionalism revolve' (Beaton, 2010:9). Trust is the underlying mechanism at work when the delivery of a professional service takes place. If professionalism is to be defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, autonomy, trustworthiness and altruism, then trust is thought by some to be the most important component (Beaton, 2010; Bailey, 2011). Without it, a lot of professional services in society which are taken for granted, like medicine and law, would be of a problematic nature (Koehn, 1994). An erosion of public trust, because of mistakes for example, is a threat to professions; this is because 'the professional conveys intangible standards that win our trust that he or she is there to serve interests larger than him- or herself' (Beaton, 2010:5). Trust in a professional means handing over the authority to take someone's fate temporarily in their hands. Even in a professional context, with ethical codes likely to be in place, trust entails an engagement on a personal level (Banks, 2004). Although trust in professionals is an intensification of ordinary trust in people, professions are structured in such way that supports the development of trust relations (Koehn, 1994).

Trust can be viewed in connection with ethical standards and expert knowledge. As with professional ethics, altruism is linked with trust in the sense that trust is placed in the professional to act in an altruistic mode (Scott and Seglow, 2007). Due to the idea that the professional acts in an ethical manner with the client's best interest in mind and, due to the fact that the professional holds the expert knowledge necessary to handle and

solve the client's problem, he or she becomes a well-trusted party in the professional transaction (Koehn, 1994; Friedson, 2001; Grace, 2014). These two conditions lead to a creation of a feeling of trust (Friedson, 2001). It might be difficult to explain which comes first. It could be that it is trust that leads one to address a professional or vice versa. The process probably swings in circles, and may vary according to the profession and the period in time (Lunt, 2008). Professionals sometimes enjoy the privilege of trust as a result of perceived class superiority, which consequently leads to them being viewed as experts (Friedson, 2001). Trust is followed by autonomy of work which is meant to characterise professionals of a certain level of skill and competence (Grace, 2014). To enjoy high levels of remunerations, authority and power, professionalism requires that those engaged in professional work 'to be worthy of trust', putting clients first and maintaining a confidential trust-based relationship with clients (Evetts, 2014:32). Again, the correlation can be reversed given the situation within which much professional work takes place (Friedson, 2001). Moreover, professionalism, ethics and trust are interlocked with one another; as Shaw puts it: it 'is unethical to be unprofessional, and unprofessional to be unethical, but there are many differences between the two concepts' (Shaw, 2009:60).

However, Lunt (2008) refers to a crisis of trust in professional work in recent years. The "new professionalism", a concept incorporating occupational value, organisational professionalism and discourse (Evetts, 2009:247; Evetts, 2011a), de-professionalization, attempts to control professionals, and eliminate their power and dominance, have all created a loss of confidence in professional efficiency that alters the meaning of trust for both professionals and clients (Banks, 2004). A move from 'trust in professional judgement' to the introduction of 'performance measurement' and target-based professional outcomes has shifted 'the basis of professional work, trust and accountability' (Lunt, 2008:85). The demonstration of 'trust, transparency and accountability' now seem to go hand-in-hand with 'increased regulation, audit and assessment' (Evetts, 2014:30).

A climate of public distrust has formed, resulting in greater questioning of professional knowledge and skills that affects the public image of a professional, with negative assumptions perhaps becoming unavoidable in an era of readily available information (Bailey, 2011). Clients have perhaps become more suspicious of professionals' claim to expertise, and thus the services they offer. For this reason, though, trust remains a

dominant characteristic of professional work, given the negative consequences of bad publicity and damaged reputations. As Beaton notes, ‘for a profession to be accepted as such, it must generate trust’ (2010:10). Therefore, it is understood that trust acts as an underlying mechanism in any professional transaction based on the client giving the authority to a professional to act on their behalf, with the professional expected to safeguard this trust from erosion, malpractice and exploitation.

2.2.5 Professional identity

The fourth common element generally present in professions and processes of professionalisation, as discussed above, is the presence of a distinctive shared professional identity (Evetts, 2014), which can be seen as a result or an amalgamation of ethics, expertise and trust. In comprehending professional identity one must consider what it is and explain how it is constructed, as well as understand what influences or threatens it. In general, professional identity encompasses all of the features of a professional occupation that are considered by the practitioner to be most important; features worth not only preserving, but also embracing, as one’s self ego and socially projected identity (Banks, 2004). Professional identity is a discrete form of identity which is specific or related to a professional situation. Identity is different from image or persona, which refers ‘to the impressions people believe they convey to others’ (Ibarra, 1999:765). However, while ‘people enact personas that convey qualities they want others to ascribe to them, for example, qualities prescribed by their professional roles, such as judgment, business acumen, competence, creativity, and trustworthiness’, some of these qualities ‘may be well-defined aspects of their identities, others may be incongruent with their self-conceptions, and still others remain to be elaborated with experience’ (Ibarra, 1999:765).

Perhaps the most straightforward approach to understanding professional identity is to recognise that it is an emotional state that, once reached, becomes the centre of professional activity. It is a core psychological position that declares not only the activities of professional practice, but also the character of the human being involved (Hogg and Terry, 2001; Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer and Lloyd, 2006). Identity can be so intense that the professional’s ‘*understanding* of him- or herself in the world may profoundly affect his or her *being in* the world’, with the combination of knowing and being at the same time meaning that the professional experiences a phenomenon of ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2008:194). Professional identity says a lot about the

practitioner and emits the attributes one expects to find from a professional. It operates as a device to enable professionals and laypeople to communicate with one another.

The formation of professional identity is claimed to start taking shape in the early years of training for a professional career: 'this may include the self and other ascribed knowledge, values and skills gained through education, training and socialisation into the profession' (Banks, 2004:137). A 'common' identity is thought to exist amongst those considered to be perceived as professionals which comes as a result of 'common experiences, understandings and expertise, shared ways of perceiving problems and their possible solutions'; an identity which is 'produced and reproduced through occupational and professional socialization', educational backgrounds, training and membership to professional institutes and associations (Evetts, 2014:32). It is thought that professional identity is 'more adaptable and mutable early in one's career' (Ibarra, 1999:765). Moreover, studies have examined how the process of professional identity formation and development operates (Lamote and Engels, 2010), the influences on this process (Raz, Jensen, Walter and Drake, 1991; Sutherland, Howard and Markauskaite, 2010; Dang, 2013; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013) and its implications (Sutherland, Howard and Markauskaite, 2010; Worthington, Salamonson, Weaver and Cleary, 2012). Work has also been done on how professional identity evolves as practitioners develop their careers (Rettinger, 2011; Williams, 2010; Ladge, Clair and Greenberg, 2012). As people move into more senior roles it creates an 'adaptation repertoire' with 'provisional selves', performing tasks of experimenting and evaluating those provisional selves to achieve effectiveness in their new role (Ibarra, 1999:787).

An important factor in professional identity development concerns the role of 'extra-organizational work-related groups', and wider 'communities of practice' which can have multiple dimensions depending on the type of relationship the professional has with his or her workplace (Johnson *et al.*, 2006:498). Socialisation and identity development often occur outside of employing organisations, on an occupational basis, in the context of professional associations. However, this can lead to rivalry between different professional occupations, with negative consequences for practitioners who can develop a 'silo identity' (Khalili, Hall and DeLuca, 2014:93). As a result, there can be a demand for a 'dual professional and interprofessional identity' (Khalili, Hall and DeLuca, 2014:95).

Identity formation in contemporary work settings is claimed to be influenced by a combination of policy-level debates and personal accounts of practitioners' professional work-life (Jones and Green, 2006). Organisational roles can become part of the person's professional identity formation, demanding that the expert takes on another identity and be capable of carrying both – organisational and expert identity (Paton and Hodgson, 2016). There is a potential willingness to develop a more professional-managerial identity to better fit in with managerial-organisational contexts (McGivern *et al.*, 2015). Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufman have reviewed analytically how identity construction changes within the context of organisational life, pointing out that for many professionals reference to 'what they do' enables a richer appreciation of 'who they are' (2006:259). Occupational identity and organisational identity are not only linked, but can also constitute a 'collective-associative conception of identity' that is socially constructed in a way that gives it an existence of its own (Ashcraft, 2013:13).

This highlights the potential for professional identity formation to come under organisational control (Otubanjo, 2012). In professional services firms, managers aim to shape employees' behaviour, manage them and therefore control the fruits of their professional identity and practice (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). There is thus a potential clash between the altruistic purposes of a profession, which is considered an intrinsic feature of professional identity – at least in the traditional sense – and those organisational purposes with commercial motives (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006). Instead of more traditional reasons for pursuing a professional orientation, such as altruism, respect and autonomy, the reasons nowadays are seen to be more in line with the idea of 'new professionalism' linked more to organisational professional aims, and the chance of being involved in 'nice work' (Jones and Green, 2006:948); projecting a professional identity construction which is based more on technical characteristics rather than commitment and client relationships.

Clearly, undertaking organisational roles influences practitioners' identity formation, in a way that can "interfere" with the professional identity derived from their occupation (Paton and Hodgson, 2016). It also raises the prospect of "hybrid" managerial-professional' identities being present when professionals operate in organisational contexts (McGivern *et al.*, 2015:412; Paton and Hodgson, 2016). It seems hybrid forms of professional-manager identity are becoming the norm since it is hard to think of professionals outside organisational environment (Correia and Denis, 2016). Although

their implications for professional identity remain unclear, hybrid forms of professional-managerial identity seem to challenge and disrupt traditional professionalism, by ‘aligning and legitimating professionalism with its managerial context’, and perhaps also by positioning hybrids ‘collectively as a professional elite’ (McGivern, *et al.*, 2015:427,428). Moreover, such hybrid tendencies have an effect on professional identity construction which is based more on technical characteristics rather than commitment and client relationships. So, professionals can find themselves in a state of liminality when trying to reconcile their loyalty to their ‘profession, and its assurance through knowledge enclosure and affiliation with the wider community of practice’ and their ‘loyalty to the employing company and the need to practice within, and add value to, a particular business’ (Paton and Hodgson, 2016:30). Therefore, professional identity is understood as an amalgamation of ethics, expertise and trust that becomes a feeling, a sense that permeates a professional’s personality in a distinct way; influencing his or her behaviour and understanding of themselves, in a way which is (socially) projected by their overall professional image and standing, while conveying qualities that others could aspire to.

2.3 Theorising professions and professionalisation

The previous section recognised that the concept of a profession is difficult to define. It also demonstrated the difficulties of assigning specific characteristics due to the complexity and ambiguity of professional work (Friedson, 2014), although some common elements have been recognised – a commitment to ethical standards, knowledge and expertise, trust and a distinctive professional identity. Examining HR as a profession, however, also requires the adoption of an appropriate theoretical perspective. The study of the professions as a whole has been viewed by sociologists as essential in understanding the rise of, first, industrial and, later on, post-industrial societies (Morrison, 2006). Although their work has become crucial for analysing the professions (Morrison, 2006; Liu, 2014), the main theorists such as Weber and Marx wrote nothing specifically about the professions; Marx preferred not to deal with the subject because he did not acknowledge their role in capitalist societies; and Weber, because he did not see them as significant enough. Durkheim, however, discussed extensively the matter of professional ethics (Durkheim, 1957), but did not provide any historical analysis of the professions (Burrage, 1990a).

Yet perspectives taken from the broader work of these theorists aid in placing professions within the sociological context necessary for conceptualising the meaning of professionalism, and in providing the basis for understanding contemporary forms of professionalism and professional work (Morrison, 2006; Friedson; 2014; Liu, 2014). Analyses of professions, based on the work of Marx, Weber and later Foucault, have challenged some of the assumptions of writers such as Talcott Parsons, by raising suspicions about the knowledge and genuine intentions of professionals. This has opened the way for a ‘shift of focus from professions as an occupation to professionalism as an ideology’ (Young and Muller, 2014:4). It is also important to recognise how the different perspectives on professionalism have been challenged by writers from other schools (Saks, 2012; Saks, 2016). Yet, the different perspectives are worth reviewing briefly, not only since each places a different value on the professions, why they emerged and the purpose of their existence, but also because they have significance for current and future studies of the professions (Liu; 2014; Adams, 2015). Understanding HR as a profession, however, means that we need to recognise the dynamics of professionalism, and the nature of HR’s distinctive “professional project”, highlighting the particular relevance of a neo-Weberian approach,

2.3.1 Sociological perspectives on professions

One of the most prominent perspectives on professionalism is that of functionalism. According to functionalist writers, professions are to be viewed as institutions that benefit society by setting standards and influencing societal values (MacDonald, 1995). Since they serve the interests of the public and provide knowledge which is of great importance to society, professions attract high prestige (Saks, 2016). There is an important emphasis on altruism based on an “ethics of doing good” (Turner, 1999; Dingwall, 2014), with serving the interests of clients, rather than the pursuit of monetary reward, viewed as being the essence of professionalism (Marshall, 1963). The functionalist approach was strongly influenced by the work of Durkheim, who believed that individuals conform into society, and take on its values, through a process, which they barely perceive (Durkheim, 1957). There is a strong emphasis placed on ethical standards, with practitioners expected to conduct themselves in an appropriate “professional” manner by observing rules and codes designed to regulate behaviour and even social order (Durkheim 1957; Grace, 2014). This is viewed as essential, not only for protecting clients – and the public interest – but also practitioners themselves.

There can be problems with operating codes of ethical practice which are too rigid; and the presence of such a code does not by itself make an occupation a profession (Millerson, 1964). Nevertheless, there is often an emphasis placed on how ethical codes can be used to control practices and regulate the behaviour of practitioners, protecting the professional group from non-conforming outsiders (Durkheim, 1957; Grace, 2014), and controlling the body of knowledge in a way that raises the status of practitioners. Thus, training and rigorous testing arrangements help to control entry to occupations, helping to create a culture of exclusiveness (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933). Professional associations are responsible for advancing principles and setting standards that benefit society, thus acting as a stabilising force (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933). This highlights the important extent to which functionalists are concerned with societal order, with the role of the professions viewed in this light – as institutions, which, through processes of socialisation, and by creating and maintaining certain values and standards, help states to avoid deviations from established norms (Evetts, 2014). Furthermore, the body of expert knowledge becomes a privileged characteristic of professional monopoly, not just in terms of content, but also with regard to the process for acquiring knowledge. Abbott (1988:5) refers to this as the ‘asymmetry of expertise’ which obliges a client to trust the professional.

The functionalist perspective has influenced much further writing on understanding the professions (MacDonald, 1995). However, functionalism does not place enough importance on the more micro-level factors that influence the formation and operation of professions (Saks, 2016). This has been the counter-argument of writers such as Everett Hughes (1958), and members of the interactionist school, who claim that professionalism has to be understood in a more grounded and dynamic way, with an emphasis on the circumstances, and the process, by which practitioners in occupations attempt to become “professionals” (Hughes, 1945; Hughes, 1958; Friedson, 2001; Dingwall, 2014; Liu, 2014). The interactionist approach, based on the importance of self-projection into society and understanding how the use of symbols becomes part of daily transactions, rejects an idealistic view on professions based on the belief that they are meant to serve an altruistic purpose (Hughes, 1945; Hughes, 1958; Friedson, 2001; Dingwall, 2014). A profession is something that emerges out of everyday interactions between members of an occupation, and do not have a particular overall purpose, as the functionalists would argue.

The enduring influence of the interactionist approach can be seen in more recent studies which are concerned with how social actors construct “professions”, the nature of “professional” work, and what “professionalism” means, through their everyday behaviours and relationships (Khalili, Hall and DeLuca, 2014). There is a particular concern with how practitioners construct, and manage, distinctive professional identities (Dent and Whitehead, 2002). Such an approach has been applied to the field of HR, where Pritchard and Symon examine how customer service representatives attempted individually and collectively ‘to *work up* their roles as “professionals” in opposition to possible alternative constructions of routine and unskilled work practices’ (2011:445). It would appear that ““being a HR professional” in this context was both contested and involved considerable identity work to maintain’ (Pritchard and Symon, 2011:445).

While the micro-level focus on understanding the dynamics of professions offered by interactionist and social constructivist perspectives is valuable, it tends to avoid matters of power and control (Saks, 2016). These are features which are central to the Marxist perspective on understanding professions (Hanlon, 2007), one that offers a radical alternative to the functionalist approach. Marx himself was largely concerned with the development of class relations under capitalism and the potential for class conflict (Hyman, 2006; MacDonald, 2006; Saks, 2016). More specifically, the Marxian sociology of the professions is mainly concerned with two issues. The first concerns understanding the relationship between the professions and the state, in particular how professions operate to influence, control and uphold the capitalist state (Johnson, 1972; MacDonald, 1995; MacDonald, 2006; Hanlon, 2007). From a Marxist perspective, the functionalist approach to understanding the professions is ahistorical and inadequate, because it fails to recognise the competition that exists between holders of knowledge and the owners of capital, and the importance of production relations and the division of labour (Johnson, 1972; MacDonald, 1995). Professions are the outcome of social conflicts, related to the efforts of social classes to improve their economic conditions (Macdonald, 1995; Hanlon, 2007). Thus, it ‘is not knowledge *per se* that gives professionals their relatively high status in society, but the value that such knowledge has for the capitalist system’ (Macdonald, 1995:41, 42). The second issue concerns the ‘proletarianization of professional occupations’ through the de-skilling and degradation of work, linked to the demands of capitalists for greater control over the relations of production (MacDonald, 2006:361). Overall, then, the Marxist approach is concerned with structures and processes such as ‘polarization of social classes [and]

monopolization of the means of production’, which are viewed as being embedded in the development and maintenance of professions (MacDonald, 2006:361).

Lately, however, there has been a growing interest in Foucauldian and other post-structuralist perspectives on understanding professions. Foucault’s interest in knowledge has already been recognised (see section 2.2.4). More generally, his thoughts on knowledge and work provide a modern way of interpreting professions and professionalism (Burrell, 2006; Power, 2011). Thinking about the elements of Foucault’s perspective – the power of knowledge, how power is enhanced by the relevant use of language, control, modern surveillance techniques, subtle dominance, and the power to punish and discipline – they are applied to the extent that they can be responsible for the creation of professional domains (Richardson, 1996; Power, 2011), and professions’ supremacy (Foucault, 2002; MacDonald, 1995; Dean, 1999). Foucault’s perspective is appropriate when it comes to understanding contemporary professions because it makes the client or patient the main subject of enquiry, accompanied by highly supervised study and the application of knowledge (MacDonald, 2006). Moreover, Fournier (1999) is largely responsible for conceptualising professionalism, particularly in organisational settings, as a discourse, with a focus on the “vocabulary” of professions (Muzio, Brock, and Suddaby; 2013; Evetts, 2014; Saks, 2016). Professions created as part of a micro-cosmos are able to exercise influence through the use of technical terminology which has come to be a focal point for the emergence of new professions, also shaping professional conduct, acting as a disciplinary mechanism to safeguard professionals, as well as constructing “‘appropriate” work identities and conducts’ (Fournier, 1999:281; Power, 2011). Unlike the functionalist perspective, where the greater cause and purpose served by the professionals are the main dominating themes in professional conduct, through Foucault’s concept of “governmentality” the individual’s capacity to engage primarily in self-control is considered more important for professional dominance (MacDonald, 1995; Dean 1999; Lemke, 2000; Saks, 2016). Thus professionalism establishes itself, ‘not on the grounds of traditional and gentlemanliness, but on the basis of education in scientifically, or at least systematically and rationally based knowledge’ (MacDonald, 1995:183).

2.3.2 Professionalisation and professional projects – the neo-Weberian approach

The previous section recognised that a range of perspectives exist that can be applied to understanding professions in general, and the claims of HR to professionalism in particular. A key advantage of a neo-Weberian approach, though, which claims that professions emerge as a result of coordinated efforts by occupational groups to achieve professional status, is that it allows for a focus on processes of professionalisation and professional projects (Evetts, 2014; Saks, 2016). From this perspective, it makes more sense to view HR as being in the midst of a process of professionalisation (Abbott 1988; Balthazard, 2015), or a “project”, one which is marked by a number of specific and distinctive features, rather than describing it straightforwardly as a “profession”. A neo-Weberian approach to understanding professions focuses on how members of an occupation attempt to secure professional standing and control of the market, thus raising their status and securing increased rewards (Larson, 1977; Macdonald, 1995; Adams, 2015; Saks, 2016).

From a neo-Weberian perspective the emphasis is on the process, or path, towards professional status taken by occupations and their members (Goode, 1969; Adams, 2015); there is often a concern with making an effort to emulate, or “mimic”, established professions and thus benefit from the rewards they are seen to attract. There is a particular interest in controlling labour markets, especially entry to the occupation, in order to boost practitioners’ remuneration, as well as projecting the image of a highly dedicated professional working for the public cause. The professional project can therefore be viewed as a strategy (Adams, 2015; Saks, 2016): ‘an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources – special knowledge and skills – into another – social and economic rewards’ (Larson, 1977: xvii). A considerable amount of continuous effort is required to achieve professional status, since it often does not happen naturally due to the intangible nature of the services offered, leading to social closure and control (Murphy, 1988; MacDonald, 1995). Knowledge is critical. As Larson recognises, the ‘unification of a professional area’ is based on formalized, ‘depersonalized’ knowledge and a group of members who, with enough ‘persuasive or coercive power’, are ‘ready to champion the propagation of one paradigm’ (Larson, 1977: 40). Although this can promote monopoly power and exclusivity, it can also encourage bureaucratic structures to arise, especially when practitioners operate within organisations (Elliott, 1972; Larson, 1977; Rueschemeyer, 2014). Two other issues are also important. First, professional projects vary according to the structural and contextual factors evident;

therefore no two cases are the same. Second, a sense of common professional identity comes from the operation of ‘systematic training, resting, registration and licensing’ arrangements (Larson, 1977: 68), including the emphasis on practitioners gaining formal credentials.

A neo-Weberian approach, one that puts an emphasis on the nature and dynamics of distinctive professional projects, is thought to be a particularly appropriate approach to the formation of new and emerging professions because examples of this approach are observed in contemporary markets, including those which transcend national boundaries (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2011; Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011; Saks, 2012; Adams, 2015; Butler and Collins, 2016; Saks, 2016). It recognizes the importance of the environment within which professionalisation projects exist, and also the underlying structures that affect how they develop, including the ‘dynamic and competitive world of macro political power and interests’, as well as the relevance of how knowledge is organised (Saks, 2012:4). There has been an increase in the number of occupations that are termed, or project themselves as, professions (Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009; Crook, 2008), reflecting processes of professionalisation that have their own dynamic and are responsible for the achievement, or not, of professional status.

Moreover, a neo-Weberian focus on professionalisation projects recognises that efforts to secure a path to professionalism may take different forms (Evetts, 2009; McGivern, *et al.*, 2015; Butler and Collins, 2016). In particular, it allows for an examination of how professional projects operate in organisational, rather than just societal, settings. In this way, then, ‘less mainstream professional groups are now starting to be examined in some detail from a neo-Weberian viewpoint in the European literature on professions and organizations’, something which has helped develop a better understanding of the nature of professionalism in general (Brock and Saks, 2016:3, 4). It has been claimed that more research is needed in managerial occupations which appear to be pursuing professional status, thus aiding and understanding of professional projects in general (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015).

Research shows that in organisational settings, occupations pursue professionalisation through narrow industry principles, instead of wider societal values. Securing the advantages and identities of professionalism, then, comes not by means of ‘automatic legitimization’, but rather through ‘self-legitimization’ (Campbell-Verduyn, 2015:367).

As the next section shows, professional projects in organisational settings have stimulated interest in the distinction to be made between “collegial” and “corporate” professionalism, with the latter perhaps marked by the presence of a ‘hybrid professionalization strategy, driven by the need to combine distinct logics and achieve and maintain legitimacy with different stakeholders’ (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015:757). This involves practitioners pursuing professionalisation ‘selectively and opportunistically’, seeking to reconcile the contradictions that arise from trying to reconcile ‘traditional – collegial’ logics with ‘entrepreneurial – organizational’ goals (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015:757). Friedson notes that efforts to understand professional projects, given the differences between them, are essential, and questions whether the term ‘professionalization’ ought to be used ‘only retrospectively to label the process by which present day professions have attained their profession’ (2014:26).

Saks (2016) depicts the main ways that approaches to the professions have changed over the years, with reference to the different sociological schools of thought, matching changes in sociological thinking on the role of professions in society (see table 2.1). Conceptualising professions through the various perspectives offered on professions and professionalism and through historical evolution, as seen further on, it has become apparent that ‘tracing the evolution of professionalism over time indicates that the meaning of professionalism is not fixed; rather the discourse of professionalism has shifted over time both in its interpretation and function’ (Khalili, Hall and DeLuca, 2014:95).

Table 2.1 Mainstream social scientific theories of professions, organizations and society

Theories of Professions	Organizations	Society	Main time period
Trait approach	Classificatory so little interest in the organizational role of professions	Professions not typically located in wider social structure	1950s-1960s
Functionalism	A key focus is on the link between professions and organizations	Perceived functional trade-off between professions and society	1950s-1960s
Interactionism	Professions viewed as socially negotiated label in organizations	Little interest in wider structures of power or historical processes	1960s-1970s
Marxism	The class-based organizational context of professions is critical	Professions seen as engaging in social control under capitalism	1970s-
Foucauldianism	Interest in rationality of progress in organizational contexts	Professional incorporation into state governance is central	1970s-
Neo-Weberianism	Concerned with tensions between professions and organizations	Professional interests and power structures linked to social closure	1970s-
Discourse analysis	Focus on discourse in professional culture in organizations	Analysis not usually pitched at the macro societal level	1990s-
Neo-institutionalism	Professional service firms and other organizational contexts are key	Professions are part of a global ecology of competing institutions	2000s-

Source: Saks (2016:282)

2.4 Understanding new, emerging and aspiring professions

There are a number of theoretical perspectives that can be applied to understanding the formation and purpose of professions. When it comes to understanding HR, however, a neo-Weberian perspective, which emphasises the dynamics of professionalisation, and the role of occupational actors in pursuing professionalism, is particularly useful (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). This is in the context of scholarly work which has been done to explore the issues and challenges relating to the development of new and emerging professions, with the neo-Weberian approach influencing this study of professions (Adams, 2015). The recent literature in this area not only highlights their complex and ambiguous nature, but it also seems to be increasing in volume, making it harder to grasp the various concepts put forward (Švarc, 2016). Writers have explored the implications for both professions and organisations involved in providing professional services, when it comes to understanding professional projects, sometimes in a global and transnational context (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2011; Delattre and Ocler, 2012; Evetts, 2012a; Butler, Chillias and Muhr, 2012; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013; Liu, 2014; Adams, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2016; Saks, 2016).

2.4.1 The dynamics of professions

One of the reasons why it is difficult to define a profession concerns the third, and perhaps most important point, put forward by Millerson (1964), being the ever evolving and dynamic nature of professionalism and professional work. Professions are dynamic and evolve with changes in society, the economic structure and market trends (Hanlon, 2007; Liu, 2014). Although there are differences across nations as to how professionalism is perceived and expressed (Spence *et al.*, 2016), there is a European approach to professions and professionalisation based on combining the sociology of professions with organisational theory (Brock and Saks, 2016).

Looking at the history of professions gives us a clear picture of the extent to which they have evolved, highlighting differences in how they have been considered over the years. Originating as medieval “guilds of learning” the professions initially developed as religious training institutions, until the end of the 16th century, when they took on a secular dimension, encompassing architects, surgeons and apothecaries (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Grace, 2014). Subsequently, the development of research and scientific methodologies associated with the rise of industrial organisations, helped to

create the occupations of secretaries, accountants, bankers, surveyors and estate agents (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Jackson, 1970; Abbott, 1988; Witz, 1992). By the 20th century, in many cases entry by examination into an occupation became a required route into professional work; with increasingly rigid control over entry often creating rival associations (Millerson, 1964). New entrants to the professional domain have become a more regularly observed phenomenon in recent decades, with the rise of the service class, growing job specialisation (Perkin, 1989) and the idea of the “semi-professions”, relating to largely feminised occupations such as nursing (Etzioni, 1969).

The second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of modern professions such as in management, advertising, creative occupations, auxiliary medical, and in the area of management information systems (MIS) (Abbott, 1988). Furthermore, occupations associated with the media and the internet emerged, as well as professions associated with information and communication technologies: mobile and wireless, where the use of these technologies *by* the professionals in the field becomes a study in itself (Kakihara and Sorensen, 2002). Overall, then, there is a significant historical dimension to the evolution of professions. The way that professions evolved, based on the Continental and Scandinavian model, is connected to the ‘growth of the state bureaucracies’ with an emphasis on trust emanating from above related to ‘delegated legal authority and legitimacy’ (Evetts, 2012b:2).

Elsewhere, the Anglo-Saxon model suggests the rise of professions was more related to the growth of the ‘system of higher education’ with an emphasis on the professional associations that have greater control over educating and licensing potential professionals who have the freedom of self-employment and aim to control a monopoly in a market where the responsibility is more towards citizens and clients (Evetts, 2012b:2). This highlights that, as well as historical reasons for the evolution and understanding of professions, there are also similarities in respect of societal systems. Although some differences have been observed, for instance between the French, UK and US, and Canadian settings that affect professions (Leicht, Walter, Sainsaulieu and Davies, 2009), through the study of big professional firms, an overall homogeneity in the Western countries is observed – ‘an erosion of the traditional archetypal professional who safeguards the public interest’ (Spence, *et al.*, 2016:15), and an emphasis on market incentives, national contexts and local forces (Leicht, *et al.*, 2009:598-600). Similarities arising from issues such as global marketisation, managerialism,

consumerism and organisational pressures and performativity are linked to the extensive use of a discourse of professionalism which can provide a common theoretical base with wider ‘relevance and references’ (Evetts, 2003b; Ball, 2008; Evetts, 2012b: 13). More research into the great variety of “professional” groups emerging (other than medicine and accounting) is needed taking into account transnational professional forces, the effects of globalisation and the influences of associations and industries (Brock and Saks, 2016; Spence, *et al.*, 2016)

2.4.2 New entrants to the professional domain – professional projects

There has been an increasing tendency for occupations to be termed, or project themselves as, professions (Crook, 2008; Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009). According to Švarc, a ‘variety of new occupations, inconceivably just a decade ago, have emerged in the labour market and are on a path of turning into complete and structured professions’ (2016:405). The rise of new and emerging professions has generated new ways of thinking about what professionalism means, because of their new functions, codes of conduct, professional standards, identities, as well as new ways of aspiring to professionalisation (Evetts, 2006a; Švarc, 2016). Professionalisation is very attractive because it appears to offer the prospect of better status and rewards (Evetts, 2012a). New entrants to the professional domain demand their share of autonomy, status, control and freedom to operate within their own set boundaries. This first element alone makes the study of professions and the identity of the professional of current interest, and certainly an ever-evolving one (Crook, 2008, Massey, 2010). In modern societies occupational groups often make an effort to become professional disciplines; although whether or not they are successful is a different matter. Occupations in relatively new fields such as advertising, auxiliary medicine and management are thought to have taken, or be taking, steps towards professionalisation, reshaping the map of traditionally established professions and creating associations with their own relevant bodies of knowledge, specific training programmes and methods of entry control (Noordegraaf, 2007; Noordegraaf, Van Der Steen and Van Twist, 2014).

When it comes to such professional projects there are two issues which are of particular relevance to the field of HR. First of all, there is the notion that professional projects can be gendered. There has long been an interest in the development of female dominated “semi-” or “quasi-” professions linked to the growth of the female workforce, where practitioners enjoyed lower levels of autonomy (Etzioni, 1969;

Goode, 1969; Simpson and Simpson, 1969; MacDonald, 2006:309). Witz (1992) highlights the importance of a feminist approach to understanding professions, one that recognises the importance of gender and gender-based inequalities, under the influence of patriarchal societies. Moreover, the ‘paradoxical’ ‘feminization’ of the professions has stimulated interest in the role of gender in professional projects, such as HR, and the nature of, and obstacles to, professionalisation (Bolton and Muzio, 2008:283). This highlights the important extent to which those in occupations marked by gendered professional projects may enjoy a greater degree of privileged status, however, not widely legitimised, but also ‘remain in states of flux marked by continual challenges to their restricted degrees of market competition and self-regulatory capacities’ (Campbell-Verduyn, 2015:356). By developing “‘thicker” congruence with broader social values’ they may ‘more widely legitimize the privileges of professionalism’ (Campbell-Verduyn, 2015:356).

The second issue in relation to HR concerns the distinction which has been drawn between ‘occupational’ and ‘organisational’ professionalism (Evetts, 2013:778-796), or ‘collegial’ and ‘corporate’ professionalism (Butler and Collins, 2016:49), and what this means for understanding professional projects in organisational, corporate contexts. For managerial occupations, located mainly in organisations, conventional forms of professionalisation have become unattractive because of the difficulties associated with securing the privileges enjoyed by traditional professions, such as ‘monopolistic closure’, ‘restricted practices’, ‘self-regulation’ and ‘explicit and exclusive knowledge’ (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013:227). As a result, a type of ‘corporate professionalisation’ has been favoured (Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, and Hall, 2011; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Paton and Hodgson, 2016:26), particularly within large corporations, for those working in areas thought of as ‘expert occupations’, such as ‘supply chain management’, ‘human resource management’, ‘consultancy’ and ‘project management’ (Paton, Hodgson, and Muzio, 2013:228).

Since even the established professions have suffered under pressures associated with greater managerialism, de-professionalisation, market forces and corporate logics (Martin, Armstrong, Aveling, Herbert, and Dixon-Woods, 2015), as discussed in section 2.5, this has encouraged such new ‘expert occupations’ to avoid the methods associated with traditional professional projects, and instead utilise specific ‘distinctive tactics’ that suit their particular ‘knowledge base, work profile and industry structure’; allowing

them to establish themselves professionally, while also aiming to provide economically beneficial results at the same time (Paton, Hodgson, and Muzio, 2013:237). Corporate professions develop associations that serve the interests of both their practitioners as well as practitioners' employing organisations (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013). Conceived in this way, professionalism involves three players: the professional body, its members and relevant employing organisations (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013). In other cases, where it is difficult for occupations to legitimise their professional status, alternative ways, other than gaining public recognition, have been sought in order to demonstrate their professional status; for example by promoting the contribution they can make to innovation and efficiency improvements (Maestriperi, 2016). Instead of formal credentials and associations, market forces and social exposure can, in some cases, aid members of "corporate" professions to achieve their desired status (Maestriperi, 2016).

Furthermore, new occupations that aspire to professional status should expect their practitioners to be faced with a career within large professional service providers, being a form of professionalism in itself, instead of a career as an independent professional (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011). Organisations as sites for professional development and colonisation have become important, something that holds true in both the private and public sectors (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Evetts, 2014; Ackroyd, 2016; Saks, 2016). Therefore, being "professional" can take on a whole new meaning each time the landscape of professional work changes, with different occupational groups aiming to dominate, with new meanings to the interpretation of professionalism being added (Evans, 2008). The opening up of markets loosens boundaries; therefore, tighter control of professional standards becomes imperative, opening the way for aspiring professions, sometimes with the encouragement of the state, to fill any gaps arising for stronger structures, by offering scope for service guarantees and the maintenance of order (Evetts, 2006a; Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009; Healy, 2009). From this, it is recognised that professionalisation efforts do not necessarily follow a clear cut-out path towards professionalism, as it is conventionally understood, and that there are alternative paths to professionalism, or situations which "professionally" aspiring occupations find themselves in, and which do not necessarily lead to similar outcomes (Butler and Collins, 2016). Accepting the existence of alternative professionalisation paths moves on from a rather 'simplistic dualism between "collegial" professionalism

and “corporate” professionalism’, giving rise to concepts such as ‘hybrid-professionalism’ (Butler and Collins, 2016:49) (see section 2.5).

Another issue is the failure of a professional project to be successful. It is evident that a number of occupations engaged in professionalisation efforts in contemporary societies are failing to succeed in establishing themselves as professions, in the traditional understanding of the term (Butler, Chillias, and Muhr, 2012; Maestripieri, 2016). Not all occupational groups that term themselves as professions manage to turn themselves into professions, with a number remaining ‘at the margins’ (Butler, Chillias and Muhr, 2012:259). The process of professionalisation has its own dynamic, one that is responsible for achieving professional status or not. Some of the reasons given are: firstly, that occupations may not have ‘established large and influential’ associations to represent their members and work towards securing certification, and may also lack a very specialised body of knowledge that can be ‘systematized to a high level of abstraction’; secondly, that there are gender divisions based on a ‘historical split’ between male and female work that affects the landscape of occupations and influences the possibilities of professionalisation; thirdly, that there are ‘stigmatised’ professions which are viewed unfavourably, and carry degrees of stereotyping for society to accept them as professions (Butler, Chillias and Muhr, 2012:260, 262, 264) – for example, occupations pursuing corporate professionalisation may lack independence and legitimacy, because little congruence exists with wider, societal principles (Campbell-Verduyn, 2015); and fourthly, that there are cases where marginalisation comes from within the occupational group, with members being excluded due to class origin, race and gender differences (Butler, Chillias and Muhr, 2012:260, 262, 264).

All this highlights a problem with conceiving occupations or fields straightforwardly as “new” or “emerging” professions. The problem with the former concept is that it assumes that one can determine unambiguously what a profession is, by elaborating a set of criteria, however broad, and then identify when an occupation has met these criteria, and thus become a profession. While the concept of the “emerging” profession avoids this, by recognising that an occupation might be taking on some of the characteristics of a profession, by means of a professionalisation project, it still implies that one can easily define what a “profession” is, and also implies an end-point – becoming a professionalised occupation. As a result of this, there has been some attention paid to the “aspiring” dimension of professional projects, in the sense of

having ambitions to achieve a goal. The term *aspirant* profession is used by Timmons (2011:337) to recognise that the particular occupational group of the health care department, may be marked by a professionalisation dynamic, as well as the elements of a distinctive professionalism, but without having succeeded to professionalise in the conventionally assumed manner, or even that this is a desirable outcome (Timmons, 2011).

The idea that an occupation can be ‘aspiring’, or have ‘aspirations’, towards professional status is not new, having been mentioned in relation to social work (Hamilton, 1974:333), manual workers (Burrage, 1990b:151), financial advice (Clarke, 2000:1), the process of ‘corporate professionalisation’ apparent in project management and management consultancy (Muzio *et al.*, 2011:446&449) and even – in passing – HR (Ardagh, 2007). Most notably, Bolton and Muzio classify management in general as a gendered ‘aspiring professional project’ (2008:283); with aspiring professions characterised as occupations which hold ‘professional ambitions as illustrated by a preoccupation with formal closure, a growing attention to occupational self-regulation and the development of strong professional institutions’ (Bolton and Muzio, 2008:284). Occupations might aspire to professional status, but the success of their projects is by no means guaranteed. In the case of paramedics, for example, different agendas and interests, ‘power imbalances in the employment relationship, a mismatch between formal, senior level institutional entrepreneurship and informal, street-level institutional work’ all helped to explain why multi-level actions were compatible or incompatible in contributing to ‘institutional and professional change projects’ (McCann, *et al.*, 2013:772). As a result, the paramedics’ professionalisation efforts achieved little in the way of gaining the privileges established professions like law and medicine enjoy (McCann, *et al.*, 2013).

2.5 Understanding professionalism and the professions: contemporary issues and challenges

There are a number of contemporary issues and challenges which influence professionalism and the professions, including those associated with professional work often no longer being confined within national boundaries (Evetts, 2003b; Champy, 2008; Evetts, 2011b). Yet perhaps the most notable issue concerns the growing number of people engaged in professional work who practice within commercial organisations, rather than independently (Delattre and Ocler, 2012; Saks, 2016). Emerging or aspiring

professions, like HR, largely operate within organisational and institutional settings (Muzio, Brock, and Suddaby, 2013). As a result, work on the sociology of the professions is increasingly undertaken in combination with perspectives on management and organisations (Brock and Saks, 2016). With the decline of expert knowledge as a core dimension of a profession, there are two main tendencies in understanding professionalism (Švarc, 2016). One is an ‘idealistic’ focus on the ‘deterioration of professionalism in modern occupations’ (Švarc, 2016:402), given the commercialisation of professions and the turn to credentialism. The other is more ‘realistic’, in that it ‘tries to identify and define new types of professions and their particular features’, (Švarc, 2016:402); including efforts to incorporate emerging and aspiring professions.

2.5.1 The commercialisation of professional standards and “organisational professionalism”

One of the most notable influences on professions and professionalism concerns the rising importance of neo-liberal policies and greater managerialism (Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts, 1997; Hanlon, 2000). Broadly speaking, neo-liberalism emphasises the importance of free markets (Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009). It holds that economic growth comes from the promotion of free markets, privatisation and minimal government intervention, all of which are designed to promote a profitable business culture with little concern about social justice (Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts, 1997; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Hanlon, 2007; Cornell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009). Neo-liberals tend to distrust professions, since their efforts to maintain control over occupational entry and preserve certain norms and values are considered to be self-serving (Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts, 1997; Hanlon, 2000). As a result, in the public sector governments have enacted measures that subject members of the professions to more rigorous and stringent performance standards, making them more accountable, and undermining their autonomy (Avis, 2003; Gleeson and Knights, 2006; Hanlon, 2000; Hanlon, 2007; Whitty, 2008; Williams, 2008).

New public management regimes are designed to apply market-based practices within the public sector for the purpose of increasing organisational competitiveness and performance (Leicht *et al.*, 2009; Muzio, Brock and Suddaby, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2016). More than this, some argue that, at least in the public sector, a broader range of factors, including social and technological change, mean that professional work is being ‘reconfigured’ (Noordegraaf, Van Der Steen, Van Twist, 2014; Martin *et al.*, 2015;

Švarc, 2016; Noordegraaf, 2016:790). This process of ‘reconfiguration’ involves the ‘*reorganization*’, ‘*restratification*’ and ‘*relocation*’ of professional work in a way that blurs the traditional divide between organisations and professions (Noordegraaf, 2016:790&791). As a consequence, professionalism is increasingly becoming ‘dispersed and distributed instead of uniform and concentrated’ (Noordegraaf, 2016:786).

A particularly notable influence on the commercialisation of professional standards concerns the increasing extent to which people engaged in professional work inhabit organisational settings, and gain legitimacy through their ability to demonstrate their contribution to organisational interests (Muzio, Brock and Suddaby, 2013). The rise of this ‘new professionalism’ (Evetts, 2009:247; Evetts 2011b) or ‘organisational professionalism’ (Evetts 2013:785; Evetts 2014) is illustrated by the emergence of new professionalisation projects which unfold entirely within organisational boundaries and structures. Members of organisational professions ‘succeed by solving core problems for their employers and colonising enclaves and key positions in the organisational hierarchies they inhabit’ (Muzio, Brock and Suddaby 2013:710). The greater commercialisation of professional standards means that the essential features of what was considered to be the core, classic meaning of professional work have become less notable (Hanlon, 1997; Adler, Kwon and Heckscher, 2008). The commercialisation of professional standards, and the rise of a more managerial professionalism, has raised questions about the traditional sense of an altruistic professional, being detached, disinterested and independent, with the emphasis now on abiding by company policy (Coulehan, 2005; Evetts, 2006a; Beaton, 2010).

The rise of commercialised, organisational professionalism points to the need for professionals to demonstrate additional skills, related to being managerial and entrepreneurial (MacKinnon, 2000), including financial management and business development (Fallows, 1986; Grace, 2014), without which advancement and success are not guaranteed (Hanlon, 1998; Clarke, 2000; Mackinnon, 2000). Responding to market pressures obliges professionals ‘to adapt to social change, capitalist pressures, and consumerist tendencies’ (Noordegraaf, 2007:63), something which may divert them from their core practice. In particular there is a greater emphasis in the private sector on efficiency and the fulfilment of business targets, while in the public sector greater control is exercised through tighter regulation and cost-cutting (Hanlon, 1998; Hanlon,

2007) . Managerial ‘demands for quality control and audit, target-setting and performance review become reinterpreted as the promotion of professionalism’ (Evetts, 2014:44).

The rise of organisational professionalism (Evetts, 2014) can thus mean that professionals become subject to greater managerial control, and the fragmentation and routinisation of work, resulting in reduced autonomy and discretion (Healy and Meagher, 2004; Noordegraaf, 2007; Hanlon, 2007; Adler, Kwon and Heckscher, 2008; Evans, 2008; Evetts, 2012a). Commercialisation thus not only affects the ideal of professional standards and faith in the professional-client relationship (Coulehan, 2005; Barnett, 2008; Lunt, 2008), but it can also result in a tendency towards de-professionalisation (Friedson, 2001; Noordegraaf, 2007). Professional work in organisations is marked by a ‘paradoxical logic’, with people being expected to act as “professionals”, and yet at the same time operate within a more managerial context amidst a ‘welter of performance measures’ (McCann, *et al.*, 2013:756). Professionals may have a struggle to deal with the potentially conflicting interests arising from the demands of their employing organisation and those of their professional body, with implications for their professional status (Hutton and Massey, 2006:23), the maintenance of their ‘professional pride’ (Schön, 1987:6), and their professional autonomy (Grace, 2014).

On this account, the question arises as to how helpless professions really are; whether they are left powerless to the organisational demands and employer control; or whether they are adaptable and resistant and, in a ‘reflexive’ sense, perhaps emerge reinforced as a result of the threats and challenges they face (Champy, 2008:663; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Evetts, 2012a)? There has been growing interest in how professions and professionals have responded to commercialisation pressures (Adler, Kwon and Heckscher, 2008; Champy, 2008; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011).

One key reaction to organisational pressures is at the level of professional projects where those at senior levels develop their own type of project, accommodating organisational interests and agendas in the process (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011), ending up with professional domains that are ‘heavily skewed to the interests of dominant firms’ (Lounsbury, 2002 cited in Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011:396). Other ways of remaining independent from organisational control include maintaining a

stricter professional identity (Savage *et al.*, cited in Hanlon, 1998), forming more ‘collaborative communities’ and seeing non-professionals as sources of learning ‘rather than interference’ (Adler, Kwon and Heckscher, 2008:371), or even colonising ‘new organisational spaces, structures, practices and systems’ to sustain and reinforce their professional dominance (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011:396). Recent work points to how deprofessionalisation operates hand-in-hand with professionalisation, with professionals in a position to be able to regulate ‘what they know (*knowledge*)’, ‘who they are (*identity*)’ and ‘how they work (*standards*)’ (Noordegraaf, Van Der Steen and Van Twist, 2014:23, 23-25). Efforts by both established and aspiring professions to maintain the essence of what is considered “professional”, and demonstrate their claim to a professional ideal, continue to be important (Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts, 1997; Clarke, 2000; Crook, 2008; Maestripieri, 2016).

2.5.2 Defining professionalism: ambiguity and polysemy

In their professionalisation projects, aspiring professions, like HR, often try to emulate or “mimic” those features which resemble as closely as possible the status and esteem the traditional, so-called “pure” professions enjoy (Noordegraaf, 2007:761; Noordegraaf, 2015:192). Yet, as has already been shown, professionalism is a rather ambiguous concept (Liljegren, 2012). Moreover, efforts to understand contemporary professions show how the dynamics of professional projects have both produced new, and reinforced existing, ambiguities (Crook, 2008). The ambiguity of professionalism, particularly the inability to provide a specific definition of a profession, has become an inherent part of understanding professions (Abbott, 1988). Yet for Noordegraaf, the result is a ‘mixed up professionalism’, one that does not have any ‘epistemological grounds or definable boundaries’, yet is unique in its own way due to its ‘work-related respects’ and a distinctive ‘socio-cultural make-up’; it is a professionalism that ‘professionalizes ways of becoming professional without ever really becoming professional’ (2007:775, 781).

The rise of ‘organisational professionalism’ (Evetts, 2006a:138) is linked with the use of techniques and language more associated with the corporate missions and managerial goals, in ways that influence practitioners’ identities, careers and their ‘senses of self’ (Evetts, 2012a:4). Yet rather than seeing managerialism and professionalism as distinct from one another, and even adversaries, the two would appear to be connected, in a way that makes distinguishing between ‘occupational’ and ‘organisational’ professionalism

difficult (Evetts: 2006a:138; Evetts, 2009). Professions and organisations are dynamically interwoven, with the implication that professionals working in organisations need to better understand the realities and incorporate new linkages in their practice (Noordgraaf, 2011; Noordegraaf, Van Der Steen and Van Twist, 2014). As a result, there is growing interest in the nature, principles and practice of professional work in organizational settings (Noordegraaf, Van Der Steen and Van Twist, 2014; Maestriperi, 2016).

For Noordegraaf, traditional, occupational-based professionalism can be viewed as a ‘pure’ type of professionalism, which engages with the ‘content’ of what a professional does and the ‘control’ he or she holds over non-professionals (2007:766). However, new ways of thinking about, and conceptualising, professionalism have arisen, based on the rise of new occupations in service-based economies, changing ‘the “controlled content” of professionalism to “content of control”’ (Noordegraaf, 2007:761). In particular, there is increasing interest in ‘so-called corporate forms of professionalism’ and the potential for ‘own brand’ forms of professionalism, defined by the standards and codes of practice of large firms and demonstrated by holding internal certificates and qualifications (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011:397; Thursfield, 2012). Concepts such as ‘new’, ‘corporate’ and ‘hybrid’ forms of professionalism point to how ‘professionalism’, as a concept, is evolving in service-based organisational contexts (Švarc, 2016:402).

The ‘hybrid’ approach is particularly useful because it avoids some of the drawbacks associated with distinguishing between the concepts of “professions”, “professionalisation” and “professionalism” (Butler and Collins, 2016:49). It accommodates occupations, such as management consultancy, that for various reasons lack elements of “pure”, traditional professions; recognising the diversity of professionalism, particularly in situations where practitioners have lost their ‘grip on normative and cognitive mechanisms’, but without losing opportunities for advancement and development (Butler and Collins, 2016:62). The concept of ‘hybrid’ professionalism recognises that there is a distinction between performance-oriented managerial control arrangements and organisational approaches that respect professionals (Noordegraaf, 2015:187). Yet it is more managerialist, in a way that perhaps undermines the legitimacy of practitioners in the eyes of their peers and raises doubts about how far they serve societal interests (Currie, Burgess and Tuck, 2016).

One result is that as their professional autonomy is challenged, professionals may have to defend themselves against, or try to neutralise, managerial “attacks”, in order to defend their positions (Noordegraaf, 2015; Martin, *et al.*, 2015).

Given the growing amount of research on the interaction between professionals and organisations (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011), some have claimed that an ‘institutional’ (or sometimes ‘neo-institutional’) approach is valuable when it comes to understanding contemporary professionalism (Muzio, Brock and Suddaby, 2013:700), particularly when it is combined with a neo-Weberian perspective (Saks, 2016). This captures the growing extent to which people engaged in professional work are located in organisational settings, suggests that professional projects can be viewed as broader processes of institutionalisation and recognises the part played by professionals themselves in developing professional projects, and thus enacting institutional change (Muzio, Brock and Suddaby, 2013). One criticism of institutional theory, though, is that it shares ‘many of the assumptions of functionalism’, particularly the notion that change reflects developments in the broader ‘organisational field’ (Ackroyd, 2016:19). Yet its value is evident from a study of paramedics. It shows that aspiring professions like emergency medicine may lack power, with ambivalent consequences for their professionalisation efforts, with such projects becoming more about attempts to secure ‘identity and dignity than about real prospects of genuine institutional change’ (McCann, *et al.*, 2013:772).

Although there is a *polysemy* of perspectives on professionalism, involving many meanings and symbols, this should not be an inhibitor in trying to understand its nature (Delattre and Ocler, 2012). Moreover, in the effort to conceptualise professions, perhaps examining those occupations whose professional projects do not appear to have been successful, or those that exist ‘at the margins’ (Butler, Chillias and Muhr, 2012: 260), would help in shedding light upon chosen paths to professionalisation. Maintaining the meaning of professionalism, and particularly two main aspects of it, one, knowledge and expertise, and two, trustworthiness and altruism, as naive as it may sound in this era, is thought to be important both for humanity and for the evolution of society (Beaton, 2010). After all, occupationally-based professions, those close to the traditional form, still continue to exist and flourish, even by accommodating some of the threats to professionalism (Evetts, 2012a).

Whether due to neoliberal policies, managerial control or societal demands for higher accountability, professionals operate in a far more volatile environment (Noordegraaf, 2016:785). They are subject to a range of competing influences, and face challenges from interests derived from other logics (Martin *et al.*, 2015). As a result, understandings of professionalism have moved on, from the ‘dualistic and oppositional understandings of professionalism versus managerialism’ to new combinations of organising work and professional practice (Noordegraaf, 2015:188; Currie, Burgess and Tuck, 2016). However, Noordegraaf, tries to move beyond ‘hybridity’, by identifying four types of professionalism – ‘pure’, ‘controlled’, ‘managed’ and ‘organising’ professionalism – as a way of understanding the diversity of professional occupations in contemporary societies, and of addressing, at least in part, some of the problems associated with the ambiguities of professionalism and the resulting definitional challenges (2015:196). For Noordegraaf, it is ‘organizing professionalism’, which privileges processes in which professionals support staff, clients and stakeholders in an interconnected way, which is the best option for taking into account the changing contexts of professionalism and produces more cooperative, dynamic and connective results (2015:203). At the same time it enhances the professional legitimacy of practitioners both in the eyes of their peers and the public interest (Currie, Burgess and Tuck, 2016).

2.5.3 Implications for understanding professions and professionalism

There are a number of implications of such contemporary challenges for professionalism when it comes to understanding ‘aspiring’ professions like HR. First, although trust is a key component of professionalism, it has been pressured by the commercialisation of professional standards (Avis, 2003; Adler, Kwon and Heckscher, 2008; Healy, 2009), and often requires having to be renegotiated and gained again (Lunt, 2008). The rise of organisational professionalism has consequences for the main elements of professionalism, as conceived in the traditional sense, with greater managerial control potentially disturbing the relationship between practitioners and clients, reducing professional autonomy, and eroding established professional norms and understandings (Evetts, 2009; Grace, 2014). Under the redefinition of professionalism, professionals now ‘seek to prove their trustworthiness on a regular basis and on an increasingly changed set of criteria’ (Hanlon, 1998:54), and perhaps have to re-engage their moral compass (Grace, 2014). One way in which occupations have done this is by placing more of an emphasis on ethical codes, continuing

professional development and credentialism in an attempt to revalidate their work and integrity (Lunt, 2008).

A second issue concerns the way that commercialisation pressures have caused professions to turn to knowledge as a tool for closure of their professional area, by means of what Eraut calls 'the social control of expertise' (1994:2). Professions *need* to close markets to secure the control necessary for professional formation, but also, once this closure is achieved, to be able to invest efforts in order to reach the higher levels in quality of service and enhance the value of their profession (Evetts, 2006a; Rueschemeyer, 2014). As well as being part of a service, knowledge can be used as a social closure device (Barnett, 2008; Lunt, 2008). Promoting the image of a profession externally, reinforcing its ability to maintain social control, especially in an era when certain professions have become part of large corporations, may imply losing a degree of control over the professional-client relationship (Hanlon, 1997).

However, the exploitation of expertise can be taken a bit too far for professionals' own good (Ashley and Empson, 2016). The suspicion that they use knowledge to promote their own self-interest, rather than the public interest, has encouraged the potential 'de-mystification' of professional expertise (Evetts, 2012a:20), with clients seeking 'safety valves' to safeguard themselves from malpractice (Noordegraaf, 2007:764). In a more commercialised context, and as the link between trust and professionalism takes on new meanings, claims by professionals to hold specialist expertise have become more closely scrutinised (Evetts, 2006b). The need to abide by organisational goals, together with the difficulty of persuading an increasingly well-informed and assertive clientele, makes for a more complex framework within which professionals have to practice, and has also increased their exposure and accountability (Evetts, 2014; Noordegraaf, 2016). Professionals could once protect themselves against outside interference; however, now it seems the outside world is 'penetrating professional domains, work, and practices' (Noordegraaf, 2016:786).

A third issue concerns credentialism. The commercialisation of professional standards has stimulated greater demand for credentials (Fallows, 1986; Taylor and McGugan, 1995; Montgomery and Oliver, 2007). Given the need to safeguard their service levels and reputations, large professional service firms, where most professional activity takes place, have placed a greater interest on credentials (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011). By

supporting and recognising specialist knowledge and expertise, credentials are an important means by which professionals try to gain occupational closure (Collins, 1990; Montgomery and Oliver, 2007; Beaton, 2010). From a neo-Weberian perspective, competition for credentials is viewed as central to systems of social stratification (Brown, 2001). However, the rise in demand for acquiring credentials does not necessarily mean an equivalent increase in status and earnings. On the one hand, pressure to attain credentials is often perceived by professionals as increased bureaucratisation, without any increase in the quality of the service provided to clients (Evetts, 2006a:139). On the other hand, though, credentialism can help to tackle the problem of underachievement by practitioners, and may also offer an opportunity to improve professional standards, enhance client relationships and open up promotion paths (Evetts, 2009:260; Evetts, 2012a).

A fourth issue concerns the implications of commercialisation for professional identity. As professions reshape, influenced by historical, sociological and economic factors, so does the identity and behaviour of professionals, as they adjust to external and internal changes (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006; Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Khalili, Hall and DeLuca, 2014). While in the traditional sense professional identity may have been regarded as relatively unproblematic, it has now become much more varied, complex and contingent (Healy, 2009; Paton and Hodgson, 2016), particularly as professionalism is 'restratified', 'relocated' and 'reconfigured' (Noordegraaf, 2016:798). In a more commercialised context, professionals are caught between the demands of what must be done, in terms of performance indicators, standards and company targets, and what ought to be done, as a critical reflective practitioner, in terms of loyalty and commitment to the best interests of clients (Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Barnett, 2008; Scott and Seglow, 2007; Grace, 2014). Established professional identities can be threatened by the challenge organisational demands pose to their knowledge base (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Whitchurch, 2008), greater career uncertainty (Jones and Green, 2006), the emphasis on an 'ethic of performance rather than an ethic of service' (Barnett, 2008:197) and ineffective or confused processes of professional formation (Feen-Calligan, 2012). Operating with integrity, and upholding certain moral values, can be difficult in more complex and fluid organisational environments (Barnett, 2008), as professionals attempt to make sense of, and retain, their autonomy, through a constant process of reinvention (Gleeson and Knights, 2006; Grace, 2014). Unsurprisingly, professionals can face deep-rooted dilemmas, potentially shattering their professional

identity, by leading them to question their own values and beliefs, and which can adversely affect their work quality (Banks, 2004; Power, 2008).

The commercialisation of professional standards and the rise of organisational professionalism mean that professional identity is increasingly managerial, or even administrative, in character, being shaped by organisations and their activities (Evetts, 2012a; Russell, 2012; Noordegraaf, 2016). In highly pressured, and perhaps unsupportive, work environments, maintaining a distinct professional identity becomes more difficult and demands considerable resilience on the part of practitioners (Martin, Mackenzie and Healy, 2012). Yet the extent to which professional identity is eroded varies, with some occupations perhaps more vulnerable to external threats than others (Jones and Green, 2006), and others may come out, in some ways, stronger overall (Correia and Denis, 2016). Moreover, there are methods professionals can use to protect their sense of professional identity in organisations (Jones and Green, 2006; Power, 2008). There is a recognition of how they can effect a reconciliation of multiple professional identities (McGivern *et al.*, 2015; Currie, Burgess, Tuck, 2016). Perhaps the biggest challenge facing professionals is the ‘test of occupational integrity’, which sees them either as being ‘technical experts and efficient producers or deliverers’ of services in organisations, or as finding the ‘courage’ to uphold a stronger role as being the ‘critics and conscience of society’ (Grace, 2014:25).

2.6 Chapter conclusion

This study of the nature of HR as a “profession”, its efforts to professionalise and how HR practitioners respond to this as *aspirant* professionals, is in line with calls from some for more attention to be paid to professional projects among management occupations (Evetts, 2014; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015). One key thought to bear in mind concerns the difficulty of assigning specific characteristics to a profession, professionalism and, consequently, a professional, something which inevitably influences the nature of a professionalisation process. As this chapter shows, though, it is possible to identify certain core elements – trust, ethical practice, specialist knowledge and a distinct professional identity. However, the material suggests that while this may well be the case for the more traditional, ‘pure’ professions (Noordegraaf, 2007:761), there remain a number of conceptual issues, problems and concerns, particularly in respect of the implications of the commercialisation of professional standards and the rise of organisational professionalism. In this context,

therefore, the chapter proposes the relevance of the neo-Weberian perspective for understanding HR as a profession. It emphasises efforts by occupations to professionalise, with the implication that successful professionalisation, in the conventional, “pure” sense, is not guaranteed. Therefore it seems sensible to view HR, as an occupation whose members are based mainly in employing organisations, operating as *aspirant* professionals rather than as straightforwardly as members of a “new” or “emerging” profession. As the next chapter shows, there is a professional project apparent in HR; but questions exist about the nature of this project and whether or not it has resulted in HR unambiguously becoming a profession, or is ever likely to do so.

3. The HR professional project

3.1 Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) has received increased attention, since the term became a lingua franca in the mid-1980s. It has been proposed as a distinctive approach to managing people (Erickson, 2009), through a greater strategic integration with the business and evaluation of its impact on business performance. As a result, attention has turned to the role of HR practitioners, who seem to be in the proscenium, being those responsible for enacting people management techniques that contribute to the achievement of organisational goals. It is in this context that HR has been characterised as an “emerging managerial profession” (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016), an “aspiring profession” (Ardagh, 2007) or as part of the “aspiring professional project” of management that has made the most progress when it comes to professionalisation (Bolton and Muzio, 2008). With this in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to explore the nature of HR as a “profession”, in the sense of a community of practitioners who by responding to efforts to professionalise HR, may appear ambitious about achieving, and are engaged in pursuing, or aspiring to, professional status as denoted by their relevant institute.

The rise of HRM, and the greater demands placed on HR practitioners to work strategically in order to contribute to business performance, appears to have promoted HR practitioners’ professional standing. In the UK, the efforts of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in promoting the professional status of HR have been a critical feature of the professional project in progress. The development of HRM has been viewed as ‘evolutionary’, with its benefits outweighing the ambiguity that surrounds it (Armstrong, 2000; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2009); but with an impact on the role and significance of HR practitioners (Kersley, Alpin, Forth, Bryson, Bewley, Dix and Oxenbridge, 2006). Although there are numerous writings on the importance of HRM, not as much attention has perhaps been given to the people operating in HR roles, specifically how they perceive their role and the challenges they face, given the increasingly professional status assigned to them. Therefore, the HR role is reviewed; the contribution it is thought to be making for the organisation and the different misconceptions that arise from this, with particular attention given to the various models proposed as the appropriate structures for the HR role for both its value in the business

and its projection as a professional role. This review of the literature on HR professionalisation, furthermore, explores the issues involved in viewing the HR role as a managerial and/or professional position, considering relevant strengths, ambiguities and difficulties. Combined with relevant literature derived from work on the professions (see chapter two), the material in this chapter creates the research framework for this study, one which responds to the call by Pohler and Willness (2014) for more studies of the HR professionalisation project. Based on appropriate insights from the literature concerning professions and professionalisation, combined with relevant points about the professional nature of the HR role, the final part of this chapter positions the inquiry and develops a research framework for conducting the investigation.

3.2 HRM, HR roles and HR professionalisation

There is a growing amount of attention being paid to HR as either an “emerging managerial profession” (Higgins, Roper, and Gamwell, 2016), or as an integral part of the ‘aspiring professional project of management’ (Bolton and Muzio, 2008:283). The traditional view of HR - or personnel as it was generally known - was that its claim to professional status was rather weak (Watson, 1977; Legge, 1978; Farndale and Brewster, 2005). However, there has been a growing amount of interest in how distinct managerial functions within organisations, whose activities are fundamentally concerned with tackling organisational issues and challenges, have engaged in professionalisation projects, for the purpose of increasing their power and status (Armstrong, 1987; Reed and Anthony, 1992; Wright, 2008). From this perspective, then, efforts by members of the HR community, as a distinctive managerial function, to professionalise are perhaps best viewed in “organisational” rather than “occupational” terms (Evetts, 2013). Moreover, the development of the HR professional project is often linked to the contribution contemporary HR is claimed to make in promoting the strategic goals of business organisations, and improving their performance, thus raising the credibility, legitimacy and status of practitioners (Wright, 2008).

3.2.1 Strategic HRM, performance and HR professionalisation

The above has to be seen in the context of the rise of HRM, and the claims HRM makes when it comes to enhancing business performance (Armstrong, 2000; Guest, 2007; Paauwe and Boon, 2009; Guest, 2011; Guest and Conway, 2011), particularly through the strategic contribution it makes to organisational goals (Bach 2005; Gerhart, 2005; Legge, 2005; Hesketh and Fleetwood, 2006; Fleetwood and Hesketh, 2008; Fleetwood

and Hesketh, 2010; Boxall and Purcell, 2008; Boxall, Ang and Bartram, 2011; Boxall, 2012; Paauwe, Wright, and Guest, 2013). The integration of HRM with strategy (Batt, 2002; Ahmad and Shroeder, 2003; Worland and Manning, 2005), and a concern with how HRM can enhance business performance, are believed to have opened up a path for the professionalisation of the HR field. The credibility and legitimacy of HR practitioners in organisations, and their claim to “professional” status, rests upon the extent to which they are viewed as making a valued, strategic and explicitly managerial contribution to organisational goals (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). There has long been a tendency to conceive of HR professionalism in a way that highlights the expertise and competence of practitioners, and the contribution they make to organisational effectiveness as a result (Watson, 2002). The rise of strategic HRM (SHRM), though, is arguably central to HR’s professional project (Wright, 2008). It has been claimed that, by focusing on issues such as talent management, leadership and organisational effectiveness, HR has an opportunity to re-invent itself, helping to gain much sought after kudos and credibility for its practitioners (Lawler, 2011:173; Marchington, 2015), thus boosting its claim to professional status (Higgins, Roper, and Gamwell, 2016).

Most studies on the link between HRM and performance have focused on policies and strategies (Boselie, Dietz and Boon, 2005) and not on the ‘role played by individual actors and departments in putting these policies into practice’ (Hailey, Farndale and Truss, 2005:49; McClean and Collins, 2011). Clearly, though, HR practitioners are important stakeholders in their own right, depending on their competencies, how they enact HR practices and how employees perceive their services (Hermans, Wright, Ulrich, and Sioli, 2009; Hailey, Farndale and Truss, 2005; Nishii, Lepak and Schneider, 2008; Long and Ismail, 2011). Paauwe (2004:3) brings a more humanistic perspective on the HRM-performance link, based on the powerful relationship between employer and employee, the underlying value of the parties involved, leading to the understanding that the role of the HR function is, or at least ought to be, of a “professional” nature that maintains a balance between all parties and ensures effective corporate citizenship. However, in a difficult economic climate this can take second place as HR performance is judged on its ability to keep the business “afloat”, with financial indicators coming to the forefront (Nijssen and Paauwe, 2012). All this highlights the difficulty which can arise from the dual position of the HR function, being responsible for a workforce that is considered a key asset and at the same time having to serve management goals. And,

there is also the challenge of demonstrating the undisputable contribution of HR, given the doubts that have been expressed about HR practitioners' credibility as expert professionals (Bach, 2005). This means that those in HR roles can be *praised* and yet *pressured* at the same time. The implications of HR practitioners' activities for business performance are worth assessing, yet they also come under pressure to demonstrate results. The problem with this is that it might undermine their claim to operate a "professional" HR domain.

The supposedly more "professional" dimension of the HR role has attracted more attention as expectations rise, but together with misconceptions too, as to what is expected of an HR professional within a business context (Roche and Teague, 2012). Although the literature on HRM is often more concerned with its function and how HR policies and practices add value to the business, there are writers who are interested in analysing HR as a role and the part it plays in enacting the HR function (Tyson and Fell, 1992; Caldwell, 2003, Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Keegan and Francis, 2010). New organisational and employment settings, the strong presence of information technology and the seeking for competitive edge have had an impact on the HR role, pointing to some bright prospects, but also bringing implications and challenges (Caldwell, 2003; Caldwell, 2010; Keegan and Francis, 2010). In particular, there is a notable concern with how HR practitioners, by operating as strategic "business partners" or "internal consultants" (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) can enhance their professional standing.

3.2.2 HR roles

Efforts to understand the nature of HR roles, and to categorise them, have a long history and debate about their effectiveness for the business (Legge 1978; Storey 1992; Tyson and Fell, 1992; Torrington and Hall, 1998; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Purcell and Kinnie, 2007). However, the most influential recent approach to conceptualising HR roles is the one developed by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005). They highlight the importance of delivering the HR service which 'translates to mastery of certain roles and competencies. Roles define what work must be done; competencies define how work is done' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005:199). The role descriptions proposed are: 'employee advocate', which deals with the employee-employer relationship; 'human capital developer', whose main responsibility is to develop and build on the human asset; 'functional expert', ensuring the design and execution of HR practices; and 'strategic partner', who consults with line managers (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005:201).

The four roles reflect the previously created roles of ‘employee champion’, ‘administrative expert’, ‘change agent’ and ‘strategic partner’ previously developed by Ulrich in the 1990s (Ulrich, 1996 cited in Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005).

What is central to all of the HR roles suggested by Ulrich and Brockbank is that each one of them is meant to be a ‘genuine HR leader’ working in a way that adds value to the business (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005:201). The main thinking behind Ulrich’s models is that when roles and competencies are well defined HR practitioners can ‘clearly articulate expectations of themselves and others’ and as ‘professionals’ they ‘can ensure that they know how to deliver value’ (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005:280). Recognising the financial difficulties businesses and organisations have come under due to the economic crisis, Ulrich and Brockbank have stressed the importance of the competencies that HR practitioners need to demonstrate (Brockett, 2010; Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank and Ulrich, 2012). These are described, briefly, as: ‘HR innovator and integrator’, that amalgamates solutions and collective HR work; ‘strategic positioner’, translating external business knowledge to internal organisation decisions/actions; ‘technology proponent’, making use of systems such as social networking to improve communication and the organisation’s identity; ‘capability builder’, enhancing organisational capabilities to invest upon; ‘change champion’, who initiates change to match developments in the external environment; and finally the ‘credible activist’, building personal relationships to influence others positively, but at the same time being highly credible to deliver (Ulrich, *et al.*, 2012:3; Ulrich, 2012). Being a ‘credible activist’ is described as the ‘crux of the HR professional role’ (Ulrich, Brockback and Ulrich, 2010:24). An HR role with the competencies of the credible activist enjoys the trust and respect of others in the organisation and is an overall valuable contributor (Ulrich, Brockback and Ulrich, 2010; Ulrich, Younger and Brockbank, 2012). In order to achieve this, HR practitioners must develop their skills by ‘delivering results with integrity’, ‘building relationships of trust’, ‘sharing information’ and by ‘doing HR with an attitude’ (Ulrich, Brockback and Ulrich, 2010:29).

The influential business partnering model, mentioned above (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), has influenced other approaches to how HR practitioners can enhance their professional standing, including a focus on organisational development and effectiveness (Sweem, 2010) and an emphasis on the ‘customer experience’, devolving many activities to line managers, so that the HR role is involved less with

administration and more with matters such as talent management and culture change (Vickers, 2013:23). Ulrich's latest proposition sees that HR needs to adopt an 'outside/inside' approach (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). Taking such an approach, 'represents an advance beyond an inside/outside approach' and 'HR no longer creates value by just serving employees, redesigning HR practices or making them more efficient' (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015:191). Instead, HR gets influenced and informed by the external environment so it creates value by making sure the services it offers 'inside the company align to expectations outside the company' which puts the HR role not just in a position of responding to strategy, but rather shaping and creating it – 'a full partnership role' (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015:191). On the whole, the HR role has evolved over the years and all the models developed are along the lines of moving away from an administrative role to a business contributor seeing it as an upgrade on the responsibilities and on the level of decision-making HR practitioners have (Yusoff, 2012).

It has been claimed that SHRM has upgraded the HR role since the people management function is now seen as integral to the survival and growth of an organisation (Salaman and Mabey, 1995; Wright and McMahan, 1999; Kaufman, 2007; Armstrong, 2008; Boxall and Purcell, 2008; Boxall, Ang and Bartram, 2011; Boxall, 2012). However, empirical research shows that HR has not made equivalent progress at a strategic level. 'The inability of the HR function to break out of its operational regime' and the failure to apply 'best', 'magic formula' practices or 'HR bundles', make it often impossible to have a proper 'strategic' HR and business linkage (Caldwell, 2004:203). Advancement in technology offers HR the possibility of "automating" some of its transactional activities by offering self-service systems to employees, releasing HR practitioners from more transactional jobs and enabling them to undertake strategic ones, in a way that elevates the strategic value of the HR function (Keegan and Francis, 2010; Parry, 2011).

3.2.3 HR's professional standing and business partnering

Having reviewed the rise and implications of HRM, as well as having considered the aspects of the nature of HR roles, with specific reference to the recent work of Ulrich, attention now turns to the implications of all this for the professional standing of HR practitioners. There has long been pressure on HR to demonstrate its value, since there is the strong belief that strategic human resource effectiveness 'enhances firm performance' (Huselid, Jackson and Schuler, 1997:185). The implications for HR

managers are obvious since, by demanding high performance levels, HR needs to live up to the expectations set out by SHRM. It is expected that the ‘professional skills and abilities of human resource staff appear to support the implementation of strategic HRM activities’ (Huselid, Jackson and Schuler, 1997:185). Some advocate that the effectiveness and future and success of HR in implementing strategy lies in playing a more strategic, business-oriented role, even being at the top of leadership (Stevens, 2010).

A key implication of the above is that HR practitioners can enhance their professional standing, and promote professionalisation, by avoiding administrative aspects of their role and becoming more engaged with advancing business goals, through business development, talent management and culture change (Sweem, 2010; Yusoff, 2012; Vickers, 2013; Marchington, 2015). It is generally accepted that a move away from the traditional administrative orientation of HR, towards a more strategic business focus, something that may imply a role for HR at board-level, can help to demonstrate its professional, managerial standing in organisations (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016).

This is central to the business partnering model advanced by Ulrich. His influential model claims that the “strategic” or “business partner” HR role can deliver success (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Ulrich believes that ‘with this value proposition, the HR profession has a point of view about what can be and should be for all stakeholders, a set of standards directing HR investments in strategy, structure, and practices, and a template for ensuring that each HR professional contributes. The HR Value Proposition is the blueprint for the future of HR’ (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005: 281). With this statement, Ulrich not only suggests the model as a positive influence for the HR professional role, but sees it as the *only* proposition for the future of HR. Operating as a ‘business partner’ or ‘internal consultant’ not only demonstrates the effective role played by HR practitioners in delivering business results, but also enhances their professional standing in organisations (Kenton and Moody, 2004; Wright, 2008).

However, to what extent is business partnering effective, or even appropriate, as a means of enhancing the professional standing of HR practitioners? One problem concerns HR practitioners’ often limited business exposure. This highlights the question of whether or not they are capable of assuming strategically higher positions, especially

as others may not recognise their ability, thus undermining their suitability for higher business roles. This is claimed as one of the reasons why HR practitioners' knowledge is insufficient, if limited only to HR matters, and may jeopardise the effectiveness of HR for the organisation (Payne, 2010; 2011). Moreover, how do HR practitioners really add value to their organisations? It seems that managers "believe" more in HR when HR practitioners adopt high-performance work systems for their HR practices, since this seems to be the only way managers see that HR adds value (Guthrie, Flood, Liu, MacCurtain and Armstrong, 2011; Chen, Hsu and Yip, 2011). However, this can contribute to inaccurate perceptions HR and line managers hold of each others' roles and their effectiveness for the organisation (Chen, Hsu and Yip, 2011). One example of this concerns different perceptions of HR and non-HR staff as to who the customers of the HR function are, or ought to be (Ulrich *et al.*, 2007). The latter believe that external customers need to be included, challenging the perception that HR practitioners consider employees and line managers as their only customers (Ulrich *et al.*, 2007). Differences in perceptions of the HR role and the skills required of HR are observed even early on in the training stages of HR practitioners (Nickson, Hurrell, Warhurst, Newsome, Scholarios, Commander, and Preston, 2008). Furthermore, there are different expectations of HR's role from different stakeholders in organisations, such as from line managers and union representatives, each of whom will expect a different kind of involvement of HR at strategic level (De Winne, Delmotte, Gilbert, and Sels, 2013).

More deeply, even with a stronger, more assertive HR role in organisations, this does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with the professional aspect it is seeking to develop (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Wright, 2008). Objections have been raised about the effectiveness of the business partnering approach and the competency of the HR role in ensuring that business partners possess performance outputs to guarantee the linkage between HR strategy and business strategy (Caldwell, 2010). Studies of whether and how HR practitioners have embraced the "strategic-partnership" approach show that there is limited faith in such competency model propositions, and that Ulrich's model is not as widely used as is sometimes claimed (Caldwell, 2008; Guest and Bryson, 2009). Sceptics see the model as being too prescriptive, and they question the differences between Ulrich's approach and previous efforts to categorise HR roles (Caldwell, 2003). The business partner model has to be seen as a new language, one used as 'a force for change' to bring about a refocusing of the HR role to a more business-centred approach (Keegan and Francis, 2010:874). Yet the extent to which the rise of SHRM

has helped overcome the traditional degree of uncertainty, in terms of weak credibility and value, that has often affected HR practitioners in their effort to break loose from the ‘vicious circle’ identified by Legge (1995:75), is unclear. The strategic business partner and internal consultant roles are seen as being too normative; they do not add to the attributes of a professional role leaving the HR role disconnected from the corporate level which is ideally where it should be (Guest and Bryson, 2009). Indeed, Wright claims that ‘rather than acting as a form of occupational closure, the rhetoric of business partnership and internal consultancy appears to have further diluted occupational identity, reduced entry barriers and encouraged the entry of rival functional groups’ (2008:1083).

Even though business partnering can work against, and perhaps even harm, the professional standing of HR practitioners (Thompson, 2011), for those that adopt it, the main reason is because of the ‘promise’ that it will offset the loss of control, the lack of autonomy and the low credibility the HR function has had to combat for many years (Keegan and Francis, 2010: 891). Because HR practitioners experience a lack of specific characteristics in the role they are meant to undertake, they may also encounter a lack of clarity in their goals, thus creating ambiguity over the contribution they make (Caldwell, 2003). Especially with the call for strategic intervention, an ambiguous role specification lessens the credibility and trust of those in HR roles, since expectations are higher than under the personnel administrative function of the past (Caldwell, 2003; Legge, 2005). Moreover, these expectations may also vary according to the different stakeholders – as seen above – contributing even more to the lack of clarity (De Winne *et al.*, 2013).

There has been much debate concerning the implications of the rise of strategic HRM and the concern with link between HRM and performance for understanding HR roles. Such changes have helped to raise the expectations of HR practitioners, supposedly giving them greater opportunities to demonstrate their value, however, in organisational terms, and potentially enhancing their professional standing (Marchington, 2015). Yet the extent to which HR has become genuinely strategic is open to dispute, with claims of very little progress (Lawler, 2011). Moreover, making a strategic level contribution does not make HR immune from organisational control even if it is considered, or aspires to be called, a profession; if anything, abiding by organisational terms makes HR subject to stricter performance measurements and quality controls. Perhaps more

deeply, the emphasis given to acting as a strategic “business partner” means that other HR functions become neglected, with potentially damaging consequences for the viability of HR’s professional project (Marchington, 2015).

3.3 The HR professionalisation project and the CIPD

Despite some of the issues and challenges concerning the relationship between strategic HRM, business partnering and the professional standing of HR practitioners, a notable HR professionalisation project is apparent, one which is particularly associated, in the UK, with the activities of the CIPD. The idea that HRM constitutes an “emerging profession”, or is part of the “aspiring profession” of management; and that HR practitioners perform a “professional” role, reflecting moral codes and standards, has become a major subject in recent writings (Ardagh, 2007; Bennington, 2007; Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). Signs of an HR professionalisation project exist, marked by efforts to emulate established professions, through the development of codes of conduct, for example, and attempts to secure occupational closure (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Legge, 2005; Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Rothwell and Arnold, 2005; Pohler and Willness, 2014). For Bolton and Muzio, HR is an ‘area of management which has progressed further down the path towards professionalization, displaying both effective closure and solid professional institutions...indicating perhaps how weaker and usually more feminized specialisms may view professionalism as a welcome source of legitimacy and as an attractive path for upward mobility’ (2008:289-90).

HR associations, like the CIPD, which calls itself ‘the professional body for HR and people development’ (CIPD 2016:2), have played a leading part in progressing the HR professional project (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). By setting appropriate professional standards, which support its qualification scheme, the CIPD has significantly influenced the training and image of HR practitioners. The Institute’s existence, which has taken a number of different forms, dates back to 1913 and the formation of the Welfare Workers’ Association (WWA), initially with a membership of just 34 people, the majority of whom were female (Evans, 2006). As the IPM (Institute of Personnel Management) and then, from 1994 to 2000, the IPD (Institute for Personnel and Development), the Institute developed education and training programmes, publications, and codes of practice for members, and partnered with educational institutions such as universities.

Full membership became restricted to proof of achievement. In 2000, the Institute was granted chartered status, becoming the CIPD (Evans, 2006; Brewster, Wilson and Holley, 2008). Professionalising HR has been a notable feature of the CIPD's agenda. This has been one of its most attractive features, making the CIPD an influential organisation in the field of HRM. More people have looked to acquire its qualification in order to have demonstrable credentials for employment in the HR field; however, in recent years the rate of increase in membership has slowed. Nevertheless, in 2016 the CIPD claimed over 140,000 members around the world (CIPD, 2016).

The CIPD has attempted to promote HR professionalisation, through 'growing and developing a community of professionals that champion better work and working lives' (<https://www.cipd.co.uk/about/who-we-are/purpose>), in two principal ways; first by publishing relevant professional standards which, on meeting them, grants individual chartered status on HR practitioners who have achieved the appropriate qualifications; and second, by developing, and periodically refining, its Code of Professional Conduct. With regard to its professional standards, in 2009 the CIPD undertook what was claimed as a 'radical re-visioning...to equip the profession for the challenges ahead' (MacLachlan, 2009:18). This included the development of a 'profession map', which 'captures the knowledge and behaviours that HR and L&D professionals need to demonstrate in order to meet [the CIPD's] requirements for professional membership' (Croft 2009a; <https://www.cipd.co.uk/learn/career/profession-map>).

It has been claimed that by revising its professional standards, restructuring the membership grades and showing how HR can add value to organisations the HR function will set new benchmarks for other business professions (MacLachlan, 2009). The CIPD's Profession Map 'defines the building blocks of effective people management practice across ten professional specialisms, and describes eight fundamental behaviours that underpin good practice regardless of specialism'. These behaviours 'describe in detail how a professional needs to carry out their activities' (<https://www.cipd.co.uk/learn/career/profession-map>). Figure 3.1 provides further details. The eight behaviours, and their descriptions, project the idea of an HR "professional" who uses their expertise, insights, leadership skills and credibility to enhance organisational decision-making and add business value in a way that benefits the organisations, staff and the wider society. As the CIPD states, there 'is a critical role for the HR profession of the future to play, by developing its expertise in human and

organisation behaviour and using that to help create business solutions that have lasting benefits for all stakeholders' (CIPD, 2017: 3).

For the CIPD, being an HR professional, and meeting its professional standards, means that members must 'demonstrate their commitment' to continuing professional development (CPD) (CIPD, 2016:7). Holding a formal qualification is insufficient on its own to provide professional status; ongoing professional development is also important (Bailey, 2015). According to the CIPD, being a member 'is a recognised benchmark of professionalism. To support the HR profession in meeting global demands and pressures and to enable agility, the CIPD sets high standards of entry for professional members and requires a firm commitment to continuing professional development and lifelong learning' (<https://www.cipd.co.uk/learn/cpd/policy>).

The CIPD continues to review and refine its professional standards, for the purpose of adapting them to changes in organisations and the world of work. In 2015, it launched its 'Profession for the Future' strategy, something which is intended to provide a 'new definition of what it means to be an HR professional, described in a new framework of professional standards, that will ensure HR remains a trusted and credible profession that can have a real impact on work and working lives' (<https://www.cipd.co.uk/news-views/future-profession>). One key feature of this exercise has been an attempt to develop a new way of thinking about HR 'professional principles', described as the 'fundamental priorities...that would describe what people management and development professionals stand for, as opposed to the activities they carry out at work' (CIPD, 2015b:7).

In addition to its efforts to define, and refine as appropriate, a set of relevant professional standards, the CIPD has also emphasised the importance of its Code of Professional Conduct as a key part of its attempt to advance HR professionalisation. Changes in the Code, over the years, reflect the changing demands on HR and the importance attached to practitioners being presented as professionals. Originally published in 2007, the Code states 'the promotion of the art and science of the management and development of people for the public benefit'; it was subsequently revised in 2011 and 2015, requiring all CIPD members to adhere to its claimed 'high standards of entry' (CIPD, 2012; CIPD, 2015a).

Figure 3.1 The CIPD Professional Map - Behaviours

Behaviour	Description
Curious	Future-focused, inquisitive and open-minded; seeks out evolving and innovative ways to add value to the organisation.
Decisive thinker	Demonstrates the ability to analyse and understand data and information quickly. Uses information, insights and knowledge in a structured way to identify options, make recommendations and make robust, defensible decisions.
Skilled influencer	Demonstrates the ability to influence to gain the necessary commitment and support from diverse stakeholders in pursuit of organisation value.
Personally credible	Builds and delivers professionalism through combining commercial and HR expertise to bring value to the organisation, stakeholders and peers.
Collaborative	Works effectively and inclusively with a range of people, both within and outside of the organisation.
Driven to deliver	Demonstrates determination, resourcefulness and purpose to deliver the best results for the organisation and its people.
Courage to challenge	Shows courage and confidence to speak up skilfully, challenging others even when confronted with resistance or unfamiliar circumstances.
Role model	Consistently leads by example. Acts with integrity, impartiality and independence, balancing individual, organisation and legal parameters.

Source: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/learn/career/profession-map/behaviours>

The 2012 version articulated CIPD membership as ‘a recognised benchmark of professionalism within the field of HR’ and placed the CIPD in the role as ‘regulator of the highest standards of behaviour and practice in the HR profession’ (CIPD, 2012:1). There is a notable emphasis placed on the importance of members undertaking CPD activity, with a hint that they could be held accountable if they are not believed to be upholding the required standards. The most recent (2015) version of the code is organised around four main principles: ‘professional competence and behaviour’; ‘ethical standards and integrity’; ‘representative of the profession’; and ‘stewardship’; highlighting its universal applicability, regardless of the level, role, sector or specialism of the practitioner (CIPD, 2015a).

By having articulated a set of professional standards, developed an HR Profession Map, published (and revised) a Code of Professional Conduct, and encouraged HR practitioners to engage in CPD, thus emulating the characteristics of more established professions, the CIPD has played an important role in promoting the HR professionalisation project. Moreover, the Institute constantly aims at reinforcing the value of HR practice via its publications, sponsored student texts and research, and through the creation of controlled entry to membership status and quality measures on the courses leading to its qualification (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). In 2013, the CIPD celebrated its centenary by highlighting the work the Institute had done over the years to shape the HR profession. For the CIPD, the focus of HR is now not only on supporting line managers, but also on aiming for general employee well-being and support through management processes. This was signalled in 2013 with the new stated purpose of the CIPD being to ‘champion better work and working lives’ (Marchington, 2015:184).

However, although the CIPD emphasises the importance of its professional chartered status, HR practitioners are not obliged to hold its qualification; hence, the possibility that non-members can assume positions in HR. While this may be seen to reflect a lack of power on the part of the CIPD, and questions the necessity of its membership, the Institute has been successful in creating a market pressure to make its qualification, and CIPD membership, informally a prerequisite for HR positions (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). Furthermore, the CIPD has introduced the idea of the ‘thinking performer’, something thought to combat all perceptions of negativity around the HR role’s effectiveness. On this, it was concluded that there is a need to apply more pedagogical techniques in order to place the ‘thinking performer’ role within a more balanced

perspective encompassing overall human and economic factors (Francis and Keegan, 2006).

The CIPD has undoubtedly honed its efforts into presenting the HR practitioner as an expert on all HR matters, hinting at a professional level of practice. However, there are a number of key characteristics of a profession which may compromise the effectiveness of the CIPD's efforts (Illich *et al.*, 1977; MacDonald 1995; Friedson, 2001). Having a subject area with a taught syllabus, a period of training and a supporting institute are only some of the characteristics of a profession. Although personnel management as a field has several decades of history, it has not followed the sort of course set historically by established professions (Abbott, 1988; Perkin, 1989; MacDonald, 1995). Professionalising the HR role, in terms of achieving chartered status for the CIPD, has been considered as a boost for the HR position. However, this does not necessarily equate to an "overnight" shift to becoming an actual profession (Guest and Bryson, 2009). So, although the CIPD has gained chartered status, this does not mean that it automatically demonstrates the equivalent levels of expertise, credibility and trust characteristic of established professions; and its members' social contribution as professionals still needs to be realised.

In its quest to give a more defined description to the HR role as a profession, the CIPD did embrace Ulrich's model of HR roles (Ulrich, and Brockbank, 2005), originally incorporating in its HR "Profession Map" the competencies necessary to perform the various roles proposed (Ulrich, Younger and Brockbank, 2012). This choice of the CIPD is understandable, mainly because of the importance Ulrich's model assigns to the HR role by giving it equal status with other managerial positions and emphasising its strategic importance for organisations. The rhetoric of the business partnering model and the strategic partner appear to be adopted even early on by those studying for a CIPD qualification (Nickson, *et al.*, 2008). So, Ulrich's proposal is seen as an effective way of improving the credibility of the HR role, leading it to becoming a trusted and valued profession. Professionalising the HR role has been 'another way of countering concerns about personnel specialists' by trying to 'shed off' some of the disbelief about their value and credibility (Guest and Bryson, 2009:121). All that said, however, there are some notable problems and challenges which obstruct the professional project in HR.

3.4 An HR profession?

HR faces a lot of conceptual debate as a starting point before even being considered a profession: the debate about whether or not HR is a “profession”; how far management can be seen as a “profession”; and even deeper than this, whether or not management is a distinctive occupation in the first place. The professional nature of managerial work, particularly in terms of the possibility of “making managers” through an education system that results in management of a professional kind, has attracted attention (Reed, 1992). In a sceptical way, professionalising management has been seen as simply an act of ‘responsibilisation’, justifying its responsibilities in order to give management the legitimacy it seeks (Grey, 1997:703). In a nutshell, the idea of professionalising management is based on the ‘reliance on a model of “status” rather than “occupational” professionalism’, which tends to create weaknesses in perceiving and accepting management as a profession (Reed, 1992:593). Going a level below, there has been a debate about whether or not management is a distinctive job description in the first place and how far managers can be distinguished from non-managers. From a “critical humanistic” perspective, managerial actions are not a distinctive group of activities (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Again, discourse may have played a part in constructing or shifting the meaning of management, being responsible for the rise of new managerial attributes such as ‘teambuilders’ and ‘champions’, or ‘networkers’ and ‘relationship-builders’ which become ‘legitimate’ characteristics of the ‘professional manager’ (Grey, 1999:570).

The idea that the above could be the case with HR has been considered a plausible one (Townley, 1993), and it is thought that this ‘managerialist conception of the discourse of HRM’ that has dominated the literature in the last decades, has been responsible for much of the debate on the theme of HR (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010:813). For that, a more critical approach needs to be adopted, or at least one that is pragmatically embedded in terms of research and its findings (Watson, 2010). However, making the assertion that HRM, in some ways, is a creation of discourse has been viewed as mistaken since it is ‘disconnected of context’ and ignores empirical accounts of HRM research (Thompson, 2011:357). Even so, this does not reduce the importance of understanding how HRM professes a professional stance, and how this manifests itself.

Having discussed HR’s professionalisation agenda, and the role played by the CIPD in promoting it, it is imperative to see how the claimed professionalisation of HR

supposedly takes shape. In doing so, a series of issues unfold. As already mentioned, HR has been characterised as an ‘emerging new managerial profession’ (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016:286), or as part of the ‘aspiring’ professional project of management (Bolton and Muzio 2008:281). This project is based on the belief that the credibility, legitimacy and status of HR practitioners, and thus their “professionalism”, is best achieved by being closer to the business and engaged in addressing strategic business challenges (Wright, 2008). Efforts by HR practitioners to maintain professional standards may complement their role by supporting business objectives. Enhancing HRM performance not only supports the business but also gives the HR role opportunities to demonstrate its value and work at a strategic level which can benefit its professional standing (Huselid, Jackson and Schuler, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Brockbank and Ulrich, 2009; Ulrich, 2012; Ulrich, Younger and Brockbank, 2012).

It is thought that while HR may encounter difficulties in fulfilling organisational objectives, while maintaining true to its function, it can ‘combine activities and processes’, reflect on these and turn them to its advantage (Ruona and Gibson, 2004:49). Critically reflecting on Ulrich’s “thinking performer” role, and bringing it to the foreground, may aid both the business and increase HR credibility (Ruona and Gibson, 2004; Francis and Keegan, 2006). Using its strengths in all the functions involved, HR can bring a certain convergence and synergy to its role (Ruona and Gibson, 2004). This enables the HR role to be viewed by others as operating in a professional manner, benefiting its overall professional standing. However, there are a number of problems with viewing the HR role in such terms. Ambitious attempts to be a strategic business partner while simultaneously fulfilling a professional role leave HR practitioners exposed to management tensions. Challenging the duality of HR’s commitment, brings to surface a number of issues HR encounters when it aspires to operate as a profession, which need to be considered (Legge, 2005; Francis and Keegan, 2006; Boxall and Purcell, 2008; Guest and Woodrow, 2012).

3.4.1 Inhibitors of HR professional practice

One issue concerns the factors that inhibit effective HR professional practice. These are the issues that HR practitioners face in terms of credibility, trust, lack of status and contradictory commitments that make it challenging for those in HR roles to perform in professional terms. The HR role seems to suffer a certain degree of powerlessness in

terms of involvement in decision-making processes (Guest and Woodrow, 2012); and given the relatively high proportion of women in personnel/HR managerial roles, it does not do any favours for this feminised occupational sector (Guest and Bryson, 2009). In fact, even when assuming a “business partner” role HR practitioners find themselves still having to find a balance between being involved in both strategic and transactional decisions, something which creates role tensions (Pritchard, 2010). Much of the work of HR practitioners in organisations involves ‘maintenance’ activities, ensuring that administrative systems operate smoothly (Glover and Butler 2012:199). The administrative aspect of HR roles is still present, along with characteristics of the welfare role too, creating an image of practitioners operating as bureaucratic police (Welch and Welch, 2012). For instance, even though HR practitioners aim to “educate” line managers about how to handle situations such as disciplinary procedures as independently as possible, they still end up “stepping in”, either because line managers have failed to abide by proper procedures, are too scared to take responsibility, or even retain the impression that doing so is HR’s job; an altogether complex issue that leaves HR practitioners juggling between commitments (Jones and Saundry, 2012). Although practitioners may be called in to solve such problems, it does not say much for the status of the HR role, since if it was perceived as having high status, HR’s involvement would have been sought at an earlier stage.

HR practitioners try to prove their value by aspiring to satisfy varying interests. For instance, maintaining a strategic role and ensuring the smoothest of administrative processes, or motivating employees and maintaining union representatives’ trust, may result in outcomes that are not always perceived to be what is expected of HR, depending upon the parties involved (De Winne *et al.*, 2013). This can lead to a lack of trust in, and respect for, the HR role (Guest and King, 2004), undermining the status of practitioners. Part of the problem is to be found in the decentralisation of HR activities. Devolution of the HR function, the delivery of HR practices by line-managers, outsourcing and e-HR can cause HR to lose control over the enactment and the quality of its function (Caldwell, 2003; Keegan and Francis, 2010; Parry, 2011). Part of the issue is associated with the strategic business contribution, since HR practitioners may not be regarded, by non-HR managers, as being competent in this area, something which affects others’ trust in them (Payne, 2010). As a result, they end up needing to acquire competencies more directly related to overall business knowledge, showing ‘flexibility, proactiveness and an open mind set’ (Long and Ismail, 2011:1065).

Furthermore, attempting to maintain standards that are based on more formalised processes, while keeping with a strategic approach, can generate conflict in a way that makes HR practitioners more reactive rather than strategically forward-thinking partners (Roche and Teague, 2012). Status generated from HR expertise and trust in the HR role is not only crucial for the practice of HR policies and processes, but also permeates many aspects influencing performance outcomes, operational effectiveness and employee well-being (Searle and Dietz, 2012). On the whole, trust and respect act as an overall important link between HR practices and employees' faith in their employing organisation (Alfes, Shantz and Truss, 2012). The establishment of good and truthful relationships is the building block of the role HR practitioners aim to enact (Jones and Saundry, 2012); however, with an initial higher status for HR's area of expertise, some of these inhibitors of HR practice could be eliminated or diminished.

So, since HR practitioners' expertise is not always received with the desired value, it undermines the trust in, and respect for, the HR function, something which does not help in making an impact and demonstrating the professional status of the role (Guest and King, 2004). Although HR is considered to be responsible for the 'most valued company resource', as Legge (1995:75) expresses it, it still suffers a certain ambiguity in terms of credibility and value by being enclosed within a 'vicious circle' where the non-involvement of HR practitioners in the planning process gives rise to problems left to them to solve (Legge, 2005:68). Only now, involvement in strategic level issues has raised expectations of the HR role and any non-delivery of expected professional expertise may create an environment of crisis, threatening the capacity of the HR role to function effectively. Professionalising the HR role has thus been seen as a way out of the low status it suffers (Wright, 2008).

3.4.2 The evolution of the HR profession on organisational terms

A second issue concerns the extent to which HR professionalism is based on organisational terms. Despite the clear efforts of the CIPD to promote the acceptability of HR as a professional discipline, the HR role still lacks the credibility of an *established* profession, unlike those with full status and legal protection (Lane, Wilkinson, Littek, Heisig, Brown, Burchell, Mankelow, Potton, and Tutschner, 2004; Bailey, 2011). Even if one wants to term HR a "profession", despite personnel's longstanding history in the employment field, it cannot be considered a profession due to its more recent history of credentialism (Hallier and Summers, 2011), with some

describing it as ‘a new graduate occupation’ (Elias and Purcell, 2004 cited in Hallier and Summers, 2011:205). Potentially, one may argue whether the transition from an HR manager/practitioner to an HR professional is possible, and whether or not using the language of professionalism is more a case of legitimising managerial authority through discourse (Grey, 1997). HR’s legitimacy comes from its attempt to become closer to the business and be associated with strategic business goals. It is seen as being closer to a managerial position rather than a professional one, and actually closer to being a ‘managerial profession’ that seeks legitimacy and recognition internally from senior executives where it needs to prove its purpose and value (Wright, 2008:1; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016).

Does HR’s concern with organisational interests and managerial goals mean that it has become too closely associated with the narrow interests of employers, undermining its claim to professional status (Pohler and Willness, 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016)? HRM favours organisational well-being and, more importantly, business growth, rather than more altruistic professional purposes (Turner, 1999; Friedson, 2001). This highlights an important ‘paradox at the heart of HR professionalism’ (Farndale and Brewster, 2005:44). Its claim to professional status is associated with promoting the business partner model and becoming closer to the business. It is thought that the HR role has been ‘too eager to embrace a business partner role’ (Roche and Teague, 2012:1334), which leads one to think that the HR profession’s existence is only through its strategic nature. Yet, ‘one of the hallmarks of a profession is having its own standards that override those of the business’ (Farndale and Brewster, 2005:44). In cases where a business partnering approach has not been achieved, this has lead HR to end up ‘in a no-man’s land, having repudiated its traditional role’ (Roche and Teague, 2012:1334). Thompson paints a rather hopeless picture for the HR role, or “profession”, claiming that HR is not doing itself any favours by adopting a ‘shareholder value logic’ and succumbing to market pressures, but it is rather distancing and isolating itself from the potential of an HR profession (2011:363). Changes in the HR function are thought to have resulted in it losing part of its core “professional” value (Keegan and Francis, 2010). For Marchington, the narrow focus on promoting HR’s value to the business, in terms of improvements in business performance, by neglecting the interests of other stakeholders has adverse consequences for ‘the long-term sustainability of HRM and the role that employers should play in society’ (2015:183).

Some have argued that, for the purpose of legitimacy, HR's professional project would be more effective by promoting and safeguarding higher-level social and ethical values, and a concern with a wider range of stakeholders (Friedson, 2001; Kochan, 2004; Kochan, 2007; Higgins, Gamwell and Roper, 2016). The distancing of the HR role from an ethical and social standpoint may be responsible for the perceived failure of HR professionalisation, and is therefore a subject which needs to be carefully evaluated (Kochan, 2004; Bennington, 2007). One of the characteristics of established professions is the presence of ethical standards that are broader than, and go beyond, rather narrow business interests (Farndale and Brewster, 2005). Over the years, concerns have been raised about the conflicts associated with the HR role (Legge, 1995; Legge, 2005; Wright, 2008), pointing to problems regarding the ethical treatment of employees, considering the human aspect in organisations and the importance of keeping a strategic focus (Winstanley and Woodall, 2000; Bolton and Houlihan, 2007). One view is that HR practitioners should operate as ethical agents (Bennington, 2007) and, above all, the business-oriented function should be employee advocates (Rucci, 2009). However, the more integrated with a strategic business dimension, the more difficult it becomes for the HR role to maintain a 'moral decency' (Macklin, 2007:267). Yet implementing and abiding by a moral and ethical code seems important if the HR role is to operate as a profession (Ardagh, 2007; Macklin, 2007; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Marchington, 2015; CIPD, 2017).

Strategic HRM can impose demands on the HR role, with regard to challenging the "rightfulness" of certain actions, and experiencing the potentially contradictory commitments between striving to meet organisational goals and maintaining the standards set out by the "professional" (ethical) code of conduct that has now become part of the role (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Guest and Woodrow, 2012). The connection between ethics and HRM has been a concern, since there is a tendency to manage the human asset as any other form of capital or commodity, neglecting the human element (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Kamoche, 2007). This puts a pressure on the HR practitioner to decide the level of intervention when aiming to bridge the two sides of managing the human asset in a way that brings business results and also be in keeping with the ethical treatment of employees (Watson, 2007). Even if HR approaches can potentially create space for the ethical treatment of employees, they may be unachievable where HR practitioners solely carry the responsibility of

implementation (Guest and Woodrow, 2012), something which brings us back to the issue of HR having limited power and lacking wide acceptance and support.

That said, though, it is to HR practitioners that members of an organisation often turn in order to handle ethical matters; and they ought to get credit for implementing workplace equality and diversity and health and safety issues (Dex and Forth, 2009). However, it is thought that depending on the framework that HR practitioners function in, their ethical standards and behaviour get moulded by that framework; instead of the practitioners being able to impose their ethics and morality (de Gama, McKenna, and Peticca-Harris, 2012). It is more the case of applying the rules rather than having a moral base; and while doing so, HR practitioners may function in ‘a framework of distance, depersonalization and dissembling in the management of people in organizations, serving to neutralize the moral impulse’ (de Gama, McKenna, and Peticca-Harris, 2012:107). Following on from this, and thinking of their claimed lack of authority and status, HR practitioners may find it difficult to deal with ethical dilemmas and conflicts present when professionals work in environments where there may not be a shared consensus supporting their professional values (Styhre, 2007; Gunz and Gunz, 2007). HR practitioners might aspire to be “ethical stewards”, but in practice are not always able to fulfil such a role (CIPD, 2017). This creates difficulties with developing and projecting a professional identity. Although the role of the “thinking performer” has been developed as a route that might facilitate the work of HR practitioners in dealing with professional dilemmas (Francis and Keegan, 2006), even when taking decisions based on moral and ethical codes, they are still ‘within terms which recognize the dominance of a logic of corporate business success...’, instead of based on a professional moral code (Watson, 2003:169).

3.4.3 HR’s weak professional identity and legitimacy

A third issue concerns the questionable extent to which a distinctive HR professional identity exists, given the variety of HR roles suggested and the debates on their effectiveness in promoting a professional identity for HR practitioners. There is some evidence that there is a distinct professional identity apparent among HR practitioners, based on identifying with, and showing their attachment to, the HR profession (CIPD, 2017). However, it is argued that the HR role seems to suffer from weak occupational professional identity (Wright, 2008). In addition to the issues concerning the lack of trust and status, contradictory commitments and possible ethical dilemmas, it has been

claimed that HR practitioners perceive a lack of connection with their roles, with the development of their professional identity suffering as a result. In aiming to move away from an HR role towards an HR identity, there can be a blending of the two, leading to an identity construction that may have a broader impact within the organisational context. Thus tensions can be created 'between different groups of HR practitioners as different constructions of becoming strategic and becoming a partner are worked through. The impact of these tensions is felt across the HR department, and indeed beyond...' (Pritchard, 2010:185).

The HR identity lacks a much needed standing in order for the professional dimension to dominate more strongly and thus profit from the benefits of having greater professional authority. As a result of the lack of authority of their role and, at times, the unclear distinction into the kind of professional contribution they make, HR practitioners often do not have such a strong sense of professional identity. This has been highlighted as an unfortunate side effect of the ambiguity that surrounds the transition from personnel to HRM, and from the reactive to a more proactive and strategic role (Legge, 2005; Wright, 2008). Any association with developing an identity based on the "strategic partner" role has not shown any real signs of legitimising a professional identity (Pritchard, 2010). Moreover, the "business partner" model has even been associated with the presence of a 'deprofessionalizing dynamic', given the extent to which its rise seems to have contributed to diluting HR occupational identity (Wright, 2008:1081).

A further complication is that the HR role faces certain challenges and dilemmas in terms of its professionalism. During the 1990s, there was considerable interest in the extent to which HRM was coming to replace personnel management in organisations, and the implications for HR roles, and how they should be understood (Gennard and Kelly, 1995; Grant and Oswick, 1998). The possibility of the HR role's 'old ambiguities' turning into 'new uncertainties' (Caldwell, 2003:1; Caldwell, 2010) is a threat to its potential professional future, while taking also into consideration the diverse functions the role may be called to play because of the economic recession (Lengnick-Hall, Beck and Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Nijssen and Paauwe, 2012; Roche and Teague, 2012), as well as the impact of such challenges for a still highly feminised occupational identity (Guest and Bryson, 2009). Whether or not the HR role's professional future lies in its strategic contribution is another matter for discussion and, if that is so, then there

is a potential threat here, given that ‘HR professionals need to develop competencies in strategic management. Lack of such competencies is likely to prompt the demand for other professionals with business background outside the HR function to take over strategic HR roles’ (Payne, 2010:11). If this is a threat, it highlights even more HR’s weak professional identity and even weaker professional control over its practice area. It would be a difficult task to shed managers’ view that it is only through strategic-level practices and high-performance systems that HR practitioners are worthy of an important role in organisations (Guthrie *et al.*, 2011). If, in order to demonstrate their professional role, HR practitioners decide to go down a different route, other than by focusing on strategic integration, they will face a hard task in persuading managers of their professional role being detached from strategic tasks.

Moreover, HR practitioners face similar issues to certain other occupations, which aspire to professional status, for example management consultants, not in terms of a formal codified knowledge-base or regulation of the occupation, but in terms of legitimacy, proof of their efficiency, vulnerability and lack of a clearly defined social status (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Kitay and Wright, 2007; Kochan, 2007). In this case, management consultancy has been examined in order to understand why it is failing to reach professional status even though it has attracted high levels of reward as a field (Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011; Butler, Chillias and Muhr, 2012). On the one hand, it is thought that it is the type of knowledge-base, seen as ‘too elusive, fuzzy and perishable’ together with the consultants’ unwillingness to be taken as professionals, that has prevented this field from becoming a profession (Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011:807). On the other hand, however, there can be factors that contribute to a distinctive process of professionalisation (Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011:810).

Although there is evidence from HR associations worldwide that there is some sense of community identity apparent, the fact that there is no obligatory requirement for practitioners to hold a qualification in order to practice in the HR field, works against legitimacy and the development of occupational and professional identity (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Pohler and Willness, 2014). Moreover, the diverse and fragmented nature of HR roles, and the fact that much HR activity is devolved to line managers, not only weakens their occupational identity, but also makes it difficult for HR practitioners

to demonstrate their distinctive contribution, and how their expertise can make a difference (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016).

Research into whether or not HR practitioners have embraced the suggested roles by Ulrich, (Ulrich 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), who propose them to be a way of gaining professional credibility, reveals that the HR role is a 'weak occupational group' defined in problems such as 'powerlessness' and an 'inability to maintain or defend the boundaries of their specialist expertise' (Caldwell, 2003:984). It has even been suggested that the shift towards the business partnering model, as mentioned above, has inhibited the development of an HR professional identity (Wright, 2008; Thompson, 2011; Roche and Teague, 2012).

Even though there is a specific, codified body of knowledge and a supporting institute, the HR role is perceived to lack legitimacy, social status and the authority of a profession (Kochan, 2007; Watson, 2007). The construction of a strong professional identity, as seen in the previous chapter, normally occurs during the early stages of training. However, the construction of a strong HR professional identity is not helped by the numerous 'perspectives on HRM which university students are expected to assimilate, an HRM degree is ill-placed to present a unified view of its practical content, vocational role and organisational contribution' (Hallier and Summers, 2011:205). Discovering early on about the ambiguities and potential problems concerning the HR function – such as a lack of credibility, increasing outsourcing, uncertain career paths and ethical issues – can lead to developing feelings of 'dissonance', 'resonance' and 'rejection' which can have adverse implications for HR professional identity formation (Hallier and Summers, 2011:204-219). An initial process of identity formation is only ever going to be part of an 'evolving process of professional identity construction', both during HR practitioners' studies and their careers (Hallier and Summers, 2011:205). Perhaps, it is the lack of commitment to continuous professional development which is thought to have an impact on the development of professional identity, in a way that inhibits the development of a strong identity (Bailey, 2011). Nevertheless, there are areas such as 'legislation and codes of practice and the CIPD code of professional conduct' that affect the professional behaviour and identity of HR practitioners. A deepening of their knowledge and expertise in this respect, referred to as 'professionalism', could enhance their status and work positively towards a more defined professional identity (Bailey, 2011:495).

The shift towards a strategically contributing HR role may have elevated it in one respect, but it has not necessarily worked towards giving practitioners a more defined professional identity. Difficulties in comprehending the real essence of the “strategic” aspect and the term “partner” in relation to the contribution HR practitioners make, are apparent in a troubled process of attempting to construct a social identity and move away from being a *role* to being a *profession* (Pritchard, 2010). Rather than seeing HR as possessing a distinctive professional identity, which has been promoted by its professional project, some claim that the concern should be with how HR practitioners, individually and collectively, socially construct notions of “professionalism” and what it is to be a “professional”. Pritchard and Symon, for example, demonstrate how customer service representatives in an HR call centre attempted to ‘*work up* their roles as “professionals” in opposition to possible alternative constructions of routine and unskilled work practices’ (2011:445). As a result the act of “being a HR professional” in this context was both contested and involved considerable identity work to maintain’ (Pritchard and Symon, 2011:445). Another study shows the techniques HR practitioners use to reclaim their professional identity, in the face of challenge, particularly by demonstrating how their expertise can be used to find solutions to business problems. Thus, ‘HR practice is in part embedded in, and constructed through, the identity work of these HR professionals, rather than entirely predicated on or derived from organizational requirements’ (Pritchard and Fear, 2015:361).

HR practitioners’ identity may be socially constructed rather than occupationally based; for example, non-strategic level practitioners may have the knowledge and expertise expected of HR professionals, but the division of the HR function has created situations where professional identity construction becomes more localised in nature (Pritchard and Symon, 2011), carrying a different meaning depending on the level practitioners serve (Hallier and Summers, 2011). In such cases, ‘the strategic orientation of HR has left [non-strategic level practitioners] with less favourable “identities” as reactive information handlers rather than proactive HR solutions providers’ (Pritchard and Symon, 2011:446). That said, though, some have tried to ‘reclaim their professional identities, and more specifically to claim the important welfare and advocate role left vacant with the move towards a strategic focus’ (Pritchard and Symon, 2011:446). This indicates that the professional identity of HR practitioners may be more ad hoc and socially constructed, rather than occupationally based, and illustrative more of a situational construction of professional identity. This brings to mind the question posed

by Bailey (2011), as to whether all HR roles are ‘professional’ and whether or not a split between ‘professional’ and ‘non-professional’ roles ought to be considered, especially given the ‘erratic’ way in which continuous professional development is pursued (Bailey, 2011:492).

3.5 Conceptualising HR as a profession: a framework for research

There is some evidence for the progress of the HR professionalisation project, based on emulating the characteristics of established professions (Pohler and Willness, 2014). However, there are a number of problems with viewing HR straightforwardly as a profession in the conventional sense, particularly the large extent to which its power and authority stem from the perceived contribution of its practitioners to organisational goals (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). For Ulrich and Dulebohn, (2015), HR lost its path to professionalisation as far back as the 1970s when it “settled” for an administrative, inward-looking role, and it needs to reclaim its position only in organisational value-adding terms. For some, HR’s pursuit of professional status would be better achieved by redefining its value-base in terms of its ethical, social and employee contributions, consistent with an emphasis on long-term sustainability (Kochan, 2004; Kochan, 2007; Marchington, 2015).

As has been demonstrated, there are certain difficulties in viewing HR as a profession (Roche and Teague, 2012), and certainly not in a ‘pure’ sense, in Noordegraaf’s terms (2007:765). It may seem to operate more as a ‘situated’ or ‘hybridised’ form of professionalism - within organisational contexts and practices (Noordegraaf, 2007:771), given also the distinction made between ‘organisational’ and ‘occupational’ professions (Evetts, 2013), or aiming perhaps towards ‘organising professionalism’ where professionals take the terms of the game in their hands (Noordegraaf, 2015:201). Nevertheless, in the context of organisations playing a greater part in shaping professionalism, there is a process of professionalisation apparent highlighting the relevance of a neo-Weberian approach (Goode, 1969; Larson, 1977; Saks, 2010; Saks, 2012; Saks, 2016), relating to the conscious and organised efforts of occupations to become professions by taking into consideration the greater social and economic environment constraints (Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2011). HR should perhaps be viewed, then, as aspiring to become a profession, in the sense that there is clearly a professionalisation project present (Ardagh, 2007; Bennington, 2007; Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016), but it

remains unclear how successful it will eventually end up being. Its members then, seen as being part of a professionalisation project, mainly instigated by the CIPD, and responding to the call for professionalism (or professional status), can perhaps thus be viewed as *aspirant* professionals.

Having analysed the themes applicable to the research over two chapters, key elements from relevant literature on the sociology of professions and HR are now combined to create a conceptual framework for the research investigation, one that not only forms the basis from which to address the research objectives, but also works as a guide for later analysis (see figure 3.2). The basis of this framework are the four research objectives, specified in chapter one, which concern the nature of the HR professional role and professional identity, HR professionalism and status, understanding HR as a professional project and how HR practitioners respond to this by operating as *aspirant* professionals, and consider the implications for HR as a profession. These research objectives guided the review of relevant literature in chapters two and three. From this literature, five key themes have been derived – professional ethics, expert knowledge, trust/credibility and status/credibility, and professional identity – as a means of framing the research, conducting the analysis and addressing the objectives.

First, with regard to professional ethics, in the previous chapter it was shown that professional ethics constitute the base upon which professional codes of conduct are constructed, according to which the behaviour of professionals is determined (Durkheim, 1957; Lunt, 2008). Professionals working according to their ethical standards, in theory, do not – theoretically - face ethical dilemmas, assuming they follow their standards and have the best interests of their clients in mind. However, there are difficulties and dilemmas associated with professionals working within organisational environments (Gunz and Gunz, 2007). Within HR, an increasing emphasis has been placed on ethics (Guest and Woodrow, 2012), with queries raised about how ethical standards can be maintained in practice. HR practitioners are often charged with safeguarding ethical standards in organisations, particularly in relation to matters such as equality, diversity and health and safety (Dex and Forth, 2009). However, the monitoring of ethical standards is more problematic in the case of HR when a significant degree of devolution and outsourcing means that occupational boundaries are diluted. Furthermore, ethics are interlinked with trust and credibility, something that, as mentioned above, is a problematic feature of the HR field. Control

over the level of service and the maintenance of “professional” standards may thus be tricky for HR practitioners. For these reasons, then, in this research it is important to investigate how they perceive and tackle ethical issues and challenges arising in their roles.

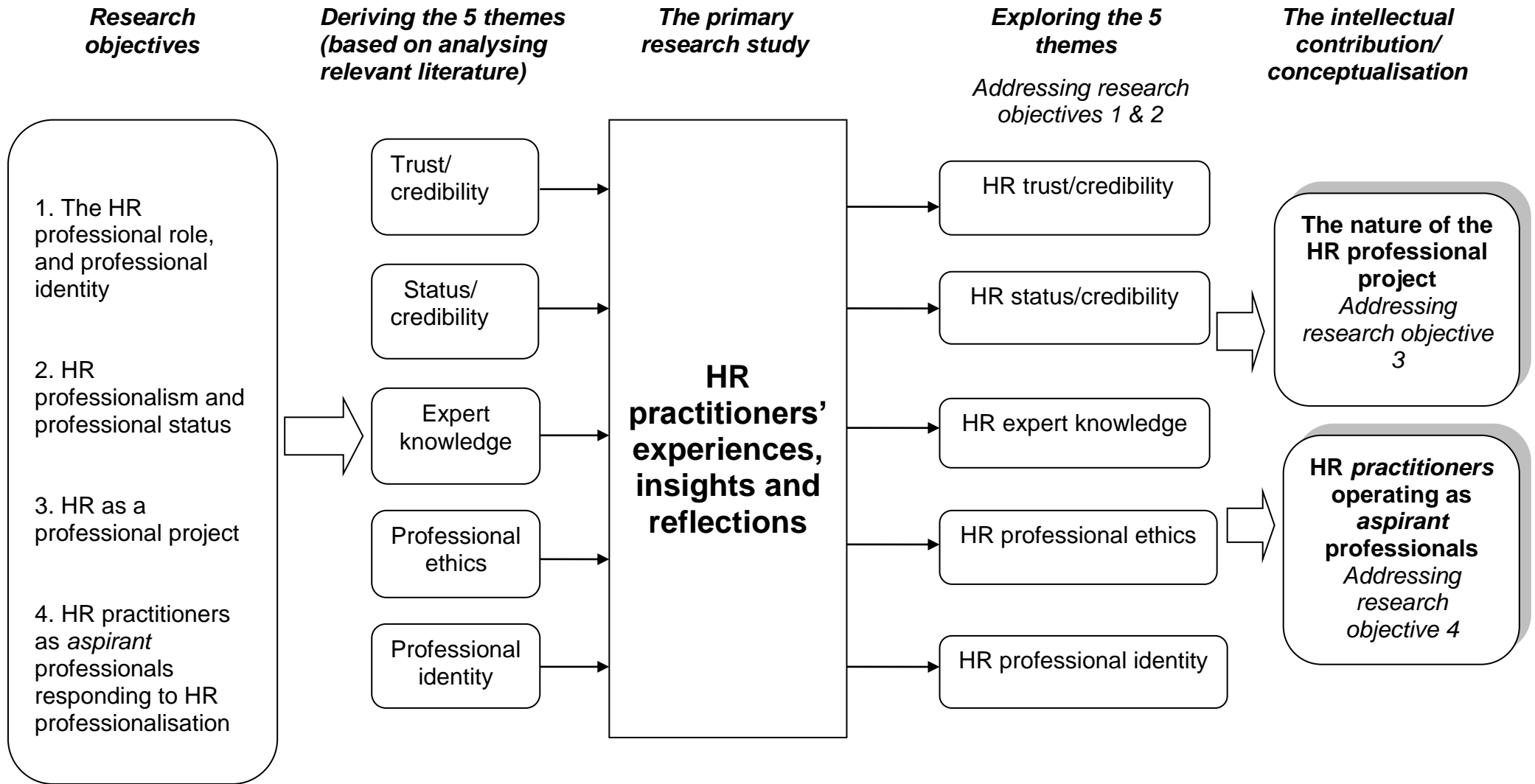
Concerning the second theme – expert knowledge – there has been extensive analysis as to what brings the acquisition of knowledge to a professional level, where the practitioner becomes appropriately qualified and an expert in a particular niche (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Hammond, McClelland, and Mumpower, 1980; Schön, 1983; Dreyfus, Dreyfus and Athanasiou, 1986; 2000; Schön, 1987; Lester, 1995; Clark, 2008; Winch, 2014). Knowledge is considered the reason professions exist in the first place (Johnson, 1972; Illich *et al.*, 1977; Abbott, 1988; Eraut, 1994; Macdonald, 1995; Friedson, 2001; Young and Muller, 2014). Compared with the expertise evident in traditional professions, HR is claimed not to be in the same league. There are issues associated with the HR qualification (Hallier and Summers, 2011), which do not work in HR’s favour in attempting to achieve closure of its field via rigorous training and credentials (Macdonald, 2006). In an era of “credentialism” and “new professionalism” (Evetts, 2011a) accreditation, or a formal credential, may perhaps be enough to consider HR a profession. However, although there may be a codified area of knowledge and a supporting institute present, the HR role is still thought to be lacking in legitimacy, social status and the authority associated with a conventional profession (Watson, 2007; Kochan, 2007). Therefore, the research aims to understand how equipped and qualified, in terms of their knowledge and expertise, HR practitioners feel with regard to performing their role as a profession.

The third and fourth themes concern trust and status, and the credibility derived from them, which members of established professions enjoy to great degree. While trust is thought to be the underlying fabric upon which professional-client transactions take place; status often comes from holding relevant credentials, especially formal qualifications (Beaton, 2010; Bailey, 2011; Grace, 2014; Evetts, 2014). Without trust, any attempt to deliver professional services is void (Koehn, 1994). For HR, credibility is very important and it is something HR practitioners strive for (Legge, 2005). The battle of trust in HR and the value it brings has been a major theme in HR writing for quite some time, right up to the Ulrich period (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Guest and Bryson, 2009; Pritchard, 2010; Long and Ismail, 2011). The HR role is often seen as

having weak business credibility (Wright, 2008), suggesting there are doubts about its “professional” standing, with HR practitioners lacking in trust and status, especially since formal qualifications are not a requirement to work in the HR field (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). Together with the ambiguities the HR field carries throughout its evolution, this challenges its claim to professional status. Therefore the questions in mind include: what type of “professionalism” are HR practitioners engaged in? And how do they try to demonstrate their “professional” status? The research thus investigates how HR practitioners aim to secure the trust and status that comes with “professional” standing, particularly by winning greater credibility.

Concerning the fifth theme, professional identity is generally seen as a distinct form of identity (Ibarra, 1999; Evetts, 2014), resulting from all the elements that contribute to making one a professional working within a professional discipline (Banks, 2004). The way that professional identity is constructed, and the strength that it has, varies based on the early exposure of potential professionals to their discipline areas and also on factors such as the business environment and culture, as well as organisational pressure to control the outcome of professional services (Banks, 2004; Lamote and Engels, 2010; Worthington *et al.*, 2012; Ashcraft, 2013). There can be ambivalence (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006) between organisational control and personal power over professional identity. In the case of HR, organisational control seems to dominate. For personal power over identity to dominate, knowledge, trust and ethical disposition need to be strong underlying elements and in the case of HR these are affected by business demands and pressures; development of the HR role has been more for organisational well-being as a reason rather than a professional altruistic cause. HR practitioners often feel less connection with their role, since they are not clear of the kind of “professional” contribution they are expected to make (Pritchard, 2010). An investigation of how HR practitioners understand their own “professional” HR identity will shed more light on this matter.

Figure 3.2 The research framework



These five themes were used to guide the research inquiry among HR practitioners. Their role in this respect is undoubtedly crucial, since they are responsible for enacting the HR role; and it is their credibility and legitimacy that are critical for HR's professional image. As figure 3.2 shows, the research investigation focused on collecting in-depth data from HR practitioners concerning their experiences, insights and reflections. Chapter four provides details of the research methodology and methods employed. Applying the five-theme framework enabled the interpretation of a set of relevant research findings, which are covered in chapters five and six. As a result of the research investigation, the discussion and conclusion chapters (seven and eight) return to the research objectives, demonstrating how they have been addressed. The five themes – HR professional ethics, HR expert knowledge, HR trust/credibility, HR status/credibility and HR professional identity – project both the nature of the HR professional role and a distinct sense of HR professionalism, addressing the first and second research objectives. This facilitates the main intellectual contributions of the research, conceptualising the nature of the HR professional project, viewing HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals and exploring the implications for HR as a "profession" – dealing with the third and fourth research objectives. By doing this, the research addresses an acknowledged gap in the literature, given the calls that have been made for more research to be undertaken on professional projects in organisational settings in general (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Brock and Saks, 2016), and the HR professionalisation project in particular (Pohler and Willness, 2014).

3.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has explored the relevant literature relating to the field of HRM, the nature of HR roles, and the professionalisation agenda. There has been a growing degree of interest in the nature of HR professionalism, the professional identity of HR practitioners and the development of the HR professionalisation project (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Wright, 2008; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Pritchard and Fear, 2015; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). The rise of SHRM and an increasing concern to demonstrate a link between HRM and performance have helped to showcase the "business partner" role of HR practitioners, often as "professionals". However, a number of issues and problems were highlighted, ranging

from problems of credibility and trust, a lack of status and authority to weak professional identity, raising questions about how far HR can truly be conceptualised as a profession. Nevertheless, it does appear to have the characteristics of a professional project in progress, marked by a process of emulating the features of established professions (Pohler and Willness, 2014). Yet because HR is often lacking in social accountability, it seems to be searching for accountability through greater organisational approval (Wright, 2008; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016), instead of focusing externally on the wider public interest, and associated social and ethical considerations, beyond specific individual and organisational interests (Kochan, 2004; Marchington, 2015).

Nevertheless, it does seem that HR is in a process of transformation. It appears to have all the characteristics of an occupational field aiming for professionalisation, based on elements such as ethical considerations, knowledge, trust, status, professional identity (Pohler and Willness, 2014), only not to the essential degree necessary to guarantee the success of its project. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of HR practitioners, given that they enact the role, and would be the beneficiaries of achieving professional status, is therefore crucial; giving a sense as to whatever direction HR professionalisation is taking. The five-theme framework forms the basis of the research exploration, enabling a better understanding of some of the key issues highlighted. It provides a foundation for the research design, strategy and execution, based on a qualitative investigation of the experiences and perspectives of HR practitioners themselves. Their contribution is of primary importance in order to gain a first-hand understanding of how HR practitioners operate as *aspirant* professionals, responding to the call for professionalisation of their field, while investigating the nature of HR's professionalisation process.

4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Research methodology is the vital link between the analysis of existing literature and real world research; bringing together those elements that constitute a coherent and meaningful set of findings. A key challenge for management research is the necessity of not only achieving “relevance”, but also maintaining “rigour” when it comes to the theoretical approach, design and execution (Myers 2013). The methodological process encompasses principles on the one hand, and practical procedures on the other, necessary for the research to materialise following a path inevitably set by philosophical debates, practicalities and on-going judgement calls. As chapter three shows, there has been an increasing amount of interest directed at the HR professional role and HR professionalisation. However, work in this area is often undertaken without relying much on primary, empirical data (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Marchington, 2015; Higgins, Roper, and Gamwell, 2016). It is true that empirical work on closely related matters already exists – on the topic of HR professional identity for example (Wright, 2008; Pritchard, 2010; Pritchard and Symon, 2011). Yet the primary research which forms the basis of this project, concerned with HR practitioners’ experiences, perspectives and understandings of the HR professional role, HR professionalism and HR professionalisation, is distinctive because of the way in which it enables an empirical investigation of the HR professional project and the role that HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals play as part of an occupation aspiring to professional status. This provides an insightful contribution to understanding HR as a potentially “professional” occupation, filling an important gap in the existing literature, in a way that would not have been possible if it was to have followed the qualitative *synthesis* route (Major and Savin-Baden, 2010:18,20).

To briefly recapitulate the research objectives, set out in chapter one, this study is concerned with: exploring HR practitioners’ perception of how they understand their “professional” role and the nature of their professional identity; investigating the nature of HR professionalism, connected to the efforts of the HR community to secure professional status for HR practice; investigating HR as a professional project, given the CIPD’s efforts to promote it as a professional occupation; and understanding how HR practitioners respond to this professionalisation project by exploring and

conceptualising the role of HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals, while considering the implications of what all this means for HR as a “profession”. In order to address these objectives a programme of empirical primary research was necessary, tackled by means of a qualitative enquiry. The research draws on the experiences of HR practitioners to explore how they perceive and understand their role, especially its “professional” nature, in line with the phenomenological approach. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The research conducted was of an exploratory, inquisitive character, consistent with an approach that builds familiarity and understanding of the social world (Stebbins, 2001). It did not aim to test hypotheses or determine the validity of any specific propositions. Therefore, it can be said to be broadly non-positivistic and inductive in character, although marked by a deductive element where existing relevant literature inspired the exploration. This was evident in the five-theme framework, incorporating trust, status, knowledge, ethics and professional identity, presented in the previous chapter, which was derived from the literature on professionalism and HR for the purpose of guiding the inquiry. The material that follows covers: the nature of this particular research investigation; philosophical debates around research; relevant theoretical perspectives; the methodological strategy; research design issues; the particular techniques used to analyse the qualitative data; reflexivity; and the main ethical considerations that applied. Taking all this into account, this investigation is centred upon a triangular exploration of HR, professionalism and HR practitioners’ experiences and perspectives. This provides an insightful contribution to understanding HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals and understanding the nature of HR as a “professional” occupation, filling an important gap in the existing literature.

4.2 Theory and its relationship with data

Before it is possible to discuss the research strategy and research design issues, it is imperative to understand the research philosophy that underlies research methodology. Concerning the relationship between theory and data, the field of philosophy lends itself in order to determine the different ways of viewing how theory is developed from data, as well as offering a general outlook as to what constitutes theory and what counts as data. Reviewing relevant theory is essential for understanding more clearly the choices made in this particular research study, and specifically the choice of a non-positivistic stance as the basis for the investigation.

Positivism, a philosophy associated with Auguste Comte, while often perceived negatively by social science researchers, had rather radical origins (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2013). It claims that there is one “true” knowledge to be found which can be explained through sense-based experiences by a detached researcher (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Positivism is linked to the natural sciences, with, following Habermas, social phenomena claimed to exist objectively, irrespective of the subjectivity of the researcher (Silveman, 2000; Neuman, 2011; Bryman 2016).

However, because this research study is concerned with investigating and unravelling the experiences, perceptions and understandings of HR practitioners, a non-positivistic approach was deemed more suitable; opening up space for discussion, reflection and interpretation. This is in line with the exploratory and broadly inductive nature of the enquiry, one which seeks new insights and understandings, rather than wanting to establish explanatory, causal relationships between particular phenomena as under positivism (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Robson, 2002; Breakwell and Rose, 2006; Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012; Robson and McCartan, 2016). It also enables an interpretive approach to be employed, one which permits understanding data for the purpose of theory development (Neuman, 2011; Bryman, 2016). In this, the researcher is not detached but takes a reflexive stance (Coyle, 2016b). Given the “turn” towards interpretation in recent years, some claim that justifying choosing non-positivism over positivism in research is no longer needed anymore (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2013:7).

Empirical studies in social research, according to “conventional wisdom”, are based upon either inductive or deductive approaches (Hammersley, 2008; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Coyle, 2016b). So, reviewing the theory in relation to data, this research study, given that it involves a focus on understanding the experiences, perceptions and understandings of HR practitioners, benefits from an inductive approach. Induction involves observing the social world, and continuing to observe it, until one can construct a general theory from the total of observations which can be used to understand the social world (Gilbert, 2008; Hammersley, 2008; Gilbert, 2008). Znaniecki attempts to distinguish between ‘analytic induction’ and ‘enumerative induction’; clearly trying to give ‘analytic induction’ the task of discovering a phenomenon, but also pointing to the difficulty of needing to pre-know the particular

setting of a phenomenon in order to understand it properly (Znaniecki cited in Hammersley, 2008:70).

However, this study also contains elements of the deductive approach, particularly where the research has been informed by pre-existing literature. Deduction involves starting off with a theory which is used to explain behaviours/observations by taking data from a particular case and applying it to deduce explanation (Gilbert, 2008; Coyle, 2016b). In short, then, ‘induction is the technique for generating theories and deduction is the technique for applying them’ (Hammersley, 2008; Gilbert, 2008:27). In practice, however, it can be difficult to treat them as distinct (Breakwell and Rose, 2006). Theory developed from ‘sifting through data’, as with induction, may be no different from ‘theory emerging through the accumulation of verified hypothesizing’, as under deduction (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011:3). While this study of HR practitioners is broadly inductive in its approach, the enquiry was guided by existing concepts and ideas derived from the literature. The relationship between theory and data is a complex one (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Moreover, research in business and management is generally a circular process where the existing knowledge sets the base for empirical research to take place, the outcome of which then feeds back into, and becomes part of, the existing body of knowledge (Myers, 2013).

4.3 Research Philosophy

Any social science research must be based on an appropriate philosophy (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Alvesson, 2011; Willig, 2013; Coyle, 2016b), which is widely used to generate, prove or disregard theories (Alvesson, 2011; Willig, 2013). The multiplicity of perspectives, endless philosophical debates about the rightfulness of methods and rationales that are often different in miniscule ways, yet make a great difference in research, are all rooted in philosophy (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Undertaking empirical research, to collect first-hand knowledge, is an important means of understanding the social world (Alvesson, 2011; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Willig, 2013). Yet how knowledge is sought and understood as part of the research process must rest on an appropriate philosophical method. However, there is always risk of that too much of an emphasis on ‘methodology’, an obsession with the way that knowledge is generated, becomes more important than the actual knowledge itself (Willig and Stainton-Rose, 2013:10). That said, though, the phenomenological perspective which underpins this investigation of HR professionalism and professionalisation, needs to be

explained. Before doing so, it is important to cover the concepts of epistemology and ontology.

4.3.1 Theoretical paradigms of epistemology and ontology

Epistemology and ontology provide a means of understanding knowledge acquisition; how it is that people come to understand the external world (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Willig, 2013). Epistemology, deriving from the term *episteme*, meaning science, determines the relationship between knowledge and the world, a theory which presumes knowledge of the settings within which knowledge takes place (Hindess, 1977; Johnson and Duberley, 2000). It evaluates the link between perceptual belief and truth (Audi, 1998), and determines the importance of knowledge, as well as the limits of human knowledge. While epistemology provides a philosophical background to the nature of knowledge and the significance of its attainment, how this knowledge enters the sphere of perception and understanding has not been without disagreement, creating philosophical differences between empiricists, such as Locke and Hume, and rationalists, such as Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza (Dancy, 1985; Kenny, 2006). As a consequence of this division, various ‘schools of thought’ developed concerning the relationship between researchers and their data, including positivism, interpretivism, constructionism, feminism, realism (May, 2002; Gray, 2004; Breakwell and Rose, 2006; Willig, 2013), neo-Kantianism (Crowell, 1998), and postmodernism (Farganis, 2004). The importance of epistemology in any piece of management research is stressed by Johnson and Duberley (2000), since it not only offers a theoretical perspective for the researcher, but also provides the ‘criteria for distinguishing between reliable and unreliable knowledge’ (Johnson and Duberley, 2000:5).

Ontology, a term first adopted by Leibniz after the works of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Owen, 1971; Sadler, 1996), deals with the inquiry of existence (*ousía: matter*), of being and not being and the questioning of abstract, impossible and imaginative entities, meanings, words and negation (Wiggins, 1971). In research, ontology tends to provide a way of understanding whatever knowledge is there to be perceived beyond the senses and interpreted through rational thinking (Coyle, 2016b). The theoretical perspective of ontology is divided into two traditions deriving from ancient philosophies; the Parmenidean that sees knowledge based on an unchanging, clearly formed world, the ontology of *being*; and the Heraclitean philosophy that sees the formation of knowledge out of an emerging, changing world, where the lack of set boundaries and the presence

of absence can be responsible for the construction of knowledge, the ontology of *becoming* (Schmidt, 1998; Gadamer, 2001; Kenny, 2006). It could be said that this research sits within the ontological paradigm of the Heraclitean philosophy because it sees the potential formation of an HR profession within a dynamic environment. It is characterised by exploration, and leans towards theory building rather than theory testing. The data derive from what appears, and seems to HR practitioners to be real, and is therefore in line with the way phenomenology allows data to be understood, as explained below (see section 4.4.2). Even more, because it concerns the investigation of matters such as values, ethics, identity, altruism, all notions that are subjective and come from self-understanding and self-realisation, and which feature in the research.

4.3.2 Phenomenology

Phenomenology has long been considered to be a relevant approach in the field of management research (Sanders, 1982). Given the overall aim of the research, its specific objectives and the kind of data which were sought, it was determined that phenomenology was the most appropriate philosophical standpoint. Phenomenology is based on the philosophy of seeking to understand ways of inquiry which aim to make knowledge more intelligible, without objectivistic and positivistic accounts of the world (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2013; Smith, 2016). When Franz Brentano referred to *phenomena*, he included perception and imagination in the sense-experience of the world (Thines, 1977), while Schutz recognised the importance in the distinction between the objective and the subjective in the social sciences (Schutz, 1967). In phenomenology, ‘perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted’ (Moustakas, 1994:52). Thus as a method of research, phenomenology is not concerned with possessing a set body of agreed beliefs but, as an investigative approach, something which is ‘directed towards a methodologically structured investigation of our experience of the world’ (Spinelli, 2005:7). It recognises that knowledge can be generated from accounts of human experience, and the connections made consciously between experience and the material world, in a way that is related to transcendental science and the development of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), and Heidegger’s existential phenomenology (Caputo, 1998; Spinelli, 2005). Phenomenology is connected with hermeneutics, idiography and interpretative phenomenology, all of which are considered separate from phenomenology but share common ground; hermeneutics, originally used to understand biblical texts and later

analysed by thinkers like Ricoeur (Kearney, 1998; Vedder, 1998), is ‘the theory of interpretation’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:21), considered as ‘the art of reading a text’ (Moustakas, 1994:9), aiming to deduce the true meaning of someone’s thoughts; interpretative phenomenology combining phenomenology and hermeneutics appears to be of use in interpreting life changing events through the realisation of what is happening making what is happening meaningful; idiography, aims at understanding phenomena from the perspective of particular people instead of trying “nomothetically” to establish laws of human behaviour (Moustakas, 1994; Smith and Eatough, 2006; Smith and Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Giorgi and Giorgi, 2013).

Looking at the origins of phenomenology, four major philosophers – Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre – worked in a phenomenological way (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012), but with distinctions which ‘illustrate phenomenology as a singular but also pluralist endeavour’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:12). For Husserl, the focus was on the experience that is perceived consciously by the individual (Macann, 1993; Moustakas, 1994). Heidegger, diverging from his teacher Husserl, moved away from a concern with ‘transcendental projects’ and set out ‘the beginnings of the hermeneutic and existential emphases in phenomenological philosophy’ (Caputo, 1998; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:16). Heidegger was concerned with ‘the conceptual basis of existence’, but also the context, the world, within which the person exists (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:17) and intersubjectivity: ‘the shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:17). Merleau-Ponty, while sharing Husserl’s and Heidegger’s ideas, developed the contextualised being-in-the-world further by considering the ‘*embodied* nature of our relationship to that world and how that led to the primacy of our own individual situated perspective of the world’; this is because the person is a holistic being looking at the world not just being ‘subsumed’ within it (Caputo, 1998; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:18). For Sartre, while the being-in-the world is self-conscious and seeking meaning in the relationship with the world, this is ‘an action-oriented meaning making’, as the being engages with the world (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:19). He stressed ‘the developmental, processual aspect of human being’, explaining that the being is always becoming; that it is not ‘a pre-existing unity to be discovered, but rather an ongoing project to be unfurled’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:19).

According to the phenomenological approach, human experience should be examined as ‘it occurs and in its own terms’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:12). Not only does it allow the surfacing of concepts and feelings, but it also allows the researcher to recognise how the subjects of study make sense of what they experience in their understanding of the social world. The phenomenological approach/method recognises the importance of people’s ‘lived experiences’, and the importance of communication, reflection and interpretation (Tappan, 2001:47).

Why is phenomenology an appropriate method for this study of HR practitioners? It does not view their experiences, and how they perceive and understand their experiences, as matters that are independent of the environment in which they are situated; rather they are linked to the natural world around them (organisations and societies), enabling a focus on how practitioners themselves ‘interpretively produce the recognizable, intelligible forms they treat as real’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 1998:139). Therefore, these experiences have complex elements that need to be taken into account when researching their field, where interpretation, reflection, future aspirations and communication also have a place (Dilthey cited in Tappan, 2001). The enquiry, then, seeks to explore and understand, instead of explain, and interpret rather than prove; in line with the non-positivistic research approach (Shkedi, 2005). Interpreting what is subjectively perceived as reality in sociological terms is brought to the surface by means of a phenomenological approach (Holstein and Gubrium, 1998). This facilitates an understanding of people’s subjective experiences of knowledge (Tolman and Brydon-Miller, 2001), which come to be presented as constituting the real world, at the same time highlighting the important role played by social actors in understanding this reality. In this process the lived experience of HR practitioners can only be recorded and understood as they (the actors) perceive it; the *phenomena*, as would be explained in Greek as *phenesthai*, ‘to flare up, to show itself, to appear’ (Moustakas, 1994:26).

Given that phenomenology ‘is a philosophical approach to the study of experience’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009:12), its main value for this research is that it provides an appropriate way of comprehending what HR practitioners do, experience and understand as HR “professionals”. Phenomenology is interested in people’s lived experiences, placing consideration on both the researcher’s interpretation and on the subjects of the research (Gray, 2004). With phenomenology the researcher attempts to ‘clarify situations lived through by persons in everyday life’ (Giorgi and Giorgi,

2008:27). The researcher in this case is interested in the way things appear and are consciously understood by the subjects of the study, as well as in the link between consciousness and what is genuinely believed as truth (Macann, 1993; Bernet, 1998; Wertz, 2011). For this study of HR practitioners, the benefit of the phenomenological approach concerns the emphasis on recording what appears to be real and important to them. The phenomenological approach, being consistent with an interpretive, naturalistic, qualitative approach to research, views the behaviour and experiences of HR practitioners as products of the way they interpret the world, and more importantly the way they allocate meaning, being in a process of '*interpretation*' and constant '*definition*' when it comes to changing situations (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975:14).

Having reviewed theory and its relationship with data, epistemology and ontology and the relevance for this study of the phenomenological approach, it is important to bear in mind that approaches to knowledge acquisition do not exist in a pure form, rather, they range on a spectrum where approaches overlap with boundaries, blurred or common (Coyle, 2016b; Lyons, 2016). Pragmatically any philosophical paradigm used as the basis for undertaking research does not exist in absolute terms, or in isolation. Other approaches such as critical realism, (Lopez and Potter, 2001; Cruickshank, 2003; Farganis, 2004; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009; Coyle, 2016b; Lyons, 2016), ethnography (Brewer, 2004; Samra-Fredericks, 2004; Fielding, 2008b; Gobo, 2011; Griffin and Bengry-Howell, 2013; Eberle and Maeder, 2011) and hermeneutics, derived from the verb *hermeneuein*: *ερμηνεύω*, which signifies to interpret and to translate into a meaningful form (Vedder, 1998; Kearney, 1998; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009; McAuley, 2004; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Bryman, 2016), can share common elements with phenomenology. They can even offer valuable dimensions when undertaking social research, and help with critically evaluating, interpreting and analysing the gathered data. However, in this research, phenomenology is the main broad method employed.

4.4 Qualitative inquiry

Quantitative research involves numbers and statistical analysis as a means of measurement; while qualitative research involves collecting data with the aim to describe, interpret and understand (Silverman, 2000; Gilbert, 2008; Savin-Baden and Mayor, 2013; Willig, 2013). Quantitative research is an important means of collecting social science data (Myers, 2013), however, it is not sufficient or effective for

understanding human behaviour (Holliday, 2002). Therefore, for the purpose of this research study among HR practitioners, a qualitative inquiry was preferred, since it is better suited to the ontological theoretical paradigm within which the research study sits, its phenomenological stance and the broadly inductive approach taken. Qualitative research is more suitable for exploratory, in-depth purposes (Myers, 2013), and for understanding people, their behaviours and experiences, and the meanings they assign to them, in a way that cannot be counted (Silverman, 2000; Holliday, 2002; Gilbert, 2008; Myers, 2013; Willig, 2013). Qualitative researchers often claim the qualitative approach as ‘superior’ because it better reflects the complexity of human nature and is more naturalistic (Hammersley, 2008:39). Comparing qualitative and quantitative approaches is not very helpful because they are different, although they can complement each other if suitable for the research (Mostyn, 1985; Creswell, 2007; Tashakkori and Teddie, 1998; Marvasti, 2004; Neuman, 2011; Willig, 2013).

Although quantitative research methods are often used in empirical work on HRM, the nature of the subject here does not offer itself for quantifiable measures. Even though validity and reliability can be issues in qualitative research (Silverman, 2000; Gilbert, 2008), it is an approach suitable for exploratory management research, and it can offer good opportunities for generalisation even from few cases (Gummesson, 2000).

Although some believe that conducting social research can combine qualitative and quantitative approaches effectively (Bryman, 1998; Byrne, 2002; Neuman, 2011; Bryman, 2016), for the purpose of this study it was determined that a qualitative enquiry was best suited for investigating the experiences, perceptions and understandings of HR practitioners with regard to their professional role, sense of professionalism and the nature of their “professional being”. As an exploratory study, this research benefits from taking an approach which involves ‘an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998:3). By investigating social phenomena, qualitative studies can be used to interpret behaviour and experience in a way that can enrich knowledge and bridge the gap between preconceived perceptions and observed lived situations (Oishi, 2003). They not only provide an understanding of ‘experiences, events and facts’, but they also open up the way for new questions that have not been thought of under other types of research (Neuman, 2011:8). As a result, the approach taken in this research is in line with other studies of the HR field, which have used qualitative methods to good effect, sometimes in conjunction with quantitative methods (Caldwell, 2003; Hailey, Farndale and Truss, 2005; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Wright, 2008;

Pritchard, 2010; Jones and Saundry, 2012). Although not a new field, HR still offers itself for both ‘investigative exploration’ and ‘exploration for discovery’ (Stebbins, 2001:2, 3).

4.5 Research strategy and design

The research approach, being a broadly inductive, exploratory and qualitative inquiry, within the ambit of phenomenology, requires a strategy for collecting data that reflects this. Planning a research strategy under a phenomenological method encompasses three steps, called ‘rules’, which need to be taken into account when designing and executing the research. The first is ‘the rule of epoché, meaning researchers should set aside any preconceived ideas, biases, expectations and assumptions as far as possible, in order to focus on the primary data (Spinelli, 2005:20). The second is ‘the rule of description’, based on the need to ‘describe’ rather than ‘explain’; that is by remaining close to the true experience transmitted to the researcher, with analysis focused on interpreting this experience. The third is ‘the rule of horizontalization’ which requires all initial experiences recorded to be treated of equal significance, thus avoiding placing any ‘questionable... hierarchies’ in the data (Spinelli, 2005:22). With this in mind, and bearing in mind the research objectives, it was decided that conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with HR practitioners would be the most appropriate data collection strategy, allowing participants an opportunity to transmit their experiences to the researcher. That way there would be as an account as possible of the experiences and perceptions of HR practitioners; an account that would allow the researcher to treat the material following the rules of ‘epoché’ and ‘horizontalization’ (Spinelli, 2005).

The chosen model, on which the research strategy was based, is the ‘interactive approach’. This permits making ongoing adjustments and revisions to the research process as it progresses, allowing ‘interconnection and interaction among the different design components’ (Maxwell, 2005:3). This interactive approach encompasses objectives, the conceptual framework, methods, validity, research questions, resources, research skills, problems, ethical issues, data collected and factors influencing the results (Maxwell, 2005:6) - see Appendix A. As a design model, it complements the exploratory nature of the research because of its flexible structure, rather than being a rigid set of steps to follow. For example, the interactive approach accommodates the possibility of undertaking a pilot study in order to determine the most worthwhile questions for investigation (Robson, 1993; Gray, 2004). Most importantly, though, it

allows for a spiral process of data collection and reflection, taking into account the intervening elements in respect of the practical issues and logistics necessary for the completion of research. The model can be adapted, to fit the particulars of specific research, allowing room for unanticipated themes, as was the case in this study.

4.5.1 Choice of data collection method: in-depth interviews with HR practitioners

Given the nature of the qualitative data to be obtained, concerning the experiences, perceptions and reflections of HR practitioners, and the need to interpret them, in-depth interviews were the chosen data collection method. While a survey approach would have been less time consuming, required less involvement from the researcher and been easier to analyse the results, survey data, gained from questionnaires, would not have allowed sufficient knowledge and understanding of HR practitioners' experiences and perceptions, or the depth of insight into their personal feelings and thoughts required. Central to the design of the research was a belief that discussions with individual HR practitioners, in a one-to-one setting, would facilitate communication between the researcher and the participant, allowing the latter to feel comfortable with unfolding their thoughts. While questionnaires were considered as a complementary method of data collection, recognising the desirability of 'methodological pluralism' (Arksey and Knight, 1999:33), they were ruled out due to time constraints and due to doubts as to the validity of the results (Guest, 2001); after all, 'the method should suit the research problem rather than the problem being fitted to a set method' (De Vaus, 1993:335).

A case study approach was ruled out for two main reasons. First, the purpose of the research was not about understanding the views of HR practitioners in one or more specific organisations (Silverman, 2005). Rather, the aim was to collect data from individual HR practitioners with extensive experience. The research was concerned more with data at a micro-level rather than at a meso-level. The emphasis was on the individual practitioner, not the organisation. Second, a factor also taken into consideration was that the 'case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:247). A case study approach would not have provided an effective opportunity to explore the "professional" HR role and HR "professionalism" across a variety of organisations. Understanding HR practitioners' deeper thoughts 'coloured' from the culture of just one or two organisations (Silverman, 2005) would not have been in tune with the exploratory nature of this research and might have limited the breadth and depth of the issues investigated.

Therefore, collecting data through in-depth interviews was considered to be more meaningful, since the aim 'of any qualitative interview is therefore to see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee, and to understand how and why they come to have this particular perspective' (King, 2004:11), something which is in line with the phenomenological approach undertaken. In-depth interviews with individual participants are particularly useful in qualitative research investigations; not only because of the insights they provide, but also because they can enhance the participation of respondents (Oishi, 2003), with 'the interviewer's interaction with the respondent [becoming] part of the data collection process' (Oishi, 2003:171). As Morgan (2011:18) explains, a phenomenological approach to interviewing sees the interviewer act as 'an appreciative perceiver' with whom the interviewee not only 'confides', but also has the right to make questions themselves, thus creating a dialogue. Moreover, interviews create a situational environment where issues can arise that might otherwise have not been considered or been neglected (Fontana and Frey, 1998; Alvesson, 2011).

Concerns have been raised that interviews can be socially constructed situations that may lead to the construction of data, and an interpretive construction of that data, which could be considered "un-natural". This is because data are expected to be revealed by the interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011; Briggs (1986) cited in Holstein and Gubrium, 2011). There is also a concern about the validity of data in qualitative interviewing, in particular whether or not interviewees' responses 'reflect their experiences and opinions outside the interview situation, or whether they are an outcome of the interview situation itself' (Peräkylä, 2011:366). Data from qualitative interviewing have been criticised due to their "closeness" to theoretical and philosophical ideas, and the belief that it is the interpretation of the results of such qualitative methods of data collection that finally gives shape to the actual findings (Alvesson, 2011). To a large extent the phenomenological approach which characterises this study denotes that participants provide responses which, to them, are perceived as real. However, it was essential for the researcher to be aware, as much as possible, of the socially constructed nature of the "interview situation", as well as factors such as language, social dynamics, impression management, social and psychological aspects, political interests and motives, and the "rules" that apply in the interviewer-interviewee "relationship" (Alvesson, 2011). For that, care was taken in the design of the questions as well as creating a situation where interviewees could freely unfold their thoughts (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Alvesson, 2011).

Interviews can be designed in various ways depending on the type of data the researcher is seeking. Three main design approaches exist: the standardised or structured interview; the semi-structured or semi-standardised interview; and the unstructured interview. These vary mainly in the amount of pre-prepared and open-ended questions used (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander, 1990; Fielding and Thomas, 2008). Entirely unstructured interviews were avoided since the excessive length and the variety of issues discussed would have resulted in an unmanageable volume of information and “incompatible data” for the researcher (Arksey and Knight, 1999:82). Specifically, for this research, semi-structured interviews, in the form of in-depth discussions, incorporating an element of biographic/life history narrative, provided a useful means of data collection, as explained below

4.5.2 In-depth interviewing

Interview-based research can be undertaken in different ways, reflecting inductive and deductive approaches (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Wengraf, 2001). In order to achieve a deeper exploration of the relevant issues, it was decided that in-depth interviews would be the most appropriate technique. An in-depth interview is a type of interview which involves ‘...in-depth exploration in which respondents are encouraged to speak freely about whatever comes to mind regarding the interview topics’ (Oishi, 2003:171). It is a form of interview that allows time for discussion between the interviewer and the interviewee, with a very specific focus ‘on the informant’s perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words’ (Minichiello, *et al.*, 1990:87). Using in-depth interviews is consistent with the phenomenological method, given its concern with ‘wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives’ and its commitment to ‘descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses’ (Moustakas, 1994:58).

In-depth, qualitative interviewing moves beyond a simple exchange of ideas to allow the conversationalists to engage with relevant issues, analyse, reflect and contradict. Narratives in in-depth interviewing provide “evidence” of the phenomena occurring in social surroundings, recognising discourse and subjectivity (Miller and Glassner, 2011). What is important with in-depth interviewing is the informant’s experiences and perceptions in his or her own natural way, and not the researcher’s perspective. This shifts the interview experience away from the ‘interrogative’ mode of questionnaires

and structured interviews to that “of a more conversational process” (Minichiello, *et al.*, 1990:93). Although it is often not possible to observe interviewees in their natural setting, this is offset, to a certain degree, by considering that the interviewees’ words reflect the meanings they assign to “their world”, and by the researcher’s level of interpretation (Minichiello, *et al.*, 1990). Therefore, conducting in-depth interviews, with a narrative life-history element present, provides data within a meaningful context. An example of this is the research study undertaken by Wright (2008) which examined how HR managers interpret their role as business partners and internal consultants respectively. This shows that in-depth interviews, together with the use of a biographical method which allows practitioners to delve into career experiences, provide both a more holistic view and a deeper understanding of people’s social worlds (Plummer, 1983; Eakin, 1999; Josselson and Lieblich, 1999).

Since the interview style for this research was intended to take the form of a conversation, particular care was taken with the preparation of both the design and the mode of the semi-structured interviews (Wengraf, 2001:5). The issue raised by Gillham (2000), who observes that an interview for research purposes is beneficial to the researcher, but not to the respondent, was taken into serious consideration. The interviews were conducted in a way that showed a degree of sensitivity to respondents, and what matters to them. Moreover, by giving back information on a selection of findings once the research has been completed, the intention is that participation in the research will benefit both the researcher and the participants.

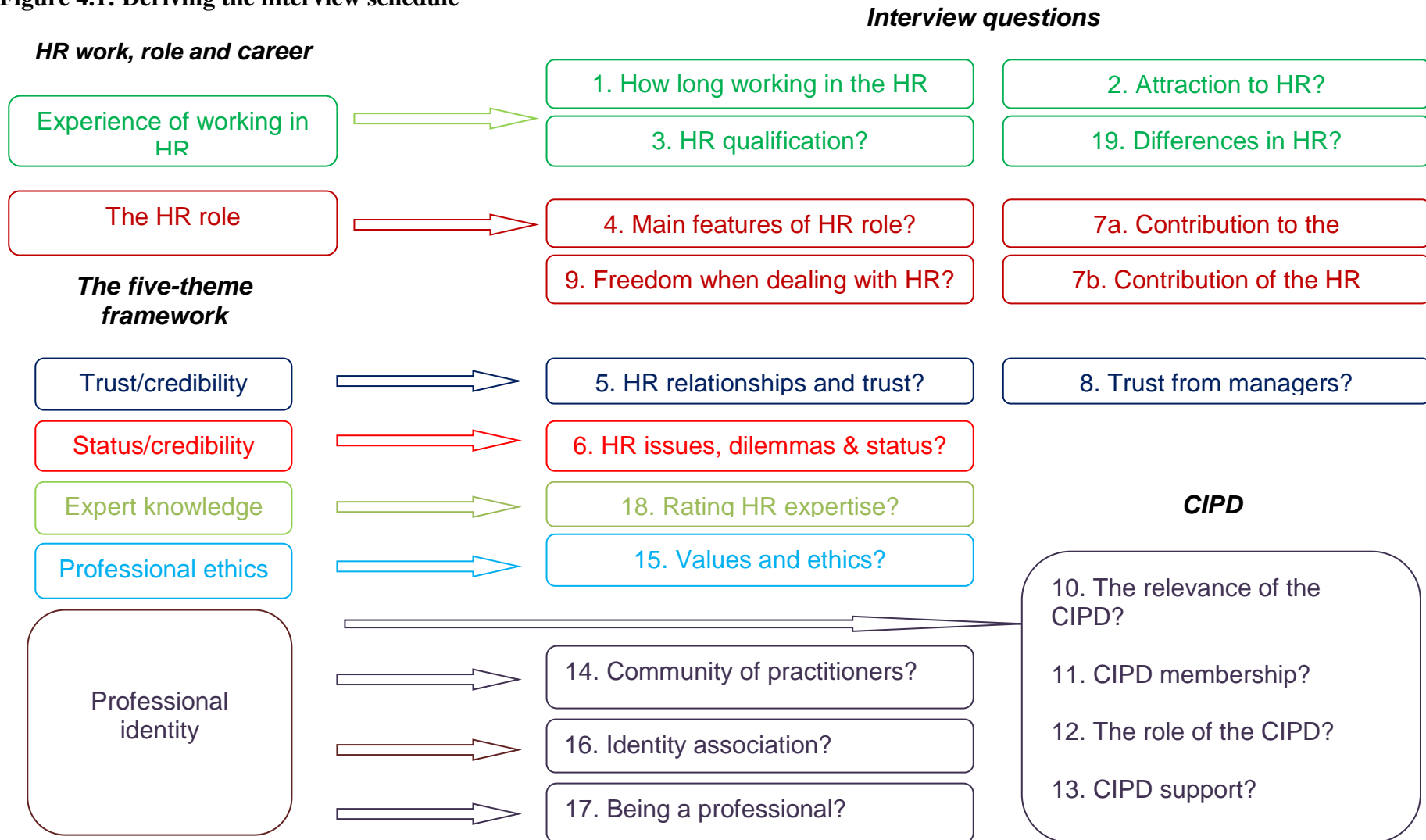
4.5.3 Design of the interview schedule

Choosing semi-structured interviews, in the form of in-depth discussions, incorporating an element of biographic/life history narrative, which allowed participants to communicate their stories, proved to be an effective means of generating ample data. With the phenomenological approach in mind, the interview script was designed to be non-invasive, encourage discussion and dialogue, allow room for clarifications on subtle notions, discrete when needed, direct, but without being directive or suggesting ways of responding, and offering alternative wording of questions to ensure their clear understanding (Moustakas, 1994; Spinelli, 2005). The design of the interview schedule took into consideration the effort of the researcher to remain unbiased as far as possible, in order to facilitate the processes of unfolding the participants’ lived experiences

(Spinelli, 2005). The process was meant to set a safe, comfortable setting for participants to share their thoughts, experiences, examples, feelings, preferences, hopes and aspirations concerning their work; at no time were they to feel they were being “questioned” and have to “come-up” with answers. As with other phenomenological studies (Davidson, Strayner, Lambert, Smith and Sledge, 2001), participants were allowed sufficient space to narrate their experiences in relation to the interview script questions with an emphasis put on the meaning the experiences carried for them.

The interview script consisted of a list of questions, inspired by the literature review and guided by the research objectives. Based on this five-theme framework developed by the researcher (see chapter three), some 40 possible questions were initially put together out of which 19 were eventually selected, after being suitably adjusted (see appendix B for the full interview schedule). The questions explored eight main areas: covering practitioners’ experience of HR; the nature of their HR role; and the elements of the five-theme framework – trust/credibility, status/credibility, expert knowledge, professional ethics and professional identity – with the last of these also encompassing a specific set of questions around practitioners’ engagement with the CIPD. Figure 4.1 illustrates how the 19 interview questions were derived. The questions were then grouped into subject areas based on their type. This grouping was useful in several ways: first, it provided a logical sequence for the interview process, moving from simpler to more complex questions; second, it helped with explaining to the interviewees the process of the interview; and third, it provided a useful cluster of subjects for subsequent coding and analysis.

Figure 4.1: Deriving the interview schedule



The questions were meant to be delivered in the same way for each participant, providing for equal treatment, consistent with the phenomenological ‘rule of horizontalization’ (Spinelli, 2005); although with a degree of flexibility built in (Minichiello, *et al.*, 1990). This allowed the researcher some freedom ‘to alter their sequence and probe for more information [and]...adapt the research instrument to the respondent’s level of comprehension and articulacy...’ (Fielding and Thomas, 2008:246). This approach encouraged discussion around the relevant topics. It also allowed time for the HR practitioners to articulate their personal experiences, expressing themselves in a more narrative manner when necessary; ‘as such the life history method provides a fundamental source of knowledge about how people experience and make sense of themselves and their environments’ (Musson, 2004:35). Given the phenomenological approach taken by the research, it was important to get a ‘fixed textual expression’ of HR practitioners’ lived experiences; as permitted by ‘a tape recorded interview narrative’ which enables a careful study, analysis and interpretation of their lived experiences (Tappan 2001:48; Groenewald, 2004). Therefore, the interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants.

In order to make the interview process as smooth and as fruitful as possible, two pilot stages preceded the actual interviews with the main participants: the pre- pilot and the pilot stages. Two pre-pilot discussions with colleagues were undertaken in order to aid the researcher in setting the mode and tone of the interviews in such a way that facilitated the respondents to feel comfortable and engaged with the particular interview setting. The purpose of the pre-pilot discussions was to gain an understanding of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee within an “interview situation”. Questions on general, non-HR matters and some sample questions from an initial draft of the interview script enabled the researcher to practice their interviewing skills, helped to define the relationship between the interviewer and the participant and set the researcher’s conduct, including mannerisms and gestures, tone and strength of voice and eye contact. This was done because no matter how straightforward an effect a one-to-one conversation may have, face-to face interaction can create uneasiness and difficulties during the interview process. No material from the pre-pilot discussions was included in the research findings since they were not undertaken for the purpose of generating data.

Subsequently, two pilot interviews were undertaken in order to: iron-out any issues relating to the interview schedule; smooth out the order and process of the interview; ensure the questions were understood; determine the time needed for answering questions; and for determining any minor adjustments needed for the rest of the interviews. The one substantive change made to the interview script following the pilot stage was to prompt the interviewees in respect of HR attributes at the relevant point. The rationale behind this decision came after the initial interviews of the pilot stage were completed. The discussions with the participants had brought out thoughts about professionalism and HR and what the “professional HR” person has to demonstrate. So, this generated the idea of asking the participants to give the adjectives that best described the “HR professional”, something that served as a comparator with the idea of professional attributes as explained in the literature, as well as with the CIPD’s professional map which would prove to be useful in understanding the HR role. Since the CIPD provides a guide to the qualities the HR professional-practitioner ought to possess and demonstrate, it made sense to explore the respondents’ perspective on this and ascertain at first hand the attributes an HR practitioner/professional possesses. Gathering the adjectives that participants believed best described their role added an extra dimension to addressing the first and fourth of the research objectives.

Because the interview script was largely unchanged after the pilots, and therefore generated relevant data, it was decided to include them in the research findings, and they were thus analysed appropriately. No matter how experienced the researcher, it still takes skill to master probing, prompting and control of the flow of an interview (Gillham, 2000). During the interviews themselves, the need for clear two-way communication between the interviewer and the interviewee and effective comprehension were regarded as essential. A key approach taken was that of ‘reflecting as a special form of probing’, which is a ‘technique of offering back, essentially in the *interviewee’s* own words, the essence of what they have just said’ (Gillham, 2000:50). Although challenging, this was found to be helpful in two ways: first, it meant that there was little distortion of words on the part of the researcher; and second, when topics were discussed that contained a degree of emotion it helped to reassure respondents of their thoughts, something which at times gave them the opportunity to clarify their responses.

4.6 Sampling

A non-probability sampling approach was used in order to select participants fitting the required characteristics. This simply meant that to satisfy the objectives of the research it was essential to conduct the study among practitioners that had experience of working in defined or organised HR or personnel departments, so that they will have been exposed to a relevant breadth of issues. Without setting the parameters of choice in this way, interview data could have been produced that were less usable. Although probability sampling might have been appropriate, a non-probability sampling approach was considered more suitable both in terms of enabling access and also the nature of the research, given the aim of including experienced HR practitioners who were able to be contacted via a convenience sampling technique. Access to respondents was achieved via networking, and focused initially on the public sector within the South Hampshire area. However, the use of snowballing and networking techniques enabled the sample to be extended to cover North Hampshire and London. The snowballing technique proved to be particularly fruitful since it provided access to high calibre practitioners, all of whom had at least five years of experience, and was consistent with the broad non-probability sampling approach used in the research (Robson, 1993:141-142).

Given the chosen method of data collection, the size of the sample did not need be very large since the aim was to collect in-depth, qualitative data from experienced HR practitioners. This was justified on the basis that ‘in any given qualitative study, interviews are usually done with only a few respondents....Statistical power is not a goal, and large samples cannot easily be analyzed with qualitative methods’ (Oishi, 2003:174). It was originally intended to limit the number of respondents to twenty-five. However, the final sample size was twenty, of which two had also served as pilot interviews, as mentioned above. All of the twenty respondents, including the pilots, contacted through the networking and snowballing approach agreed to be included in the research. However, when efforts were made to expand to the desired sample size, through contacts with relevant organisations, and through further networking approaches, this failed to produce any more responses. The difficulty of determining an appropriate sample size in this kind of qualitative research has been acknowledged (Fusch and Ness, 2015). The important thing to bear in mind, though is that saturation is reached when the data are sufficient to ‘capture a range of experiences but not so large as to be repetitious’ (O’Reilly and Parker, 2012:193). Based on this, the eventual sample size proved to be ample enough for the purpose of securing a sufficient degree

of data saturation; this was because the design of the questions yielded rich and large amounts of data that enabled a thorough analysis. The interviews conducted provided a sufficient quantity of data, from which a selection had to be made for presenting the findings, given that it would have not been feasible to include all the responses in order to meet the overall research aim. As Oishi has explained, ‘qualitative methods are less concerned with standardization, and the focus is usually on eliciting great amounts of detail from a few respondents’ (2003:9).

Before knowing what sort of participants would be available to take part in this research, a minimum of two years’ experience was set as a basic prerequisite so that the respondents were not entirely new in the field. As a matter of fact, this was not an issue at all. As it turned out, all of the respondents had lengthy careers in HR; the extensive experience and knowledge they possessed was invaluable for the purposes of the research. Most were employed in senior or very senior positions working as HR advisers, HR business partners, HR managers/directors, HR training managers or HR consultants. Many had experience of working in both the public and the private sectors. Their experience had been gained in diverse backgrounds, at different levels and in different roles, which meant they were able to “dip” into their past and present experiences of working in the HR field, generally in a lot of depth. The quantity and quality of data collected was, to a large extent, a product of the snowballing technique utilised, since participants often recommended other HR practitioners of a similar calibre and level to be approached. See table 4.1 for details of the participants, who have all been given pseudonyms.

Table 4.1: Details of participants

Name	Years of experience	Roles undertaken	Public sector experience	Private sector experience
Yasmin	20	Variety of administrative roles; managerial position; business advisor	√	√
Elisa	20	Training; generalist HR; business partner	√	√
Reed	30	Teaching and training; international HR; head of training; consultancy		√
Darius	18	Administrative, payroll and training; generalist HR	√	
Lena	Over 10	Teaching and training	√	√
Erika	10	Administration; HR officer; business partner	√	√
Renato	Over 30	Generalist HR; union negotiator; Head of HR	√	√
Ariadne	25	Personnel assistant; administration; generalist roles; training and development; head of training & development	√	√
Salma	15	Recruitment manager; training and development	√	√
Ylenia	17	Administration; benefits and pensions; general HR administration; business partner	√	√
Evan	Over 20	Personnel administrator; staff rep/union rep; compensation and benefits		√

Name	Years of experience	Roles undertaken	Public sector experience	Private sector experience
Jessie	Over 27	Personnel assistant; assistant to HR director; personnel manager	√	√
Teresa	25	Training		√
Ettie	20	Business partner; head of HR; generalist HR; HR business partner		√
Charles	Over 6	Administrative role; administration team leader; HR customer service; payroll	√	
Elvira	26	Specialist HR; administrative role/payroll; generalist role; union negotiator; HR and business change manager/employee engagement; senior HR advisor		√
Hollie	30	Training and development; HR business partner; consultancy	√	√
Nerina	20	Generalist HR; HR business partner	√	√
Andreas *	Over 17	General administration; employee engagement; head of HR and training		√
Maria *	17	Administration; payroll; generalist HR		√

***pilot interviewees**

4.7 The interview process and transcribing the data

Prior to undertaking the interviews, respondents were given a brief description of the purpose of the study, what was expected of them and certain details of the topics to be discussed. The meetings were arranged in quiet locations where the conversations unfolded with minimum interruption. On a small number of occasions, though, background noise made transcription of the tapes rather difficult, with notes taken during the interview used as a back-up. Each of the interviews lasted around an hour on average, although the longest took over two hours. In most cases the interviewees were willing to engage further in the discussion, for longer than the time initially set aside for the interviews.

Some key elements were kept in mind during the interview process. One was the necessity for the researcher to remain motivated since any mood fluctuations could have transmitted the wrong signals, perhaps creating a sense of disbelief about the seriousness of the research and the interviewees' reasons for participation. A second element kept in mind was the consistency effect (Oishi, 2003), making sure that all respondents had a chance to answer all the questions. A third element taken into account was the possibility of the fatigue effect (Oishi, 2003), so question types were varied to maintain attention. A further issue taken into consideration was that, although researchers are advised that interview schedules need to have an 'introductory' phase, 'an opening development and substantive content' phase and a 'closure' phase (Gillham, 2000:38,40,42), it was soon understood that some respondents appreciated skipping the introductory and opening phases and preferred to start directly with the main questions.

During the process of undertaking the interviews a small checklist was employed to help manage the data, clarifying any issues arising for the following parts of the fieldwork. This involved tasks such as: making notes for planning the analysis stage; and making note of things to bear in mind for the upcoming interviews. The constant reflective mode that underpinned the fieldwork not only supported the data collected and helped to hone the interview skills, but also, more importantly, it provided a constant indication of the themes emerging for analysis. Overall, respondents seemed very pleased with their interviews; several mentioned that the experience had given them a good opportunity for reflection. Their day-to-day activities mean that they do not often have a chance to contemplate their work and reflect on their feelings about it. This

was a particularly positive aspect of the research process. It meant that the time spent by the respondents did not only benefit the researcher, and help to facilitate the research objectives, but also resulted in a positive experience for the participants.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and were supplemented with notes taken by the researcher during each interview and shortly afterwards, while the relevant information was still fresh in the memory. These notes included observations by the researcher about the “feel” of the interview in relation to the issues discussed. After all, ‘nonverbal gestures on the part of the respondent, body language, and any other phenomena that the interviewer notes may become part of the data’ (Oishi, 2003:171). Much interview data in social research are not transcribed, because researchers use field notes, listening techniques or videos to record the data they need (Gillham, 2000). Although this reduces the time needed for transcribing, it does not provide a full picture of the interview. After “picking” out relevant data it can be difficult to remind oneself of the context within which something was said (Gillham, 2000; Fielding and Thomas, 2008). Phenomenology’s aim is to remain close to the phenomena, exploring the experiences and perceptions of HR practitioners (Moustakas, 1994; Tappan 2001; Groenewald, 2004). For these reasons, it was decided that a full verbatim transcription would give the richest, most highly detailed data. Having such in-depth data provided a firm foundation upon which to form codes, subjects and themes for analysis and unfold the phenomenologically based interpretation. The main downside of transcribing such extensive volumes of conversation verbatim was its time-consuming nature; each interview transcript amounted on average to between ten and twelve thousand words, in addition to the researcher’s notes. However, the end result made the process worthwhile given the richness of the data produced.

4.8 Qualitative data analysis

For the purpose of analysing the qualitative data, it was important to do so in a way that is in line with the phenomenological method adopted in the research; therefore the phenomenological interpretation was operationalised by a thematic analysis technique (Boyatzis, 1998; Bryman, 2008; Franzosi, 2009; Morgan, 2011). Analysing qualitative data poses different challenges to quantitative data (Stebbins, 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Silverman, 2011), with the latter often considered more rigorous due to their measurability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Lyons, 2016). It depends greatly on the skill, knowledge and interpretation of the researcher (Lyons, 2016), who has a number

of roles: as ‘bricoleur’, ‘journalist’ and ‘soft scientist’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998:7). Despite the unstructured nature of the qualitative data collected, this did ‘not mean that the data lack *all* structure’ (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996: 282). The exploratory nature of this research inquiry meant that the analysis did not happen at one, clear-cut stage; but instead, was achieved by means of a ‘continuous process, closely linked with ongoing data-gathering’, and thus through a ‘less standardised’ approach (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996; Anderson, 2009:213). The most effective way of comprehending the process of analysing unstructured data based upon exploratory research is to conceive of it as a spiral, marked by an ongoing interchange between collection and reflection (Minichiello *et al.*, 1990).

4.9 Analysing qualitative data under phenomenology

Phenomenology should ‘allow the method of analysis to follow the nature of the data itself’ (Waters, 2016), while achieving a deeper understanding of what the participants are describing and explaining. One of the ways ‘to get to the essential meaning of the experience’ is ‘to abstract out the themes’, through ‘thoughtful engagement’, based on thematic analysis (Waters, 2016). The purpose of analysis is to ensure that ‘descriptions retain, as close as possible, the original texture of things, their phenomenal qualities and material properties’, in order to keep ‘a phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence [and] accentuate its underlying meanings...’ (Moustakas, 1994:59). Therefore, when analysing the data the focus was on ‘the meaningfulness of the experiences *for the participants* as opposed to *for us*’ (Davidson, *et al.*, 2001:168), in line with the phenomenological method. Following the phenomenological study of Davidson *et al* (2001), this was done by:

‘(1) utilizing established qualitative-phenomenological data analytic procedures designed to ground [...] interpretations in the participants’ own life contexts, and (2) involving the participants themselves in understanding their responses’. (Davidson, *et al.*, 2001:168)

Concerning the first of these points, and utilising the example from a phenomenological analysis, the analysis of transcripts involved ‘two levels of review: within each individual and then across individuals’ (Davidson, *et al.*, 2001:168), which means two rounds of analysis, one within each individual interviewee’s transcript/discussion and one across the other interviewees’ transcripts/discussions. The second point was addressed in two ways: first, in the design and wording of the interview script and the pre-pilot and pilot testing (section 4.6.3); and second, during the actual discussions with

participants themselves (section 4.8). The analysis was undertaken in two broad rounds, or phases of analysis, called above ‘levels’ by Davidson *et al.* (2001). The first round or phase involved reviewing the data from each individual participant, allowing familiarisation and understanding of each HR practitioners’ personal experience. At the second round of analysis – across individuals – more extensive analysis took place, since this was imperative for fulfilling the research enquiry. This second broad round, or phase of analysis consisted of several stages, allowing the various subjects and themes to emerge, in order to reach a meaningful in-depth outcome. The second broad level of analysis – across individuals – was achieved by following Colaizzi’s five steps of phenomenological analysis (Spinelli, 2005:135-141). This involved:

1. Reading the transcripts (called a ‘protocol statement’ in Colaizzi’s steps): reading and re-reading the interview transcripts of the one-to-one discussions with the HR practitioners allowed familiarisation with the “raw” material, the experiences and insights provided by the practitioners, based on the carefully designed interview schedule.

2. Extracting significant statements (quotes) from the transcripts that directly relate to the phenomenon, finding same/similar, contrasting and standalone statements: using a coding system by Saldaña, (2009) (see section 4.11), a plethora of points were extracted from the interviews with HR practitioners referring to the subjects investigated in the research, as guided by the interview schedule.

Example: quotation extracted from the transcript:

‘I would say that what I’m expected to do is in line with my kind of ethics and my morals. What other people do that we’re trying to stop them doing may not be, but, that’s what we are here to do. So...’

3. Formulating meanings involving the creativity of the researcher: meanings were formulated while retaining the three rules of phenomenology as discussed above.

Formulating meaning based on example extracted above:

the participant considered him/her self to be lucky to have the same ethics and morals with the organisation they work for, and understands that what HR does is to stop others’ unethical or amoral behaviour, making sense that one of HR role’s is to show or stop such behaviour.

4. Extracting clusters of themes by repeating steps 1-3: this process was repeated several times until saturation occurred and formulation of themes was achieved, as well as new

emerging themes being recorded, worth investigating and repeating the steps to establish the links. This is also part of the coding process explained in section 4.12 where the process involved several levels or cycles of coding, due to the in-depth nature of the discussion.

At this point, while extracting quotations (significant statements) and formulating meaning, a check system was created by the researcher to keep track of the process of interpretation. It included the following:

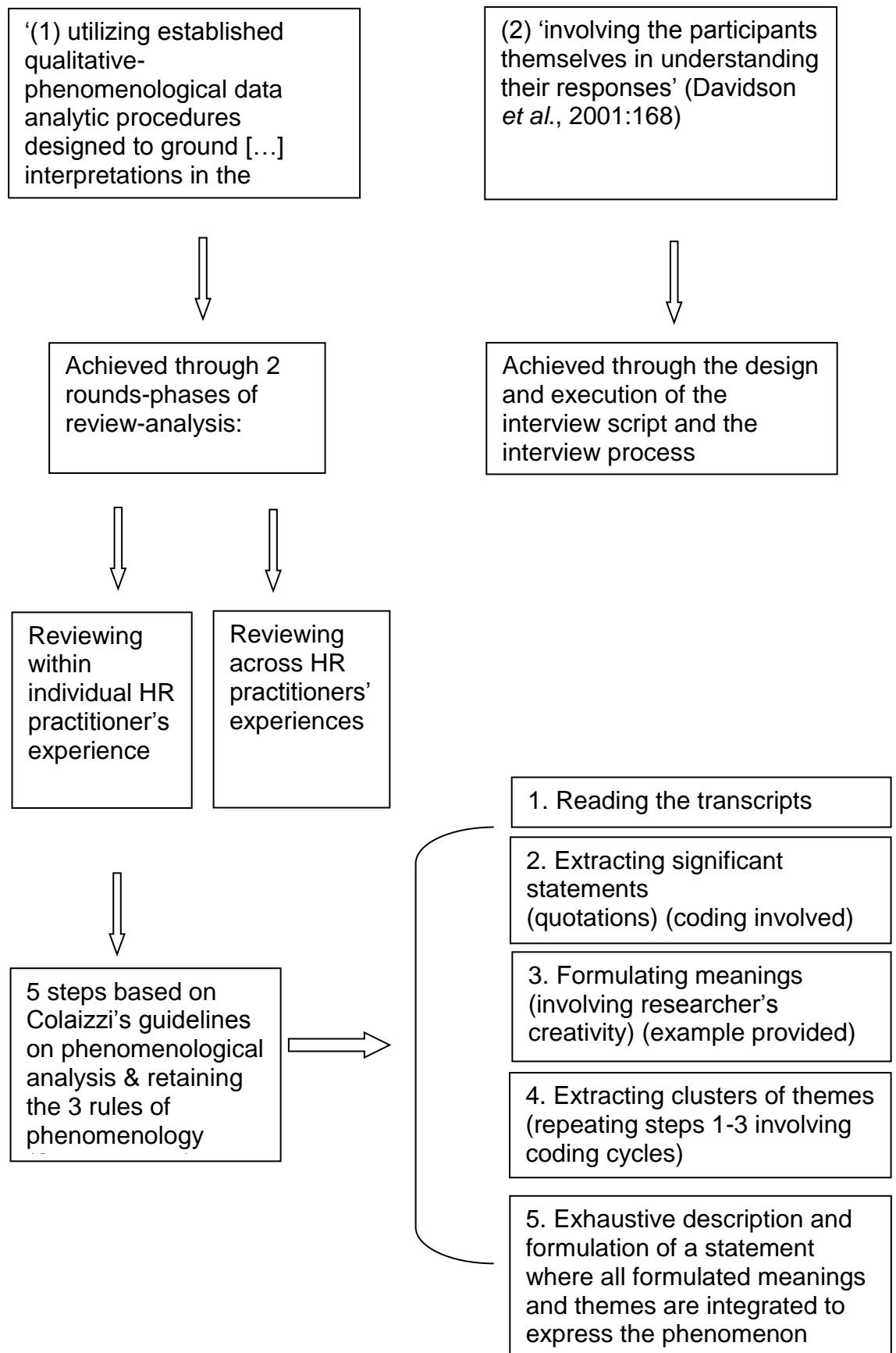
- Check that the ideas are not too broad.
- Check the ideas are not too narrow.
- Checking that ideas make sense.
- Check for repeating ideas that can be clustered together
- Checking the wording does not include any 'unquoted' parts of the scripts.

5. Exhaustive description and formulation of a statement where all formulated meanings and themes are integrated to express the phenomenon: at this point the meaning extracted from HR practitioners' experiences and perceptions, and the themes and sub-themes created from the previous steps, results in the analysis and interpretation of the lived experiences of HR practitioners with respect to the subjects discussed. Based on the above extracted example -quotation, it shows how the formulation of meaning in the analysis unfolded:

HR practitioners considered themselves as fortunate in not having encountered any ethical dilemmas in their practice. However, feeling lucky to having the same ethical values with the organisation can be due to an organisational identity formation. Furthermore, keeping others in line with the organisation's ethics is a way of making sense of the in-between position HR has as a function in bringing together organisational needs and employee needs. Furthermore, the above described experience opens the question as to whether ethical dilemmas are faced by HR practitioners or whether they choose not to acknowledge them.

Figure 4.2 illustrates how the process of phenomenological analysis and interpretation of the research data took place. Following the guidelines on phenomenological analysis illuminated the experiences of the HR practitioners participating in the research. The phenomenological approach was pursued in conjunction with thematic analysis as a technique to identify the emergent themes (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012), something that worked well for the purpose of addressing the research objectives and informing the five-theme framework that underpins the study (see sections 4.11, 4.12).

Figure 4.2: the phenomenological approach to analysing the research data adopted from Spinelli (2005), as used in the research.



4.10 The thematic analysis technique

There are a number of different techniques that can be used to analyse qualitative data (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson, and McSpadden, 2011) including conversation analysis (Myers, 2000; Haven, 2007; Drew, 2008; Wilkinson and Kitzenger, 2013), discourse analysis (Gill, 2000; Peräkylä, 2008; Willig, 2008; Coyle, 2016a) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Charmaz, 2008; Charmaz and Henwood, 2013; Payne, 2016). However, the advantage of thematic analysis is its perceived rigour (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). It is a particularly suitable technique in phenomenological research studies (Willig, 2013). As ‘a process for encoding qualitative information’ (Boyatzis, 1998:4), thematic ‘analysis is ideally suited to getting a clear picture of the content of a text, and to gain a deep understanding of the data’ (Franzosi, 2009:562). A theme is described as ‘a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis, 1998:4). The thematic analysis technique allows for the construction of relevant main or central themes and sub-themes (Bryman, 2008; Morgan, 2011; Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012).

The flexibility of thematic analysis is an important advantage (Clarke and Braun, 2016); moreover, it works well in conjunction with other analytic approaches, as is done in this research, even though it can be used as a standalone technique as well (Terry, 2016).

Analysing data using thematic analysis does not follow a set of rules, but relies on creativity in not only assigning the data to categories or themes, but also in assigning these themes (Morgan, 2011). However, a ‘limitation of the thematic analysis technique lies in the very richness in the variety of coding scheme design. There is no single way of capturing the meaning of a text’ (Franzosi, 2009:550). Other downsides of the thematic analysis technique are its broadness and flexibility (Willig, 2013; Clarke and Braun, 2016). Although being apparent advantages for the researcher, they can also work as disadvantages because they can make the guidelines difficult to follow, confusing the researcher’s choice and leading to outcomes which can be too descriptive (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A further problem with thematic analysis concerns the cost of ‘generality’: ‘the coder has to struggle to fit concrete and specific text into typically abstract coding categories designed on the basis of the investigator’s substantive and theoretical interests, rather than the intrinsic linguistic properties of the text’ (Franzosi, 2009:562).

In this research, the disadvantages of thematic analysis were addressed in a number of ways: first, by designing interview questions with a “solid” theme-base to act as a guide; second, by using a more interpretive outlook in the narration of the findings dictated by the phenomenological guidelines followed (see section 4.9); and third, through a careful dialogue with the literature where the interweaving with the findings constructs an effective story that ‘stands with merit’ (Aronson, 1994:1). Moreover, when rigour and care has been applied beforehand in the design of the data collection tools and the coding of the text, this can improve the validity of the findings (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For the purposes of this research study, the use of thematic analysis enhanced and supported the phenomenological approach undertaken and worked towards realising both the analysis and interpretation of the data in order to address the research objectives.

4.11 Applying thematic analysis to phenomenological research

The thematic analysis technique is well-suited to the overall phenomenological approach of the research (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). Having explained the value of thematic analysis as an analytical tool, what now needs to be explained is how it was used and operationalised under phenomenology in the research to convert the data into research findings. The key steps taken were:

- familiarising with the data
- generating initial coding
- searching for themes
- reviewing the themes
- searching for sub-themes
- reviewing the sub-themes
- defining and naming the themes
- report writing

(adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006; see also Terry, 2016)

The flexibility of the technique allowed the researcher to select as broad or as narrow a theme and sub-theme as desired (Cassell, Buehring, Symon, Johnson and Bishop, 2005). The essential meanings extracted from the data to form understandable phenomenon descriptions - unique to the experience of the participants - projected a multitude of insights (themes and sub-themes) which fed back into the main 5-theme

framework. Discussion of each emerging theme and sub-theme (as revealed by the coding – see section 4.12), was done with a narrative-discursive outlook in order to maintain a sense of continuity and to provide a richer interpretation, making sense of the accounts and experiences of the participants, in a similar way to Weiland (2010). Inclusive coding with interview excerpts was used, rather than just rigid separations of themes. This way the thematic analysis supported the phenomenologically extracted meanings and aided formulation of abstract concepts, as discussed in section 4.10. All the while, the richness and subtleness of the participants' narrations were kept in mind. However, a narrative alone can be seen as limiting in terms of codifying and presenting coherent results (Brown, 2006); so the use of thematic analysis for a structural base eliminated the problem that is often described as too much *storytelling* (Brown, 2006).

The experiences of the HR practitioners who participated in this study are of a subjective nature; the phenomenological approach recognises and accepts a 'lack of totalness' (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008:49), therefore, using thematic analysis under phenomenology was instrumental because it allowed: first, to establish the necessary link with the themes identified in the literature review; second, to realise the framework designed to fulfil the inquiry of the research; and third, to provide an organised and meaningful way of presenting the results. Using a phenomenological approach therefore conveys meaning which, in this research, was reinforced with the use of thematic analysis as a technique. The two worked together well. The figure in Appendix C provides a detailed and analytic example of how this interlinked process operated. While phenomenology worked for the interpretation of the findings, thematic analysis provided the best appropriate analytical tool for processing the findings and work in accordance with the research framework, both to inform the framework and satisfy the research objectives.

4.12 Coding the data

The coding process operated to bring out the meanings and experiences under the phenomenological approach employed, while also identifying the themes as part of the thematic analysis technique employed to inform the research framework. In order to avoid missing out on any information, coding of qualitative interviews with open-ended questions needs to operate in an organised manner (Silverman, 2000; Fielding, 2008a; Saldaña, 2009). There are various ways of organising the data. Some researchers organise data simply based on the method or timing of their collection. However, others

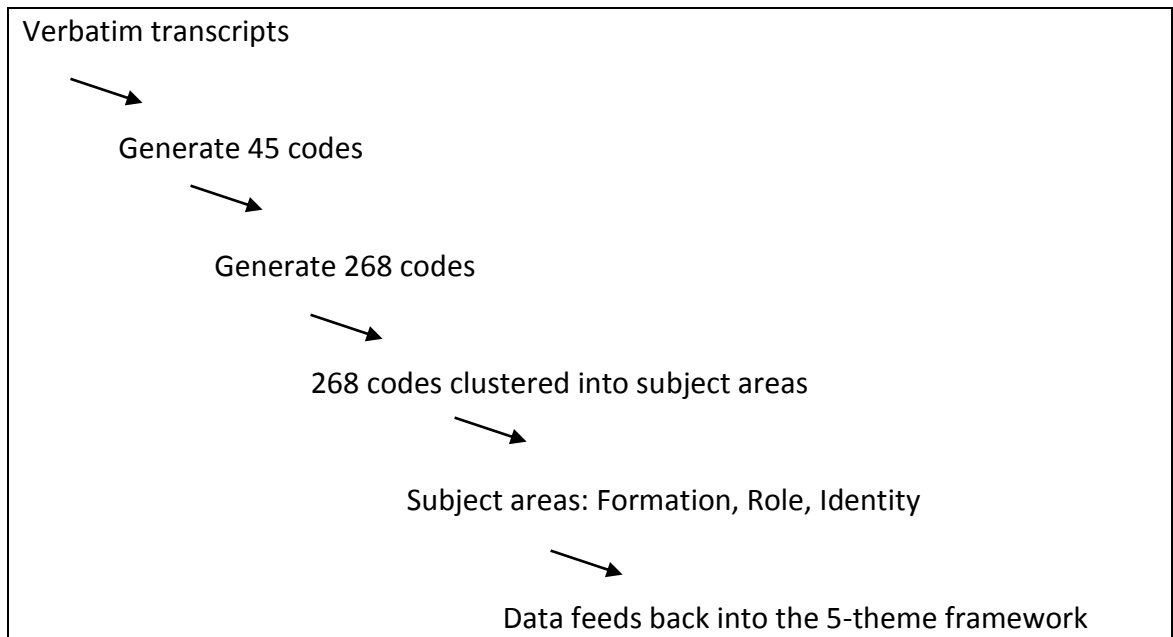
favour a thematic approach because of its holistic focus on ‘the totality of the data’ (Holliday, 2002:103). This was the approach favoured in this study. The coding of the data involved systematically screening each interview in order to: first, eliminate the “noise” that is any unnecessary talk; second, to identify emerging themes and concepts; and third, to return to each interview for any additional details that would inform the analysis.

Colaizzi’s (section 4.10) guidelines of the phenomenological analysis included several levels or cycles of coding; for some segments of the data two main cycles took place but for others the data needed further coding. This was due to the in-depth nature of the discussion. As Fielding and Thomas (2008) explain, ‘the analytical challenge’ of identifying ‘thematically similar segments, both within and between interviews’ proved to be a difficult one and therefore, a constant “back and forth” flow, when viewing and coding, seemed unavoidable in order to consider the different possibilities. The codes can come from different origins, such as literature topics, subject areas, (*a priori*) or field notes, the interview questions or the transcripts (Fielding and Thomas, 2008:259). Consistent with the research approach mentioned above, a hybrid of inductive and deductive coding was used for the analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The codes’ origins were to some extent based on the interview questions, but mainly on the interview transcripts and field notes. The computer programme NVivo (Gibbs, 2002; Bazeley, 2007) was used for qualitative analysis at a basic level, something which assisted greatly in dividing and segmenting the data. Certain guidelines concerning the coding process were followed:

1. Familiarize yourself with the dataset (note initial comments and ideas)
 2. Generate initial codes (systematically code whole dataset)
 3. Search for themes (collate similar codes into potential themes; gather all data for potential theme)
 4. Review themes (check if themes work in relation to the dataset, check for examples that do not fit, generate a thematic map/diagram)
 5. Refine themes (refine specifics of each theme and linkages between them, generate propositions; look for complexity associations)
- (sources: Grbich 1999 cited in Rapley, 2011; Braun and Clarke, 2006 cited in Rapley, 2011:274)

In particular, first the interview transcripts were coded, something which created 45 main codes (the first-level or cycle of coding). These were then further coded (generating 268 codes varying in levels – that is the number of cycles of coding done for each of the 45 main codes depends upon the depth of the subject discussed as mentioned above). Furthermore, the 45 main codes (categories) were grouped into clusters to feed back into the analysis of the five main themes of the research. Figure 4.3 contains an illustration of how this coding process operated and an example from the text. For the coding process the following techniques were used and applied: the type of coding at the first level – the *initial coding* to derive the 45 main codes – followed the *holistic coding* approach, enabling general descriptions to be assigned, in tune with exploratory methods (Saldaña, 2009:46). However, a *structural coding* approach was also used in cases where the origin of the code happened to be the same as the question posed for the particular subject discussed (Saldaña, 2009). Further cycles of coding followed more of a *focused coding* approach (Saldaña, 2009), where descriptions were more directed at the particular theme discussed each time. Moreover, for several segments of the text the *simultaneous coding* technique was applied, particularly where the segment carried more than one meaning (Saldaña, 2009), something quite common in this type of research. Finally, *in vivo coding* (Saldaña, 2009) was also used when keeping the actual language used in the text, and turning that into an actual code, because retaining the quotation was considered worthwhile. An illustration of how this worked is provided below; although it cannot by any means display the magnitude of the coding and analysis work that took place. This is only an example of the coding undertaken, since multiple mental processes take place during such work, which are not possible to be recorded in writing.

Figure 4.3 Coding process



Example from the text:

Initial coding: one of the 45 codes:

1. Necessity of the CPD for HR practitioners

Second level coding:

2. Necessity of the CPD 3. Obligatory versus non-obligatory

Third level coding:

4. Absolutely necessary and do so. 5. Good idea but don't. 6. Do not see the point.

Above 6 codes belong to cluster concerning identity/ professional standards.

Data contained in professional identity inform 2 themes: knowledge and professional identity and interlinked with trust and status

Examples from the text:

Initial –Holistic coding

Text: *'No. In fact, none of us are... CIPD registered...'*

Holistic code: No membership of the CIPD

Focused coding

Text: *'I used to be in R..., I worked as a trainer for quite a number of years, uh, I really hadn't found my calling if you like, not that I was meant to get in HR.*

One thing leads to another and you kind of fall into it, I suppose. I suppose, I guess the training side of things meant something to me, otherwise, I wouldn't have..., I mean the people side. '

Focused Code: Not a conscious decision to pursue a career in HR. Found an interest later on

In vivo codes

Text: *'I suppose it's the cliché, it's a job well done. It's knowing that you....actually made a difference to somebody, even if it is only A somebody under that ...event. If somebody, it's when you get that phone call, that e-mail saying 'thank you', something you've done has made a difference. Like I say, it's a bit of a cliché,....'*

In Vivo Code: (kept as above, demonstrated where satisfaction and inspiration to do the job comes from)

Simultaneous coding

Text: *'I think the business partnering has done a lot for HR, because previously it wasn't clear what we actually do, or seen as paper-filling bodies or the HR role-helps with some sort of...it's definitely moving in the right direction; because you're building relationships with people...'*

Code 1: Considers the bus. partner as a positive development for demonstrating the HR person's activities.

Code 2: Acknowledges that the activities of HR are not visible/transparent to those outside the department

Structural Coding

Text: *'...But that's not to say it is necessary to be qualified. If you're looking for a role in HR then I think yes... and again it would depend on the level at which you are recruiting somebody. If I were responsible for hiring somebody...I would expect them to have some experience not necessarily...I think what is important is to have a business understanding ...some experience, I would like the experience.'*

Structural code: considers a qualification necessary to work in HR (matches the question about necessity of an HR qualification to do the job)

This is an example of a structural code which may be coded using the simultaneous coding technique, producing a second code which refers to the importance placed on having business experience in general when considering an HR position. Moreover, out of this it is possible to derive a third code: qualification versus experience. This demonstrates the complexity of coding with such rich text, the difficulty of taking decisions which can potentially steer the findings in different directions and also the time-consuming element of the decision-making process in this respect. There were some other problems and challenges encountered, which needed to be overcome during the process of transcribing and coding the data:

(a) Dealing with the high volume of data to be transcribed and analysed, meant eliminating unnecessary talk at the start and staying focused during the first-level analysis to filter out any unusable parts.

(b) Employing appropriate coding techniques suitable for the volume and type of data in question meant staying close to the text and keeping the reasons for the research at the forefront.

(c) Avoiding an over-reliance on electronic databases for the coding and analysis meant that after the process of first-level coding was complete, the analysis was finished manually, with the use of database programmes as a support.

(d) Selecting the appropriate findings necessary to help achieve the research objectives meant understanding that there is no one “right way”.

These points are important, because while care and alertness are needed at the data collection stage, the same is true during the process of qualitative analysis and coding (Holliday, 2002), in order not to diverge from the aims of the inquiry (Northey, Tepperman and Russell, 2002).

4.13 Rigour in qualitative research

Elements in the design and collection of data, as well as the structure of thematic analysis, which was undertaken in a way consistent with the phenomenological approach, provided an extra element of validity, due to the rigorous way of designing the questions and the closeness to the text used when analysing the findings; as suggested for enhancing the validity of qualitative research (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). Measuring validity in such qualitative exploratory research does not mean ‘demonstrating a fixed correspondence between a carefully defined abstract concept and a precisely calibrated measure of its empirical appearance’ (Neuman, 2011:216). Rather, three criteria need to be satisfied. First, plausibility, meaning ‘that the data and statements about it are not exclusive; they are not the only possible claims, nor are they exact accounts of the one truth in the world’ (Neuman, 2011:216). Second, validity also arises when the researcher’s empirical claims are ‘supported by numerous pieces of diverse empirical data’; and third, when seeking connections between the diverse accounts of data forming a ‘dense connectivity in disparate details’ (Neuman, 2011:216). With regard to this piece of research, the interpretive mode of phenomenology and the thematic analysis technique used, the diversity of the data collected from HR practitioners and the meanings sought in their experiences, as well as the overall phenomenological approach on which the research stands upon, all help to satisfy the above points concerning validity.

Reliability can be an issue with research of this type (Guest, MacQueen, Namey, 2012). As mentioned already, the data collection did reach a degree of saturation once the themes started emerging during the fieldwork; nevertheless, the sample, one might argue, could have been larger to ensure greater rigour. However, this is a thought more akin to traditional positivist assumption, as opposed to the non-positivist stance taken in this research (Silverman, 2000; Neuman, 2011). Although reliability is important, it is not so relevant in this case due to the broadly inductive, exploratory mode of the research (Silverman, 2000). Once we ‘treat social reality as always in flux, then it makes no sense to worry about whether our research instruments measure accurately’ (Silverman, 2000:188). This is a highly relevant point given the ontological paradigm underpinning this research study.

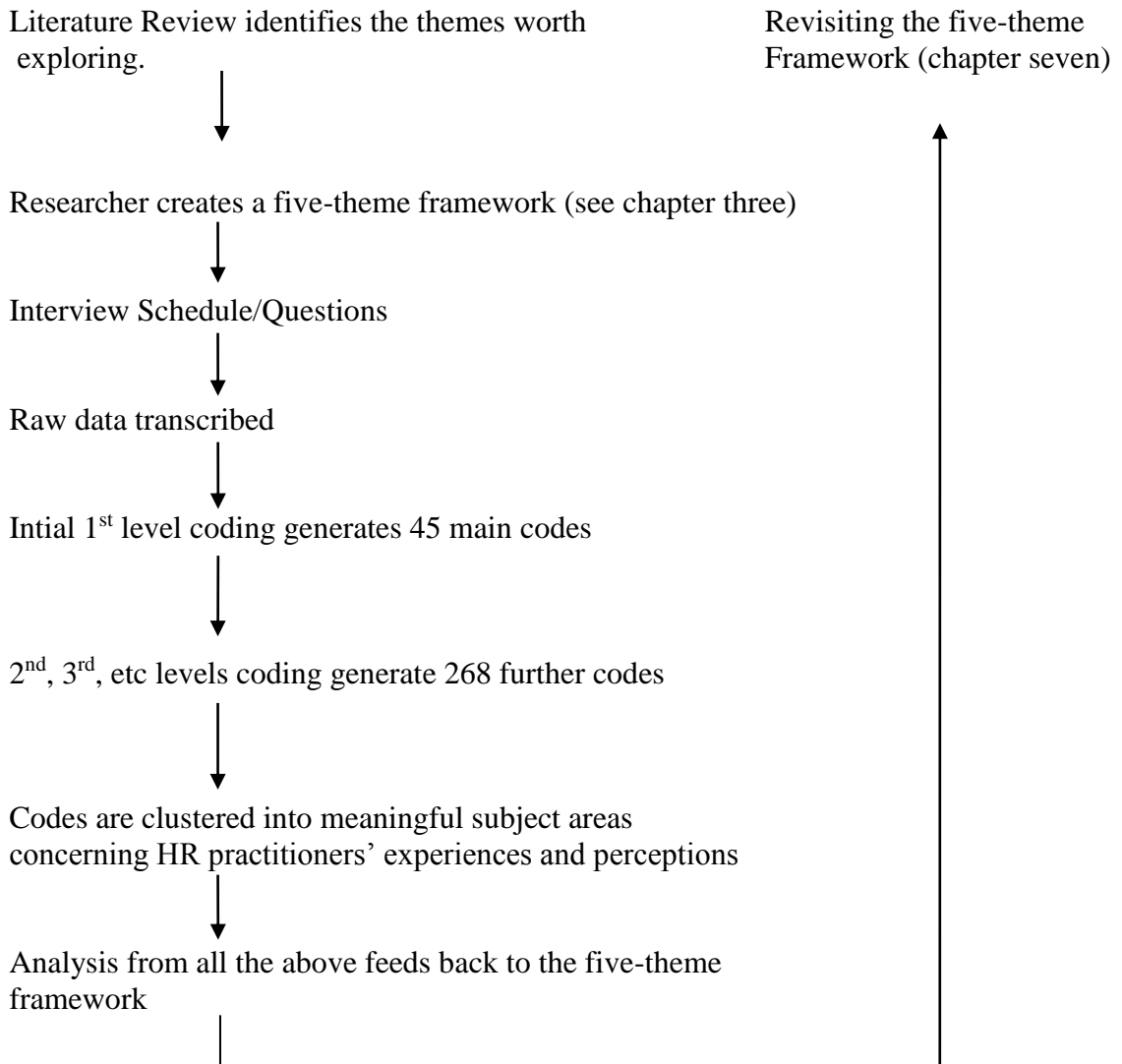
The inductive element of the research inquiry aims at theory building rather than looking for data to provide theory verification or rejection. Therefore, the inductive approach was meant to explore HR practitioners' own perceptions of their role and experience. Furthermore, the degree of data saturation was also rooted in the choice of sampling where respondents were selected because of their extensive seniority in the HR field in organisational settings. Thus the results are reliable for HR practitioners who appear to possess extensive experience and knowledge of the HR field, something which gave the in-depth issues discussed a more reflective dimension.

4.14 Review, reflexivity and personal standpoint

Figure 4.4 recapitulates the flow of the research work undertaken and the process of analysis. It summarises the steps of research design, fieldwork and analysis covered in the section above, and they inform the project. There has been a growing interest in the importance of reflexivity and the use of ‘reflexive practices’ in management research (Hardy, Phillips and Clegg, 2001; Alvesson, Hardy and Harley, 2008:487; Gabriel, 2015). Reflexivity refers to recognising and understanding the role of the researcher in social research, referring to ‘the speaking position’ the standpoint of the researcher, including any ‘theoretical commitments’ and ‘personal experiences’ and ‘understandings’ (Coyle, 2016b:20). Although the researcher is in a position of power, it could be said, in terms of knowing the process and being in “charge” of interpreting the results (Jones, 2001), in this particular research study the participants also held a degree

of power, in terms of their depth of experience and being those holding the “knowledge” the researcher is after.

Figure 4.4: Flow of work/ research framework



Reflexivity also requires that researchers are aware of, and reflect on, the assumptions that guide the research process and their methodological choices (Gabriel, 2015).

Taking Coyle’s advice that ‘personal reflections can be kept from the main body of the text’ (2016b:21), an account of the researcher’s standpoint is provided here relating to the periods both before and after the exploration of the data. Given the phenomenological approach of this research, the participants’ experiences were the focal point, and although the researcher’s position is of secondary importance, by acting as a facilitator during the interview process, the analysis of the data meant the

researcher had a personal input – up to a certain degree. But starting off prior to the research, despite the researcher being initially unsure about the role of HR practitioners, the plethora of thoughts, feelings and experiences the participants shared enriched her knowledge and understandings of HR and HR practitioners in a positive way. The analysis and interpretation that took place was done with respect to the phenomena observed to unravel the links behind the emerging meanings. Contrary to considering the role of the researcher as possibly contaminating the analysis and the results in quantitative research, in qualitative research, ‘properly done, this can acknowledge the role of the researcher and it can increase the transparency of the research process’ (Coyle, 2016b:20). Qualitative data collection uses methods that ‘require a more informal type of interaction between researcher and participant’, and therefore more chances for a biased stance (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012:252). Therefore, during the fieldwork process an attempt was made to maintain an objective-neutral outlook.

However, complete disengagement is not humanly possible, since ‘qualitative research calls for moral responsibility in a field littered with dilemmas, not for quick pre-fixed answers’ (Ryen, 2011:432). Even when trying to remain neutral during an interview, without influencing or leading the participants, the researcher is still part of the data collection process, and therefore contributes both consciously and unconsciously to the outcome. (Oishi, 2003:174). For this reason, the researcher remained aware of any emotional or other difficulties that arose during the process, since ‘the creative interviewer recognizes his own humanity as the beginning of the understanding of all human beings’ (Douglas, 1985:42). In the end, personal experiences and knowledge were used to support the analytical and critical skills employed when capturing and interpreting the research findings. The two key skills that were employed were: first, an appropriate degree of sensitivity to understanding others; and second, the necessary caution to avoid distortion and misinterpretation of others’ sayings. This could be said to be more of an ‘empathic’ approach to the interpretation of the data, however, a ‘suspicious’ (Willig, 2013), approach to the data cannot be ruled out, because at times there was critical evaluation of the meanings interpreted and the researcher was vigilant in portraying this.

On a final note, the overall experience of conducting the field work and analysing the data, although it ran smoothly, still posed dilemmas, encompassed much repetitive work, and was filled with moments of challenging decision making. Rapley (2011) provides certain guidelines when it comes to analysing the data; these refer to the decisions the researcher needs to make concerning uncertainty, intuition and hunches, on how and when to label data, on being systematic and looking for detail, on splitting, combining, simplifying and reducing the data, and on being aware of repetition and boredom, and knowing when it is worth returning to parts of the data and recognising exceptions (Rapley, 2011). In fact, all of these features were experienced during the fieldwork, coding and analysis stages of this research process. Although time-consuming to experience, it was comforting to know that these are phases the researcher goes through when faced with large volumes of raw data, and when undertaking an investigation of an exploratory nature such as this one.

4.15 Ethical considerations

Research in general and management research in particular ought to follow ethical principles (Willig, 2013; Steffen, 2016). Treating others as you would like to be treated yourself is often held up as the “golden rule”: being honest; avoiding plagiarism; ensuring informed consent; having permission to publish; and respecting laws on privacy and data protection (Myers, 2013:49-55). An overall consideration of ethical issues was put in place even during the early stages of the research process (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Mason, 2002; Steffen, 2016), not just at the interview stage. The subjects chosen to be discussed were of a type that would generate discussion and might perhaps have created difficulties with confidentiality. However, this research was interested in personal experiences and perceptions not company data. This offered an advantage when seeking approval for participation as well as when getting clearance by means of the institutional ethical approval form (See Appendix D). However, a true ethical consideration does not rest solely on forms and rules, but also in how the researcher responds to rising dilemmas and challenges while amidst the fieldwork, where a consideration of ethical issues is paramount (Ryen, 2011).

Prior to each interview, participants were given an explanation about the nature and subjects of the research, not only ensuring their informed consent, but also helping to create a rapport (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Steffen, 2016). Great care was taken to

make participants comfortable with their decision to take part in the discussions, and they were encouraged to feel free to discontinue their participation should they have wished to do so, without any explanation needed. Participants were not obliged to answer or discuss any question or subject they felt uncomfortable with. Furthermore, the identity of the respondents was not a concern of this research and the first names used in the findings are pseudonyms, there only for assisting the reader. The anonymity of the participants and of the organisations that employ them has been safeguarded, with any personal or organisational information treated as confidential. Procedures for handling, processing, storage and destruction of the data complied with the Data Protection Act 1998. Throughout the research, the data were stored securely in a locked location to which only the researcher had access. The data were recorded and analysed only for the purpose of fulfilling the aims of the research, and will remain in the possession of the researcher for the time period needed to complete the requirements of the research study.

4.16 Chapter conclusion

Having established the literature background concerning the role of HR practitioners in organisations and the notion of professionalism in chapters two and three, this chapter dealt with explaining how the investigation developed in order to capture empirical data from HR practitioners relating to their experiences, perceptions and understandings of the HR professional role, HR professionalism and HR professionalisation, in line with the research framework set out at the end of chapter three. Based on the objectives set, the research inquiry unfolded and the appropriate methodological strategy and design were put in place. The methodology applied to the research was based on a non-positivistic, ontological perspective. The inductive inquiry, while encompassing a deductive component arising from the links to relevant literature, followed a broadly phenomenological approach. The methodological strategy, based on an interactive model allowed flexibility, reflection and re-tracing of processes. The choice of in-depth interviewing as the data collection method allowed participants to discuss, interpret and reflect on their experiences and perceptions based on the topics discussed. The non-probability sampling approach was realised through networking and snowballing techniques, resulting in a sample of highly experienced HR practitioners whose valuable contributions resulted in a large amount of recorded and coded data. Participants' contributions were interpreted using a phenomenological approach and analysed by

means of a thematic analysis technique, leading to the findings that fulfil the objectives of the research. The methodology applied was well-suited to the investigation, with the fieldwork proving to be a positive experience for both the researcher and the participants. The resulting data produced notable research findings, providing new insights into the HR “professional” role, HR “professionalism” and understanding HR as a “profession”, which are explored in the following chapters.

5. Being an HR Professional

5.1 Introduction

The first of the two chapters devoted to the research findings is concerned with understanding the nature of HR roles, and how the HR practitioners entered these roles in the first place. It does so by examining and interpreting the experiences of HR practitioners themselves, based on the phenomenological approach set out in the methodology chapter. In emphasising the voices of HR practitioners, and bringing to light their stories and experiences, the material conveys an understanding of how they make sense of their roles, what being an HR professional means, and what this implies for thinking about the process of HR professionalisation. The first section (5.2) is concerned with the subject of professional formation, exploring the career development steps practitioners take on their way to working in the HR field; what is involved in “becoming” an HR “professional”. Considered together, the findings reported here offer some important insights into the nature of HR practitioners’ professional formation. The second section (5.3), based on the experiences and perceptions of HR practitioners themselves, examines the nature of HR roles, and how people reflect upon, and make sense of, their experiences. There is a particular focus on understanding the challenges involved in HR work, including those that arise in relation to commitment and the need for an “*on-going balance of judgement*”. The third section (5.4) concerns three aspects which are often regarded as being very important in respect of HR professionalism: trust-driven credibility; status-driven credibility; and knowledge and expertise. The experiences of practitioners with regard to how these issues manifest themselves in their day-to-day HR practice, and how they understand them, make an important contribution to understanding what “being” an HR “professional” actually means.

5.2 Becoming an HR professional

The first set of findings, relating to HR practitioners’ professional formation, present the career development steps they took on their way to working in the HR field.

Practitioners explained what motivated them to pursue a career in HR and reflected on the nature of the training they received, explaining the relevance and value of this training for their daily work. Considered together, these findings offer some important insights into how people become HR professionals.

5.2.1 Attraction to an HR career

Practitioners reflected on the initial steps that led to them working in HR and the reasons for pursuing a career in this field. It was revealing to discover how common it was for people operating in HR to be doing so as a second or even a third career. Practitioners had often undertaken other jobs before finding themselves involved in HR. The HR field was viewed by them as a new career, for which they had had to retrain in order to progress further; yet they also managed somehow to utilise the skills and knowledge from jobs they had previously performed prior to taking up an HR position. What had attracted the HR practitioners who participated in this study to a career in the field? For some only, a specific interest in personnel or the employment field in general had been a decisive factor in being attracted to an HR role. This was apparent in the case of Charles for example, who had developed a career solely in HR:

'I had done work experience in HR ...so I knew bit about it, I was always interested in ... so I applied for the job in HR....That's where I started. I did an admin role in one organisation ...and then, moved to another organisation, ... then a third organisation.....and all that sort of things.' [Charles]

Practitioners such as Charles, who had started their careers in an administrative role, had been HR practitioners more or less from the start of their working lives. His experience projects the intrinsic interest in the HR field that can attract practitioners to work within it. Yet such an HR vocation is not very common. Few people seem to give much, if any, thought to working in HR as a career towards the start of their working lives.

Therefore, a particularly noteworthy case of HR practitioners' experiences concerns the unplanned nature of their careers in HR, rather than a reflection of some kind of underlying vocation – a calling. When asked about why they had decided to follow a career in HR it was striking how often practitioners used expressions such as: 'by accident' or 'it was pure luck'. Erika, like Charles, had started off in an administrative role. But for her, there was no pre-planned approach to working in HR:

'Um, it was an accident... I got the job and it turned out to be an HR administrative role and then they progressed me to HR officer quite quickly, but I didn't have any qualifications at that point. So ..., I'm not sure if anybody actually chooses it. I'm not sure if somebody wakes up in the morning and go,

“I’d quite like to be an HR person”. [BUT] I think it matches people’s personalities though.’ [Erika]

‘I guess I have to say it wasn’t a grand plan. I kind of stumbled into this...[HR] ...I think you kinda fall into it. I know I did’. [Erika]

Erika’s experience communicates the strong sense evident from the research that HR was “just a job” in which practitioners happened to have found themselves. There were no specific, underlying motivations that had led them to work in HR; rather an administrative role in the field offered a convenient entry point. The interviews with HR practitioners conveyed an understanding that “falling” into HR, largely by accident, is an important dimension of what it means to “become” an HR practitioner. There is no real sense of a “calling” being apparent, as would perhaps be the case in conventional, more established professional occupations. Reflecting on their experiences of entering HR, there was an understanding among practitioners of how trying to find employment of some kind, and ending up in an entry-level HR administrative position, had been important, but not a conscious decision to start a career in HR.

However, this was not true of all the HR practitioners who featured in the research. In some cases practitioners reflected upon how they had been attracted to the HR field because of its central concern with dealing with matters relating to people, and their own interest in “human nature”. In this respect, the experiences of Elisa and Lena are informative:

‘... what I liked about HR is that you were dealing with people, who are unpredictable and every time even if you are dealing with a similar type of case the outcomes could be very different because of the people that you are dealing with and it’s all about those skills, those interpersonal skills of influencing and communicating and problem-solving –but with also a structured background, particularly moving into the HR side of things and the legislative framework.... So, it’s sort of that that appealed to me, a sort of ...the legislative framework and then the working with people.’ [Elisa]

‘It’s the people side of things. It is the interaction with people, building up the working relationships, you know credibility... I don’t think there is one thing, ...am very much somebody who helps others, ... and I think, I think I just thought it’s the right area for me, to use the skill-set that I’ve got.’ [Lena]

Common to both Elisa and Lena’s experiences was that they had started out in training roles, which is how they pursued their interest in the human element of organisations. HR practitioners made sense of their interest in the “people” side of organisations by

highlighting the need for problem-solving and the sense of “comfort” they felt knowing they operate within a structured legislative framework, dealing with people who, by their very nature, are unpredictable; and the importance of helping them tackle stressful situations. Being in roles that involve building interpersonal skills and supporting people shows an important underlying attraction relating to human nature. The experiences of HR practitioners conveyed a sense that no matter how business-oriented the HR role is said to have become, the “human” side of the role is an important dimension. This was apparent even among those who most accepted the business partner model.

The experiences of the practitioners in this study, and how they reflected on the process by which they became HR professionals, suggest that HR should perhaps be considered less of a “profession”, at least in the established sense, and more as an organisational field, which people enter initially to bank some administrative experience. While the “people” side of organisations could be an important attraction, when reflecting on their career histories generally HR practitioners could not identify making a conscious decision, initially anyway, to work in the HR field. However, the decision to remain in HR, and build a career within it, was very much a conscious one. These findings indicate that, as a professional occupation, HR is characterised by a different mode of attraction than is the case with other, more conventional professions where people are attracted to developing careers within them from the outset, more as a vocation. Having a “taste” of what HR is, and how it operates, seems to be important before considering it as an attractive career choice.

5.2.2 Developing as an HR practitioner/“professional”

Having examined how HR practitioners become attracted to a career in the field, it is important now to investigate the process of their professional training and development. Generally, a key part of the process of becoming an HR professional involves acquiring a relevant qualification, particularly by studying on programmes accredited by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). Yet it is important to keep in mind that despite their often long experience and successful careers in HR, they had not necessarily all acquired a formal HR qualification or engaged in any related studies.

The lack of a qualification did not seem to have posed much of an obstacle to the development of HR practitioners’ careers, so, this raises questions about whether or not

holding a specialist qualification is necessary for a career in HR. The data show that the value of the CIPD qualification has to be seen, not as a licence to practice, but more as something which boosts the esteem and self-confidence of HR practitioners, and demonstrates their credibility in organisational settings. There is a sense that the value of acquiring a formal, specialist qualification comes not so much in what it contains, but in how it influences the perceptions of others towards HR practitioners, by giving them higher status and providing evidence of their capability to operate in organisational HR roles.

Practitioners reflected on their experiences of developing as HR professionals. Here, the material concerns HR practitioners' reflections upon, and their attempts to make sense of, their experiences of training and development in HR. Although most referred to training and development activities associated with acquiring the CIPD qualification, there was some mention of experiences of other types of training they had undertaken, involving higher education, programmes offered by their employing organisations or seminar events. An attempt was made to understand how practitioners believed they had become sufficiently knowledgeable, equipped and confident once they had completed their training in HR in order to undertake their roles effectively. In analysing the experiences, perceptions and reflections of HR practitioners, it became apparent that they judged their training experience in terms of how relevant or not it was for their work, whether or not it provided them with adequate knowledge, how far it instilled in them the values necessary to practice as HR practitioners, and how practical it was in terms of giving them the tools to do their jobs. Of course, two things need to be taken into consideration: first, that for some people their experiences of training had taken place quite far back in the past; and second, many would have undertaken training activities or pursued the CIPD qualification while already working in the field.

The experiences of HR practitioners highlight the importance of five key issues with regard to their training and development activity. First of all, it was evident that they judge their training in terms of its relevance to their work. Erika, for example, reflected on the practical value of her learning activity:

'And it's all of that kind of stuff, so for me, because I was able to practically put into place some of the things that I was actually learning at the time, and also I

think probably of significant value is working in groups on the course with other HR practitioners who were actually working in ..., in all sorts of things where they kind of you learn a lot from them and how they do things. And there's that networking that you start together as well.' [Erika]

In this sense, then, the HR practitioners understand training and development as being about what is relevant to what they are doing at the time in their job roles. This way, it is claimed makes more sense, giving them a better understanding of HR practices and enhancing their existing knowledge. But such a positive experience of initial professional development seems to be outweighed by a more sceptical perception that it had felt out of place, lacking in relevance, and without being able to identify any parallels with what HR practitioners actually did in their actual jobs in their employing organisations. This was evident from the experience of Lena:

'Um, I think there are some elements within the... course, probably more... where you're doing the sort of professional management side of things, where depending on the level of your role, within HR at the time..., but it doesn't directly correlate to the job you're paid to do at that point in time.' [Lena]

Her experience conveys the sense that existed among practitioners of there being a lack of correlation between the practices identified in the initial training and development of HR practitioners and the realities of what actually needs to be done in their roles. This means that they often do not get an opportunity to use the knowledge they have acquired.

In addition to the relevance of their initial professional training and development, HR practitioners also judged it in terms of its adequacy and the level of knowledge acquired. There were apparently some notably positive experiences, especially from those, such as Charles, who appreciated that it had provided them with a broad and all-round knowledge and understanding of HR issues:

'Ok, Uh, the coursework wasn't anything like a training course like say, you do the training course, then you know everything there is to know about and you can work in any organisation...(ironic tone of voice) ...and it was quite broad cause obviously it tries to cover all aspects of HR. So, you're doing your learning and development, and you pay and reward and your just touching on a lot of things, cause obviously in HR in reality a lot of people are specialist.'
[Charles]

For Teresa, it was the exposure to the distinctive ethos of HR that had been important, in a way that made connections to practical issues of delivery:

*'Yes, I would say that the postgraduate course that I did was excellent. I think it gave you sound grounding in the theory, the legislation, as it was at that time really, it changes, but yes I think it did give you an insight into values and standards and there's a practical side to it as well, you know, how to do it'.
[Teresa]*

Those who felt that their initial training and development has been adequate, or even expressed satisfaction with it, highlighted how it had provided them with an all-round knowledge of HR issues. Even though this could mean covering a wide range of issues without going into sufficient depth – a perceived lack of in-depth learning could be a difficulty – the overall experience was a positive one. Yet this assessment was not universally shared. See the experience of Ariadne, for example:

'I never left that course, thinking that I was sort of, you know, fully-formed as a practitioner, in any sense in fact, probably not in many senses, other than at the level that I had learned some interesting things and I'd do some projects and those were very useful, part of the whole business....., I think actually you took...If you took a learning year and a working year and compared them you'd be learning more on the job than you would...probably in the classroom.' [Ariadne]

Contrary to the beliefs expressed by others, her comments reflected a concern that initial training and development had not provided her with the necessary practical tools to undertake an HR role effectively. In such cases, practitioners felt obliged to go elsewhere to complete their knowledge acquisition. What is interesting here, then, is not just the lack of consensus evident when it comes to HR practitioners' evaluation of their initial training and development experience, but also the questions it raises about the nature of professional HR knowledge and whether it can actually be effectively determined, especially if it varies according to the organisational context. On the one hand, there is general support for the idea that a training and development programme is important to instil the necessary overall values and guidance; but on the other hand, due to the varying nature of the HR service in organisations and the specialist nature of HR roles, any kind of all-encompassing programme of professional HR development poses serious limitations.

With this in mind, there is a third issue relevant here. This concerns the way in which HR practitioners draw their professional values from other sources, including their employing organisations, rather than the CIPD and its qualification process. This was

apparent from the experience of Ettie, who had worked exclusively in the private sector; she made it very clear just how important her company's approach is when it comes to promoting a certain set of values:

'Not the CIPD, NO. The company YES. Because the company has got some strong values in how it behaves and how it performs, I'm talking about...so [the organisation] had a very strong corporate identity, it had a very strong...it had a set of values, a mission, a vision, values, which basically permeated all the way down the organisation...everything that you did was meant to sort to reflect that,...So I think that gave me more than CIPD and we did a lot of in-house training at the time the training was in-house...'. [Ettie]

For Ettie, then, HR professional development, and becoming an HR professional, was understood very much in corporate terms. There was very little sense from HR practitioners in general that the process of studying to gain their professional qualification had instilled in them any distinct professional, occupational values. Their experience of the CIPD qualification was that it was focused on providing only practical guidance, without instilling a value base or inspiring a moral code of conduct. This relates to a fourth issue, which is that practitioners tend to judge their training experience in terms of its practical nature; both whether or not it provides them with the practical tools for their work and how well the theory combines with practice. This was the experience of Ylenia, who mentioned that when it comes to training and learning:

'I think the blended approach helps. I think actually from my perspective what I like is actually going on courses, doing the theory, but if you then don't put that into practice, how valuable is it? So from my own perspective, I would [have] to say that it's got to be the blended. Yes, because you're not just learning the theory, you're actually able to practice. No, no, I think that definitely helps if you're actually doing a role, even if it's not the role that you're going to use some of those skills in, it gives you an idea and sorts of things that really you might come across if you were to get a different role or whatever, it gives you the theory...even if you're using it in your job or not. So I think the blended approach, from my perspective is so much better.' [Ylenia]

In this sense, developing as an HR professional is understood as involving the combination of theory derived from academic courses with organisational practice.

Developing as an HR practitioner, and thus becoming an HR "professional", means pursuing the CIPD qualification at the same time as working in an HR role.

Understanding relevant HR issues and concepts is essential; but these really only make sense to practitioners, and enable their effective professional development, if it is

combined with some actual relevant working experience. The HR practitioners in the study reflected on how they had benefited both from working alongside and being in a learning environment with others who were also involved in HR. This made sense given their rather negative experiences of the adequacy of their initial professional learning, in terms of it feeling out of place and lacking relevance to what they were actually doing in their roles. The research findings convey a sense that, given that the CIPD qualification is perceived to be rather academic in focus, effective professional development must also involve organisation-based training interventions and work experience to help fill in the gaps left by theory. More than this, in some cases it is their organisational and workplace-based learning and training experiences that are crucial to practitioners' formation as HR professionals, either because the process of gaining the formal qualification was so inadequate or because they had not pursued one at all. In such cases, it was the positive experience of work-based learning and training opportunities offered by their employing organisations that were central to HR practitioners' professional formation and development, providing them with what they needed to pursue a successful career in HR.

The fifth and final point concerns the important opportunity that a formal qualification provided for future career and professional development. Acquiring an HR qualification might not necessarily be very important for getting an HR position in the first place. However, it could be useful later on for providing evidence that practitioners possess the relevant expertise, thus improving their employability. According to Yasmin:

'No, I didn't do it to get into the job, I got it primarily because I wanted the recognition of what I was doing and also I wanted something that was transportable in terms of a qualification because I knew that I was likely to be leaving my then employer.' [Yasmin]

For her, with 20 years of HR experience, attaining a qualification meant that she could ensure that her skills were transferable in a way that verifies skills already acquired. Thus gaining an HR qualification is about being able to demonstrate the "proof of the skills" practitioners already believe they have acquired, thus demonstrating their capabilities and competences. The data also suggest that acquiring a relevant qualification can be important for raising the self-esteem of HR practitioners, elevating their self-confidence, and giving them the security they believe is necessary to undertake their roles effectively. That said, however, reflecting on their experience in

the field, there is a strong sense from the HR practitioners in this study that the CIPD qualification may be of little use for moving to higher-level organisational positions.

Given changes in organisations and the HR field, relying on learning acquired through the initial process of acquiring a qualification is clearly insufficient. But, any training and learning soon becomes obsolete if it is not kept up to date in a way that helps to maintain professional standards. The data project a sense that the changing nature of the HR function, particularly the shift away from transactional type activities – dealing with the administration of activities such as recruitment, sickness absence monitoring, processing, maternity, discipline and grievance – towards a more strategic-level approach based on supporting business needs, appears to have stimulated demand for more, and different, types of training. Overall, it was very clear that the skills and knowledge claimed by HR practitioners surpassed that offered by a formal qualification. This demonstrates that when it comes to thinking about the nature of the HR professional one must look beyond formal credentials and consider practitioners' background and experience. More importantly, it raises questions about how one evaluates the level of the HR "professional" and the necessity of a formal qualification.

5.3 Enacting the HR professional role

Building on the material in the previous section, which concerned understanding, interpreting and making sense of the experience of HR practitioners in becoming HR professionals, this section is devoted to exploring how they enact their roles as HR professionals. First, there is a concern with understanding the realities and ambiguities of HR roles in organisations, particularly the influence of HR's prior reputation and how it affects practitioners' everyday work. Second, there is a focus on the challenges and conflicts experienced by HR practitioners in organisations, including that of integrating HR policy and practice with the strategic business goals. Third, the presence of two particularly notable characteristics is emphasised: the feature associated with having a "*fluid commitment*" and the mode of operating an "*on-going balance of judgement*".

5.3.1 The realities of HR roles

From the research, it was apparent just how much practitioners make sense of their roles through the lens of changes in HR. They do not experience their role as being more formalised or more bureaucratic, but instead realise the interdependency of their role

with other parts of the organisation and the greater need for seeking approval of their actions, which may be time-consuming. For Nerina, a greater degree of engagement with the business had provided opportunities to take on a more strategic, transformational role, in a way that offered more challenges. Her role was seen as:

‘far more interesting because it isn’t just focused on HR because there is that commercial side that comes into it as well and you need to understand how the wider business operates, so if I think back to the early days it was, you know you did your HR bit and that was really it. You didn’t necessarily need to understand the wider context, whereas now you do. I think it’s more interesting, it’s more challenging’. [Nerina]

Nerina’s experience is suggestive of how HR practitioners wanted their role, and also their contribution to the business, to be better understood and appreciated – under the label of a “profession”. In practitioners’ experience, this had given them a more valuable understanding of how to alter, and improve, their roles, and thus the services they provided to their employing organisations. On the whole, those practitioners who had experienced major changes in their roles felt more confident and credible than had been the case earlier on in their careers. A dynamic could be identified. As well as business partnering, and the role changes associated with it, having helped to promote HR professionalisation, the development of the HR professional project more generally seems to have boosted practitioners’ credibility and, by implication, their professional standing. This was apparent from the experience of Lena, who observed that:

‘I think that lifted everybody to then make sure they were qualified and having the work-based route to provide evidence to get the qualification, I think... it was useful for people to have that. So, I do see it as a positive...’ [Lena]

The greater division of HR work and the increased specialisation demanded mean that practitioners have had to adopt a more professional approach and strive to achieve wider business credibility. The experiences of the HR practitioners in this study highlighted the importance they attach to demonstrating evidence of their abilities and skills, whether work-related or course-based. As a result, the HR role is better understood. While the evolution of HR on business partner terms may have brought its practitioners higher status and a greater degree of professional standing, there is a difficulty with business partnering, and the contribution it can supposedly make to HR professionalisation. This concerns the lack of clarity in HR roles often experienced by HR practitioners. According to Yasmin:

'...we haven't got clear processes. It is quite clear in some people's head. But there's lots of different interpretation...But I think in the Ulrich model...if you're clear about what is and who does what, that can free up the ability to work strategically at a different level, but it does make for a more boring job for the people who are carrying out the transactions.' [Yasmin]

Yasmin's experience conveys a sense that a key supposed change in HR, namely the shift to a clearer task division between transactional and transformational activities, is not viewed necessarily as being very positive for the HR role. Instead, there still appear to be some "muddy waters"; with the distinction between these activities having created a divide in HR work, raising doubts as to how beneficial these changes have really been. The experiences of the HR practitioners in this study indicate that because of the supposed dichotomy between more or less strategic work, or, in other words, between transformational and transactional activities, there is greater scope for role frustration. This causes delays and misunderstandings linked to uncertainty about the role of HR practitioners. One might have thought that greater formalisation and standardisation of HR practices would have been welcomed by practitioners, freeing-up time to pursue more strategic activities. However, their experiences suggest that HR has not become less bureaucratic; rather, it is often not so much an issue of processes becoming more or less bureaucratic, but rather a shift to having to seek approval, through more stages, which takes up greater time, and which may result in HR giving an impression of being more bureaucratic.

A further, related issue concerns HR practitioners' experiences as the guardians of organisational people management policies. Evan reflected on this:

'I think, the biggest thing for HR and I don't think it's just this [organisation], I think, generally, we, we've got to see ourselves less as policemen and more as advisers... Because I think in the real world, there are no absolute yeses ... Sometimes it's about taking calculated risks and I think we should be there to advise people "OK, if you do this that potentially could be a problem". It's down to managers to ultimately decide. Obviously, there are certain things we couldn't condone. But generally speaking we need to move more to being more of a provider of information and advice. Not telling people what they should and shouldn't do. We do that too much.' [Evan]

Given the role that HR practitioners have in being responsible for designing policies and procedures, in addition to ensuring that their employing organisations operate lawfully, this often puts them in a position of acting as "enforcers" of organisational policies, and

gaining a reputation for instructing managers about what they should be doing. As Evan, among others, recognised, HR practitioners do aspire to try to change this situation, principally by attempting to adopt more of a consultancy role, and thus not just focusing on enforcing organisational rules. The research findings convey a sense that, due to the individual nature of the cases they deal with, HR practitioners aspire to operate more like lawyers, combining advisory and consultancy roles at the same time, and being less compliance oriented. Their experiences suggest that a degree of frustration can exist when others focus too closely on ensuring that managers comply with rules and regulations, and implement HR procedures appropriately. The findings suggest that practitioners need to understand that effective HR practice is not about acting like a “cat and mouse” with managers, as one of them described it. More emphasis needs to be placed on managers understanding that it is their responsibility to comply with HR standards. Nerina reflected on her experience as an HR business partner, observing that:

‘...managers being asked to do certain things and my view is you’ve got to stop chasing managers because they come to expect that. So, they think, oh I’m not going to do this because I know I’ll be chased.’ [Nerina]

A further notable issue concerns how much the business credibility of HR practitioners rests upon their reputation, and how this is influenced by people’s past experience of their role and activities. It was apparent just how much HR practitioners felt that HR’s unfavourable reputation damages their credibility; especially the difficulties arising because of this in dismissing the negative impressions of others – line managers and members of the workforce. They were aware that others might have had bad experiences when previously dealing with HR, that issues might not have been resolved to their advantage, or were not handled in an appropriately “professional” manner; all things which will have influenced attitudes towards HR practitioners in general. HR practitioners believe that it is their responsibility to work in ways that aim to challenge such perceptions. Why do such difficulties arise? Reflecting deeply, Charles observed that:

‘HR issues that affect the individual they are very personal issues. First impressions, especially like inductions, things like that, that’s why I think, things that go wrong and I’m sure they frequently do go wrong affects someone’s perception of HR for a very long time..... I think, because it’s personal, matters to people, ..., if your pay is mixed up is a big deal, it matters to you, you know more than if the local accountant has got his figures wrong, that may not affect you. Affects you, your family, your kids, whatever, it’s a personal issue. So, it

matters to people.’ [Charles]

This shows an understanding that the main reason why a previous negative experience of HR could have such an intense impact is because the issues handled by HR practitioners are those that matter such a great deal to employees. They concern their workplaces, careers and livelihoods. When HR practitioners meet employees for the first time to deal with an issue they are unaware of their predisposition towards HR, or their experiences of HR. While they make an effort to do an effective job, it can be very difficult to overcome negative perceptions arising out of things that may have gone wrong in the past.

Even though it may have been a minor issue, and perhaps not even HR’s fault, it could have been just enough to establish a negative impression of HR as a field. Experiences such as these mean that HR practitioners feel they have to work particularly hard to demonstrate not just their individual effectiveness and professionalism as practitioners themselves, but also to overcome the negative reputation HR has inherited. It is generally believed that HR has a poor reputation because most of the time people do not get to see an HR practitioner or have any dealings with the HR function unless something has gone wrong, which of course automatically generates a negative association. However, it is also acknowledged that there are cases where HR has been responsible for creating a negative impression, something that added to the pressure on practitioners who do take more pride in their HR work. This is how Erika felt:

‘Because I think HR people get quite a bad rap... But I think, you know I always felt that it’s about giving a service. It’s really sad that some people have a terrible um, have a real terrible opinion or have had terrible experience of HR because, I just don’t see how, I think these people must be in the wrong job.... and it’s a real shame for me. For me as a profession I’m quite proud of what I do.’ [Erika]

Being frustrated about the poor quality of communication between their colleagues, or the lack of speed in changing and implementing organisational matters, HR practitioners acknowledge how such situations create structural problems for the HR function. Their experiences had made them aware of how HR often attracts a poor reputation since it is associated with negative issues in the organisation – which they are called upon to resolve. Therefore the function lends itself to being treated as the scapegoat when problems arise in organisations. This does not help practitioners to shed

any negative impressions which HR often attracts. Indeed, they recognised that different parts of the HR function could be seen in a more favourable or positive light than others and, moreover, believed that those on the outside do not actually know enough about what HR actually involves, missing the point that HR largely functions to suit primarily business needs. HR practitioners had experience of how bureaucratic processes could obstruct clear, direct routes to management. They feel under pressure to ensure that, with certain aspects of work, they set appropriate examples. Moreover, they believe that they have to act as they preach if they are to demonstrate their credibility convincingly. Exploring the experiences of their roles in this way, then, has offered a grounded, reality-based perspective of HR practitioners' feelings, worries, frustrations, understandings and aspirations, including those about HR as a field of work. It demonstrates their awareness of the realities of enacting the HR role in organisations, the factors that inhibit their effectiveness and what, if changed, could lead to an enhanced HR contribution in organisations and thus improve their "professional" standing.

5.3.2 Challenges and conflicts in HR roles

HR practitioners in the study reflected on their experiences in a way that offers an understanding of the challenges they face. In particular, the broader issue of coping with potentially conflicting demands and targets obliges them to perform a delicate balancing act when undertaking their roles. Nevertheless, practitioners' experiences not only point to the different techniques which they use to overcome these challenges, but also shed more light on how such issues are tackled in their everyday HR roles. One key challenge concerns integrating HR practices with the business, something that can give rise to conflict. Elisa, whose current role is an HR business partner, reflected on what this involves:

'...so we're far more into that area [the partnering], which we weren't before but then there's a lot about educating managers into what your new role is, getting them to believe that you can make a difference and actually getting in there and making that difference! [it's about] ...getting more involved at an earlier stage of what they're doing, so when they're setting their strategies thinking about the HR issues that are likely to flow from that, [managers are] thinking about planning their staff, thinking about the development of their staff, thinking about the structures that they have...' [Elisa]

Her experience points to an understanding that embedding HR practices within organisations is a risky task, along with educating others in the organisation about the

role and value of HR, especially since the partnering role has proved to be such a challenge in itself. It seems that there is still a need for HR practitioners to convince others about their contribution, even in cases where there is a more integral role for HR in the organisation. Moreover, it is not only a matter of HR involvement in itself, but also of ensuring that HR is involved as early as possible. As the experience of Elisa shows, although not a guarantee of success, this can better ensure an effective end result. Linked to this, there is often a mistaken view that HR is concerned just with looking after people in an organisation, when it is not about that at all, or at least not just about that. Satisfying business needs is viewed as the prime aim, with practitioners focusing their efforts in a way that suits these needs. As a result, people not directly engaged in HR do not realise just how much is actually involved in it. Ylenia, also an HR business partner, reflected on the challenge of integrating HR with the business:

'...I'm not sure that morally I would want to be doing this but sometimes you think for the greater good of where that manager is trying to go [for] the organisation, there's always going to be that conflict that you're going to have to overcome'. [Ylenia]

Her experience provides an understanding that conflict can sometimes arise between the objectives of trying to implement what practitioners consider to be HR best practice and that of satisfying business demands. This reflects the on-going debate about the challenges of aligning the aims of HR and the demands of the business, something which HR practitioners still seem to have to live with, accommodate and respond to on a regular basis. Conflict often arises due to: contrasting perceptions of what an appropriate solution to a problem is; the fact that those outside may have differing ideas of what HR is; or because HR practitioners are perceived as not truly grasping the relevant business rationale. So the idea of appropriate decisions and solutions varies according to these conflicting perceptions. This was the experience of Charles who observed that it is:

'... quite common in HR is people don't know what it's like out there in the business, doing the stuff. Like they're advising people, but they are not always in the line, they're out in the business doing the work and people think HR don't understand them.' [Charles]

There is also an on-going struggle over what is preferable – to ensure that a process is followed appropriately in order to reach a result, or to pay less regard to the process and concentrate more on achieving the desired outcome. This was recognised by Yasmin:

'There's conflict, in as much as you have to try and get people to where they want to be appropriately, legally, using the right processes, ... but I would normally come from a starting point of either understanding where they are trying to get to or having a conversation with them to help them clarify where they need to get to...' [Yasmin]

However, her experience highlights the important extent to which the role of HR practitioners in such situations seems to involve developing common understandings and clarifying expectations. Linked to all this is the key challenge of demonstrating the relevance of HR. For HR practitioners, the longstanding battle for credibility is a constant issue. With an HR career lasting 30 years, Reed's experience was that:

'...[for example], ...more things go wrong...with the management of change than they do with anything else, [things] fail and they don't fail because the economics are wrong, or that the finance is been done wrong, it's because people, often,... I mean there are often unrealistic assumptions... key groups of people are not kept, are not integrated, the value they bring to the business is not understood, and profited from; and those are HR issues...the integration of people into business, for me, HR issues, straight HR issues.' [Reed]

The lesson to be taken from this is that HR should be more forceful in making others understand its relevance, and what needs to be done, in a way that would benefit the business. However, it can be difficult to demonstrate the relevance of HR when faced with scepticism from others within the organisation. It is those who think that they can handle any situation without the need for HR intervention who need most convincing; or those who believe that anything HR has to offer by way of advice is not for their benefit but only something they have to comply with, in a way that doubts HR's relevance to the business. In the private sector, Elvira reflected on how she tackled this challenge:

'... I think as well, I mean if you want to put the commercial edge to it, when you don't handle the things well people are focused on themselves and their issues and they're not focused on the job, they're not focused on delivering what's required for the customer and they're too busy minding about their pension or the pay rise they haven't had or pursuing a grievance which is taking up loads of peoples' time. So there is a commercial edge you can put to all of it anyway, not apart from just being nice...it encompass really around engaging people which that is the key focus now; engage people, provide better service and the rest of it, but then you have to be serious about it.' [Elvira]

The experiences of HR practitioners also suggest that there is a challenge associated with delivering HR services. In this regard, a particularly notable issue relates to communication, in terms of interpreting information from external sources and

formatting it appropriately to ensure comprehension, cooperation and implementation. One aspect of this involves conveying information in a format appropriate for others, for example line managers; while another concerns interpreting what it is that managers are trying to achieve. Practitioners' experiences demonstrate that it is not just the challenge of making sure that all parties have understood what they are meant to; but also the task of finding sufficient time to ensure that information is conveyed in an understandable manner. Related to this is the importance of ensuring consistency. At times HR practitioners are called upon to customise their practices; while at others they have to implement practices and procedures for the sake of consistency. Having to say "no" to those that do not want to abide by HR's wishes, even when it is absolutely necessary to do so, is a constant challenge for practitioners. This was the experience of Renato:

'...I'll give you an example of what area HR needs to say no, in recruitment, if [managers or departments] now want to bring in their friends as members of staff or bring their family or their friends, we have to say, no you can't do that. You've got to advertise a role, you can't just bring a mate in...to do a particular job, you have to advertise, so...for equal opportunities and fairness. ... it's always a battle about having to say... no you must advertise roles so that people have an equal opportunity to apply, ... so that's an example where we have to say no, make ourselves unpopular sometimes.' [Renato]

A further key challenge highlighted by practitioners relates to HR complexity. In this respect, they understand the tension that can arise from needing to strike a balance between avoiding too much risk and not being too risk averse when aiming for results. This involves maintaining a balancing act of achievability, something that is an on-going challenge when operating HR practices. Elisa reflected on how she deals with such a challenge, and attempts to operate as a facilitator within this remit of risk:

'...but what we will do is we will look at risk. How much risk is there in going to where the business wants, what's the risk in terms of perception to the employees, perception perhaps to unions, perception outside [the organisation], or in cost, you know. So, what's the risk? ...And then we will weigh that up and make a decision. Wherever we can we will try to facilitate what client areas want to do, what [different parts of the business] will want to do, within the remit of risk....And this is quite, ah, a balancing judgment that you need to make...we're constantly weighing out risks. We constantly think about what are the risks of doing it.' [Elisa]

5.3.3 Commitment to a side

HR practitioners reflected on their experiences of managing the commitment issues that they face in their work. On the whole, their experiences convey an understanding that it is not possible to operate as an HR practitioner if one thinks there ought to be commitment to one side or another within an organisation. However, For Erika, ultimately the interests of the business came first, since its success keeps people in work:

'... you know at the end of the day we work for a salary and the business applies to salary and if, we're doing our roles with the allegiance to the business that means that the business should be pottering along without tribunals or too many grievances or...., whatever that may be. And therefore, our allegiance should be, in my book, with the business, but that's not to, that's not to undermine the importance of the people because it's the people who create the business. So, I feel that there, my allegiance has to be with the business, but if the business is operating correctly and doing what it should do then people should in theory, it doesn't always work, but in theory be as happy as they could be and feel as valued as they are and be the right people at the right place at the right time to do the right jobs...' [Erika]

Yet too much of a focus on pursuing the business partner model can create confusion. In practitioners' experience, while the aim is to give the best possible advice and keep separate lines between cases, the partnering model has created some confusion and dilemma. Ariadne, for example, reflected how she felt on different occasions that:

'...sometimes you'd be on side of management thinking that's entirely what I think I should be doing and other times you think that's entirely the wrong thing to be doing, ... and yet, all the business partnering stuff says basically get off the side of the employee and start working for the business; you know it's more ambiguous than that.' [Ariadne]

How do HR practitioners cope with these ambiguities and dilemmas that arise from their role as employee advocates, yet also prioritising the needs of the business? For Darius, in his public sector organisation it is a matter of ensuring there is sufficient separation:

'...I think that definitely there's always been the dilemma for HR, ...understanding that there are situations where we need to kind of keep a barrier. So, for instance, if I'm supporting an employee in a certain situation, ... it won't be appropriate for me to support the manager, they're the more tricky ones...There are situations...but,... sometimes it just doesn't look, it doesn't give the appearance of being right. So, where we can that's what we would do,...

keep that separation there, ... that helps you to kind of give your focus to the individual... ' [Darius]

His experience conveys the important sense that treating individual cases on their merits, without having any predisposition, is a key element of HR professionalism. Effective HR work is about gathering together all the relevant and useful information needed, on which to base fair and informed judgments. The findings demonstrate an understanding of how the HR professional operates; supporting individuals, but tending to maintain clear lines between cases. The primary concern of HR practitioners, as they understood it, is to try to operate fairly, transparently and without displaying bias. Clearly individual staff can feel unsupported. In such cases, effective HR work is about maintaining and restoring lines of communication. For Lena, this also means adopting a frame of mind which is explicitly not about taking sides. Although this may be easier in a training role:

'More often than not it's been a breakdown of communication. Uh, and sometimes there are things that haven't gone right on both parties' sides. So, it's certainly I would never put myself in a position, in a moral view that the manager's always right and the employee's in the wrong; because actually it can be six of one half dozen of the other.' [Lena]

HR practitioners understand their work as having a predominantly advisory function, especially when dealing with line managers. The HR professional role is understood as being concerned with providing managers with appropriate guidance about how to operate organisational policies and practices, even if the ultimate recipient is an employee. That said, no matter whom they advise in their work, the support HR practitioners offer is aimed at making sure that organisational relationships run smoothly. Yet HR practitioners recognise the misconceptions about HR that people in organisations often have, and the nature of HR practitioners' commitment, influenced by previous experiences of HR, good or bad. There is an understanding that this can be the fault of practitioners themselves for not communicating clearer and more positive messages about their role.

Thinking about commitment, it might be expected that in professional disciplines practising professionals would have definite goals and a commitment to their professional standards that inform their behaviour. Therefore, the lack of a particular commitment to any part of, or aspect of, the business perhaps raises questions about the nature of the HR "professional" role. In some ways, the experiences of HR practitioners,

and how they understand and make sense of these experiences, suggests the presence of a “*fluid commitment*”, the focus of which changes depending on who it is they are advising. Furthermore, it may not matter that HR practitioners are, or at least seem to be, committed to a certain side, if others in the organisation have a formed view about HR and the role it plays. This influences somewhat the outcomes HR practitioners are trying to achieve. Their experience demonstrates that HR professionalism involves a desire to promote best practice and to ensure that people are treated fairly. However, positioning themselves as employee advocates may end up leaving managers feeling neglected and unsupported. Despite efforts to remain unbiased, and avoid showing a “commitment to a side”, the research with HR practitioners indicates their understanding that they are not always successful in conveying such a message to the organisation at large. What is understood here is that, due to practitioners’ extensive experience in practising HR they can now function with this “*fluid commitment*”; the HR role should therefore be understood as having moved beyond a dualistic sense of them-and-us mentality.

5.3.4 Balance of judgment

The experiences of HR practitioners also convey an appreciation of how, given changes in HR, and the challenges, difficulties and conflicts they faced when trying to meet targets and serve the organisation’s business needs, they need to be cautious when offering their commitment to supporting and resolving cases they encounter. Balancing situations was crucial to making relevant decisions. The research findings conveyed a strong sense of how HR practitioners understand their roles in terms of upholding a balancing act. Maintaining such a “*balance of judgment*” is necessary not only when making decisions, but also as part of dealing with any credibility and trust issues related to the HR role. HR practitioners make sense of their role by viewing it as being about ensuring relevant judgments are made when it comes to avoiding risk, delivering services with fairness and integrity and serving organisational goals.

Thus it can be said that, as revealed by their reflections on, and understandings of, their experiences, HR practitioners operate in a state which can be compared to a constant balancing act. This manifests itself in all sorts of aspects of their role, in terms of: commitment; business decisions and HR practices; assuring their credibility and faith from line managers in order to get their work done; when trying to demonstrate their expertise and knowledge; when knowing when to stop “telling” others what to do; and

when trying to demonstrate that any past negative reputation which HR attracts is mistaken. As Elisa observed, in her experience what was important was the necessity, and indeed the difficulty, of taking decisions when considering, not only the available options, but also the consequences of those options. This also includes a sense that line managers sometimes find this balancing act on the part of HR practitioners difficult to comprehend. In Elisa's experience:

'Everything we do there is a balance of judgment in it, that you decide whether you can, whether, how, what the risk factor is, what you can change, what you should stick to and you just kind of make those judgments on case by case...there is not a lot of black and white, there's lots of shades of grey in everything. So everything you do is making a judgment based on the facts that you have available. The managers find that difficult of our profession because depending on what the scenario is the response may be different.' [Elisa]

Furthermore, one of the main reasons for this difference in understanding is often the presence of an innate perception on the part of others that HR is somewhat detached from the rest of the organisation, particularly the business side of things. Ariadne expresses how she experiences such situations:

'[others think]...we sit on an ivory tower and we don't really know what it's like to be out there in the thick of it, you know. I'm an HR practitioner and I'm a manager and I could sometimes have to take off my HR hat and put on my manager's hat, and actually I could say that. I could say maybe HR is not always knowing the best way to do things, or understand the complexities of life, you know being the other side, outside of that fence.' [Ariadne]

One area where striking an appropriate balance is particularly important is when it comes to enacting organisational policies. HR practitioners understand that getting the balance right between simply implementing a policy, which is appropriate in some circumstances, and taking steps to make sure it is properly implemented, which is needed in others, is by no means easy; especially given that managers elsewhere in the organisation may feel they have not been properly supported. However, the experiences of HR practitioners convey a strong sense that it is generally line managers themselves who have not followed procedures properly, and that by the time an HR practitioner becomes involved any problems may have become far more difficult to resolve. For HR practitioners, there are different perceptions of HR that exist, depending upon who you talk to; finding a balance between these perceptions is very much a part of their role. It was recognised that more time could be devoted to listening to what others want, rather

than instructing them on what they have to do. But equally, managers need to do the same. Evan understood that the balancing function would be made a lot easier if managers spent a bit more time understanding HR's role. At the same time, though, HR practitioners could be less rigid themselves:

'I think we need to perhaps spend a little less time quoting the rules but I think, some of the managers needed a bit more time reading the rules...I think the answer falls somewhere in-between the two.' [Evan]

The experiences of HR practitioners convey a strong sense that it can be difficult for them to shed the perception that HR is the "owner of the rulebook" in organisations. They find themselves having to undertake a balancing act, between maintaining the rulebook for the sake of upholding organisational policies and, at the same time, showing that they can be flexible and adjustable enough for the sake of the business, and often for the sake of the employees. In addition to the importance of balancing their judgments, there is also the question of judging risk. The research findings show just how importantly HR practitioners understand their role as being concerned with assessing risk, connected with their sense of the HR role as being about operating a "balance of judgement". This can be a difficult challenge; to maintain "the hard balance" as it was described by one practitioner in the study. HR is considered to be a special function, where the "balance of judgement" happens within diverse dimensions. Based on the experiences of the HR practitioners in this study, the issue of the "balance of judgement" seems to be present overall in almost all aspects of their role. It influences their credibility, their trust, the way they demonstrate their knowledge and their decision-making in terms of risk and ethical dilemmas.

5.4 Upholding HR professionalism

Having considered issues around HR professional formation, and how people become HR practitioners, and also explored the nature and challenges of HR roles, the purpose of this section is to examine three features which are often highlighted as important when thinking about HR professionalism: first, the trust that HR practitioners accrue from trying to build trustworthy organisational relationships that boost their credibility; second, the credibility HR achieves as a result of its "professional" status; and third, HR practitioners' level of knowledge and expertise and how they understand them in relation to their experience of HR.

5.4.1 Trust-driven credibility

In order to demonstrate their professional standing, attracting the trust of others in their organisations is crucial to upholding the credibility of those in HR roles. The experiences of HR practitioners revealed just how important they understand it is to build rapport with managers, in a way that attracts greater credibility; and how this can be done effectively. Overall, building trust is a positive experience for HR practitioners in this study, given their lengthy service in HR, which meant that over time they had managed to develop good cooperative relationships that had gained them a high level of trust. How, then, do HR practitioners attempt to build trust? Their experiences highlight three particularly notable dimensions.

First, there is the importance of how they behave – particularly with regard to ensuring confidentiality, sharing responsibility and showing a capacity for flexibility, openness and honesty. Confidentiality is understood as the starting point for building trust in HR, as Ariadne recognised:

‘Well,... if people would not use you as a bias-free service if they know you're gonna blab to other people and similarly sometimes you have to hold back information that you know the individuals you're working with would really like to know....Because you are compromising that situation and ...if you're in a department or a service and you need some confidential advice you could go to HR and hopefully unless they haven't got the credibility and professional staff in place, you'd get it,...’ [Ariadne]

Although it might not be seen as crucial as being involved in strategic business processes, providing a confidential service is often the essential starting point for the credibility of HR. In the experience of Lena it was a willingness to share responsibility with others in the organisation that was central to building and maintaining HR credibility:

‘...also, it's bringing them into the fact that actually there are certain things that they're responsible for doing, that they do need to do, and that can sometimes be hard because we know that everyone thinks “oh, it's all processes driven, it's all bureaucratic and I just want to get a parson A off the street to do this job tomorrow” ...and you're saying “I've got to do all this stuff, fill in all these forms, do all these interviews, get all these files...”’, whatever it may be.’ [Lena]

In this way, others can better understand and appreciate what HR is trying to achieve, and thus have greater respect for, and trust, its efforts. The experiences of HR

practitioners also highlight the important extent to which they try to build trust, and gain business credibility, by demonstrating their flexibility and ability to tackle problems.

This was Ylenia's experience as a business partner:

'Yes, and I think the other way I feel I've build some of the relationships that I've got, it's much more about, yes there's rules and regs, there's risks to weigh up, but actually ... I've been flexible with some of our procedures to allow them to do that. ...ok you can't do it all the time, but, ... they see you as somebody who can help solve some of the things that they're dealing with. You become their help. You sort of become their consultant –problem solver.' [Ylenia]

All this is crucial to “building bridges”, as it was sometimes put. HR practitioners understand that there has to be some give-and-take, as in any relationship, when it comes to enforcing HR policies. Moreover, they have a sense of how it can pay to be flexible in certain situations in order to gain the trust of others. This is as long as it is made clear that any such flexibility is always in relation to the particular situation that arises and is not something to be expected at all times, otherwise consistency can be compromised. Furthermore, having an informal style and being open with people are important means of allaying suspicions and mistrust. Taking an honest approach in all situations, rather than hiding behind the mask of the HR expert, is an effective means of demonstrating the credibility of HR practitioners, despite its potential risks. Thus ways of behaving, to the extent that they can attract trust, and therefore enhance credibility, are understood to inform effective HR work.

In addition to particular kinds of behaviours, a second way in which HR practitioners make sense of their role, in terms of seeking to build trust-based credibility, is through the “*proof before trust*” approach; using their expertise to demonstrate their value in organisations. In this way, HR practitioners can convince others of their professionalism. The private sector experiences of Elvira and Ettie are instructive:

'So, I was completely new to them, I was been brought into the team as somebody who's an expert in certain things, but who are they to know that! So, I am starting from scratch, ...but you know I've got to prove myself to them because ok, they've been told I've been brought in due to the experience to head up this part of it, but until I get some delivery for under my belt why should they respect me or think that I know what I'm doing, so, it isn't a case that it's an automatic given because I'm been here a long time and I've got a senior's role that I'm going to be given respect and authority. I have got to build relationships and establish myself, ... So, it isn't the case of you're here a long time therefore you're automatically respected.' [Elvira]

'...I think, you can try your hardest..., generally speaking,,... but as a business partner I always used to find... that you had to get in there and prove yourself quite quickly...But my view is that you try and establish the rapport as quickly as you possibly can, sometimes to do that you need to get some quick wins in, that's quite key. But also you need to find more buttons, what are their buttons and so, ...' [Ettie]

They demonstrate the important sense among HR practitioners that they must somehow prove their knowledge and expertise first; it is not necessarily a given. It is a matter of making others realise that they need HR's involvement so that they can feel they can trust HR. Thus the HR role is able to gain an appropriate level of credibility only after some proof of practitioners' competence has been demonstrated. It does not matter whether or not they have any professional status themselves as practitioners. What matters is showing what HR can do; this enables practitioners to be trusted and seen as valued contributors.

The third way in which HR practitioners make sense of their experiences when it comes to trying to build trust, and this enhance their credibility, is by demonstrating their "closeness to the business"; by demonstrating their business awareness and using the business partnering role to develop relationships within organisations. There is an understanding that this comes from promoting how HR practitioners can act in ways that help find solutions to business problems, rather than conveying an impression that they are obstacles, as the reflections of Renato and Evan make clear:

'...that's where HR changed over the years. We started as laying down policies, and saying this is how you should do it, ... and we're changing, we're saying more of what you need as a business and how can we work with you and how can we support you, so that's how we won over the clients.' [Renato]

'... I think we have got to move away from being the custodian of a set of rules to: you tell what you want to do and we'll see how we find a way of doing it!' [Evan]

In their experience the move away from a focus on enforcing policies and procedures to adding value and understanding the business has changed the way others view HR. It is the shift from being told what to do, to taking ownership of their actions, as in the case of sharing responsibility, that makes managers and others in the organisation value the role of HR practitioners more highly. The research findings point to the understanding present among HR practitioners that when they avoid acting in a policing manner, they

achieve better rapport with others, and therefore secure increased respect and trust. In relation to demonstrating their business awareness and contribution, there is also the effort being made by HR practitioners to shed off the often negative perceptions associated with their past. Their ability to build trust, and thus enhance their credibility, often depends upon people's previous experience with HR practitioners. Much effort is put into shedding the effects of any previous negative experiences, and demonstrating that sceptics of HR are wrong. This is a particular problem when it comes to understanding HR as a "profession".

Concerning the challenges associated with building trust and raising their credibility, the experience of HR practitioners convey their sense that it is hard work, and remains an ongoing battle; but at least it is underway. That said, the research findings indicate that HR practitioners sometimes perceive a reluctance to involve HR in organisational processes, giving rise to a sense of exclusion. Practitioners can thus experience reduced opportunities for HR to develop important relationships upon which trust is built. More importantly, when HR is not trusted to deal with issues from the start – but is called upon to be involved at a later stage – this still gives HR an acknowledgement that it is there to deal with the harder tasks. In some ways, this highlights the important role undertaken by HR practitioners when it comes to solving organisational problems and helping matters run smoothly.

5.4.2 Status-driven credibility

The credibility of HR practitioners as professionals is not only a function of building trust, but also involves acquiring an appropriate status. Yet the HR practitioners in this study often perceived themselves as lacking in status. As Darius observed, this can be because of insufficient credit being given to the HR contribution:

'.. I think HR can never say 'WE did it'. 'WE did something'. You're working with managers, you're working with employees, it's a partnership. You never feel like, you know, 'I've sealed all these...I can't say, 'I' did this! Did a small part, but overall thing that we're feeling proud...' [Darius]

While his experience perhaps reflects his location in a public sector organisation, it does point to the problem of the lack of visibility of much HR work, resulting in practitioners believing that they do not receive the appropriate credit, and understood as adversely affecting their status. There is also a sense among HR practitioners that their status can be undermined by a lack of respect in organisations for the HR function, or a lack of

appreciation of what it does. The credibility of HR practitioners, and therefore their status, is influenced by the degree of importance others attach to having an HR function in the organisation. No matter how much good work they do, when there is lack of respect for HR in organisations the attitudes of senior managers and the presence of misconceptions about the HR role play a major part in undermining the status of HR. Based on her experience in both private and public sector organisations, Ariadne reflected on why this happens:

'I think it could be personalities to be honest with you. Or that might be too simple, or as I said before perhaps an underdeveloped understanding of what [HR] is and can do for you to help you as the senior leader...and get what you want done. I don't know what it is, so, ...' [Ariadne]

The status of HR practitioners in organisations, and thus their credibility, is also negatively affected by the belief that they act as an organisation's "internal police". This was Nerina's experience:

'I guess you often hear HR described as sort of keeping managers on... out of jail, on the right track, making sure, and there is an element of that. Yes, that can often be and there's still an element of that I have to say, so there is a lot of chasing, tracking, making sure managers are compliant.' [Nerina]

There was an appreciation among HR practitioners that their status could be enhanced if they were less associated with operating rules and regulations and more concerned with business problem-solving. Having a reputation for straightforwardly applying procedures is not a good starting point for enhancing the status of the HR role. This points to an understanding of how the question of credibility, whether in the form of expert status, or through securing trust from others, starts from within the HR function itself. There may be times when HR practitioners themselves either do not practice what they preach, or spend so much time dealing with others, that they forget to look after their own function. Having said all that, the HR practitioners in this study were able to reflect on how they sought to pursue greater respect and status in their roles. For Renato, it was the reassurance of holding a formal, recognised credential that was particularly important:

'I would see when I'm dealing with colleagues in finance or in IT or in other professional services, you need that [the qualification] ..., you need that to give you the equivalence to you with the other professions; particularly finance, we work close now with finance; they have their professional qualifications,

accountancy qualifications, it is very important that we have the CIPD, and so from that point of view ...' [Renato]

This highlights how HR practitioners can ascribe their status to possessing a formal qualification; “the paper” credential they hold that demonstrates they have the required skills and knowledge. This way they understand themselves as attracting certain respect and status because others within their organisations recognise that HR practitioners are qualified, just like those in other professional fields. However, acquiring status is not just about holding formal credentials. Much seems to depend upon how HR practitioners conduct themselves, including working out, and responding to, the needs of others in the organisation. This was Hollie’s experience:

‘... I like to meet people face to face. ...Of course it works but it takes longer.What I tend to do is I spend a lot of time to try and find out what it is they want rather than just say from [our side] what we can do is ...So, I try and understand what it really is they are trying to achieve and then start to think about what would be. So, I’ve got very, very keen to customise whatever we need to do for all the managers in the organisation....Most of the people I speak to tend to be the senior people or the HR team that are looking to do something for their part of the organisation. So, all the time I’m trying to find out what you’re really trying to achieve.’ [Hollie]

The above illustrates how HR practitioners understand the process of raising their status, and securing credibility in their organisations, in terms of recognising their clients’ needs in order to provide the best possible service. Operating in this way is believed to enhance the status of those in HR roles. In other words, the process of building status is reversed. Instead of the qualification being the principal source of status, leading others in organisations to respect those in HR roles, it is rather the ability of HR practitioners to put themselves in the position of others that raises the status of HR and boosts their credibility. The experiences of HR practitioners convey a strong sense that what matters is how they operate as “people”, not the “paper” credentials they happen to hold. Contrary to the view that status straightforwardly rests upon having proof of a qualification, and the weight which that qualification carries, it is HR practitioners themselves who are fundamentally responsible for promoting a desired status, in particular through how they undertake their work and build relationships in ways that inspire respect. This includes being approachable, given that HR practitioners sometimes have a reputation of being distant and unapproachable to build rapport with, something that works against gaining respect and status.

A further source of status relating to the role of HR practitioners as “people” comes from empowering others, especially managers. From her involvement in training in the private sector, Teresa observed:

‘... it wasn’t particularly for me, you know I think to gain the trust is not something that comes automatically, so, it’s about the way that you work, ... it’s about making them responsible for their staff. Yes, yes. I mean at the other end of the spectrum, “that stuff is HR”, “HR will deal with that”, you know and there’s probably odd points in-between really, but to a certain extent it’s about training managers effectively.’ [Teresa]

Teresa’s experience points to an understanding that demystifying professional expertise is important in order to help others do a better job, rather than trying to hold on to knowledge. There is a sense that the role of HR practitioners is to facilitate others to achieve what they want unaided. Training managers to be less dependent upon HR, and empowering them to be confident enough to carry out tasks without “holding” HR’s hand, are things which managers can be thankful for. This raises the respect given to HR, with positive implications for the status and credibility of those HR roles. It seems that in this case status is a matter of perspectives. What HR is meant to do for an organisation, and the approach practitioners take in terms of controlling and holding on to their knowledge, influences the respect gained from others. Being more open and less “secretive”, and without being fearful of parting with HR knowledge, can help to raise the status and credibility of those in HR roles.

In summary, it would appear that, based on the experiences of HR practitioners, and how they understand and make sense of these experiences, status has to be viewed, not only in terms of holding a relevant credential, but also in how practitioners conduct themselves in their roles as people, including by empowering and passing on knowledge to others in their organisations. This suggests that HR credibility is as much related to the individual practitioner as to the HR function in general.

5.4.3 Knowledge – making sense of HR expertise

Research with HR practitioners highlights how they draw on their experiences to make sense of their expertise based on a range of relevant factors. More analytically, they use different lenses through which to evaluate and thus perceive HR expertise. This involves making a series of comparisons, relating to matters such as risk factors, quality of service provided and the type of training undertaken, as can be seen from figure 5.1,

which was devised by the researcher to demonstrate the different ways practitioners perceive their own area of expertise. One of the ways HR expertise is understood in relation to the expertise of other professions is the element of risk, and the differences in the level of risk involved. Elisa shared her understanding of HR knowledge and how it works for her:

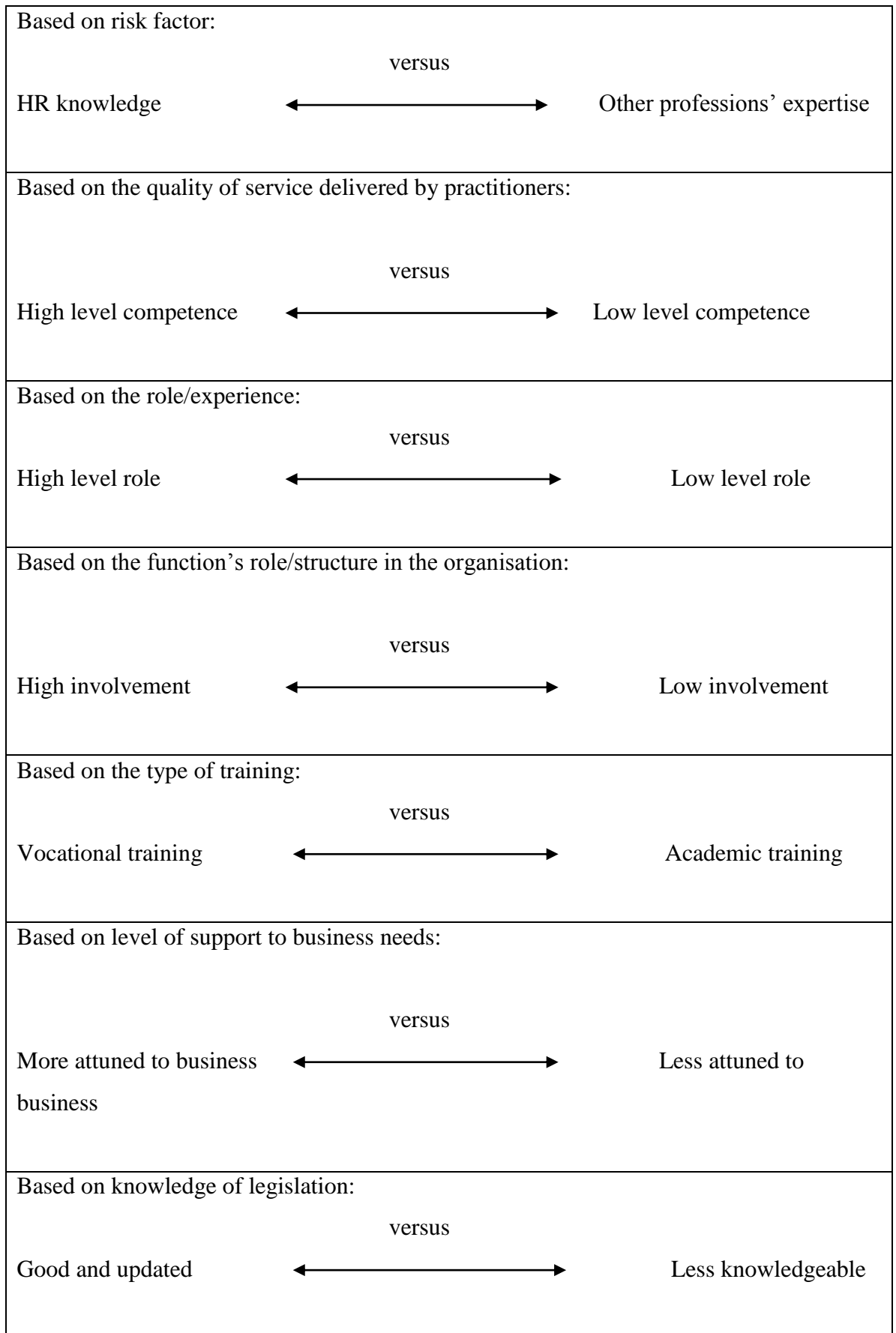
'So, you know if you're a doctor or a surgeon and you do something wrong the chances of claims of malpractice against those types of people is significant, you know, and you've got risk of damaging people's health or ultimately killing somebody. The risks in that are really, really high of getting it wrong. With us, we're making judgements of a situation that affects an individual's employment, then, we could end up with a legal case, we could end up with money against the [organisation], we could end up with poor reputation..., which are all important things, but in my world it doesn't have the same as potentially life threatening stuff!' [Elisa]

From this perspective, HR knowledge and expertise is understood as being rather limited, on the basis that the HR role does not carry a high risk factor. Making mistakes in practising HR would not produce outcomes as damaging as would be the case in other professions, particularly those involving medicine.

Another lens used by HR practitioners to evaluate, and thus make sense of their knowledge and expertise, is through the quality of service they believe they provide, and their competence. In relation to this, HR expertise is interpreted on the basis that there is always room for improvement. Practitioners are aware of the ground that needs to be covered before they feel able to make positive claims for HR knowledge. Building better relationships within their organisations, and getting involved in more areas, are the types of improvements needed. HR is thus perceived as a “work in progress”, and it is through this lens that practitioners can make sense of their expertise. When it comes to understanding HR knowledge and expertise, Ettie recognised another dimension:

'Now, that's really difficult because they range, from very junior to very senior, so it depends. I don't think you can give one number to that. And it depends where in their sort of life, you know where in their career; they just started or they sort of being around the block a few times. I don't know really'. [Ettie]

Figure 5.1 Comparative perspectives on judging HR expertise



Thus, efforts to ascertain the expertise of HR practitioners are made difficult by the different levels at which individuals operate. One cannot encompass all roles under the same criterion. Levels of expertise need to be judged in relation to the level at which a practitioner is operating, or the stage they have reached in their career. There is also a sense that HR knowledge and expertise has to be understood with regard to the nature of the HR function; including how it is organised, how it operates and what kind of services it provides. Key influences include the extent to which HR services are outsourced, and whether or not a call centre arrangement exists as a means of handling routine queries. In contemplating their HR knowledge and expertise practitioners – such as Evan for example – also reflect on the level and nature of their initial training:

‘One of [the] things that’s kind of influenced my view goes back to around the time when I first started studying for the CIPD, ...previously I’d done an HND, ... And there were one or two who would refer to their CIPD studies as my degree, which I think was sort of silly. Although I know the CIPD seems to sit in some sort of hierarchy above an HND, HND ... was much more difficult!...I quite enjoyed some of the discussion and debate in studying the CIPD. Yes, you do have to know and understand certain things, [but], I’m not [a] rocket scientist.’ [Evan]

There is clearly an understanding here that HR practitioners’ experience of initial professional training can be inadequate, leaving many unable to demonstrate the level of expertise viewed as corresponding to a professional role. This could be taken as an indication that the expertise and specialisation characteristic of HR cannot be equated with those of other, more established professions.

Another lens used by HR practitioners to evaluate, and thus reflect upon, their expertise concerns how well HR supports the business in the context of the particular industry in which it operates. The less “attuned” to business needs, the less expertise HR practitioners have, as Jessie observed:

‘Expertise in HR?... I think my problem is that knowledge of the industry that they work in, that’s lower and I think that actually, ...cause you can’t operate, ...you can’t operate HR on its own, you have to understand the context in which you’re operating and it’s not just the context, of maybe the company or the organisation, but actually the wider sector.’ [Jessie]

Finally, as seen from figure 5.1, HR practitioners also evaluate, and make sense of, their expertise according to the level of legal knowledge they believe they possess, including

how up-to-date they consider themselves to be with the details of the legislative framework governing HR matters. This is believed to be an important indication of expertise. For Elisa, for example, detailed knowledge of the law makes for a more expert HR practitioner:

'Well, in order to operate and provide the right advice and guidance, etc. then you have to have a good understanding of the legislative framework that you're working in, which is continuously changing, so we've got to continuously keep up to date ourselves and you have to keep up to date with new ways of doing things' [Elisa]

Clearly, HR practitioners evaluate, and are thus in a position to reflect on, and make sense of, their expertise through a number of different comparative, analytical lenses, based on various factors, such as the risk level in relation to other established professions, service delivery, level and experience in the role, the function and structure of the HR department, the type and nature of their training and qualifications, how attuned they are to the business and their knowledge of relevant legislation. However, the experience of some HR practitioners had led them to believe that it was not possible to specify HR expertise in a straightforward manner – for two main reasons. One is because different HR practitioners may be good at different activities or tasks, each of which demands different levels of proficiency. What is important is that there is an appropriate mix of skills available within an HR department. This was the experience of Yasmin, who recognised the limits of her legal knowledge, but acknowledged the expertise of others:

'Ye[s], and that's the way I think about it; is that I've got more breadth but not depth on employment law....then anyway all of us, all of us need the lawyers from time to time, but I know that I sit with colleagues who are far more capable in those areas than I am, but I think I am more capable in my focus on what managers need, my focus on commercial approach, my focus on breaking through the bureaucracy.' [Yasmin]

Second, managing HR effectively is perceived as a joint effort, shared between specialist practitioners and line managers. Darius recognised that HR knowledge and expertise were best conceived in collective terms. HR expertise, then, functions as part of a bigger, shared effort. Therefore it cannot be considered on its own, but only in relation to the result of this collaboration:

'And, so I wouldn't think that we hold all the knowledge.... that's why we would probably say it's lower. It's not to say necessarily, that we don't know our HR

bit I think it's because it's not totally down to us. It's a shared, shared information really.' [Darius]

Reflecting on the ways that practitioners evaluate and thus understand HR expertise brings out certain thoughts. On the one hand, it might have been expected that there would be little consensus given that people have such varying experiences. However, on the other hand, what is surprising here is that practitioners do not have the same idea of what expertise in HR actually is. Not only do they understand HR expertise differently, but they also use different criteria with which to judge it. They often have very different lenses through which they perceive HR knowledge and therefore their level of HR expertise. Could this point to a problematic knowledge base for HR as a profession, given the ill-defined way in which practitioners conceive of their area of expertise?

5.5 Chapter conclusion

The material in this chapter has focused on what “being” an HR professional means, based on the experiences and reflections of HR practitioners themselves, and how they make sense of them. Three particular aspects are notable. First, there is a distinct approach to “becoming” an HR professional present, marked by the process of building a career in HR being generally not a planned, conscious one. That said, once they enter the field of HR, practitioners consciously choose to build a career in it. Thus suggests that as a “profession” HR is characterised by a different mode of attraction than is the case for other more conventional professional occupations where people are attracted to them from the outset to develop a career. Second, the research findings provide some important insights into how HR practitioners go about “enacting” their professional role. Although changes in HR mean that practitioners seem to have secured a more favourable overall position in organisations, in addition to requirements for greater business awareness, these changes have also generated lengthier processes and the necessity for greater approval. It is evident that HR practitioners have a sense of pragmatism, demonstrate a great deal of confidence, and perceive their credibility to have risen. Despite the HR role attracting a certain negativity, which in some ways is regarded as inevitable, there are nonetheless opportunities for HR practitioners to demonstrate their capabilities and secure a better reputation. The third contribution of the chapter is to understand the role played by practitioners in “upholding” HR professionalism in their roles. The findings demonstrate just how important HR credibility is to practitioners, in terms of what they do to gain trust and achieve respect

and status for HR. Through their efforts to build relationships, empower others, demonstrate the value of their contributions, and through their overall conduct, HR practitioners really do seem to work “double time”; that is, not only to secure greater credibility for their work personally, but also to improve the reputation of the field given the still lingering doubts about its business contribution. As a result, there is a strong emphasis placed on providing an effective and trustworthy service. Being considered to possess expert knowledge should help HR practitioners secure improved respect, status and credibility. However, both their knowledge base, and the area in which HR practitioners are meant to show expertise, can vary considerably, as do their perspectives on knowledge and how they rate their expertise, according to their preferred comparative lens.

6. Identifying as an HR professional

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter – “being an HR professional” – covered HR practitioners’ professional formation and key aspects of their professional role. In this chapter, the focus is on understanding the nature of HR practitioners’ professional identity and the characteristics of the “HR profession” as they experience and make sense of it. The chapter is organised around three main sections. The first section (6.2) is devoted to an exploration of HR “professional identity”. The second section (6.3) covers the ethical dimension of the HR role, values, standards, personal morals, and the extent and nature of any altruism present. The third section (6.4) is devoted to investigating HR as a profession, covering issues such as credentialism and professional development. Based on HR practitioners’ own understandings of, and insights into, the nature of the “HR professional”, and the key attributes and values they identify, the section also highlights some distinct features of HR professionalism.

6.2 HR professional identity

By exploring HR practitioners’ understandings of their own professional HR identity, the material in this section provides insights into their process of “identifying” as HR professionals. The first part of the section focuses on the sense of identity among practitioners of belonging to a wider HR community; while the second part is devoted to understanding how HR practitioners relate to their professional body – the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) – and what this means for the nature of HR professional identity.

6.2.1 HR professional identity: a wider community of HR practitioners?

Part of comprehending professional identity means understanding HR practitioners’ sense of belonging to the wider HR community. The experiences of HR practitioners, and how they interpret and make sense of their experiences, provide some useful insights when it comes to understanding the nature of HR professional identity. Most importantly, there is little sense that they identify with the HR profession at large. The HR practitioners in this study associate rather more strongly with their employing organisations, especially when they had more years of experience. There is a particular problem when it comes to identifying with HR in general, as both Erika and Ylenia –

both of whom are business partners – reflected:

'I do say, I say HR. I say ...HR business partner...I say, HR business partner because it's in my head that that's what I am. And then I am, very quickly aware that they're looking at me 'what the heck's that?' [Erika]

'... this is where the messages aren't clear, people just think you do recruitment..., they really don't understand actually the complexity of the employment law side, the managing staff, advising managers and managing staff, difficult situation, redundancies; all those horrible things which actually we do most of. It's mostly horrible things. No, no so, I don't! I don't tell them that I'm in HR! ...' [Ylenia]

This highlights a degree of reluctance on the part of practitioners to identify themselves with the field of HR. On being asked how they would respond when asked to describe what they do for a living – or simply, the first thing that comes to mind instinctively when they are asked what they do for a living – it was clear that practitioners can have certain reservations about admitting to working in the HR field. Their hesitation to mention their occupation or their title was based on a deeper belief that other people might not understand what it is that they do, or because they fear a negative reaction in case the person asking has had a previous bad experience of HR.

Professions often consist of individuals who share close ties, and have an affinity, with others in their particular occupation, which is facilitated by networking activities. Therefore in line with the theme of HR practitioners' identity association, it is important to understand their experiences of networking, and belonging to a wider HR community, including through their involvement with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). HR practitioners in this study reflected on the difficulties of engaging in networking activities, because of a lack of time for example, or understand them as being largely unnecessary because of the nature of their work. That said, however, generally their experiences of networking with others in the HR field point to the presence of a certain sense of collective identification. For the most part, HR practitioners positively associate themselves with others in the field, but not necessarily through the CIPD. This was because they are seen as colleagues who they can rely upon for support and advice, something that is especially beneficial when facing similar issues or problems.

For some only, such as Renato, with his extensive years of experience in HR, involvement in the CIPD had been an important feature of networking and collective identification:

'I do support CIPD ...and they're a great source of networking and they're a great source of mutual support and I would encourage any new members at the (HR) function to really get involved; you need it when you join the profession; that was really when ...I was most active in my local CIPD when I was new to the profession then, now that I'm being a lot more mature member..., of the personnel community I think I go to networking with other HR....' [Renato]

The experience of Renato is suggestive of how practitioners associate more with the CIPD, and are involved as active members, towards the beginning of their HR careers, something which progressively diminishes as they take on more senior roles. Even those who engage with the CIPD believe that it could do more to promote greater association, through bringing practitioners with similar interests or problems together. The CIPD, however, covers all business sectors and may be thought of as less relevant to the particular needs of HR practitioners in a specific sector or organisation. It was particularly notable how limited use respondents make of the CIPD as a means of networking. More commonly, they prefer to rely on networking based on existing personal friendships and relationships, as the experience of Evan demonstrates:

'I do! [associate with others in the HR community] ...I'm not protective of information....So, I guess I would see myself as part of the community in that I'm quite happy to discuss...changes, whatever and you get ideas back from other people, and that's how we move on and progress, so, I think in that sense, yes, I do recognise, or I do see myself as part of... (meant the community). [Evan]

This highlights that some feeling of collegiality exists among HR practitioners, and a belief that they have a 'duty' towards their "profession", particularly through sharing support and information, irrespective of whether it is via the CIPD or not. Although practitioners do not identify themselves strongly as HR professionals, yet, there is a certain sense of a wider HR community, beyond specific employing organisations, and practitioners often make use of social networks to connect with each other.

The research findings indicate that size of the HR function, and the wider organisation, seem to be key influences on the nature of any networking by HR practitioners. The larger the function and organisation the more likely it is that HR practitioners receive

internal support rather than needing to rely on external networks. The experiences of respondents revealed that practitioners in small HR functions may be reluctant to deal with complex and difficult issues, particularly relating to legislation, and are therefore more likely to look for external support. Overall, though, there was a strong sense from the research that whether or not practitioners associate with the wider HR community themselves, the extent and nature of their networking, their use of the CIPD and the time available or interest in doing so, very much depends upon the role that they perform, the moment in their career and their own personal choices.

6.2.2 The value of the CIPD for the HR profession

As the institute for HR practitioners, supporting those in HR roles, the CIPD promotes a certain image of the HR professional role via its publications, seminars and through its qualification scheme. Given the concern with professional identity, it would be expected that engaging with the CIPD and its activities is an important influence on the process of “identifying” as HR practitioners; on the basis that this serves to promote a more effective collective HR professional identity. In understanding how practitioners identify as HR professionals, then, it is important, to explore their experience of CIPD membership and activities, and how they make sense of it, in a way that offers insights about the nature of HR as a profession, and the HR professional project.

The experience of HR practitioners suggests that to a certain extent the CIPD generally operates in a relatively satisfactory manner. Its publications and website are limitedly used by HR practitioners when searching for information or seeking guidance. Practitioners attend local meetings and events, particularly those that are of interest. There is a general belief that the CIPD is on the correct path, and is promoting appropriate values and practices, even if these are not always felt to reflect workplace or organisational realities. Yet Elisa’s experience highlights some problems and how she feels about the level of support offered in relation to her job:

‘Yes. It’s not great is it? So, ... you go to look at some of the learning tools, some of the research that they’ve done and it’s sometimes quite difficult to find. I’ve used their legal helpline before, which is OK. Their level of knowledge is pretty... well they’ve got a reasonable grounding... Normally if we want to find something, ... wanting very, very specific advice about something ... we’re far more likely to go to our solicitor because... I don’t think we get that level from CIPD, no. if I am looking for general documentation I’m far likely to go to

ACAS to find best practice and things like that than I am to go to CIPD, it's not my first port of call, you know.' [Elisa]

It suggests that CIPD tools and resources may be too weak, and insufficiently in-depth or up-to-date as they perhaps ought to be. Detailed information and guidance on certain issues is sometimes lacking, and employment issues beyond the UK tend to be neglected. As a result, HR practitioners must often rely upon other sources of HR knowledge, including internal resources in organisations with large and well organised HR functions. The experiences of both Yasmin and Ariadne reflect a broader sense that the CIPD's emphasis has become too commercial, and its services too costly:

'Clearly they need to make money, I imagine, at least that's how I perceive it, that it's a money making opportunity, not professionalism, not elitism within the profession.' [Yasmin]

'I don't get my learning resource from the CIPD, because they're too expensive ...so their toolkits are at least three hundred pounds, possibly more, and we don't have that money to spend, and actually you get a limited benefit from that..' [Ariadne]

The CIPD is perceived more as a money-making business rather than being an organisation which provides support and services to its members. It could do more to engage its members, particularly in relation to events, as a means of increasing both members' participation and revenue. The CIPD's commercial ethos clashes with the expectation of respondents that it should primarily be focused upon supporting and advancing the HR profession, rather than operating as a business:

'But I think in some ways the CIPD is trying to... Firm the professional footing. I pretty much applaud that, because it's the bad practice that has been going on in the past. And it's becoming more and more important because the legislation is more and more confusing. You NEED somebody to be able to kind of say, 'my interpretation of this is', or 'my experience of that is'. And if you haven't really studied or lived it, it's difficult to have that kind of view.' [Erika]

Erika's insight highlights how, beyond the provision of services, the CIPD should be pursuing the best interests of HR as a profession, representing it to the outside world, and acting as its voice; through lobbying activity and influencing legislation for example. Despite being fixated with changes and new management models, practitioners do appreciate the efforts being made by the CIPD to raise the professional standing of the HR field. How could the CIPD, as an organisation that promotes HR as a "profession", improve its services to members in their role as HR practitioners? Much

had already been done in trying to erase the negative image of HR. Demands for more rigorous continuing professional development (CPD) might aid the efforts of the CIPD to further professionalise the HR field; although stricter CPD criteria might not be received favourably by all members. The research findings convey a sense that the CIPD might also consider making its services more affordable, through lower prices, concentrate more on resourcing its branches, offer support through networking opportunities locally, and concentrate on making resources more relevant to members, so that what their fees are used for becomes more transparent.

There is a broader concern that the emphasis placed by the CIPD on professionalisation of the HR role has pushed practitioners to the forefront, but without the necessary support to enable them to function effectively. Thus the CIPD's actions attract a notable degree of scepticism. It is regarded as being quite selective in terms of where it puts its efforts. Moreover, it places too much emphasis on the promotional side of its role in terms of engaging with the media, making HR more visible; but this comes at the expense of support for practitioners. To this extent, then, for the HR practitioners in this study the CIPD is more interested in itself rather than in how it serves the interests of its members. This may reflect a lack of connection between how the CIPD promotes HR as a profession, and the importance of HR roles, and what actually happens in organisations. This was how Yasmin experienced it:

'...don't know how they're promoting the profession to be able to do that, because I think, how it appears in the workplace varies substantially between the type of workplace you are in', '...I think, the experience within various professional areas will vary quite substantially and the whole business partnering model varies substantially across organisations as well, um, so I think the way you're structured and the way you're set up, ... in your approach will vary quite substantially.' [Yasmin]

This reflects an understanding that the way the CIPD promotes the HR role is not consistent with workplace or organisational realities. How can the CIPD promote an HR "profession", when the nature and structure of HR varies so much from workplace to workplace, depending on the size of the organisation or the nature of the industry? For the HR practitioners in this study, a single model of HR is inadequate. HR is multidimensional, and it is this variety that delivers business advantages. More attention should be directed at the value HR brings, rather than what particular model it follows. Yet without the active support of HR practitioners and functions, any efforts made by

the CIPD to promote the future of the profession become void.

In order to explore the nature of the association of HR practitioners with the wider HR community it is important to investigate the value they place on their membership of the CIPD, including whether or not it is something they would keep if they were to move to a role outside HR. For Ariadne, there was no question:

'I would (no hesitation), probably for the foreseeable future, ... and I am going to keep up my CIPD membership, but that's largely because in a way I still I'm still excited by some of those issues,... and also because in a way I suppose I feel I worked hard to achieve that, and I suppose it is part of my identity in a sense. It's a symbol.' [Ariadne]

She regarded CIPD membership as linked to her identity in an important sense. Thus for HR practitioners such as Ariadne, it is something they would maintain, in a way that indicates both their loyalty to HR as a profession and as a mark of the status they had achieved. Overall, however, in the minds of HR practitioners, membership of the CIPD is linked to their work, and is not a very important aspect of their overall identity in a way that extends beyond their roles in employing organisations. That said, there is sometimes a sense that retaining CIPD membership could be important even when a practitioner moves to a non-HR role; on the basis that it offers access to useful information that could be relevant in other positions, and permits the kind of effective grounding and networking that could be valuable on any managerial position. Were they to leave HR, generally the practitioners in this study would initially retain their membership; but this would unlikely be continued if it was not seen as being relevant in their new position. Perhaps most importantly, while there is little evidence of any strong association, or identification, with the CIPD among HR practitioners, they keenly expressed their loyalty to, and a willingness to serve, the broader HR field. Although HR practitioners would appear to have a weak connection with their professional body, their association with the wider HR profession is considerably stronger. There is a feeling of pride taken in HR, something which does not really extend to loyalty to the CIPD, as the professional institute. This was also evident when it came to the characteristic ways that HR practitioners engage in networking activities, as mentioned already. They have stronger ties with other HR practitioners, through their sector and business connections, rather than via the CIPD.

What does this mean for understanding the nature of HR as a profession, and its professional project, in particular the role played by the CIPD in promoting the professional standing of HR? The CIPD plays an important part when it comes to service provision and acting as the voice of the HR community. However, there is little attachment to, or identification with, the CIPD on the part of HR practitioners, given the disconnect that seems to exist between its aspirations for HR and the (often highly variable) nature of HR practice across employing organisations. Practitioners do identify collectively somewhat with HR as a field, but without the CIPD being necessarily regarded as that important. This raises certain issues with regard to the nature of the HR professional project, particularly the extent to which it seems to be linked to practice within employing organisations.

6.3 Professional HR ethics and values

Having explored the characteristic features of how HR practitioners construct, and frame, a sense of professional identity, this section is concerned with another dimension of how they experience identifying as professionals – namely the nature of their values and ethical standpoints. The findings reported in this section concern the professional ethics, values and standards of HR practitioners. It begins by exploring any ethical issues and moral dilemmas present in HR work. The section continues by focusing on whether or not, and how, based on their experiences, and how they understand them, practitioners feel any sense of altruism in respect of their HR roles and what all this means for understanding ethics in HR practice.

6.3.1 Ethical issues and dilemmas in HR work

First of all, the research explored how, in their day-to-day practice and experience, HR practitioners made sense of any ethical issues and dilemmas that arose in their roles, particularly where their personal values and morals came into conflict with various demands of their employing organisations. From the research, it was clear that the personal moral standpoints of HR practitioners can be derived from guides to ethical practice, for example the CIPD's Code of Practice, or from their own highly individualistic and personal moral codes. Discussions with the HR practitioners in the research revolved around, whether or not, as HR practitioners, they have experienced any ethical issues or conflicts, how they strive to uphold ethical values, and respond to any challenges that arise. The first thing that needs to be said, however, is to emphasise just how reluctant HR practitioners initially were to discuss the matter ethics. They

reacted as if these were issues they had not encountered; and, at first, seemed to have little to say. They deemed themselves as being fortunate in this respect. This, they felt, was either because early HR intervention prevents difficult situations from arising, or because they felt they were attuned to their employing organisation's philosophy. However, the in-depth discussions and the interpretation of their experiences revealed clearly how much ethical issues and dilemmas are present in HR practice. To a greater or lesser degree, ethics are a matter relevant to HR practitioners in their roles. Whether or not they choose to acknowledge them explicitly, is another issue.

In terms of whether or not they uphold any ethical values, and in what form, and how they deal with the key challenges of upholding them, it was rare that HR practitioners thought of ethics as being something that operated beyond the confines of the business, or even above HR. Evan, though, recognised the difficulties of trying to do what he felt was the right thing in an organisational context:

'...I probably would need to be honest and say, for me personally, some of it is less about the HR practice and more what do I think is morally right and just. So, I know through my working life that there have been occasions where perhaps I've said or done what I think was the right thing to do that perhaps was not necessarily the best thing for my career...I think there are some very, very difficult situations...' [Evan]

His experience points to the circumstances under which, when HR practitioners find something objectionable on moral grounds, it goes beyond simply a potential conflict between the business needs and what the CIPD's Code of Practice deems to be ethical. Should this occur, it was believed that when a situation cannot be resolved satisfactorily HR practitioners should not compromise their personal standards and moral principles, and ultimately consider moving on. However, while HR practitioners should be at the forefront in promoting ethical behaviour, it was accepted that sometimes things simply do not go the way they would expect.

Yet the basis of any ethical issues and dilemmas, or moral conflicts, when they do arise, tends to be attributed to sources outside of HR itself. They reflect the extent to which a clash of interests or principles involving people is unavoidable in organisations, and that HR practitioners are often called upon to resolve any conflicts or difficulties that arise. Even if the handling of these situations creates personal or moral dilemmas, HR practitioners embrace them because they are viewed as key aspects of their role and

therefore come with the territory. Whereas there is some appreciation that a broader source of ethical values may be appropriate, for the most part ethical issues and dilemmas are understood in terms of being something intrinsically related to the business function, which is used as a prism through which HR practitioners understand their own ethical position.

A number of aspects of how this business prism operates can be identified. The first concerns the connection between ethics and risk when it comes to dealing with specific difficult cases when managing people in organisations. There is a need to communicate clearly and in an upfront manner to line managers all the risks and other repercussions for the business of the options available in any case they are handling. Although HR practitioners would support managers in what they want to achieve, they have to advise them on which actions to avoid on moral grounds and because of the risks involved. But this raises an important question: if a specific risk can be taken, then, does it mean that ethical considerations have been overcome?

A second aspect of the business prism that characterises how HR practitioners deal with ethical issues and dilemmas in their day-to-day practice concerns the importance of being pragmatic. Ethical issues and dilemmas can arise in HR work where there is an overemphasis on codifying practices. Yet it is often desirable to act more on judgement. While formal policies can be desirable, it is not necessary to have formalised HR processes for everything. HR practitioners must be pragmatic, and weigh up the merits of each specific situation, while bearing in mind the priority of complying with organisational rules and expectations too.

Third, there is a notable sense of a tendency existing among practitioners to overly rely on the law as a fall-back position when dealing with ethical issues and dilemmas in HR practice and of aiming to prevent their employing organisations from taking difficult or controversial decisions. As Jessie explained:

'there are quite a few HR professionals who tended to use the law as a crutch, so, they would say to, you know, their clients, "well you can't do this because of legislative requirements because of the law", ...yes, there is the law and you have to have that in the back of your mind but your clients quite often want to know what you can do, not what they can't do' ... because actually, [they] want to know, well what can we do.... You normally can find a way around it.'
[Jessie]

This shows that, while, on the one hand, the law is an influence on ethical practice, on the other hand, it should not be viewed straightforwardly as a restriction on business behaviour. Noteworthy are the experiences of HR practitioners who saw the law being used extensively as a guide to HR ethical practice in organisations in ways that created difficulties. Too often, it seems, HR practitioners rely upon the law as a benchmark for determining ethical practice, without necessarily claiming that as being ethically desirable or moral behaviour, but viewing it in terms of facilitating or resolving a situation. Based on their experiences, they were critical of those that function narrowly using the law, evaluating individual cases on their legal merits, and relying upon the law as means of resolving issues or even to the other extent of not considering law in HR practice, only as a last resort. Based on the cases they experienced, the role of the law is to aid consistency, not to impose conformity. HR practitioners ought to find their own ways of complying with their legal obligations, while also considering the importance of fairness and integrity when it comes to understanding HR ethics.

The above concern with operating in a way that promotes fairness and maintains integrity is a fourth key aspect of the business prism used by HR practitioners to guide how they respond to ethical issues and dilemmas in their everyday practice. As Elvira acknowledged, an emphasis on ensuring people receive fair treatment is consistent with an understanding that organisational decisions and actions should operate within an ethical framework while also fulfilling business needs:

'...[what] a lot of people think of HR is that it's about looking after people but you know it's not really. It's about ensuring that people are treated fairly and appropriately, and they're engaged and they're feeling involved, but, actually it's more around ensuring that the business needs are satisfied. And that people are brought along the change and the company isn't exposed in how we're handling people.' [Elvira]

This shows the understanding among HR practitioners of the importance of operating with a sense of fairness when managing people in organisations. As long as decisions are made, and actions taken, with regard to fairness and integrity then any ethical concerns are satisfied. In this respect, ethics is associated with the way that people in organisations are treated. Ethical behaviour is thus viewed as a prerequisite for the HR practitioner. Treating people with respect sends out the proper message and sets an example for others in the organisation. It is not about specific actions, or what ought to be done, but *how* it is done. It was striking just how often, during the discussions, the

word “integrity” was used by HR practitioners as an ethical reference point.

A fifth aspect of the business prism that characterises how HR practitioners deal with ethical issues and dilemmas in their day-to-day practice concerns, what can be called, “business alignment”. As the experience of Nerina demonstrates, ethical issues and dilemmas can arise where there is an insufficient degree of alignment between the interests of HR practitioners and business needs:

‘I always think that’s the difference between finance and HR, and it’s probably a bit too much of a generalisation, but finance is very much the numbers, and I think sometimes, we, resources is viewed as a number on a spreadsheet rather than an individual and I think that’s sometimes where you can have a bit of a conflict.’ [Nerina]

Given that conflicts over business interests are unavoidable in organisations, the better HR practitioners are able to align themselves with business needs the less likely such conflict is to arise and the less scope there is for ethical issues and dilemmas. This is especially the case in the more commercialised private sector. There seems to be a marked dichotomy between the experiences of HR practitioners in the public and private sectors. There was a belief that in the latter HR practitioners’ aspirations to operate in an ethical manner are more likely to be overruled by the potentially more narrow commercial interests of the employing organisation. In Elisa’s and Salma’s experiences:

‘I think my ethics in the private sector was compromised far more...definitely Because you know you would have managers that say well ‘just find me a way of getting rid of them’, and you’re trying to battle, we always battle with legislation against what’s reasonable but you would be far more pushed towards what managers wanted in that environment... ‘ [Elisa]

‘... [in the private sector] there was no respite, then to come... [to a public sector organisation] it’s so peaceful and calm. A different world all together, but the HR, the difference in the HR function between the two organisations is vast’ [Salma]

Whereas in the public sector, HR practitioners can generally use arguments which avoid potentially unethical decisions occurring, such as consequences for the organisation’s reputation; the private sector is sensed as a more ethically challenging environment in which to operate. Here, HR practitioners seem to have less voice and power. The objectives of maximising profit and ensuring that nothing undermines business success

are understood as the drivers behind this dichotomy in HR practice. In the public sector, though, there is a perception that HR practitioners enjoy greater scope to apply HR values, and therefore have a greater sense of freedom in their practice. From his position in a public sector organisation, Darius preferred how HR is practised there:

'...the private is not all the same, but a lot of the private you have maybe a manager/director think they can do everything and they don't necessarily have much regard for the law whereas [in the public], you know from HR perspective would say this is the law and most managers would understand that and say 'yes', this is the culture, this is how we are, we operate within the law, we don't try and traverse it, we don't try and cross it, and so that's why I feel comfortable and always like the public sector.' [Darius]

There was also a strong sense from the research that HR practitioners often have nowhere to “unload” themselves when the pressures of their role become too intense. They are called upon to provide business solutions, and often have to handle delicate situations in a way that demands a high level of integrity and a strong sense of moral purpose. However, as practitioners, they do not always feel that they are given the requisite support to help them deal with, and make sense of, it all. Although the help of colleagues, support networks and their peers, regionally or nationally, was acknowledged, this was only useful to a certain degree given the element of confidentiality that is often required in their roles.

Overall, then, there are two key features relating to ethics and values. First, despite an initial reluctance to acknowledge ethics, once discussions evolved, it became clear that HR practitioners do possess a strong sense of the ethical dilemmas present in their role. But they understand ethics, and the ethical issues and dilemmas that arise in their roles, very much through a business prism, which is adaptive to business needs and operates within the context of the employing organisation. Second, it is clear that ethical issues are intrinsic to HR practitioners' work; dealing with the management of people in organisations, ethical issues and dilemmas are bound to arise. But how do HR practitioners make sense of the problems that are generated? It is done through an emphasis on promoting fairness, acting with integrity and mitigating risk. All this points to the distinct – and highly organisationally confined – nature of HR ethics.

These findings raise questions about the extent to which HR can operate in ways that promote higher-level, broader ethical considerations; beyond a narrow concern with

boosting business performance as has been suggested in the literature (Marchington, 2015; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). But from the findings, it is not at all clear that HR practitioners conceive of their role as fulfilling any higher level social purpose or value, except in quite abstract terms; since there was limited sense that their professional ethics are a notion above HR or the needs of a business. That said, however, there is an emphasis on reconciling the effective management of people in organisations, particularly through aspirations to fairness and operating with integrity, with the obligation to promote their interests of their employing organisations as businesses. Through their experience and over time, HR practitioners learn to deal with such issues through a more experienced, detached approach.

6.3.2 Sense of altruism

The starting point for this discussion is the notion that members of traditional professions are inspired by a sense of altruism, a higher cause that influences how they practise their discipline (Shaw, 2009), which is linked to professional ethics and standards. This is based on upholding the interests of their clients and the greater public good. In order to develop an understanding of HR as a profession, then, it is important to explore practitioners' experiences of the concept of altruism, and how they make sense of it, as it applies to the HR field. In some cases they identified the presence of an element of altruism in their practice, stemming from the legacy of welfarist personnel and a concern with understanding human nature and dealing with people's wellbeing at work. According to Yasmin, for example:

'Traditionally, a lot of HR type work was focused on the employee so I think that can be where a lot of the altruistic approach comes from. They were welfare officers when I first started work, for example, now that work tends to be contracted out to support organisations, um, and it was more of the tea and sympathy which is become formalised a lot more, either through individual support to people, or through employee relations.' [Yasmin]

Overall, however, the experience of HR practitioners did not signal any strong sense that they operated in, or thought of their role as promoting, the interests of the "greater good" as you might expect from members of a conventional profession. Rather, altruism is marked by a more inward-looking focus, mainly in the sense of being concerned with how employees are treated and maintaining organisational relationships. When asked about altruism, practitioners reflected on their experiences of helping employees, how they felt they had made a positive difference to people's working lives, particularly by

ensuring that they were happier and healthier, and felt treated more fairly. This was Renato's experience:

'Well, we've got [an] altruistic cause as most people come into HR because they want to do something to help other people, people come in because they want help developing them or help make them happier at work or make them healthier at work or whatever it is. So there's...or make things fairer.' [Renato]

Reflecting on his public sector experience, Darius considered altruism in HR as being about "making a difference" to employees, by providing them with relevant and effective services, something that was evident from the gratitude this generated:

'Because even though it can sometimes see that we don't have a product per se, you have instances where, for instance recruitment, someone saying "thank you", because you meet them when they come and on their first day, quite early on, when they're bringing all their paperwork, eh, or inviting them for an interview, uh, although now that's done by e-mail now to the next point, you for instance, when you, they successfully got their certificate of sponsorship and their lead to remain and you help them they'll say "thank you". Maternity leaves. Someone going on maternity leave, you know, "thank you for your advice". So there are instances quite a lot of them thankfully, I think that's one of the reasons why it's enjoyable to work in there you do feel you're making a difference, so it's altruistic...' [Darius]

Receiving people's gratitude on a day-to-day basis seems to be an important factor in making the job of the HR practitioner worthwhile. Ensuring people's well-being, care and fair treatment in the workplace are thus understood to underpin HR altruism. Even if things have changed in recent years, the experiences of practitioners indicate that HR has essentially retained a core value of being concerned with looking after the interests and well-being of staff. That said, though, the experience of Ettie highlights the important extent to which this inward-looking, organisational-based conception of altruism is not just concerned with upholding employees' well-being, but is also present in the work of HR practitioners when it comes to mediating between, and reconciling, differences of interests within organisations:

'I suppose you could argue that its altruism comes in, in the [sense of being an] independent arbiter. So you can argue that when cases get difficult, and relationships break down between a manager and an employee, or organisation and employee, you can be the independent voice of, to an extent of saying "look, let's be reasonable, let's not rush into something"' [Ettie]

From the experiences of HR practitioners there is a strong suggestion that a sense of altruism informs the day-to-day HR practice, but of a distinct kind, being inward-looking, organisationally focused and, reflective of the welfarist legacy of the HR role, concerned with servicing employees and managers. It is influenced by an understanding that HR in contemporary organisations is, and should be conceived as, fundamentally a business service. To this extent, then, is it even appropriate to think about HR in altruistic terms? HR practitioners are not necessarily concerned with people's welfare out of a concern with them as individuals, particularly in private sector environments; rather the concern is with ensuring that people and processes function in a way that serves business needs. From this perspective, there is little or no scope for altruism in today's HR world, particularly if it is conceived in a way that extends beyond corporate interests. This was expressed by Nerina:

'... yes in that you are dealing with people and at the end of the day you have a responsibility to ensure that people are treated fairly. Good for the wider society...HR, on its own? I don't know that's a difficult one (with very doubting voice). Ya, you see I don't necessarily see that as HR's role.' [Nerina]

In relation to altruism, when it comes to the experiences of HR practitioners, and how they reflected on and tried to make sense of these experiences, perhaps the most interesting finding was just how uncomfortable respondents felt when addressing the topic. They often didn't engage with it directly, instead moved the discussion into areas where they were more comfortable, their experiences of servicing employees and managers for example, or a belief that altruism, where it exists, is personally subjective, and can only be understood in relation to the particular approach pursued by individual HR practitioners. What was also clear, moreover, is just how little importance was attached to the idea that altruism in HR has any connection with acting in the broader public interest or for the good of society at large. On the one hand, the idea that HR is marked by altruism may seem difficult to maintain, because it is inconsistent with a focus on business goals and because HR does not have the same historical traditions as conventional, more established professions. On the other hand, however, it is possible to identify a distinct kind of altruism which characterises HR practice, marked by the left-over welfare tradition of HR combined with an inward-looking belief in the importance of recognising and valuing the worth of people, mainly because this makes sound business sense.

6.4 The HR profession

The final section of this chapter, which concerns how practitioners identify as HR professionals, is devoted to exploring HR as a profession and the meaning attached to the concept of the HR professional. It is divided into three parts. The first part explores the issue of HR certification and the part played by CPD in promoting and upholding professional standards and a sense of professional identity. Part two focuses on HR as a profession, and the distinctive characteristics of HR professionalisation, through the insights and reflections of HR practitioners themselves. All of this helps to inform a conceptualisation of the characteristics and attributes of the “HR professional”, grounded in the insights and reflections of the HR practitioners who participated in the research, and which is covered in the third part.

6.4.1 Certification, CPD and HR professional standards

One of the key features of conventional professional occupations is the importance attached to practitioners holding formal credentials, particularly qualifications. Credentialism is particularly important to professional projects. The material covered in chapter five pointed to the role of the CIPD qualification, as the main form of HR certification, not as a licence to practice, but as something that raises the self-confidence of HR practitioners, and the esteem in which they are held, as well as its role as an initial foundation for future career and professional development (see section 5.2.2). Yet the data show that there are some problems with HR certification as a tool for promoting a sense of professional identity in the field. If they want to progress their careers in HR, practitioners cannot really rely on the CIPD qualification on its own, and instead make use of opportunities for learning and development derived from other sources. Even at entry-level, the data imply an emphasis on gaining some demonstrative business experience, rather than formal certification, since the credential can always be acquired later on.

The practitioners covered by the research, and others they know, had often managed to build successful careers without holding the CIPD qualification. So, by their own admission, it would be rather hypocritical now on their part to insist upon a formal credential. What mattered more was relevant experience. However, there is an understanding that whilst not having the CIPD qualification may have been acceptable in the past, in future, employing organisations are likely to take a stricter approach and insist that practitioners have acquired it. All this points to something very important

about the value of HR certification. Increasing demand from employing organisations for relevant formal credentials reflect the nature of the CIPD qualification as a signalling device. What comes across very strongly from this study, however, is the value attached to experience, and the knowledge and learning that stems from it, as important dimensions of HR professional identity.

The research explored the experiences of HR practitioners with regard to CPD, how they understood and interpreted the value of CPD based on these experiences, and what this means for making sense of the nature of HR professional identity. As was observed in chapter five, the value of engaging in CPD, particularly in respect of keeping up with legislative developments, often comes through highly from the research findings. CPD also enables HR practitioners to fulfil their professional updating. This is because it is understood as something which is important for their personal development, either by enabling them to reflect on things and be aware of their achievements, or by helping them to avoid making mistakes that had occurred in the past. For those who keenly maintained their CPD, this was not just because HR practitioners are meant to do so, but also because they take a considerable degree of pride in doing so.

The value of CPD is seen in terms of it taking the form of a practical tool which enables practitioners to reflect upon, and deepen their understanding of, matters which are relevant to their workplace and organisational development. For Erika, this reflective dimension is what she values about CPD:

'I do mine every year. It doesn't have to have been a qualification but, it could be something I read, something I've experienced...because for me that's important to reflect on it... Even if you add a word to say you did something and you go back and fill it in later, this is still an aide memoir of what you've done.'
[Erika]

In this respect, CPD can be something which is rather easy to undertake, and its purpose should not be misunderstood as relating only to training sessions or seminars; instead, it should be thought of as being essentially linked to developments and reflections in the workplace, or used as a practical tool by HR practitioners when contemplating making a career move. However, it was clear from the research that there are a number of issues and challenges that inhibit the effectiveness of CPD and limit its capacity to contribute to enhancing the professional identity of HR practitioners. Lack of time is one

consideration. While acknowledging its importance, practitioners often do not keep up with their CPD activity because their busy schedules meant that other, more immediate, issues take priority. Yasmin raised a more profound problem:

'to try and outline what any one HR professional should cover in their CPD in a prescriptive way is impossible because I think we've got soooo! many different facets to the profession, to our careers, so many different levels of interest that to be prescriptive would not work, effectively' [Yasmin]

Her experience shows that while CPD is regarded as important, there is an understanding that designing an approach to CPD which recognises the diversity of HR roles and their various aspects is a challenge. This raises the question of whether or not it is possible, or even desirable, to specify one model, or form, of the HR “professional”. Another difficulty concerns the lack of perceived value in undertaking CPD activities. This was Lena’s experience:

'...it's been one of those things where I'm playing catch up...but it's going to be obviously fine if the investment and the time and my own time to obviously sit and do it all...but I'm sure, it's probably quite costly. And then it's 'does it really add value?' To me getting another job? I'm not sure.' [Lena]

Despite the supposed advantages of engaging in CPD activities, the experience of HR practitioners suggests there may be only few actual benefits coming from them because CPD is not seen as a particularly useful developmental tool, and has a financial cost attached to it. While progressing as HR practitioners, people have to pay more to maintain their status, something which does not provide much of an incentive to further their personal development. Moreover, CPD can also be rejected on the basis that it is perceived to be too much of a “chore”, with no apparent value arising from it; being something that just needs to be done does not constitute a good enough reason for insisting upon it. There is also a sense from the HR practitioners in the study that CPD may not be part of the culture of sharing knowledge in organisations. With this in mind, then, CPD has to make sense for every different organisation and its people, something that goes against the idea of operating an independent system of assessing the development of HR “professionals” in general.

Another problem relating to CPD is its perceived lack of validity. Charles’s experience had made him rather sceptical about the validity of CPD and therefore its value:

'I understand that the reflection is good, but it's like you have to fill in a form and some might learn actually nothing, if they write a good form then they've ticked the box and they... might have learned absolutely nothing, but they've ticked the box, they've got the bit of paper and they sign it. What value's that? I understand the process or learning, it's a good thing, ... reflecting what you've learned, Did we do deal with that the right way? Is that idea that's accepted as the best one? But that should all be happening anyway. And just doing a form..., is irrelevant, it's just completing a form and that annoyed me. I struggled with that....They're doing it, ...cause they [have] got to. They're not doing it because they believe in the process.' [Charles]

Charles's experience highlights a concern about the absence of any independent verification of CPD records. How can the validity of what practitioners claim they have accomplished be properly validated? There is no effective system in place for checking that people have developed in the ways they claim to have done. Not only does CPD not actually demonstrate anything, it could also be misleading. HR practitioners often struggle to see any value in CPD, expressing concerns about whether any genuine learning actually occurs given that it is possible to complete the exercise simply by following a standardised procedure. Moreover, there is no sense among HR practitioners that CPD should be obligatory, despite professional updating being considered important. They have very busy schedules, and therefore often struggle to find time to engage in their CPD activities. The fact that the CIPD has never really policed CPD could be seen as an excuse for not engaging in CPD, rather than a reason for not wanting it to be enforced.

The experiences of HR practitioners convey an overall sense that CPD lacks sufficient value in general; and a lack of confidence about how CPD has benefited, or could benefit, them in particular. Overall, the role of CPD does not appear to have become deeply embedded within the HR profession. There are objections towards CPD on so many levels, that practitioners are yet to be convinced of its value and benefits. A greater focus on more useful approaches to learning and development, relevant to their day-to-day work activities, would be more favourably received, judging from practitioners' experiences and reflections. HR practitioners sometimes even advise colleagues to avoid engaging in CPD activities. There is even a marked sense of cynicism sometimes apparent among practitioners about the nature and purpose of CPD, reflecting their experience in HR roles. There is little confidence that engaging in CPD does much to further their development; and the efforts of the CIPD to promote it attract a degree of scepticism. Two issues arise out of this. First, how far are HR practitioners

able to develop a distinct professional identity, given the perceived low value of, and cynicism exhibited towards CPD? Second, these findings point to the large degree to which HR practitioners, as professionals, operate in the context of their employing organisations. There is little sense that CPD has contributed very much to the development of a broader, occupational professional identity on the part of HR practitioners; especially given the limited impact of the CIPD's efforts.

6.4.2 An HR profession?

Clearly, one important dimension of the professional identity of HR practitioners concerns how, through the lenses offered by their experience in the field, they understand HR as a profession. Overall, while the findings suggest a sense of scepticism regarding the idea of HR as a profession, particularly in the conventional sense, there is no reason why it cannot become one, given sufficient time. However, it is not as straightforward as this. One problem concerns HR's lack of visibility and distinctiveness as an occupation. Ettie reflected on this:

'I think there's a managerial profession ...which captures a lot of things like, finance, and I'm talking about management accountancy, rather than chartered accountancy, you know, estates, all of those things. Is HR a standalone profession? I know that the CIPD would like to think it is, but,is quite a diverse collection of management initiatives..., but it's not on the same league.... because anyone, in the theory could go in and do it. Not necessarily adequately, but learn it eventually, and do it without doing any formal qualifications ...'.
[Ettie]

Her reflections highlight a sense that HR lacks visibility and public acceptance. It belongs to a group of professions whose existence is restricted to being within the boundaries of employing organisations, and which are not visible or recognisable at societal level. Moreover, HR lacks visibility even within organisational settings, as Elisa and Salma explained in different ways:

'... Well a lot of it is absorbed I think into general management practices because a lot of what we do we'd sit behind the managers so kind of what we're doing is we're trying to help, facilitate the managers to manage but the person you see up front would be the manager. So, that's where it's kind of a bit difficult'. [Elisa]

'..., they don't really get it, it's not really a professional role and I do think that's unfair because there's a lot of responsibility placed on HR professionals, because actually they are, they have legislative drivers. There's things that they have to adhere to. And they have to ensure everybody else adheres to. It's a shame but no I don't think it's viewed as...[a profession]'. [Salma]

This conveys a sense that since most of its activities are aimed at supporting managers, HR's work often becomes invisible, meaning that practitioners do not get the necessary acknowledgment they deserve, something which adversely affects their professional standing. Moreover, there are concerns that HR's lack of history as a distinctive and identifiable profession can undermine its claim to professional status. The research findings point to a sense that HR lacks wider public awareness as a professional field. How can this be supported when practitioners themselves avoid mentioning they work in HR let alone projecting it as a profession? Professions are perceived as such because they have a longer history. Moreover, how can there be a distinct "HR profession" when employing organisations can often operate quite effectively without a dedicated HR presence? The large diversity of HR roles can also be problematic, as Charles reflected:

'... if you're an accountant or a doctor, whatever, they're professions and a certain role in HR might be a professional role, but say in a doctor's surgery you get a doctor, you obviously get the receptionist, whatever, the dentist hygienist they're different roles, you wouldn't say everyone in a doctor's surgery is a professional doctor, you wouldn't say everyone in a law firm is a lawyer. I think it's the same thing in an HR department... Whereas a lot of people in HR... have a fairly good understanding of procedures and... could give reasonable advice, but basically an admin role... it wouldn't probably make much difference [if they] was doing that in HR or anywhere.' [Charles]

The important point here is that not all roles in HR are to be considered to be operating at a "professional" level. Certain specialist HR roles, because of the dedicated knowledge they require, and those involving a strategic dimension, may have a professional character; however, practitioners in more generalist positions, and in lower-level administrative roles, perhaps cannot be viewed so much as operating as a profession. Whether or not an HR role is "professional" very much depends upon the level at which it is performed, and the importance attached to it. Such a marked diversity implies an additional complication to the question of whether or not HR is a profession. And this is not just in respect of roles. For Yasmin, it was by no means clear that HR should be understood as a profession:

'But we never used to have an HR profession, it never existed, therefore it's not essential, it's a bunch of ideas and approaches that have been put together and labels and everybody's interpretation of that is slightly different. Even the profession, regardless of its professional standards cannot enforce the way people think about a profession, whereas, a lawyer or a barrister or an NHS practitioner they've got clearly defined remits in what they do. From an HR perspective every organisation will interpret in a slightly different way and

they'll have different needs and they'll have different approaches...' [Yasmin]

This shows the important extent to which the diversity of approaches to HR taken by different employing organisations also potentially undermines the unity of HR as a professional field. There are also issues relating to HR itself which undermine its claim to professional standing. Reflecting on their experiences, the HR practitioners in the study understood that not all of their fellow HR practitioners work to the same professional standard and fail to practise what they preach, setting a bad example to other members of their employing organisations, thus jeopardising their professional standing. As Ariadne observed:

'In your own back yard it's got to be the same and I don't think they're very good at that and I'm sure that at many HR departments you might look inside and you'll find that it's almost as if you spend too much time looking after everybody else and not your own ... Sometimes we are not too good at making sure we operate as a best practice model.' [Ariadne]

There is also a sense from the research findings that HR practitioners can be too inward-looking and self-absorbed in a way that hinders their claim to professional status. There is an HR “ego” that gets in the way of effective HR work. Perhaps HR spends too much time trying to demonstrate its claim to being considered as a profession instead of concentrating on being effective.

'I think that people who work in HR need to behave in an ethical and legal and appropriate way, but I think anybody should behave in that way, regardless of what profession or non-profession they belong to...I can't get worked up about it to be honest. I think you just do your job and get on with it, and if you do it right that's great...Profession?' [Jessie]

'...So, I think HR professionals or people, people in the HR profession can do a brilliant job, but why feel the need to call yourself a professional? You know, you're not a doctor, you're not a teacher, why do you need to brand yourself? ... Why can't you just be satisfied that you are doing a good job and adding value?... If you're not doing a good job, it doesn't matter what you call yourself, doesn't matter if you say you're a professional, it doesn't matter if you say you are this, that and the other. People would just think you're not very good. But if you are doing a good job it doesn't matter what you're called ...' [Charles]

Jessie's and Charles's reflections convey a sense that perhaps it does not really matter whether or not HR is considered to be a profession, as long as practitioners undertake their role to a high standard. That is the important thing. It is the impact practitioners have in their respective roles that matters, regardless of how the occupation itself is

labelled. The reservations that exist about HR's professional standing raise some important questions about the field's claim to professional status. Furthermore, the research findings convey a sense that HR practitioners often find themselves being cynical and doubtful about their own achievements, because they are conditioned not to expect any acknowledgement for their work. As a result they may stifle and suppress their own creativity at work. Doubts about whether they actually add value to their organisations can make HR practitioners question their own professional being. Thus there are factors particular to the HR field itself, and how its practitioners operate, that undermine its claims to professional status.

For the most part, then, HR is not understood by practitioners as a conventional or traditional profession. However, there is a recognition that it is taking on some of the elements of a professional occupation, something which is consistent with the idea that HR is on a professionalisation path. Practitioners in the study reflected on how HR uses language and terminology as a means of portraying itself as a profession, and through efforts to raise barriers, mimicking other, conventional professions. There is a sense that the HR field is attempting to acquire status and professional kudos by building an image of mystery and inaccessibility. The more inexplicable the language used, the more need there is to make use of those who do understand it, in order to explain it to others.

Although, as it currently stands, based on the experiences and understandings of the practitioners covered in this research, HR perhaps cannot be considered as a profession in the conventional sense, there is a sense that certain factors, such as the establishment of a chartered institute and the growing importance attached to formal credentials, mean that HR may be on the way to becoming one, though with its own distinct features. As Lena observed:

'..I think that the profession has changed ...[since] moving to chartered status... you were beginning to see within that two year transition period that people were saying actually we are a profession we should be seen and work on the fact that we have a professional standing within business and obviously all jobs then, naturally were saying we want you to have this qualification...'. [Lena]

The research findings conveyed a sense of the scope that HR has to improve its professional standing. To a large extent, this is something which is in practitioners' own hands – working in ways that would help to elevate HR professional identity. By taking pride in their own good work practitioners can play a major part in driving and

projecting HR professionalisation; a matter that seemed to be indisputable for the practitioners in the study. A combination of gaining credibility and making HR operate in a more visible manner would be a good starting point. Ylenia suggested:

'You know..., if you were to think about it from a profession perspective I think people who are in the profession understand and are proud of what they do and I think maybe that's where more information needs to be promoted about, you know, this is a profession and this is a good career path, if it's in your interest.'
[Ylenia]

For the HR role to be viewed in professional terms others should want to imitate or follow it, and have the aspiration of becoming practitioners. Thus the advantages of being an HR practitioner should be projected more clearly to attract people to develop a career in a worthwhile field. There is a strong sense from the research findings that, despite the difficulties mentioned above, HR should be projected more as a professional occupation. This could be achieved by demonstrating the commitment HR practitioners have, and highlighting their successes. All this shows that while practitioners may be sceptical about the status and recognisability of HR as a "profession", there is nonetheless a strong belief that it is both necessary and desirable for it to acquire sufficient professional status. This conveys a meaning that, in a positive sense, HR is on the way to becoming a profession, even though sufficient acknowledgement of its contribution is lacking.

Based on this evidence, it is clear that there is a distinct HR professional project in operation. From the experiences, reflections and understandings of practitioners, HR is on an appropriate path to becoming more accepted as a professional field. However, more needs to be done to promote and project it as such. Efforts to do so, however, are not helped by the presence of both a widespread cynicism and issues such as feelings of inferiority, past reputation and even elevated egos. These are all important matters which do not seem to help HR practitioners in their claim to professional status. The idea that HR can be equated with a conventional profession attracts a considerable degree of scepticism. Nevertheless, despite the issues and challenges recognised, there are some visible elements of a distinct type of profession noticeable consistent with the process of professionalisation characterising the HR field. Perhaps most importantly, though, the existence of an HR profession may or may not be necessary. Whether or not HR is a "profession" misses the point, which in a way helps to liberate practitioners. What matters is that HR is practised to a high standard and adds value to organisations.

HR practitioners understand and identify themselves as “professionals”, without necessarily recognising that they form a professional occupation in the conventional sense.

6.4.3 The HR professional

HR practitioners can find it difficult to express with clarity what they think professionalism and being a professional mean. That said, however, on a general level the more common expressions used by practitioners include “doing my job well” and “being the expert in a really specific area”. Yet doing a job well does not make it a profession; only that the person performing it does so to the best of their capacity. The research conducted among HR practitioners suggests that HR is not understood as a conventional or established profession; but it is a field which is becoming professionalised. HR practitioners generally conceive of themselves as “professionals”. What do they mean by this? Lena reflected on what being an HR “professional” actually means:

‘...an expert with knowledge and there is an expectation on you to pass that knowledge and interrogate that knowledge and experience and skill to provide the right advice for the company that you work for to assist with potentially quite high-level strategic decision making that’s needed. But might actually have an impact on the future of the business so, um, so you’re not somebody who’s a ‘yes’ person, ‘no’ person, I think you, there is an expectation...you have a toolkit of information, knowledge and experience that you refer to but you have all the sort of integrity and values and everything else that you would need. So, you’re not, you can’t just do this job if you’re walked in off the street. To me, that embodies that whole thing about being a professional in a particular professionalism. You’ve chosen to be in a particular career, particular area of work’ [Lena]

From this there is a sense that HR practitioners, as professionals, have an obligation to ensure that they constantly update their knowledge, maintain the validity of this knowledge and pass it on to others. As part of what it means to be professional, possessing integrity and certain values are also understood as important, together with a very conscious choice one makes to follow a particular discipline. There is a perception that professionalism reflects an occupation’s status in society and the upholding of a certain image which, in addition to specialist expertise and service delivery, attracts a high level of remuneration, while acting as a role model of a professional occupation. That said, however, HR practitioners understand, often with an ironic tone present, that professionalism nowadays can be just about having a piece of paper or letters after one’s

name; whereas in the past being a professional carried a certain added weight. This raises the question of whether the concept of professionalism has perhaps lost some of its meaning now, given that under current circumstances more and more people claim to be professionals.

Strangely, given the evidence that many HR practitioners, for whatever reason, do not keep up with their CPD activities (see section 6.4.2), the research findings convey a sense of how participating in ongoing developmental activities is understood to be a key feature of professionalism. Being a professional means not only having the requisite knowledge and skills, but also, more importantly, maintaining them. Something worth emphasising here is how understandings of professionalism, and how it is evaluated, are often perceived in terms of the professional role-holder's contribution to their employing organisation, particularly business performance, given the fact that nowadays many organisations are comprised of professionals. In this respect, the research findings show that professionalism is not so much understood in idealistic terms, but more rooted in practical, common-sense considerations, being linked to credentials. Possessing relevant knowledge and expertise is only part of being a professional; having a qualification, and being a member of a professional body, act as confirmation. This was recognised by Jessie:

'I mean you have to be able to have your knowledge and expertise and experience validated in some way and the shorthand way of doing is that, is to have some sort of qualification or gone through some sort of initiation, but you know, you've gone through some process by which you can be deemed to be a paid-up member of an institute or whatever it is, or institution or whatever it is, ...'. [Jessie]

All this indicates the need for a more rigorous approach to understanding what the concept of an "HR professional" actually means, something which is best achieved by interpreting the perceptions of practitioners themselves, based on their experiences. Therefore the remainder of this section is devoted to conceptualising the nature of the "HR professional", based on the attributes specified by practitioners themselves. This permits a further investigation into the professional dimension of HR, based on the understandings of HR practitioners themselves about their role and perceived professional identity. They were asked to reflect on some of the key propositions suggested in models of HR present in the literature, and specify which of these were appropriate for HR practitioners when it comes to operating as HR professionals.

Prompts were given to respondents, in the form of statements derived from the relevant literature on professionalism about what constitutes a “professional”, including being a “critical thinker”, a “reflective practitioner”, and being “able to think on their feet”. In connection to this they were asked to give up to five adjectives that came to mind to describe professional values in HR.

As a result of this exercise, 38 attributes of the “HR professional” were generated. These attributes were identified as the most important based on the participants’ responses and worth a place among the research findings (see table 6.1). The attributes are colour coded to show an indication of which were referred to more by the HR practitioners during the discussions. So, those in red were the most discussed, those attributes in blue were less discussed and those in black were the attributes least discussed by HR practitioners. All of the 38 attributes which emerged from the research are analysed because HR practitioners considered them important, to varying degrees, in order to perform their work, and the analysis that follows shows how these take shape in their HR roles.

For further analysis, a process of “holistic” coding (Saldaña, 2009) was undertaken in order to sort the 38 attributes into six meaningful categories. Once these categories were generated, each was given a heading: “HR values”, “HR skills”, “business orientation”, “HR orientation”, “managing relationships” and “workforce orientation” (see table 6.1). This categorisation allows the key features of the “HR professional”, as understood by practitioners themselves, to be interpreted. It should be noted that the practitioners in the study sometimes claimed to be insufficiently familiar with the concepts suggested in the literature, and also the CIPD’s own model, to be able to comment adequately. In general, although they showed a good understanding of some of the key issues, they were often reluctant about making comparisons with the idea of being “professional”. However, they recognised from Ulrich’s model the relevance of having critical thinking and reasoning as being part of the characteristics of HR, and its importance for the HR role’s progression.

Table 6.1: Attributes of the “HR professional” (researcher’s table)

Attributes of “HR professionals” as reported by respondents (n=38)	Category
<p>Being trustworthy (not just in the sense of maintaining confidentiality)</p> <p>Empathy/understanding</p> <p>Pride</p> <p>Not an amateur</p> <p>Acting with integrity</p> <p>Honesty</p> <p>Hard working</p> <p>Strong work ethic</p>	HR values
<p>Self-belief</p> <p>Challengers</p> <p>Adaptability (both for self and others)</p> <p>Handling difficult situations</p> <p>Improvers</p>	HR skills
<p>Dealing with constant change</p> <p>“A doer”</p> <p>Aligned with the business</p> <p>Commercial acumen</p> <p>Hard decision makers</p> <p>Consistent deliverers</p>	Business orientation
<p>Recognising diversity</p> <p>Battling negative impressions</p> <p>Battling HR rejecters</p> <p>Ensuring that HR is a trusted function</p> <p>Sceptical-pragmatist</p> <p>Not an easy ticket</p>	HR orientation
<p>Communicators</p> <p>Engagers</p> <p>Welcomers</p> <p>Relationship establishers</p> <p>Bridge builders</p> <p>Facilitators/negotiators</p> <p>Expectations of managers</p>	Managing relationships
<p>Improvers</p> <p>More than just an aid to people</p> <p>Safeguarders of physical and mental/emotional experience</p> <p>Motivators</p> <p>No false hopes</p> <p>Workforce expectations</p>	Workforce orientation

Red: most important; Blue: moderately important; Black: least important

In terms of “HR values”, practitioners conveyed an understanding of the importance of “*being trustworthy*”, not just in the sense of maintaining confidentiality, but by ensuring that they are trusted to provide the best solutions, often by means of building fruitful relationships. “*Acting with integrity*” and “*honesty*”, and demonstrating a capacity for hard work, in order to maintain high standards, are also perceived to be important. The importance of “*pride*” was sometimes mentioned; despite the contradictory feelings they have about various aspects of their roles, HR practitioners are first and foremost very proud about what they do in their jobs. This is particularly evident when it comes to how they hold themselves in the business world, to the point of trying to overcompensate for any previous bad experiences or impressions left by HR in the past. As HR practitioners, they feel it is their duty to aim to treat people fairly - another source of pride. In their eyes, the HR “professional” is “*no amateur*”, in the sense of being someone who takes their role very seriously and strives to practise with integrity. Being trustworthy and acting with integrity are related attributes of the “HR professional” in the context of how practitioners reflect on their work. This was exemplified by Renato:

‘I think, in doing right for the business, doing right for the people, I think integrity is very important, ..., we need to be aligned with the business and at the same time we need to be a function that people can trust, cause if they can’t trust HR well who can they go to for people who work in the organisation they really need to trust us. And I think that’s important and ah, it doesn’t mean we can agree with everything, ... but, I want HR to be trusted.., I want us to be seen to be professional, to be trusted to have integrity, so integrity and honesty...’
[Renato]

When it comes to “HR skills”, being adaptable is sometimes understood as a key attribute of an HR “professional”. How HR practitioners must constantly re-prioritise through the “*balance of judgment*” they have to perform, are a daily occurrence. Practitioners sometimes see themselves as “*improvers*” of people’s working lives while challenging situations to provoke better solutions; this is how they conceptualise the *critical thinker* or the *strategist* that is often promoted in the literature on HR. In doing this, they often have only their own self-belief to boost their confidence as they tend to face a lack of trust in HR’s abilities. There is a belief that HR practitioners usually have to be involved in handling difficult situations since they are the people generally called upon to sort out problems when things go wrong. However, they do embrace this, given the extent to which resolving difficulties is viewed as an integral part of their jobs.

Their “business orientation” conveys a sense that HR practitioners have to make efforts to align themselves with the needs of the business and demonstrate their “*commercial acumen*”, in situations where they are often those who must take the hard decisions. The HR “professional” can also be understood as a “*doer*”, meaning that they are relied upon to ensure that not only are relevant tasks completed, but also that matters are taken forward where appropriate, with an emphasis on constantly delivering and always with integrity. This was how Nerina made sense of what an HR professional is:

‘...[someone with] I think integrity, a doer I suppose, what I mean a doer... is sort of that being prepared to challenge, so I think that’s a value you need to have. Somebody that’s prepared to challenge, integrity, again is around that professionalism, understanding the wider business, so the commercial acumen and I guess there is an element of trustworthy, isn’t it, there? Yes, been trusting.’
[Nerina]

The concept of the “HR orientation” refers to how practitioners make sense of their roles as “professionals” through the diverse issues they come across in their position in employing organisations, something made easier when they have a diverse background themselves. HR practitioners in the study conveyed a sense of the delicate and complicated situations in which they tend to find themselves. As one of them described it, being involved in HR is “*not an easy ticket*”, contrary to the impression sometimes held by those on the outside. HR practitioners sometimes understand themselves as acting as “*battlers of negative impressions*”, in the words of one of them, challenging those past negative experiences people might have had with the function. There can also be a sense that HR practitioners need to act as “*battlers of HR rejecters*”, as one of them explained it, taking on the preconceptions of those who reject to HR being involved in the business, or being part of the organisation at all. HR practitioners understand their role as being about ensuring that others perceive HR to be the trusted function which people can turn to for assistance. Erika explained this as such:

‘It’s crazy! But I think, you know I always felt that it’s about giving a service. It’s really sad that some people have a terrible um, have a real terrible opinion or have had terrible experience of HR because, I just don’t see how, I think these people must be in the wrong job....Where’s the loyalty?’ [Erika]

There is also a sense of how HR practitioners strive to be perceived less as “rule-quoters”, that is only being interested in ensuring that organisational policies are applied – not that the need to implement policies is unimportant; however, there is a wish not to be seen solely as keepers of the rules. Evan shared his thinking:

'I think we need to perhaps spend a little less time quoting the rules but I think, some of the managers needed a bit more time reading the rules...I think the answer falls somewhere in-between the two.' [Evan]

Insisting upon compliance with policies and procedures does not necessarily mean that HR practitioners are uncreative. Actually, they emphasise how they are the people that look for “out-of-the-box” thinking, encouraging innovative approaches to tackling organisational issues. Yet there is a sense among HR practitioners that they could be more effective when it comes to persuading others; acknowledging their lack of persuasiveness, they understand the importance of a potential HR influence in many areas.

“Managing relationships” is understood as a key priority for HR practitioners; whether building new relationships, re-building them under the partnering model, or having the responsibility of welcoming staff into the working environment, and acting as the first port of call. The nature of HR has changed, but even more so, as one practitioner put it, *“the balance of power has changed more”*; what now seems to be appreciated in organisations is the importance of forming partnerships. In the act of balancing varying organisational interests, bridging departments, engaging staff, building credibility and interpreting external information, communication is of the utmost importance. Attempting to operate as consultants and advisors, HR practitioners often understand their role as being about acting as *“facilitators”* in order to help others achieve their goals. In this, although they apply their knowledge, it is recognised as a shared knowledge-base with their client areas. They understand that by no means do they hold all the requisite expertise themselves. That is why they often describe themselves as *“facilitators”*. The insights of Elvira and Darius illustrate this well:

'...I mean in terms of a successful HR professional, is..., a lot about communication, and establishing relationships with managers, with employees and doing that in practice gives you the learning in terms of handling difficult people, handling people who don't want to take your advice, having difficult conversations, those sorts of things.' [Elvira]

'...probably the best way to describe us, we are helpers and facilitators, it's almost like a midwife. The midwife doesn't actually give birth but she's there to help and guide and everything else...like that.' [Darius]

Finally, in terms of their “workforce orientation”, HR practitioners understand how they have a duty to safeguard others’ physical, mental and emotional health in the workplace.

The sense is of ensuring that others have a smooth experience at work. They are more than just an aid to people. Instead, they make sense of their role as operating as “*improvers*” and “*motivators*”, even during a difficult financial climate. HR practitioners are primarily there to ensure that the workforce is treated in a way that adds value to the organisation. They do understand that working in HR can make them vulnerable to others’ sceptical minds; therefore, they do not hold high hopes for success. At the same time, though, they understand the importance of not offering false hopes, having to be realistic and pragmatic about HR’s role in the organisation, and manage the expectations of the workforce accordingly.

All this from the research shows that while HR practitioners might not necessarily recognise themselves as belonging to a profession, they do see the value in being HR professionals. What, then, do the research data mean for understanding the nature, role and activities of HR professionals? On the whole, with respect to the attributes of the “HR professional” identified by the research, practitioners generally value more the good work that they do, rather than the title they may have. Being aware of the tendency for HR to follow fads, HR professionals seem to be waiting for the “Ulrich era”, if one can call it that, to complete its cycle, given that sooner or later it seems likely to be determined as not being the best way for those in HR roles to make their mark. There is an acknowledgement that Ulrich’s model is aimed at establishing a more respected “HR professional”; but practitioners seem to be unsure of its lasting effect. Uncertainties were also expressed as to whether this model might be masking other inefficiencies of the HR role. Practitioners understand that the future role of, say, doctors as professionals seems relatively assured; about HR professionals, though, no one can be certain. Although HR practitioners make sense of their knowledge as being marked by “*more breadth, than depth*”, yet paradoxically, gaining experience in other parts of their organisation could enhance their professional status and credibility. But broadening one’s breadth of experience is central to the development of a more realistic HR practitioner, instead of being concerned with titles or models; as long as relevant professional HR knowledge is in place. There is also, of course, often an expectation to pass off as a professional; even perhaps a forced expectation.

Attempting to characterise and understand the nature of the “HR professional”, based on reflections and understandings of practitioners themselves, and how they make sense of their roles, offers a complex and diverse picture. Not that homogeneity was something

that was expected in sketching the features of the HR practitioner as a “professional”; however, the diversity is more evident than expected. Whether “*dealing with constant change*”, as the main characteristic of the HR role, or “*establishing trustworthiness*”, “*recognising diversity*” or being “*balance-holders*”, “*challengers*”, “*facilitators*” and “*motivators*”, whatever the numerous characteristics given, what comes across very strongly is the emphasis HR practitioners place on being adaptable; not only themselves, but also in terms of making others adaptable. These highlight important facets of the “HR professional”, based on the attributes and values articulated by practitioners themselves. It is their conceptualisation of the “HR professional”, informed by their own experiences and insights.

6.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has examined HR practitioners’ professional identity and the nature of HR as a profession, based on the lived experiences, reflections and insights of HR practitioners themselves. The findings demonstrate that there is generally a rather weak association with HR as a profession. While the efforts being made by the CIPD to promote HR as a professional occupation were acknowledged, and attempts to gain greater status for the field generally welcomed, there was scepticism about the value of the Institute’s professional project. The HR role seems to have been “pushed” to the forefront, in terms of being promoted as having a professional status, without the necessary supports having been put in place to help practitioners in their practice. With regard to professional ethics, while there is a sense that HR practitioners understand that personal morals and values are superior to the needs of the business, and are prepared not to compromise them, a widespread sense of pragmatism and experience means they take a more detached approach, as well as drawing lines where necessary to handle any situations arising. Linking ethical practice to the risks involved, or the legal aspect of their role, or the method applied are the key ways in which HR practitioners understand ethical issues. Nevertheless, how people are treated is a vital matter in HR, with the importance of integrity being vital for some, while for others abiding by the law is the decisive issue. Moreover, a distinctive type of altruism was observed, one connected to dealing with people’s well-being at work. There is quite a notable degree of scepticism about the idea that HR can be regarded as a profession, given its restriction to business organisations, and the extent to which it lacks the necessary societal acceptance or even visibility of its work. Nevertheless, there is a recognition that HR is on a professionalisation path, and that elements of a distinct sense of professionalism are

apparent within the field. On this note, practitioners offered their own insights into the nature of the “HR professional”, based on a range of relevant attributes and values. Aware of the need to try and steer away from fads - that may only mask what HR is not - they demonstrated how much there is to their roles. Detaching themselves from labels and queries as to whether HR *is* or *is not* a profession, they shared the pride they have in both being and identifying as “HR professionals”.

7. Discussion

7.1 Introduction

In the findings chapters the discussions with HR practitioners brought to light an array of issues, thoughts and reflections concerning their experiences of working in the HR field. They generously provided their insights into a multitude of subjects not just with an open-mind, but also with a critical eye. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the research findings, and explore their significance, in relation to the relevant existing literature. The chapter is divided into three main parts. The first part (7.2) addresses the five-theme framework which was derived from the literature review and used to plan the methodological strategy and data collection methods. Each of the five themes – HR trust/credibility, HR status/credibility, HR ethics, expert HR knowledge and HR professional identity – is analysed in order to explore the nature of HR professionalism and the HR professional role. Drawing on the findings of the research, the second part (7.3) of the chapter outlines the nature and characteristics of HR as an “organisational” professional project, consistent with the neo-Weberian approach taken in this study. The third part of the chapter (7.4) explores the nature of HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals as they enact their role responding to the call for an HR profession, therefore better understanding the process of professionalisation in HR. Taken together, these perspectives provide new and original insights into the nature of HR as a professional field and its professional project.

7.2 HR as a professional field

Drawing on the literature concerning the sociology of the professions and HR, a five-theme framework was established at the end of chapter three for the purpose of undertaking the research enquiry: exploring the nature of HR as a professional field, based on interpreting the experiences, insights and reflections of the HR practitioners in the study. This section of the discussion chapter returns to the five-theme framework for the purpose of interpreting and discussing the research findings. This provides insights into HR as a professional field, HR professionalism and the nature of the HR professional role.

7.2.1 Trust-driven credibility in HR

A key feature of the research findings concerns the efforts of those in HR roles to promote trust and secure credibility, since these are meant to characterise those considered as trustworthy HR professionals. The literature suggests that in order to enhance their credibility, and secure increased status and rewards, those engaged in professional work are expected to be worthy of the trust of their clients (Evetts, 2014). For HR professionals, building high trust relations with managers is a key part of becoming a ‘credible activist’ (Ulrich, Brockbank and Ulrich, 2010; Ulrich *et al.*, 2012).

The research findings reveal three key, related features of HR practitioners’ experiences of trying to secure greater credibility through high trust relations. The first concerns the importance attached to building trust through developing effective relationships with line managers, and others in their organisations, and by demonstrating an awareness of business needs. For Evetts (2014), organisational settings can mean that occupations are at risk of deprofessionalisation pressures, based on managerial efforts to control professionals, and leading to a loss of trust. The findings of this study, though, point to the vital ways in which HR practitioners work at securing trust, and building credibility, in business terms, consistent with overall managerial objectives. This includes educating line managers about the value of HR, and what it contributes to the business. There is evidence from the existing literature that although HR practitioners do aim to “educate” line managers, they still often end up having to “step in” (Jones and Saundry, 2012). However, the findings from this study demonstrate that there is a notable difference, one that sheds light on how HR’s credibility is lost or gained. HR practitioners aim not only to educate line managers, but also to encourage shared responsibility over people management tasks. Being called upon to solve problems can actually be welcomed by HR practitioners. This is viewed as a good opportunity for HR to demonstrate its ability to resolve difficult cases, making others appreciate its value. It is this kind of acknowledgement that raises the trust and credibility of HR practitioners, by enabling them to demonstrate what they can do for others and helping others understand HR’s work.

Second, the research findings show that generally the business partnering approach is one useful way for HR practitioners to win the trust of others in their organisations, and elevate their credibility because, as an approach, it allows them to demonstrate their “closeness to the business”. Some literature suggests that organisational

professionalism, because it is subject to potentially greater managerial control, erodes trust in professionals (Lunt, 2008; Evetts, 2014; Grace, 2014). There is scepticism about the value of a business partnering approach when it comes to increasing the credibility of HR practitioners (Wright, 2008). Yet the findings demonstrate that HR practitioners are very aware that being able to secure trust-based credibility is an important attribute, something also recognised in the literature (Long and Ismail, 2011). The research findings also show that demonstrating business awareness and fully understanding business needs are key methods HR practitioners employ to promote their credibility. They are more trusted by their organisations, and have greater credibility, when they appear attuned to the needs of the business, and in environments where HR as a function is accepted and valued.

Third, the research findings show that, based on the experiences of HR practitioners, although building trust and securing credibility is important, this starts from a weak trust base. Payne (2010) recognises that a perceived lack of HR competency can lower the trust placed in them by line managers. The findings show that trust and credibility cannot be assumed. The credibility of HR practitioners as professionals is not something which can be taken for granted, but rather must be worked on. The existing literature shows that, when it comes to adding value to the organisation, establishing effective and truthful relationships is the building block of the enactment of the role of HR practitioners (Jones and Saundry, 2012). The findings of this study demonstrate how gaining trust is an on-going battle; dealing with HR's negative past image and reputation can be hard work, but are welcomed together, with HR practitioners believing that they can take such difficulties in their stride. The literature on professionalism, particularly on new and emerging professions, suggests that trust has become more problematic, and that its meaning has changed (Bailey, 2011; Evetts, 2012a; Lunt, 2008). These doubts over the value, expertise and contribution of professionals are reflected in the research findings. More than this, the HR role is in keeping with this "new professionalism" (Evetts, 2011a), because of the way that it operates under the "*proof before trust*" approach. Hanlon (1998), for example, emphasises the importance of professionals in organisational settings needing to demonstrate their trustworthiness. However, nowadays this often goes hand-in-hand with "increased regulation, audit and assessment" (Evetts, 2014: 30). This research shows, additionally, that proving their credibility, and thus gaining trust, is a central feature of HR practitioners' work, in a context where negative preconceptions of HR

sometimes exist. Practitioners need to prove their competence, demonstrate results and meet targets *before* they can be trusted.

7.2.2 Status-driven credibility in HR

Status, and the credibility that stems from it, is another element anticipated to characterise HR as a professional field. The research findings thus explored the experiences and understandings of HR practitioners with regard to the status they hold as professionals. The literature on professions holds that status comes from the esteem held by practitioners due to their level of knowledge and expertise, or their ability to exercise control over their field, gained particularly by formal credentials (Larson, 1977; Eraut, 1994; MacDonald, 1995; Friedson, 2001; Friedson, 2014; MacDonald, 2006). Moreover, for neo-Weberians, collective efforts by members of occupations to raise their status in pursuit of extra rewards characterise professional projects (Larson, 1977; MacDonald, 1995; Adams, 2015; Saks, 2016). HR has often suffered from low status in organisations (Guest and King, 2004). Professionalising the HR role has been seen as a means of increasing its status, based on a business partner orientation (Wright, 2008). The credibility of HR practitioners, and their claim to professional status, is thus based on their contribution to achieving organisational goals (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016).

The research findings highlight two important features with regard to understanding the status and credibility of HR practitioners, as professionals, adding to the existing literature. First, they explore the belief that the credibility, legitimacy and status of HR practitioners, and thus, how they demonstrate professionalism, are best achieved by being closer to the business. Literature shows that efforts by HR practitioners to maintain professional standards may complement their role by supporting business objectives; enhancing HRM performance not only supports the business but also gives the HR role opportunities to demonstrate its value and work at a strategic level which can benefit its professional image (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Brockbank and Ulrich, 2009; Ulrich, 2012; Ulrich, Younger and Brockbank, 2012). The use of the business partnering approach to elevate trust towards HR practitioners has already been mentioned. Concerning status-driven credibility, however, the research findings point to the challenges arising due to certain factors that make it difficult for HR practitioners to achieve the kind of status consistent with a conventional professional occupation: the lack of visibility of their work; the insufficient credit given for their achievements; the

lack of respect shown towards the HR function; and the perception that HR operates in a bureaucratic, compliance-driven way, as the “internal police” or the “owner of the rule-book” in organisations.

Second, nevertheless the research findings also point to how HR practitioners operate to boost their status, and thus their credibility as professionals. In conventional professions, the status of professionals is linked to the possession of specialist knowledge, education and training structures and requests for formal credentials (Macdonald, 1995; Montgomery and Oliver, 2007; Beaton, 2010). However, while possessing a formal HR credential can make HR practitioners feel equivalent to other professionals in their organisations, the research findings show that HR status is derived less from the “paper”, the formal credential, and more from the “people”; that is how they behave and conduct themselves, and through the nature of the relationships they seek to develop. It is particularly about behaving in ways that show they are responsive and supportive of business needs, empowering others without being afraid to share their specialist knowledge. The research reveals how HR practitioners use means other than formal credentials and specialist knowledge to enhance the status of their role, particularly by trying to build relationships, showing an understanding of their clients’ needs, putting themselves in their position, and demonstrating openness and approachability. In this way, they aim to overcome the barriers that might work against gaining respect and status.

The research findings show that in the field of HR the process of building status is reversed. Instead of the credential being the principal source of status, leading others in organisations to respect HR’s authority and expertise, it is rather the behaviour and actions of HR practitioners that have the effect of gaining status. Contrary to those in traditional professions who tend to create a mystery around their area of expertise, hiding behind the “expert mask” (Hughes cited in Schön, 1987; Eraut, 1994; Lunt, 2008; Barnett, 2008), HR practitioners in the research believe in the importance of demonstrating openness; although as HR practitioners perceive it this can be a matter of perspectives and personalities. This can be seen as a positive feature of HR as a professional field. Being more open, less secretive and not fearful of parting with HR knowledge help to raise the status of those in HR roles, and thus their credibility. It is really the opposite of maintaining a mystery around a professional discipline. It is demystifying professional expertise in order to help others do a better job.

7.2.3 HR ethics

The third element of what constitutes a profession concerns the presence of a base of commonly accepted ethics and values. There is a distinct form of professional ethics (Banks, 2004), which include notions such as moral dilemmas, a sense of duty, an obligation to promote the greater good, responsibility for maintaining professional standards, and altruism, which provides a foundation for professions to flourish in the public eye (Koehn, 1994). Moreover, professional ethics have traditionally formed a base upon which professional institutes construct ethical codes of practice for practitioners to abide by and practice their profession (Durkheim, 1957; Morrison; 2006; Lunt, 2008). Implementing and abiding by a moral and ethical code seems important if the HR role is to operate as a profession in the conventionally understood way (Ardagh, 2007; Macklin, 2007; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Marchington, 2015). Some consider the potential for HR practitioners to operate as ethical “agents” or “stewards” in organisations (Bennington 2007; Dex and Forth, 2009; CIPD, 2017). The CIPD (2015a) has a code of conduct. For some, HR’s pursuit of professional status would be better achieved by redefining its value-base in terms of its ethical, social and employee contributions, in line with an emphasis on long-term sustainability, rather than a narrower business partnering approach (Kochan, 2004; Kochan, 2007; Marchington, 2015).

Adding to this existing literature, and offering some new perspectives on it, three related aspects of how ethics operate in HR are apparent from the research findings, demonstrating how HR practitioners make sense of professional ethics and moral dilemmas. First, there is the notable degree to which HR practitioners consider ethical issues through an organisational lens. Initially there was an obvious reluctance on the part of HR practitioners to admit that there are any ethical concerns in HR, but on closer examination it seems that they are comfortable with the challenges posed by such issues and view them as central to how HR operates. Yet there is an emphasis on the importance of promoting fairness, openness and honesty, behaving with integrity, and building effective working relationships; but in a very operational and relational sense, rather than based on higher ethical values. As long as matters are processed with integrity, then in some ways this makes them ethically acceptable. The literature suggests that when workplace ethical dilemmas arise, despite the presence of organisational guidance professionals may act according to their personal beliefs (Tay and Fraser, 2010). In the case of HR, the research findings support this only to a very

limited extent. Instead, it was apparent that HR practitioners appear to align themselves more with organisational philosophy.

This way, either consciously or unconsciously, they do not perceive any issues with ethical dilemmas. The limited degree of support given by HR practitioners to upholding professional ethical standards shows an HR practice influenced by the environment in which it operates, consistent with the view that operating in non-professional environments can adversely affect professional ethical standards (Gunz and Gunz, 2007), and at the same time detached from a clear code of ethical practice. Feeling fortunate to be attuned to the philosophy of their organisation may be a way that HR practitioners make sense of ethical considerations in their role. The formation of their ethical–moral standards as a result of the relationships and trust they build with others in their organisations hints at the lack of values instilled at the training and initiation stage of their career paths.

Second, the research findings show that HR practitioners appreciate the importance of maintaining a risk-free organisation as part of their role; this is often used as a lens to understand ethical matters and often use it as a route to support ethical standards. Moreover, what is perceived as professional ethics in HR is often *not* a divide between what needs to be done and what ought to be done, but rather a concern with *how* things are done. How HR practitioners deal with risks, and how they handle any ethical dilemmas, issues or problems that arise, are very much based on three things: their experience in working out solutions; their patience in waiting to see how things can turn around given the ever-changing environment in which they operate; and managing expectations to their advantage.

Third, the research findings indicate that HR practitioners do not feel more committed to one side or another, but rather have a “*fluid commitment*”, often derived from the way in which they respond to ethical issues and challenges. Their commitment tends to vary depending upon the situation, on a case-by-case basis, with each one judged on its own merits. In the literature, the extent to which practitioners are capable of delivering an ethical HRM has been questioned (Guest and Woodrow 2012). Clients expect professionals to act in ways that have their best interests in mind, demonstrating the appropriate commitment to those interests, since behaving otherwise would not be considered ethical (Barnett, 2008; Scott and Seglow, 2007; Beaton, 2010). There has

been a lot written about the duality of HR's commitment (Stevens 2010; Jones and Saundry 2012), bringing to the surface a number of issues HR practitioners encounter when aspiring to operate as a profession, including the challenge of pursuing a professional role while operating to support a strategically integrated business plan (Legge, 1995; Legge, 2005; Francis and Keegan, 2006; Boxall and Purcell, 2008; Guest and Woodrow, 2012). However, from the research it became apparent that it is not possible to operate as an HR practitioner if one thinks there ought to be commitment to one side or another within an organisation. HR practitioners do not seem to share this "worry" about commitment. Though there can be important challenges concerning the "rightfulness" of certain actions, arising from potentially contradictory commitments relating to pressure to meet organisational goals at the same time as maintaining standards set out by the professional code of ethical conduct (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Guest and Woodrow, 2012), however, the findings show practitioners do not perceive it as such. The "*fluid*" nature of the commitment that seems to characterise the work of HR practitioners, as derived from the research, helps to account for the view that ethical conflicts and dilemmas are not all that present, since it allows them to position themselves appropriately according to each situation. Some writers believe that a distancing of HR from ethical matters has caused it to stall as a profession (Kochan, 2004; Bennington, 2007). The CIPD recognises that while HR practitioners believe ethics are important, they often find it difficult to behave in ways that are ethical (CIPD, 2017). The connection between ethics and HRM has been a concern, since there is a tendency to manage the human asset as any other form of capital or commodity, neglecting the human element (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Kamoche, 2007). Making a contribution to the existing literature this research, however, shows that HR practitioners take a practical, realistic approach when faced with ethical issues and dilemmas, based on a pragmatic assessment of the specific matter in hand and influenced by the organisational context.

7.2.4 HR expert knowledge

The fourth element common to all theoretical perspectives on professions which, in an idealistic way of thinking, is the main reason for the development and existence of professions, is expert knowledge (Johnson, 1972; Illich *et al.*, 1977; Abbott, 1988; Eraut, 1994; Friedson, 2001; Friedson, 2014). At the core of professional occupations is the presence of a specialist body of codified and testable knowledge (Winch, 2014). Monopolising a specialist body of knowledge is central to efforts by occupations to professionalise themselves (Guile, 2014; Butler and Collins, 2016). Such specialist knowledge, achieved after prolonged periods of training and initiation, tried and tested over time, is what makes professions supposedly distinct from other occupations, since it guarantees a certain level of professional practice (Hammond, McClelland, Mumpower, 1980; Schön, 1987; Clark, 2008; Švarc, 2016). In respect of HR expert knowledge, two questions arise from the research findings. What is the nature of the specialist knowledge used by HR practitioners? And what factors inhibit the development and utilisation of this knowledge?

First, what is HR's specialist knowledge area? The core reason for a profession's existence is held to be the presence and development of a defined specialised expert knowledge area which requires a high level of skill and extensive practice to acquire (Eraut, 1994; MacDonald, 1995; Winch, 2014). The research findings show that HR practitioners use different value-bases and judgement-bases to perceive and rate HR expertise, in a way that illuminates our understanding of the HR knowledge base. One may question just what this actual HR expertise is, given the apparent lack of consensus among HR practitioners over how it should be understood, raising doubts about whether a defined area of specialist HR professional expert knowledge exists. HR practitioners often seem to have "*breadth rather than depth*" in their knowledge. To an extent, this is understandable due to the variety of issues they deal with and clients they serve, as well as the diverse environments in which they practice. Additionally, it is the extent to which knowledge is shared with line managers and others in their organisations that causes an ill-defined and non-exclusive HR knowledge base.

The research findings also point to the organisational nature of a great deal of HR knowledge. Generally, it is expected that, as a result of their training, professionals have developed the confidence to demonstrate intuitive and/or analytical thinking, capable of

acting according to the merits of individual cases, reflecting on their actions and operating creatively (Hammond, McClelland, Mumpower, 1980; Schön, 1987; Shalem, 2014). Yet the findings from this study show that HR practitioners are able to demonstrate intuitive and analytical skills only to the extent permitted by the constraints of having to abide by rules and regulations, codified practices and organisational demands; even if they are those called upon to think of resourceful, “out-of-the-box” solutions. This does not leave much room to show their creativity and be proven as critical thinkers, and as experts. That said, though, HR practitioners do have to work with constant ambiguity, and constant re-prioritisation, maintaining an appropriate “*balance of judgment*”, as it was described. In treating cases separately they are able to apply creative-interpretive processes in order to provide the best solutions possible; however, the extent to which they are able to feed this back into their practice and have an impact on the HR profession, as is the case with other professional occupations (Lester, 1995), is questionable.

Having outlined the nature of HR specialist knowledge and expertise, a second issue concerns the factors that inhibit their practice and implementation. According to the literature, being a professional is associated with being highly qualified, possessing demonstrable credentials and having up-to-date specialist, relevant expertise, especially in an era where there is an obsession with formal credentials and where both employing organisations and clients are more than ever demanding proof of knowledge and professional updating (Fallows, 1986; Taylor and McGugan, 1995; Friedson, 2001; Montgomery and Oliver, 2007; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Evetts, 2012a). The research findings show that although CPD is generally valued, the necessity of maintaining it has not yet become established. Although HR practitioners claim to take updating their professional development seriously, given that CPD is not mandatory, and also the belief that it should not be, this raises questions about how appropriate professional standards can be maintained. If it falls to employing organisations to maintain standards of practice, this can be problematic for the unity of HR as a field; so ideally such standards should be the responsibility of an external body. Yet as professionals, and supposedly trained as such, it should be expected that HR practitioners feel a personal need to keep themselves updated, and thus uphold professional standards, mainly because of their obligations to clients; however, this often gets pushed to the bottom of their priority list because of time and work constraints.

Another problem with regard to the practice of HR knowledge concerns the notion of “*proof before trust*” that came across very strongly in the research findings. While in the literature it was seen that in a professional transaction the practitioner, having the client’s best interest in mind, is trusted to deliver appropriate results (Koehn, 1994; Friedson, 2001; Friedson, 2014), HR practitioners struggle in this respect. Not only they do have to build relationships in order to prove their credibility as practitioners, they also have to show some demonstrable results before they can be trusted. Not being trusted as being the knowledgeable expert from the start inhibits efforts to use their knowledge. In conventional professions, clients may want some examples or credentials of the practitioner’s expertise before they can place their trust, but an important contribution this research makes to the existing literature is to demonstrate that in HR “*proof before trust*” seems to be more the norm.

7.2.5 HR professional identity

The fifth element of the five-theme framework is the presence of a distinct, shared professional identity on the part of practitioners (Ibarra, 1999; Banks 2004; Crook, 2008; Evetts, 2014). However, the existing literature on the HR role depicts it as having a weak occupational professional identity (Caldwell, 2003), linked to issues with legitimacy, proof of their efficiency, vulnerability and lack of a clearly defined social status (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Kitay and Wright, 2007; Kochan, 2007; Wright, 2008; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). The research findings generally confirm this picture, while offering some additional notable insights in four key respects.

First, the research reveals that while a distinct HR occupational professional community exists, with a considerable amount of networking activity being undertaken by practitioners, it can be of a rather limited nature. Although they regard themselves as performing their job roles to a professional standard, the idea of being a professional HR practitioner is not very strongly projected, with two of the most important reasons for this being: one, the extensive diversity of the tasks performed, which makes for difficulties explaining to others outside a business context what it is they do for a living and the nature of their occupation; and two, the belief that HR lacks presence in societal terms. According to the literature, such diversity, and the difficulties that HR practitioners face in demonstrating their distinct contribution, helps to undermine HR professional identity (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016).

The second insight concerns the rather weak degree of attachment to the HR professional institute, the CIPD. The literature on professional identity highlights its basis in “extra-organizational work-related groups”, which can be of a multiple nature depending on the type of relationship practitioners have in their workplaces (Johnson *et al.*, 2006:498). The research findings indicate that there is a sense of community apparent in HR, but it is more defined in relation to the sector, the business or service and far less via the CIPD itself. Although its qualification is useful when working in an HR role, and its efforts to promote the HR profession are important, CIPD membership is not viewed in terms of a lifelong association that characterises practitioners’ professional identity. This is consistent with literature which claims there is very little capacity for HR institutes, like the CIPD, to operate as a coherent professional grouping, and that while the term “profession” is being used, there seems to be no clear occupational identity evident (Wright, 2008:1083).

The third insight from the research concerns the implications for HR professional identity of HR’s characteristic knowledge base and the nature of practitioners’ training and development. The research findings are in line with claims that the lack of any obligatory requirement for HR practitioners to hold a qualification in order to practice in the field works against legitimacy and the development of occupational and professional identity (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Pohler and Willness, 2014). Moreover, another important feature of professional identity concerns the process of training and socialisation into particular occupations (Banks, 2004; Evetts, 2014). The stronger the initial professional identity, the better prospects for career advancement and enactment of this identity (Ibarra, 1999; Lamote and Engels, 2010; Worthington *et al.*, 2012). In HR, though, any initial training does not seem to offer a very consistent or coherent approach to professional formation (Hallier and Summers, 2011). The research findings confirm that the training HR practitioners receive does not constitute a very strong foundation for developing their professional identity. A role in HR is rarely their first career choice, which means that their professional formation, and therefore their professional identity, develops rather later, if it does at all, than may be the case in established conventional professions. Additionally, according to the literature, the lack of commitment to CPD can have an adverse effect on the presence of a strong identity (Bailey, 2011; Hallier and Summers, 2011). A paradox revealed by the research is that although practitioners value CPD, they do not want to be obliged to undertake it. This

suggests a limited aspiration towards maintaining professional standards, with negative consequences for HR professional identity.

The fourth insight from the research findings relating to the nature of HR professional identity concerns its highly organisational focus. They show the important ways in which the identities of HR practitioners are rooted in the organisational relationships they form, the services they deliver and the commitment they show, even if it is a “fluid” one. Being “in tune” with the organisation’s philosophy and the initial claims made about not facing any ethical dilemmas in their roles suggest the presence of an organisationally controlled professional identity. This is consistent with the growing amount of literature concerned with understanding the changing nature of professional identity in more commercialised, organisational settings, in particular the rise of “hybrid” forms of professional-managerial identity apparent among practitioners who have to combine professional aspirations with organisational objectives (Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Grace, 2014; McGivern *et al.*, 2015; Correia and Denis, 2016; Paton and Hodgson, 2016; Noordegraaf, 2016).

However, the research findings also demonstrate just how organisation-specific the practice of HR, and thus the HR role, is. When it comes to characterising the professional identity of HR practitioners, the approach taken by Ashcraft (2013), who argues for the importance of organisational identity formation being linked with occupational identity, is therefore useful. It is socially constructed in specific ways and in specific contexts (Ashcraft, 2013). Organisational pressure to hone professionals’ identity and behaviour can suit the objectives and the culture of business organisations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Otubanjo, 2012). According to the literature, in the case of HR, the division between transactional and transformational activities has created situations where professional identity construction takes on a more localised nature (Pritchard and Symon, 2011). Indeed, the research findings indicate that it is doubtful whether all levels of HR ought to, should, or even need to be considered as part of a single HR profession. The research findings are also consistent with claims that the shift towards an HR business partnering approach has inhibited the development of a distinct occupational HR identity (Wright, 2008; Roche and Teague, 2012). The research shows that business partnering has, to a certain extent, helped HR practitioners to build organisational relationships, raising their credibility; but this has come at the expense of maintaining a distinct and coherent overall professional identity. That said though, the

research outcomes do show the many attributes and characteristics that HR practitioners develop as they progress in the HR field, which point to a form of professional identity, only one constructed *posteriori*, with an *a priori* skills-base.

7.3 The HR professional role and the HR “organisational” professional project

Using the 5-theme framework as a way of interpreting the research findings reveals the presence of a particular kind of HR professionalism, which is concerned with adding value to employing organisations, advancing the interests of these organisations, and supporting the people in these organisations. The research also provides new insights into the nature of the HR professional role, and recognises the presence of an HR professional project, linked to efforts by practitioners to promote their professionalism and enhance their standing as professionals responding to the call for professionalising their field.

7.3.1 The HR professional role

The research findings provide insights into the nature of the HR professional role and HR professionalism. In the literature it was noted that the supposedly more professional dimension of the HR role has attracted ever more attention as expectations rise, but together with misconceptions too, as to what is expected of an HR professional within changing organisational and business contexts (Caldwell, 2003; Caldwell, 2010; Keegan and Francis, 2010). According to the literature, the credibility, and thus the professionalism, of those in HR roles, often depend on how far they can make a strategic contribution to organisational goals (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). The research findings are in line with this, suggesting that the greater professional status of those in HR roles is seen to arise by operating with more of an emphasis on supporting and adding value to the business, acting as advisers, engaging in consultancy roles, and educating and empowering line managers.

As the literature review shows, the CIPD’s Profession Map presents and describes eight “fundamental behaviours” thought to project the idea of an HR professional. The CIPD projects the HR professional as a resourceful, confident and determined decision maker, whose commercial and HR expertise and leadership enables them to deliver results, promote innovation and add business value - see chapter three. In some respects, the research findings reported in chapter six, which examine the attributes HR practitioners

themselves consider to make up an HR “professional”, as projected through their own lived experiences of practising HR, are consistent with this to some extent. Organised into six categories – covering, HR skills, HR values, a business orientation, an HR orientation, managing relationships, and a workforce orientation – the attributes revealed by this research study are far more detailed and seriously embedded in the actual HR role, being more encompassing and stemming from the entirety of the HR role and all its aspects. The research findings point to the importance of having a “business orientation”, covering matters such as “commercial acumen”, “business alignment” and supporting change management. The importance of “HR skills”, especially the focus on practitioners acting as “improvers” and “challengers”, is consistent with the CIPD’s model; although the research also highlights the relevance of “adaptability” and the challenge of “handling difficult situations”. By recognising the significance of “managing relationships”, covering how HR practitioners operate as “facilitators”/“negotiators” and “bridge-builders”, the research findings add to the CIPD’s model by providing additional, more detailed and more pragmatic insights into the nature of HR collaboration.

However, the research also demonstrates how HR practitioners consciously understand themselves as professionals engaged in professional work, and who are keen to improve their professional standing in a very pragmatic way, rather than exactly in the manner suggested by the CIPD. Although there is an emphasis on “HR values”, covering matters such as “empathy”, “pride” and “honesty”, these are understood in a more pragmatic and relational sense, with regards to the role of an HR professional. This is also apparent from the “workforce orientation” category, which is characterised by a concern with the managing the experiences and expectations of employees. Another notable difference with the CIPD’s model is the recognition of an “HR orientation” by HR practitioners in the research. From this perspective, the work of the HR professional can involve having to deal with the negative views and assumptions others often hold about HR.

There are often problems with identifying the contribution HR practitioners actually make to strategic business objectives, as Caldwell (2004) observes. The research findings demonstrate two additional obstacles to improving the professional standing of those in HR roles. First, the lack of visibility of HR work can be a problem. Since their role is to support others in the organisation it is not entirely clear what their contribution

is, creating misconceptions about their role; although practitioners, by facilitating others in the organisation, accept that they do not directly receive the credit. Second, an unfavourable stance from the organisation towards the HR function can also contribute to misperceptions about HR practitioners' abilities and skills. Those on the outside may be unaware of the contribution that HR makes. That said, though, HR practitioners themselves are little concerned about whether or not their occupation is considered a "profession"; instead, they are often far more concerned to be perceived as "professional", in terms of operating to high standards, and being credible in their role, and show they care for the impact their work has on both the business and the employee front. Whereas the CIPD's model is characterised by a vision of the HR professional in strategic terms as a resourceful, confident and activist leader, the findings of this study emphasise more the pragmatic, operational and relational workplace focus of HR professionalism.

The research findings also offer some insights into Ulrich's model and the nature of HR business partnering. For Ulrich and his collaborators, the organisational standing of HR is best achieved by practitioners demonstrating how they add value to business organisations, in particular by operating as "credible activists" and through business partnering (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich, Brockbank and Ulrich, 2010; Ulrich *et al.*, 2012; Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). However, the argument that a business partnering approach, by improving the credibility of those in HR roles, enhances their professional standing, has been the subject of extensive debate and criticism (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Wright, 2008; Caldwell, 2010; Keegan and Francis, 2010). The findings from this study show that HR practitioners are sceptical about the different models of HR roles and how they are projected as a way that HR can demonstrate its value and achievements; they are weary of different fads over the years and have more faith in their own experience and the quality of their work. They are very much concerned and involved, and successful, with establishing trustworthy relationships that not only raise their credibility and achieve autonomy, but also open up the road for effective future collaboration.

Eager to build bridges, HR practitioners base their practice primarily on making relevant ties with different departments in their organisations, instead of thinking of ways of convincing people of their expertise. That comes later, once others have had a taste of what HR can do. The problem with Ulrich's model is that it is based on building

relationships and delivering with integrity as a way of gaining for HR practitioners respect and status. These are all fine notions, apart from the fact that they are aimed at “proving” HR expertise. The status of “credible activist” is to be achieved by gaining results and this is exactly what HR practitioners aim to do, while the main issue created here is the lack of status as the knowledgeable expert. However, the “trap” into which HR practitioners often fall is that they are not viewed as experts in the way that other professionals are, but rather have to strive to prove themselves before they can be considered as such. This is contrary to other professionals whose starting point as credible professionals is their expert knowledge, which alone acts to guarantee their professional contribution.

7.3.2 The HR “organisational” professional project

A neo-Weberian approach to understanding professions focuses on how members of an occupation attempt to secure professional standing and control of the market (Larson, 1977; MacDonald, 1995; Saks, 2016). It is thought to be a particularly appropriate approach for understanding the development of new and emerging professions (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2011; Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping, 2011; Saks, 2012; Butler and Collins, 2016; Saks, 2016). Moreover, there is an increasing focus on professional projects in organisational settings, involving managerial occupations, “hybrid” professionalisation strategies (Evetts, 2013; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015), and a “reconfiguration” of professionalism in which the divide between organisations and professions is blurred (Noordegraaf, 2016). The focus is on goals such as efficiency and innovation, which operate as alternative ways of securing professional status (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015), with some evident attempts to maintain the essence of what is considered “professional” and the professional ideal (Maestripieri, 2016).

The existing literature suggests that there is an HR professionalisation project apparent, marked by efforts to emulate established professions, through the development of codes of conduct, for example, and attempts to secure occupational closure, for the purpose of enhancing the credibility, prestige and status of HR practitioners (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). The development of the HR professional project is often linked to the contribution contemporary HR is claimed to make in promoting the strategic goals of business organisations, thus raising the

credibility, legitimacy and status of practitioners (Wright, 2008); however, the eagerness to promote short-term business goals might lead HR to forget where it is heading in the long-term (Marchington, 2015).

The findings of this research study among HR practitioners demonstrate the presence of four key features of HR as a professional project. First, and perhaps most important, the focus of professionalism is very much concerned with being aligned with the values, and supporting the interests, of practitioners' employing organisations. Great importance is attached to demonstrating business experience and improving organisational relationships. HR professionalisation is very much an "organisational" professional project, one which is grounded in, and bounded by, employing organisations. The findings from HR practitioners suggest the presence of a potential HR profession only within organisational boundaries, and not at a societal level. While a lack of wider visibility is one reason why HR cannot be seen as a conventional profession, others include the nature of practitioners' training, the absence of initiation, and the lack of identity formation, as well as lack of history compared to traditional professions. The HR field might be making progress towards becoming a profession; however, the different and ever-changing forms, fads, and models applied to practitioners' roles deprive it of any clear boundaries and a solid base from which to progress, weakening its claim to professional status.

The second key feature of the HR professional project, as revealed by the research findings, concerns the lack of any wider occupational dimension. According to the relevant literature, HR associations, like the CIPD, which calls itself 'the professional body for HR and people development' (CIPD 2016:2), have played a major part in progressing the HR professional project (Farndale and Brewster, 2005; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). Among HR practitioners, however, there is little consensus that the CIPD plays much of a part in promoting HR as a profession. Moreover, the limited extent to which HR is considered a vocation, as well as difficulties in promoting ethical values over and above the interests and operational needs of employing organisations, mean that it is best to view the HR professional project very much on organisational, rather than societal, terms. It is often thought that altruism, an ethical obligation on professionals to act in ways that benefit others, is central to professional work (Scott and Seglow, 2007). Yet the research

findings show very clearly that the work of HR practitioners is not characterised by any strong altruistic element.

Third, the research findings also demonstrate the notable difficulties and challenges experienced by the HR field in trying to secure occupational closure. Conventional professional occupations are marked by a specialist body of codified and testable knowledge, the content of which they exercise control over, as a means of maintaining and upholding professional status (Johnson, 1972; Abbott, 1988; Friedson 2001; Friedson, 2014; Winch, 2014; Butler and Collins, 2016). Yet the research findings among HR practitioners highlight a number of problems including weak credentialism, the lack of an exclusive knowledge base and the limited extent of CPD. Three things stand out. First, there is no consensus as to what constitutes HR expertise; second, there is little support for an obligatory system of monitoring professional standards; and third, HR practitioners operate in environments where they are expected to provide “*proof before trust*”. Moreover, the research findings show that HR does not seem to have achieved much control and self-preservation through its technical knowledge and language closure. While HR may be less concerned with knowledge, it is highly dominant on relationships, with an emphasis on putting clients first.

The fourth key feature of the HR professional project, as revealed by the research undertaken among HR practitioners in this study, concerns the nature of both HR and HR work themselves. The research findings highlight problems and difficulties faced by HR practitioners when it comes to efforts to enhance their professional standing, which are specific to HR itself. These include: being too egotistical and self-absorbed; the degree of cynicism evident in HR; the rather ill-defined knowledge area; the lack of visibility of HR’s work and low prestige; certain residual elements of the welfarist legacy apparent in HR instead of a sense of doing “good for the greater good”; and the challenges associated with tackling the poor reputation HR often has in organisations. The nature of HR professionalisation, and the characteristics of its professional project, particularly driven by the CIPD, have been the subject of discussion (Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Guthrie *et al.*, 2011). Although HR is increasingly termed as a profession, the findings show that HR practitioners do not necessarily consider it to be one – at least in the conventional sense. In certain respects they have managed to prove themselves as HR professionals, and enact professionalism, within specific organisational settings, without the need to engage in a debate about HR’s professional standing, or whether it is or it is not a profession.

7.4 Exploring HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals

The original contribution made by this thesis is the effort it makes to understand the nature of HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals and the implications for viewing HR as a “profession”. The research findings provide some notable insights into the nature of the HR professional role, HR professionalism and the HR “organisational” professional project. But what does the research mean for understanding HR as a profession whose practitioners are responding to the call for HR professionalisation as *aspirant* professionals? Do *aspirant* professionals, who enact their role and adapt their knowledge and practice based on both their personal understandings of “professional image” and influences from the surrounding market and organisational environment, show an ambition to achieve the status professionalisation brings?

First of all, what makes HR practitioners a distinct kind of *aspirant* professional? HR as a field, promoted as a profession by institutes such as the CIPD, is thought to be on the path of professionalisation (Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). There has been a growing interest in, and calls for more research on, supposedly new and emerging professional occupations (Evetts, 2006a; Adams, 2015; Švarc, 2016; Brock and Saks, 2016). While HR may not be a conventional “profession”, the five-theme framework demonstrates that the experiences of HR practitioners, and how they make sense of, and interpret, these experiences, point to the presence of what could be considered to be a professional occupation. The research findings also highlight the presence of a distinct “organisational” professional project, marked by four key characteristics, as outlined in the previous section. In this sense, there is a clear professionalisation path, but of a specific and distinct kind.

The research findings show that while not members of a conventional profession, in the established sense, the application of the five-theme framework demonstrates the presence of a distinct kind of HR professionalism and the concern of HR practitioners to enhance their professional standing. This includes their efforts to gain trust through producing demonstrable results, rather than credential assurance or pre-existing status, and operating a form of “*fluid commitment*” which recognises that all parties involved are entitled to an HR service; while juggling this “*fluid commitment*” also means that HR practitioners have to navigate an ongoing “*balance of judgment*”. The research findings capture some key elements of the role of HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals, including the importance of operating in ways that add value to their

employing organisations, managing relationships effectively and operating with credibility.

In certain respects, as *aspirant* professionals HR practitioners have managed to prove themselves without the need to engage in a debate about HR's professional standing; bearing in mind that the professionalisation agenda may be something which has mainly been instigated by the CIPD. As seen in the literature, not all occupational groups manage to achieve successful professional projects, sometimes because they are highly feminised, as in the case of HR (Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Butler, Chillias and Muhr, 2012).

In some ways, the focus on business awareness and the strong degree of alignment with organisational goals, as highlighted by the research findings, might suggest that HR practitioners can be characterised as members of a “managerial profession” (Wright, 2008; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010; Watson, 2010; Thompson, 2011), and therefore as “managerial professionals”. There is a growing amount of literature devoted to professionalism and professional projects in organisational and corporate settings (Evetts, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2016; Butler and Collins, 2016; Paton and Hodgson, 2016). The research findings are in line with work that highlights the challenges faced by those in managerial occupations within organisational settings to attract the rewards and benefits typically enjoyed by members of conventional professions, including difficulties securing occupational closure and the lack of an exclusive knowledge base (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Paton and Hodgson, 2016). Moreover, they also show the important extent to which HR professionalism, and the professional role of HR practitioners, is understood in connection with the activities of their employing organisations, particularly when it comes to building relationships and delivering services.

On their own, however, these things do not mean that HR practitioners can be conceived of as members of a professional discipline, in the conventionally understood sense, or make HR a widely accepted professional occupation. The research findings also point to the presence of factors undermining HR's claim to the status of a profession, weakening practitioners' image and acceptability as HR professionals, and thus as members of a professional discipline in the conventional sense. These include: weak professional control over their area of practice; the restriction of their activities

and influence to within organisational boundaries; their lack of presence at societal level; their lack of a vocational calling; the limited support for, attachment to and identification with the professional institute (CIPD); the lack of any strong sense of belonging to a wider HR professional community; the absence of any strong ethical or altruistic sense, beyond organisational and operational concerns; and the rather ill-defined specific base of HR knowledge and expertise which, together with the fluctuations in the way that HR is practised and its weak legitimacy, suggests that the field lacks a coherent professional base. Moreover, practitioners themselves are not very concerned about whether or not HR is considered a profession; although they do conceive of themselves as “professionals” and as operating with a sense of professionalism. For them, being professional is better than worrying about whether or not you are in a profession.

The research findings show that there is clearly a process of professionalisation apparent in HR even if, because of the problems identified by the research, full professional status might continue to elude its practitioners. The value of viewing HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals is that it recognises the presence of a professionalisation dynamic, including moves towards greater certification, professional development and efforts to promote occupational closure – emulating the characteristics of established professional occupations – without assuming that the members of the occupation will necessarily (ever) end up becoming members of a professional occupation in the conventional sense. The idea that an occupation may be an “aspiring” profession has sometimes featured in the literature (Hamilton, 1974; Clarke, 2000; Ardagh, 2007; Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Muzio *et al.*, 2011;), but without being adequately conceptualised; while Timmons’ (2011) term of aspirant profession recognises a professionalisation dynamic, such as that of HR, without a desirable or needed outcome. This study, based on research undertaken with HR practitioners, highlights the importance of thinking about members of occupations, such as HR, as *aspirant* professionals. The idea of *aspirant* professionals recognises that practitioners might identify as professionals within an occupationally distinct professionalisation process but without the assumption that their occupation will ever be successfully professionalised.

A second question concerns what viewing HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals means for understanding the nature of HR as a professional field. Although some

reserve the term “profession” for occupations which come within the classic, “pure” sense of professionalism (Noordegraaf 2007:766), there has long been an interest in various occupations which have sought professional status for themselves, through the development of codes of conduct, standards of behaviour and specific identities, with the aim of attracting higher status and rewards (Crook, 2008; Evetts, 2006a; Evetts, 2012a), thus projecting themselves as professions (Crook, 2008; Connell, Fawcett, and Meagher, 2009; Švarc, 2016). As the review of the literature in chapter three showed, there is a difficulty with calling occupations “new” or “emerging” professions. This is because these concepts imply that it is straightforward to determine the characteristics of a “profession”, by elaborating a set of criteria, with the assumption of a specific end-point (becoming a successfully professionalised occupation).

The research findings indicate that, although its practitioners can be viewed as aspirant professionals, there are some doubts about the HR field’s claim to professional status; but it can equally be said that they indicate that, although there are doubts about the HR field’s claim to professional status, its practitioners can be viewed as a certain kind of professionals, as aspirant professionals. Viewing HR straightforwardly as an “organisational” or “managerial” profession still assumes that HR is a “profession” of some kind. The findings from this study of HR practitioners point to the importance of viewing them as *aspirant* professionals, since HR as a field is itself in a process of professionalisation and therefore, not conceived of as an established profession in the conventional sense, but only demonstrates elements of an aspiring one. Members of occupations, or their institutes, such as the CIPD in the case of HR, might aspire to professional status, but the success of their projects is by no means guaranteed (Timmons, 2011; Butler, Chillias and Muir, 2012; McCann *et al.*, 2013; Maestriperieri, 2016). There is clearly a distinct process of professionalisation apparent in HR, but without any guarantee of it being successful, in the sense of HR becoming accepted as a profession in the conventional sense. This is consistent with the neo-Weberian approach taken in this research study, and the nature of the HR “organisational” professional project highlighted by the research findings.

Viewing HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals demonstrates that while professional status is often claimed for occupations, it is a professionalism that “professionalizes ways of becoming professional without ever really becoming professional” (Noordegraaf, 2007:775, 781). This adds value to emerging literature on the sociology

of professions which take into consideration the ongoing and varied professionalisation paths which occupations take (Butler and Collins, 2016), while also acknowledging, however, that success may never materialise. In addition to the four types of professionalism proposed by Noordegraaf (2015:201) – ‘pure’, ‘controlled’, ‘managed (hybrid)’ and ‘organising’ professionalism – the research suggests that a fifth category, that of “aspiring” professionalism, should be added. Whether aiming for ‘pure’ professionalism or for ‘organising professionalism’, Noordegraaf’s (2015:201) categories still presuppose that there is an emerging stage and an end result with the achievement of a “profession” of some kind. The idea of *aspirant* professionals, however, implies the presence of an *aspiring* professionalism, which has the privilege of taking on the characteristics of, and adjusting to the organisational context, in an ongoing way. There is no prerequisite for an end-point. It combines elements of both “pure” and “managerial” professionalism, being both occupation and context-specific. *Aspiring* professionalism, then, involves a dynamic, evolving state of professionalism aimed at maintaining characteristics of conventional professions, while being adjustable, within organisational or other structures.

In line with both Crook (2008) and Khalili, Hall and DeLuca (2014), the ideas of *aspirant* professionals and *aspiring* professionalism deal with the problems of ambiguity and polysemy, and the shifting of professionalism discourse, when seeking to define a profession, since it points to the importance of understanding processes of professionalisation, rather than the specific features of occupations that claim to be professions. Since the concept of a “profession” constantly has to be re-defined, due to the continuous efforts of occupational groups to establish themselves and advance their interests (Abbott, 1988), the idea of *aspirant* professionals and the concept of an *aspirant* profession help to avoid the perils involved with drawing a distinction between occupations not considered to be “professional” and those that are.

7.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has discussed the main findings of the research, based on the experiences, perceptions and reflections of HR practitioners, in relation to the existing literature. The findings illuminated a more pragmatic dimension of the HR role, one enacted proudly and professionally by HR practitioners even if they do not necessarily perceive themselves as being *in* a profession. The five-theme framework used in the research, encompassing HR trust, HR status, HR ethics, HR expert knowledge and HR

professional identity, highlighted the common ground HR may have with established professions, but most importantly unveiled the distinct features of the “organisational” professional project which is apparent in the field of HR. From this, it would seem that HR practitioners can be seen as *aspirant* professionals, demonstrating characteristics of professionalism in their practice. The findings indicate how HR practitioners enact their role as *aspirant* professionals, responding to the HR professional project. The findings, together with the literature, point to potentially an *aspirant* profession concept, one where an occupation is characterised by a process of professionalisation, without ever necessarily destined to become a profession in the conventional sense. Occupations like HR, which aspire to professional status, follow a dynamic process of professionalisation in which success may never materialise. Working within a field such as HR, its members operate as *aspiring* professionals; they respond to the call for professionalisation and they emulate characteristics of professionals of established professions, even if, being considered as professionals in the conventional sense may not be their pursuing goal *per se*. So, *aspirant* professionals as members of an occupation amidst a professionalisation process emulate the behaviours, and mimic the characteristics, of members of established professional disciplines, though in distinct and occupation-specific ways. *Aspirant* professionals’ professional status may constantly elude them, since, professional closure in occupations such as HR may never materialise, but instead remain aspirant (Timmons, 2011) as it could be set on an ever-evolving journey, with a hope for, but non-guaranteed, arrival at the intended destination. Given the ambiguities concerning the perception of professionalism, and the difficulties associated with the definition of professions, the dynamic and ever-adapting *aspiring* professionalism offers an important way forward in thinking not just about the members of the HR field, but also about HR itself and its aspiring state to professional status, and of professionalisation overall.

8. Conclusion

The research reported in this thesis offers a three-fold contribution to the existing literature. First, the application of the five-theme framework provides new insights into the nature of the HR role and HR professionalism, as well as understanding HR professional identity. In line with the neo-Weberian focus on efforts by occupations to professionalise, the second contribution of the research highlights the value of understanding HR as an “organisational” professional project. Third, using the HR field as the investigation arena, the research makes a contribution to the relevant literature by adding to existing knowledge and understanding of the sociology of professions. It provides an original and clear contribution to knowledge by using the research findings to offer a novel phenomenological study of HR practitioners as *aspirant* professionals, with important implications for understanding HR as a “profession”.

The research fits in with calls for more studies of professional projects in organisational settings in general (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Brock and Saks, 2016), and the HR professionalisation project in particular (Pohler and Willness, 2014). Historically, the claim of HR to professional status was rather weak (Legge, 1978; Farndale and Brewster, 2005). However, HR has increasingly been considered as a “profession” of some kind, with its practitioners referred to as “professionals” (Ardagh, 2007; Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016); especially since the CIPD achieved chartered status, a key feature of the “professional project” it has sought to promote (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). However, given HR’s weak legitimacy, its past reputation and its lack of history as a profession in the conventional sense, there are doubts about how feasible it is to view HR as a “profession” (Keegan and Francis, 2010; Hallier and Summers, 2011),

Established professions are characterised by elements such as a set of professional ethics, control over a body of specialist knowledge, privileges that come from enjoying high levels of trust and the presence of a distinct professional identity (Lunt, 2008; Beaton, 2010; Evetts, 2014; Švarc, 2016). Too much of an emphasis on a narrow, business-focus might hinder HR’s claim to professional status (Wright, 2008; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Marchington, 2015; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016). However, there is growing concern with understanding how professions operate in organisational settings and the nature of “organisational professions” (Evetts, 2013; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Butler and Collins, 2016; Paton

and Hodgson, 2016). This thesis makes an original and distinctive contribution to knowledge by enriching our understanding of professional projects by exploring how HR practitioners operate and enact their role as *aspirant* professionals, based on the way in which they are responding to the professionalisation of the HR field.

8.1 The research inquiry

In order to make this original and distinctive contribution, a research inquiry was undertaken. This involved investigating, analysing and interpreting the experiences and perceptions of HR practitioners, and how they make sense of them. The research was based on a triangular axis: the literature on the sociology of professions; relevant literature on HR; and data collected from HR practitioners via primary research fieldwork. Guided by the research objectives set out in chapter one, the literature review covered relevant material on the sociology of professions (chapter two), and the HR professional role, HR professional project and HR professionalisation (chapter three). Drawing on this literature a research framework was established, including five themes – trust/credibility, status/credibility, expert knowledge, professional ethics and professional identity – which guided and informed the process of empirical research and data collection. Since the research was an inquisitive exploration, a discovery, a programme of empirical research was put in place, tackled by means of a qualitative inquiry, mainly inductive in nature with deductive elements, where the existing literature inspired the themes that were explored.

In terms of philosophical theories, the concepts of the HR “profession” and HR “professional”, not being things which are definite, but still in the making, meant that the philosophical stance rested upon an ontological perspective where evolution is accommodated in accordance with a non-positivist standpoint. The aim of the investigation was to explore and interpret, not prove or test a theory. Therefore, the most appropriate method of data collection for this research involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners that allowed plenty of scope for discussion and for ideas to unfold and take shape. The research followed a phenomenological approach, based on understanding and interpreting the experiences, perceptions and reflections of HR practitioners (chapter four). Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews; the participants in the research were chosen for their extensive experience in HR which provided the richness of the data that enabled the objectives of the research to be fulfilled. The phenomenological method and the

qualitative research approach allowed participants' experiences and career histories to unfold. As phenomenology embraces how subjects make sense of their own world, the reflections, feelings and insights of HR practitioners were interpreted for the value they have in their own eyes.

The approach to data collection gave space for HR practitioners to reflect on the subjects and questions put to them, and more importantly the comfort to share their thoughts freely and with the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. As expressed by the participants, the interviews gave them a chance to discuss their work and to take a step back and reflect on the nature of their roles and experiences. The data from the research were analysed and interpreted using a thematic analysis technique, consistent with the phenomenological approach to the research and informed by the five-theme framework derived from the literature review, which brought to the surface a series of complex and nuanced notions. The HR practitioners that participated in the research had extensive experience in HR and diverse backgrounds working in different sectors and roles during their careers. This meant that they were able to delve deeply into some of the concepts and ideas put to them for discussion; moreover, having lived through changes in personnel/HR matters, they were able to give more inclusive answers concerning the HR role. They were able to observe its evolution and make comparisons with the HR role at previous stages in the evolution of the field. The continuity of their observations on HR carried a stronger validity and proved to be invaluable for the research. The breadth of the subjects covered was due to the in-depth discussions held, and the richness of the data arose because of the extensive and diverse backgrounds of the HR practitioners who participated in the research. Their substantial work histories meant they were able to delve into their experiences and provide their perceptions and insights, often with a critical and reflective manner – see chapters five and six.

8.2 Addressing the research objectives

The nature of the research enquiry, and the data generated, which were analysed and interpreted, enabled the research objectives (see chapter one) to be addressed in a way that helps to make the novel and original contribution of the research more apparent.

8.2.1 The professional HR role and HR professional identity

The first objective was to investigate how HR practitioners experience and understand their role as professionals, how they consider themselves as being involved in

professional work, and what this means for their professional identity. By applying the five-theme framework, and exploring the concepts of HR trust/credibility, HR status/credibility, HR professional expert knowledge, HR professional ethics and HR professional identity, the findings provide a better understanding of the issues surrounding the HR field as narrated by those enacting HR roles. There has been a considerable amount of recent interest in the nature of HR roles (Ulrich, *et al.*, 2007; Caldwell, 2010; Keegan and Francis, 2010; Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015), including the question of HR's professional standing under business partnering (Wright, 2008). The research findings demonstrate how HR practitioners understand themselves as being involved in professional work, providing an essence of their "professional" identity.

According to the research findings, the HR professional role is characterised by a prominent organisational focus. It is about being attuned to the needs of the business, developing and maintaining organisational relationships, and overcoming negative preconceptions others might have of HR. The HR professional role is more about types of behaviour and relationships rather than, say, having formal credentials or specialist knowledge. HR practitioners do have a professional identity, but it is one which is strongly rooted in, and influenced by, their employing organisations. There is only a weak attachment to, and identification with, the CIPD as the professional institute. While this supports the view that professional identity in organisational settings has a "hybrid" dimension to it, based on reconciling professional aspirations with organisational objectives (Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Grace, 2014; McGivern *et al.*, 2015; Correia and Denis, 2016; Paton and Hodgson, 2016; Noordegraaf, 2016), the professional identity of HR practitioners is highly organisationally bounded.

The outcomes of the research show that HR practitioners echo the sceptical attitude expressed by some writers (Caldwell, 2003; Caldwell, 2008; Wright, 2008; Guest and Bryson, 2009; Keegan and Francis, 2010; Thompson, 2011) towards models of the HR role (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich, Brockbank and Ulrich, 2010; Ulrich, 2012; Ulrich *et al.*, 2012; Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). The research shows that practitioners question the effectiveness of the models and the negative effect they may have on the professional standing of the HR role. HR practitioners perceive themselves more as enablers, facilitators and, at times, as intuitive problem-solvers, among other things. The attributes of HR practitioners, as revealed by the research findings, are more encompassing and pragmatic, and of a more operational and relational nature than the

CIPD's professional behaviours contained within its Profession Map. The research contributes to debates on commitment and HR (Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995; Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Stevens, 2010; Jones and Saundry, 2012), by indicating that practitioners tend to have a "*fluid commitment*", and that their daily work is characterised by maintaining an "*ongoing-balance-of-judgements*".

One of the key features of this research project has been to develop a better understanding of what an HR professional actually is, drawing on the experiences and insights of HR practitioners. The research suggests that six dimensions – HR values; HR skills; a business orientation; an HR orientation; managing relationships; and a workforce orientation – are important. There are some similarities, but also some important contrasts, with the CIPD's model of the HR professional, based on eight fundamental behaviours. The findings of this study emphasise more the pragmatic, operational and workplace focus of HR professionalism compared with the CIPD's more strategic focus on activist leadership.

8.2.2 HR professionalism

The second research objective was to draw on the experiences of HR practitioners, and how they make sense of them, to investigate both their sense of professionalism and HR's efforts to secure professional status for its practice. Using the five-theme framework provides insights into the nature of HR professionalism and also highlights the difficulties, challenges and obstacles faced by HR practitioners in trying to promote the professional status of HR and how they attempt to overcome them. The research findings demonstrate that a particular kind of HR professionalism is present, based on adding value to employing organisations, advancing the interests of these organisations, and supporting the people in these organisations, while also strongly marked by a sense of HR pride. The nature of HR professionalism is highly organisationally focused, with a strong operational dimension, being concerned with openness, integrity and fairness, and with ensuring consistency rather than conformity.

The research shows that factors such as a lack of visibility and the mistrustful attitude towards HR in organisations can be responsible for HR not flourishing as a profession. The literature has highlighted how important credibility is for the HR role (Legge, 2005; Alfes, Shantz and Truss, 2012), affecting its overall perceived value as a profession (Bach, 2005; Guest and Bryson, 2009). The research findings show how HR

practitioners are winning the battle of credibility only through the “*proof before trust*” approach, instead of using their status as experts to do so. This may be thought of being in line with elements of the contemporary attitude towards professions and professionals which suggest that professional work has experienced a crisis of trust (Lunt, 2008), and a loss of confidence in professional efficiency (Bailey, 2011; Evetts, 2011a; Evetts, 2012a). Moreover, the research findings reveal that models which emphasise credibility and building trust through relationships (Ulrich, Brockbank and Ulrich, 2010), although sound and implemented by HR practitioners, may constitute a trap for the professional standing of HR because they place too much importance on the credibility built through trust, rather than establishing HR status through expertise and knowledge.

Professional status is identified in this research as relating to the knowledge, expertise and credentials of practitioners, and the weight this knowledge carries can play a role in society; while nowadays credentialism affects new and emerging professions’ efforts at professionalisation (Larson, 1977; Eraut, 1994; Macdonald, 1995; Friedson, 2001; Macdonald, 2006; Montgomery and Oliver, 2007; Beaton, 2010; Friedson, 2014). This research shows that while credentials are important, since they give HR practitioners a sense of pride and a degree of equivalence with other professionals in organisations, they do not seem to be a cause for enhancing HR’s professional status. Instead, the status of those in the HR field comes from how practitioners conduct themselves, rather than any formal qualification they may hold, particularly by demonstrating business acumen, by being approachable and by empowering others with the knowledge they need to work independently. This last point raises the status of HR, which though not in a way conventionally expected by those in “professional” fields, who may hold on to their knowledge as a way of enhancing an image of mystery for the profession.

A defined and specialised knowledge area, extensive training and initiation, together with professional updating, are often seen as core features of professional occupations, and constitute ways to achieve closure to their area of expertise making them distinct from other fields (Illich *et al.*, 1977; Hammond, McClelland, Mumpower, 1980; Schön, 1983; Dreyfus, Dreyfus and Athanasiou, 1986; Schön, 1987; Abbott, 1988; Eraut, 1994; MacDonald, 1995; Friedson, 2001; Montgomery and Oliver, 2007; Clark, 2008; Beaton, 2010; Friedson, 2014; Winch, 2014). The research suggests a lack of coherent agreement in what the actual HR area of expertise is, which appears to be based more on “*breadth rather than depth*” of knowledge, as described. It does not bode well for

HR's standing as a professional field when practitioners have different lenses through which they perceive the nature of HR expertise. That said, the research findings recognise that HR practitioners do apply their knowledge while working with a great deal of ambiguity, using intuitive and creative skills and demonstrating resourcefulness, contrary to the impression that they too closely abide by rules and regulations.

Finally, the question of appropriate ethical standards for HR practitioners as "professionals" is a current issue (Ardagh, 2007; Macklin, 2007; CIPD, 2017), with the distinctiveness of professional ethics, standards, morals and values providing a foundation for an occupation to be perceived as a *profession* in the public eye (Koehn, 1994; Banks, 2004). The research shows that ethical understandings are influenced by limitations arising from idiosyncrasies linked to the varied ways HR is practised in organisations, and by practitioners' individual ways of understanding morals and values. Although HR practitioners attempt to make sense of ethical dilemmas in their role by admitting they are "in tune" with organisational philosophy, there are ways of understanding ethics by linking them to the level of risk associated for the organisation, to the extent they can use legislation as a hindrance or a blessing to justify actions, or to the extent methods characterised by integrity and fairness can justify any action. Although professionals may abandon ethical standards when faced with major dilemmas (Gunz and Gunz, 2007), if HR is to be viewed as a "profession", it would be expected that practitioners would convey a strong sense of ethics and values, and be concerned with imposing their code of practice (Tay and Fraser, 2010). However, the research clarified that inherited problems with the HR field, a lack of status and a degree of low self-confidence adversely affect HR practitioners in this respect. Yet a key insight is that practitioners often welcome the idea of ethical dilemmas, recognising them as being part of their job and thus unavoidable; but furthermore, as a way of marking their presence and enhancing their value.

8.2.3 HR as an "organisational" professional project

Considered together, these research findings, which provide new insights into the nature of both the HR professional role and HR professionalism are one aspect of the three-fold contribution made by this study. The second contribution concerns the nature of HR as an "organisational" professional project. This has been achieved by drawing on findings addressing the third research objective, concerning the efforts of the CIPD to promote HR as a professional occupation, and exploring the nature, features and value

of the HR professional project. As an “organisational” professional project, it contains four prominent features: a focus on the interests of the employing organisation; a lack of wider, societal recognition; difficulties securing occupational closure; and issues and difficulties related to the nature of HR work itself, marked by both an inherent cynicism on the part of HR practitioners themselves and the lack of interest or necessity to project HR as a profession, all which inhibit professionalisation.

Previous studies have identified the presence of a professional project in HR, linked particularly to the efforts of professional institutes, such as the CIPD, to professionalise the field (Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Pohler and Willness, 2014). However, the research in this study, whilst recognising the presence of an “organisational” professional project in HR, highlighted some important doubts and concerns about both its value and likelihood of success, or indeed its necessity. The research found that while HR practitioners view themselves as HR professionals, and operate a distinct form of HR professionalism, it is doubtful that HR should be considered a profession in the conventional sense. Having some of the characteristics of professions (Illich *et al.*, 1977; MacDonald 1995; Friedson, 2001; Freidson, 2014) may not be enough when lacking in terms of professional legitimacy and societal acceptance (Abbott, 1988; Perkin, 1989; MacDonald, 1995). In fact, the research revealed that HR practitioners’ own perception is that they do not consider HR to hold the same weight in terms of risk in cases of malpractice; nor is it seen as having the historical path or carrying a strong enough contribution to society to be thought of as a conventional profession. The professionalisation of HR roles has been seen as a way of masking its problems and shedding off some of the disbelief about HR practitioners’ value and competency (Guest and Bryson, 2009:121). Noticing that the work of HR practitioners is not being sufficiently promoted, there was some belief among HR practitioners that the role of the CIPD is perhaps only to promote HR as a profession in elitist terms, therefore, raising questions about its effectiveness.

8.2.4 HR practitioners – *aspirant* professionals?

The fourth research objective is concerned with drawing on the experiences of practitioners of how they respond to HR’s call for professionalism to explore their role as aspirant professionals and the implications for the nature of HR as a profession.

The application of the five-theme framework demonstrates that HR practitioners understand themselves as undertaking professional roles, and operating with a sense of

professionalism. Moreover, there is a distinct “organisational” professional project apparent in HR. What kind of professionals are HR practitioners? And what kind of profession if any, therefore, is HR? The word *aspirant* means having an ambition to achieve something. The idea of *aspirant* professionals is an original and insightful way of thinking about members of occupations, like HR, that are marked by a process of professionalisation, without assuming that their field will necessarily ever be successfully professionalised in the manner of conventional professions. And so, members of such occupations respond to the call for professionalisation of their field by operating and acting as *aspirant* professionals. This, offers a new way of thinking about those in occupations that carry some of the features of a profession, are on a professionalisation path and aspire to operate as professional disciplines, but without any guarantee that their efforts will succeed. This research adds to the growing literature devoted to understanding the diverse and varied nature of professionalisation and professional projects, including in organisational settings (Evetts, 2006a; Adams, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2015; Brock and Saks, 2016; Butler and Collins, 2016; Noordegraaf, 2016; Paton and Hodgson, 2016; Švarc, 2016). It not only points to some of the problems of thinking about occupations like HR as “new” or “emerging” professions, but also takes a step further by understanding how practitioners perceive themselves and operate as aspiring professionals, working in fields such as HR: an occupation which is considered to be in a process of professionalisation the result of which is not certain. This better captures the dynamic state of professionalisation, and how such fields may be seen as *aspirant* professions whose professionalisation outcome is uncertain and open-ended.

As *aspirant* professionals, HR practitioners operate in a field that is characterised by certain distinct features, such as a body of knowledge with a rather ill-defined area of expertise that does not aid in supporting a strong status for its practitioners, a debatable cause of altruism, without a unified set of ethical values, an overemphasis on practitioners building strong trust with organisational clients and, despite the rather weak sense of professional identity, a strong feeling of pride in their work and a loyalty to the field of HR. The idea of a professionalised occupation is very appealing for those on the outside because it offers the prospect of increased status and rewards (Evetts, 2012a). It is important to recognise, however, that HR practitioners themselves pay little attention to the debate as to whether or not HR is a profession, or needs to be perceived and treated as such. Instead, they claim to work hard in order to compensate for any

negative reputational issues, while aiming towards establishing a credible and trustworthy HR service. Observing these characteristics leads to a realisation that although HR demonstrates elements of a “profession”, with the presence of a distinct “organisational” professional project apparent, it is not yet in the same league as those occupations which have more established professional status; furthermore, there does not appear to be any guarantee as to whether it ever will be.

Therefore, the third key contribution of the research is to understand the nature of practitioners as HR *aspirant* professionals and the implications for the nature of HR as a “profession”. Although writers have analysed HR professionalisation and the impact it has on HR “professional” identity (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Wright, 2008; Pohler and Willness, 2014; Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016), HR cannot be viewed as a “new” profession, nor it is definitely “emerging” as such; rather, it should perhaps be best understood as an *aspirant* profession. HR practitioners are best understood as *aspirant* professionals operating within and recognising the presence of a professionalisation process, based in organisational settings, but without making a judgement that their field will ever become recognised and accepted as a “profession” in its own right. The route HR needs to take in pursuing the objective of professionalisation has been a subject of much debate (Kochan, 2004; Losey, Meisinger and Ulrich, 2005; Payne, 2010; Brockett, 2010; Guthrie *et al.*, 2011; Roche and Teague, 2012; Marchington, 2015; CIPD, 2017). However, viewing HR through the lens of professionalism shows that while undergoing changes and operating in an ever-changing organisational context it is not really considered by practitioners as a professional discipline. This demonstrates that, consistent with the neo-Weberian approach on professionalisation, HR as a profession may be thought of as *aspirant*, recognising the dynamic that characterises the efforts made by *aspiring* members of occupations and their institutes, such as HR, to emulate characteristics of professionals in order to secure greater professional standing.

8.3 Reflections and limitations

The research undertaken for this thesis yielded some notable findings and contributions, which were covered in previous chapters and earlier parts of this chapter. Reflecting on the research, certain difficulties and limitations arose, which needed to be taken into consideration during the research process. Five were particularly important. The first concerns the limitations arising from the nature of the research sample. As mentioned

already (see chapter four), access to respondents was achieved through networking, focusing initially on experienced HR practitioners working in public sector organisations. But, subsequently, the networking and snowballing techniques brought in experienced practitioners from the private sector as well. Thinking of the region the sample came from – South Hampshire, North Hampshire and London – it could be argued that certain common characteristics, due to regional settings on the type of organisation, or the nature of the organisational setting, influenced responses. If the research were to have been conducted by including respondents from other parts of UK, then their backgrounds, experiences and work settings could perhaps have resulted in some different outcomes.

The sample of respondents in this research came from varied backgrounds and had extensive HR experience. Throughout the research process it was understood that if there had been more respondents included that are closer to the beginning of their careers, some of their experiences, understandings and insights about HR matters might have been different; novice HR practitioners may have had different experiences and felt differently about certain issues than the mainly very experienced HR practitioners featured in this research. Of course, though, the extensive, diverse background of the respondents is what made the research findings so rich and meaningful, and generated the contributions discussed earlier in this chapter. So, the limitations of the sample in terms of region and level of experience, though understood and recognised, did not prevent the notable research findings and the contribution from emerging, especially because the snowballing technique proved to be particularly fruitful. It provided access to high calibre practitioners, all of whom had at least five years of experience in the HR field, and was consistent with the broad non-probability sampling approach used in the research.

A second difficulty relates to the problem arising from the sheer volume of data collected which, on the one hand provided sufficient material that lead to valuable findings, but on the other hand, made it more challenging to make the choices most suitable to support the outcomes of the research. Third, because of the in-depth nature of the interviews/discussions the process of coding, analysis and interpretation ended up being rather lengthy. If time and access had not been such constraints, then it would have been desirable to have had a larger sample and conducted more interviews; though the large volume and in-depth data generated by the participants made up for it. Fourth,

the fact that the literature review required analysis in two subject areas, and the bridging of these two literature areas through the five-theme framework, meant that there was an especially large number of concepts and ideas to be discussed, put in place, and explored.

This links to a fifth difficulty, which concerns the analysis of the data and the subjects which the research dealt with. There were so many notions and concepts involved, carrying delicate nuances but also being interlinked, that demanded careful analysis and interpretation of the data and careful choices for presenting it in a meaningful way. Linking the two subject areas of the literature review, professionalism and HR, under the neo-Weberian approach, and conducting the research within a framework that was created as a result of this, posed its own specific challenges. The neo-Weberian influence was an obvious and meaningful way in setting out to explore “HR’s professionalism”. However, it had to be understood and made clear in the findings and contribution of the research that bringing in the experiences of the respondents helps to understand how HR practitioners react to the call for an HR profession, initiated by important institutes such as the CIPD. The steps taken to professionalise HR, consistent with a neo-Weberian approach, are clearly indicated by the two literature subject areas; and the practices, experiences and reflections of HR practitioners have to be seen as a response to this professionalisation effort. Recognising this, on reflection, proved to be a significant feature of the overall research. Fortunately, and reflecting on the contact with the research participants, the phenomenological approach worked well in enabling the key concepts to surface during the research, satisfying the research objectives and facilitating the overall research contribution. Thankfully, the richness and quality of the in-depth data, as well as the large volume of data, made things very worthwhile, being more than sufficient to deal with the themes of the research and address the objectives in an appropriate way.

8.4 Scope for further research

There is clearly scope for further research, arising from the findings of this particular project. Two areas in particular are worth considering. First, with regards to HR, there may be differences in how the HR role is enacted in the public and the private sectors. Therefore, conducting an investigation to explore these differences, and what they mean for HR professionalisation, on a larger scale would be beneficial. It would give a clearer sense in terms of models of the HR role and of how HR practitioners perform in this

role as aspirant professionals as well as understanding the HR field's future as a profession; perhaps as an aspirant profession, providing another dimension of how HR practitioners conceive of themselves as "professionals" and how they would conduct themselves as *aspiring* professionals in the different sectors. Additionally, since there is evidence of gender-based professional projects (Bolton and Muzio, 2008), the idea of *aspirant* professionals provides a new base for exploring gender related themes and further research opportunities. Given the feminised area of HR as a field, the idea of *aspirant* professionals can be further employed to detect differences and characteristics relating to gender, something that this research was unable to explore. The possibility of having a more gender-focused sample was deterred by some of the methodological parameters. Second, through the example of the HR role this research has offered a distinctive and original approach to understanding occupations that are in the process of professionalisation, and the importance of understanding how practitioners perceive themselves and operate as *aspiring* professionals within this dynamic state. The idea of *aspirant* professionals can be applied to other occupations whose members for their specific reasons are not perceived or accepted in the same way as established professionals. The idea of *aspirant* professionals can be usefully employed to evaluate members of other occupations that have been termed as "professions", or "new" and/or "emerging" professions, and have taken on some of the characteristics of established professional fields, but whose claim to professional standing is problematic in some way. Viewing practitioners through the idea of *aspirant* professionals and analysing occupations through the lens of an *aspirant* profession concept can identify the parameters of their own dynamic processes of professionalisation, and bring out the specific characteristics of those *aspirant* professionals for each specific case of professionalisation. Analysing a field such as HR, one that has increasingly been termed a "profession" but is not widely perceived as such, even by practitioners, brings out the characteristics of other occupations that are undertaking similar processes of professionalisation. For these occupations that are aspiring to professional status, and may be thought of as *aspirant* professions, the research has developed an original way of understanding how their members operate as *aspirant* professionals, accommodating the possibility that a process of professionalisation may be evident in their field, but without necessarily culminating in being accepted as, or even wanting to become a conventional professional occupation. Overall, this has been an investigation that has allowed the researcher to delve into two appealing areas of literature, bridging the two

for the sake of embarking on an investigation that not only yielded worthwhile outcomes, but also opened the door to more tempting possibilities for research.

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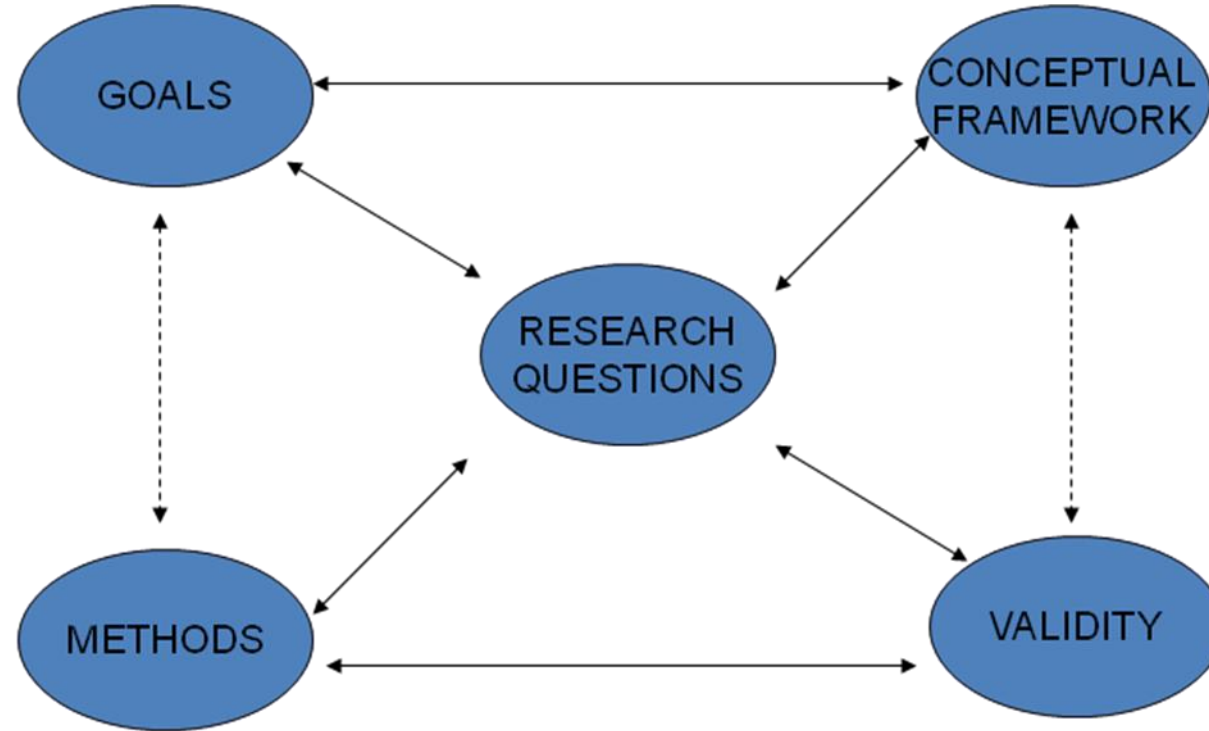
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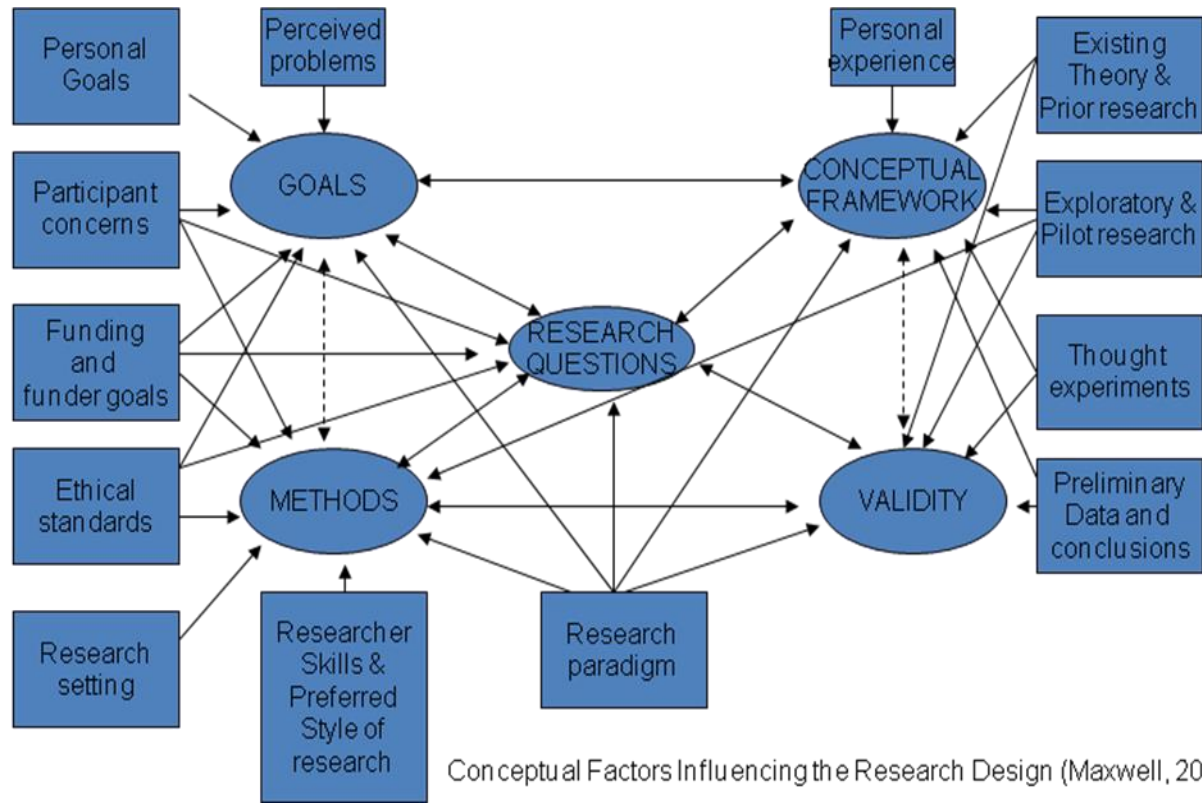
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APPENDIX A *Interactive Model of Research Design*



Interactive Model of Research Design (Maxwell, 2005)



Conceptual Factors Influencing the Research Design (Maxwell, 2005)

APPENDIX B *Interview Schedule/Script*

Script –Semi-structured interview (no personal details)

Subject area – A. Formation

1) How long have you been working in the HR field? *How did you start, in what types of roles, kinds of organisations, sector? In what other fields besides HR have you worked in? How did your previous work contribute into taking the decision to move to an HR role?*

2) What attracted you into working in the HR field? *What sort of challenges were you faced with when you first started in HR?*

Any dilemmas, any regrets about any of the choices so far, what would you do different if you were to start again, (perhaps, name one thing) (no personal details)

3) Do you hold any qualifications relating directly to HR?

If no, why is it you decided not to acquire one so far? What do you think the advantages would be of having a qualification in HR?

If yes, how important, useful do you find the qualification in order to work in the HR field? What difference has it made, if any, in undertaking your role as an HR practitioner?

Concerning the training: how effective and adequate did you find the education and training in HR studies?

In terms of knowledge: how far has it equipped you to do your job as an HR practitioner effectively?

In terms of values: did the experience of gaining the qualification instil you with any particular values?

Additional question, if relevant: Was there a period of initiation into the practice of HR? Did you have enough field practice during the studying period to prepare you to perform your current role? Would you say you learned more in the classroom environment or on the job?

(note1, for researcher: think of socialization period into the 'profession') (note 2, for the researcher: there is 'technical knowledge' referring to the one acquired through a course- program and 'practical knowledge' referring to the practice of HR) (note 3, for the researcher: think of the above questions in terms of professional training of other professional occupational groups) (note 4. for researcher: important: think of initiation period on varying groups of practitioners and take into consideration the lapse of time when getting the answers)

Subject area –**B. Work**

4) What are the main features of your current role as an HR practitioner? What are your main duties and responsibilities? How much are you able to apply the knowledge gained in HR at your current role as an HR practitioner? How far do you use the HR knowledge and expertise in your daily work? Examples? (if possible)

5) Who are the key people outside HR you cooperate with and what is the nature of this relationship? How well are you trusted to give appropriate advice? Do you pass on any of your knowledge or expertise? Who do you mainly engage with? Who are your immediate clients? How often do you give advice on best practice or options available? How often is your advice followed?

Who do you think values your expertise more? Who –which level of staff - more than others? Staff, management? Do you think the others in the organisation view you as having a set of values, credibility, status, as being the expert, someone that can be trusted?

6) What are the main issues and challenges that you face as an HR practitioner? What are the main dilemmas that you face and how does that affect your credibility as the expert in HR? To what extent do you maintain credibility as the HR expert? Status?

(note for researcher: think of interviewee's level of freedom of action as the expert: opinion heard, practiced, valued because of expertise, being an ethics agent; think of any issues in retaining trust from both managers and employees)

Can you recall a time(s) when it became difficult or impossible to maintain /practice your role due to any organisational reasons/pressures? Explanation: Anything that gets in the way when trying to 'impose' your way? How do you overcome, whenever you do, such problems? How often do you encounter such difficulties? Something that goes against your values as a practitioner, as a person, that you find difficult to overcome, or would not by-pass? When are you not willing to compromise your standards for the business?

Subject area –**C. Individual perception of their role in the organisation**

Perception of their contribution

7a) On a personal level, how do you think the way you perform your role (in what ways) contributes to the performance of your organisation? How far are you able to manage the separate demands of supporting employees and/or supporting business needs? Do you find these demands to be competing or complementary? Where do you think your commitment lies more towards? (note for researcher: think of any interests served in terms of the 'profession'- in terms of society value)

(note for researcher: or any organisation, if participant does not feel like talking about the particular organisation they work for currently, ask the following questions here:

7b) On a general level, how would you evaluate the contribution of the HR function for your organisation? Which of the various roles within the HR department would you say are the most vital? In what ways does the HR function support the business? How is that evident to others within the organisation? (name a few)

Activity – give support- being consulted

8) In your role, how far are you able to ensure the trust and support of managers in relation to HR issues? Examples, How, Why not? (if negative)

Autonomy –flexibility, control-

9) How far does your HR knowledge and expertise enable you to have freedom of action (exercise autonomy and control) when dealing with HR matters? Have there been cases when you clearly objected to higher management guidelines due to them been unreasonable and in conflict with your standards or values as an expert? Any specific obstacles you have identified?

Over the years, in your experience, have you found HR practices changing? In what ways? More formalised, more bureaucratic? Or less?

Have you found this to be more time consuming or the contrary? How does it alter your job? Does having more formalised processes create more work, or does it mean having set procedures frees up time? (note for the researcher: think of coded practices and behaviour set in more contemporary professions)

Subject area –**D. Role of the CIPD**

Usefulness -utility/value

10) How relevant are the services offered by the CIPD in helping you undertake your job? What are the main advantages of the CIPD membership for you as a practitioner? How often do you use the CIPD? Follow events, ask advice? Are the guidelines from the CIPD, (such as codes of conduct, standards, syllabus) relevant/ useful for you in order to perform your role? If not, why is it not useful to you? (note 1, for the researcher: in the case that the interviewee does not know anything about the CIPD, find out why!)

11) To what extent would it be possible to undertake your role without being a member of the CIPD? To what extent does being a CIPD member give you increased credibility, or more status? To what extent do you think not holding the qualification is a problem in this line of work? (note for researcher: keep in mind that holding the qualification doesn't mean they are also members, might have opted out)

Effectiveness –future perspectives

12) To what extent are you familiar with the ways in which the CIPD is trying to promote the HR role? Are you aware of any values the CIPD is trying to promote? How far do you share these values and how vital are these to you and the role you perform? Do you find any differences between what the HR institute projects in terms of the job and the kind of work HR practitioners do? Comparison: what they meant to do, the status they are meant to hold and what is actually happening in your workplace

Further probes, if discussion allows it:

Any thoughts on the CIPD's changes to the entry qualification, as well as the overall restructuring to support HR as a 'profession' (in CIPD terms: 'to equip the profession for the future') Do you think changes are necessary? What would you like to see changing, concerning the CIPD? How would this benefit you?

13) Thinking of the challenges you face as an HR practitioner, how well do you think the CIPD helps and supports you with these challenges? Any others challenges or difficulties you anticipate for the future?

Identifying with the HR community –viewing their position as a separate entity-detachment from organisational position

14) To what extent do you view yourself as belonging to a wider community of HR practitioners which extends beyond your organisation?

Do you network with other HR practitioners?

If you were to move to another role would you keep your membership? (note for the researcher: think connection with their role, in relation to identity questions further on, and independent nature of other professional identity- detached from organisational environment)

Subject area –E. Professional identity

15) What are the main values that inspire your work as an HR practitioner on a day-to-day basis? Do you face any ethical dilemmas? Any value-based conflict? Of what sort? How do you deal with them?

16) To what extent do you identify yourself with your job, your occupation, or your employing organisation? Would you ever consider going self-employed in the HR field, as in becoming an external consultant ?

If I ask you what do you do for a living, what is your answer? Do you see yourself primarily as a manager, or as an HR expert, HR practitioner, HR professional?

Further probes, if discussion allows it:

Do you think being a manager is a profession, in its own right? How do you deal with the managerial aspects of your job? Manager, professional, practitioner, are these related, connected, not intersecting at all?

17) A lot of people think that HR practice can be equated to a professional practice. What do you think being a professional means today? *Being called a professional, for some, implies a sense of altruism, what do you think? How do you relate to that? Do you feel that through your position you serve a cause; do you feel you serve this cause more towards the staff of the organisation or more towards the business? (note for researcher: what about the practice)*

On CPD: *It is commonly believed that continuous professional development is necessary in order to maintain a professional level in HR, how far do you agree or disagree with this? How valuable do you think continuous professional development is?*

18) On a scale from 1-10, how do you rate yourself as an HR expert?

When did you feel more like the expert? *Is it something that you felt early on, for instance, during your studies or beginning of your career, or did the sense of being the expert mature later on, with experience? Sense of responsibility? If you were to give up to 5 adjectives to describe, to characterise the HR person, what would those be?*

(note for researcher: think again of socialization period and identity formation stages, as well as critically thinking expert see: lit rev, note: adjectives can be relating to any aspect of the role, can be as vague or as specific, allow time for reflection -)

Closing question:

19) Are there any differences in the way you view your role in HR between the start of your career and now?

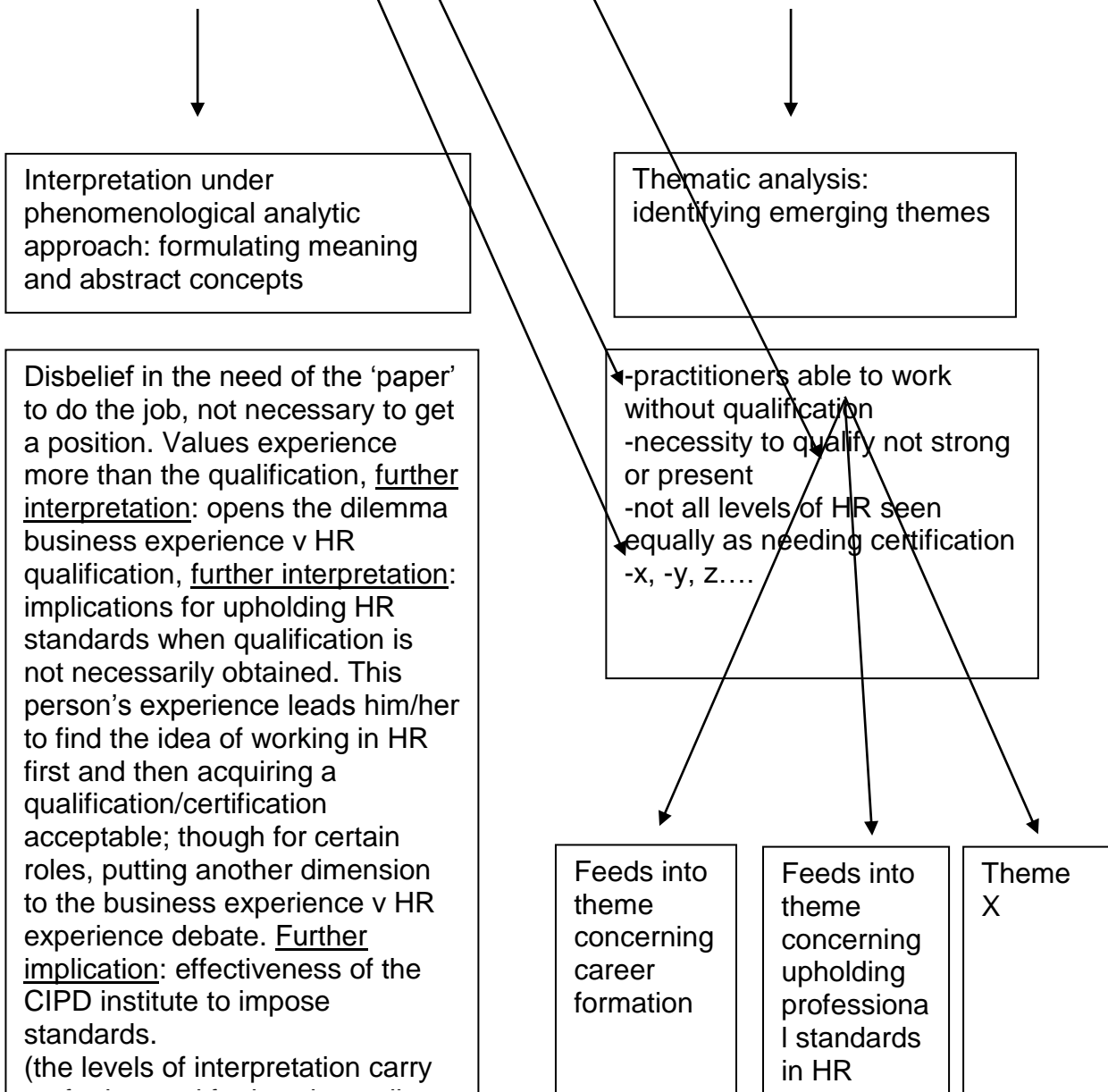
APPENDIX C

Illustration of how phenomenology and thematic analysis were combined for the purpose of the research

Figure 4.3: an illustration of how phenomenology and thematic analysis were combined for the purpose of the research

Quotation from an interview transcript:

'Well I see a lot of people moving around in roles, in HR roles not, they have...they're not necessarily CIPD qualified, although ultimately they might become. But that's not to say it is necessary to be qualified. If you're looking for a role in HR then I think yes... and again it would depend on the level at which you are recruiting somebody. If I were responsible for hiring somebody...I would expect them to have some experience not necessarily..., I think what is important is to have a business understanding ...some experience, I would like the experience.'



APPENDIX D *Ethics Approval Form*

From: Sharman Rogers
To: Anna Syrigou
CC: Sarah Gilmore
Date: 05/02/2010 14:04
Subject: Ethic Review ref E133:Anna Syrigou

Dear Anna

I am pleased to be able to confirm that your Ethics application ref E133 has now been approved.

Best Wishes

**Sharman Rogers
Faculty Office**

Ethical Review Checklist –Staff and Doctoral Students

This checklist should be completed by the researcher (PhD students to have DoS check) and sent to Sharman Rogers who will coordinate Ethics Committee scrutiny.

No primary data collection can be undertaken before the supervisor and/or Ethics Committee has given approval.

If, following review of this checklist, amendments to the proposals are agreed to be necessary, the researcher must provide Sharman with an amended version for scrutiny.

1. What are the objectives of the research project?

To investigate the HR practitioners' professional identity; to understand how they make sense of their own role in the organisation; and to highlight any issues associated with aiming to fulfill the potentially complementing or contradicting business goals.

2. Does the research involve *NHS patients, resources or staff*? YES / NO (please circle).

If YES, it is likely that full ethical review must be obtained from the NHS process before the research can start.

3. Do you intend to collect *primary data* from human subjects or data that are identifiable with individuals? (This includes, for example, questionnaires and interviews.) YES / NO (please circle)

If you do not intend to collect such primary data then please go to question 14.

If you do intend to collect such primary data then please respond to ALL the questions 4 through 13. If you feel a question does not apply then please respond with n/a (for not applicable).

4. What is the *purpose* of the primary data in the dissertation / research project?

Apart from understanding the existing literature on the role of HR practitioners in organisations, the research will attempt to fill the gap between the existing writings and how is HR actually practiced. More specifically, the research wishes to understand the way HR practitioners fulfill the professional status of their role and explore their professional identity drawing on their own personal perspectives. The research aims to shed light to any difficulties or tensions faced by HR practitioners associated with the twin demands of realising organisational goals and maintaining professional standards. The purpose of the research will be realised through primary data collection based on the perceptions and experience of people within the HR field.

5. What is/are the *survey population(s)*?

The survey population is based on individuals working as human resource practitioners in defined HR departments, where the practitioners would have gained experience and have dealt with HR issues and problems.

6. How big is the *sample* for each of the survey populations and how was this sample arrived at?

Given the nature of the information sought, and the lengthy process of in-depth interviewing, it is anticipated that up to a maximum of 30 interviews will be conducted in order to collect sufficient information to form an analysis on the issues discussed. The aim is to conduct the research among 3 local authority organisations which splits the number of participants to 8-10 for each organisation, or less once theoretical saturation is achieved.

7. How will respondents be *selected and recruited*?

There will be an aid from the supervisory team in terms of making the initial contacts with organisations in order to get access to organisations. Further than this, a networking system, and if needed a snowball technique -which is a key non-probability tool- will be applied to make contact with potential respondents. As mentioned above the group of participants will be selected among people working in HR departments as HR practitioners, the aim is for middle and senior management level, but remaining open to welcome potential respondents from all levels within the human resource department.

8. What steps are proposed to ensure that the requirements of *informed consent* will be met for those taking part in the research? If an Information Sheet for participants is to be used, please attach it to this form. If not, please explain how you will be able to demonstrate that informed consent has been gained from participants.

Apart from an information sheet and a consent form being used, (see attachment) an explanation will be given, both verbally and via e-mail, stating the purpose of the research and the reasons for the participants' contribution; as well as clarifying the way the information will be used and the strict anonymity that is to be kept throughout the research process, unless of course the participants' wish otherwise.

9. How will *data* be *collected* from each of the sample groups?

The method of data collection to be employed is that of in-depth interviews, scheduled for approximately between 45 to 60 minutes each. The interviews will be semi-structured and are intended to be in the form of a discussion allowing the participants the time and freedom to express themselves in the best way they feel appropriate. The aim is to record the interviews and the data will be transcribed by the researcher at a later stage and whenever convenient to suit the progress of the research.

10. How will *data* be *stored* and what will happen to the data at the end of the research?

The data will be stored in a locked location, only to be handled by the researcher. Any information passed on to the supervisory team, while the research is still in process, will be on an anonymous basis. The information will be kept up to the completion of the research project, in case any clarification or additional information is needed be acquired from the data. Once the research process is completed the information will then be deleted/destroyed, -whichever is appropriate, depending on the form it is in.

11. How will *confidentiality* be assured for respondents?

Any information used during the process of the research will be viewed without disclosing any details, neither of the participants nor of the organisations participating. Though there may be certain delicate issues discussed concerning HR matters, however, these are on the understanding that these are the HR practitioners' perspectives and not those of the organisations they are employed by. If any company data is used during the interviews for the sake of illustrating an example for instance, none of the company data will be included in the research findings using personal or organisational details.

12. What steps are proposed to safeguard the *anonymity* of the respondents?

As explained in the information sheet, the identity of the participants is not of any interest to the research. Therefore all the information used, such as quotes, will be used anonymously because it is the participants' comments that are of interest to the research, not who the participants are.

13. Are there any *risks* (physical or other, including reputational) *to respondents* that may result from taking part in this research? YES / NO (please circle).

If YES, please specify and state what measures are proposed to deal with these risks.

14. Are there any *risks* (physical or other, including reputational) *to the researcher or to the University* that may result from conducting this research? YES / NO (please circle).

If YES, please specify and state what measures are proposed to manage these risks.¹

Though there are no risks, physical or other involved neither for the researcher nor the university, some of the issues discussed might be seen as somehow sensitive by the respondents but this is on a subjective basis due to the fact that the information sought is generated by personal perceptions.

15. Will any *data* be *obtained from a company or other organisation*. YES / NO (please circle) For example, information provided by an employer or its employees. If NO, then please go to question 18.

16. What steps are proposed to ensure that the requirements of *informed consent* will be met for that organisation? How will *confidentiality* be assured for the organisation?

As there is going to be a number of employees contacted from a number of organisations the consent form is of a generic nature, which can be applied to different organisations. The information sought and the research questions are prepared in a way that ensures that the research is abiding with the data protection rules.

17. Does the organisation have its own ethics procedure relating to the research you intend to carry out? YES / NO (please circle).

n/a

¹ Risk evaluation should take account of the broad liberty of expression provided by the principle of academic freedom. The university's conduct with respect to academic freedom is set out in section 9.2 of the Articles of Government and its commitment to academic freedom is in section 1.2 of the Strategic Plan 2004-2008.

(Though the research does not involve the NHS, an enquiry will be made at initial contact to find out if there are any specific requirements concerning ethics and make sure the organisations approached are comfortable with this type of research.)

If YES, the University will require written evidence from the organisation that they have approved the research.

18. Will the proposed research involve any of the following (please put a \surd next to 'yes' or 'no'; consult your supervisor if you are unsure):

- | | | | | |
|---|-----|-------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------|
| • Vulnerable groups (e.g. children) ? | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Particularly sensitive topics ? | YES | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • Access to respondents via 'gatekeepers' ? | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Use of deception ? | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Access to confidential personal data ? | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Psychological stress, anxiety etc ? | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Intrusive interventions ? | YES | <input type="checkbox"/> | NO | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

19. Are there any other ethical issues that may arise from the proposed research?

n/a

Details of applicant

The member of staff undertaking the research should sign and date the application, and submit it directly to the Ethics Committee. However, where the researcher is a supervised PhD candidate, the signature of the Director of Studies is also required prior to this form being submitted.

	Name	Signature
Researcher		
Director of Studies		
Date		

Approval by Ethics Committee

I/We grant Ethical Approval

FREC

Date

AMENDMENTS

If you need to make changes please ensure you have permission before the primary data collection. If there are major changes, fill in a new form if that will make it easier for everyone. If there are minor changes then fill in the amendments (next page) and get them signed before the primary data collection begins.

CHANGES TO ETHICS PERMISSION

VERSION: _____

Please describe the nature of the change and impact on ethics:

Please print the name of:

I/We grant Ethical Approval

Researcher _____ FREC _____
Signed: _____ (Signed) _____

_____ _____
Date _____ Date _____

(please cut and paste the next section, together with the heading at the top of this page, as many times as required)

VERSION: _____

Please describe the nature of the change and impact on ethics:

Information Sheet

1. Study title

Exploring how human resource practitioners fulfil the professional identity of their role.

2. Invitation paragraph

You are personally invited to participate in a research project concerning human resource management. The data presented on this sheet will provide you with information concerning the purpose of this research as well as details concerning the procedure of the interview. Reading this sheet will help you decide whether to participate in the research and help answer some of the questions you may have at this point. Any additional clarification concerning the study may be provided for you to make an informed decision. Please read below. Thank you.

3. What is the purpose of the study?

This research aims to explore the role and professional status of human resource practitioners. The research attempts to understand the way HR practitioners deal with any issues they may face and how they manage to fulfill their role in the organization while responding to multiple demands in the workplace. This project is part of the research study conducted for completion of a PhD degree with the University of Portsmouth Business School.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen as part of a group of people that have experience in working in organizations with formed HR departments. The companies are chosen on the basis that they have operational HR departments regardless of the size of the company.

5. Do I have to take part?

‘No, it is entirely up to you whether you participate in this research study. Your acceptance involves signing a consent form only for the purpose of demonstrating you understand the aims of this research and that you accept to be interviewed. You are free to withdraw your participation at any time during the interview process without any reason given.

6. What will happen to me if I take part?

The interview is in the form of a discussion and the issues to be discussed are mainly opinions, perceptions, problems concerning contemporary HR matters. The time required should not be more than an hour, unless you wish to continue further.

7. What do I have to do?

You will simply be asked to answer certain questions. Also, you can choose to discuss any topic relevant to the theme of this research, time allowing.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

None. There are no health risks involved and nothing to jeopardize your professional career. If for any reason you feel uncomfortable due to the subjects discussed please do not hesitate to state so.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Through the discussion an opportunity is given to the participants to talk about their work, to analyse and perhaps reflect on some of the issues, difficulties and advantages of working in the HRM field. It gives the chance to evaluate HR practices and consider the problems faced by HR practitioners. Through the discussion and the exchange of views participants may view different perspectives and come to possible solutions on various debates faced in the workplace. Participants may gain a different understanding of the professional aspect of their role.

10. What if there is a problem?

If you feel you have a complaint about the way you were treated during the interview/discussion or if we wish to know more about this research, this can be discussed with the University of Portsmouth member who is supervising the research.

Name:

E-mail:

11. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your anonymity is safeguarded. Any information you provide will remain confidential.

The procedures for handling, processing, storage and destruction of the data are compliant with the Data Protection Act 1998.

The information will be recorded and analyzed only for the purpose of fulfilling the aims of the research. The data will be tape recorded and transcribed at a later stage of this research. Throughout the research, the data will be locked/stored securely and coded according to the answers and the comments given. The identity of the respondents is **not** part of the interests of this research. Any information viewed by the supervisory team will be still on anonymous basis. The data will remain in the possession of the researcher and for the time period needed to complete the requirements of the PhD study.

12. What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research will be printed and submitted to the relevant committee for PhD assessment. The information provided will not be identifiable unless you decide otherwise.

13. Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is part of a scholarship funded for studying at the University of Portsmouth Business School. The University of Portsmouth Research Ethics Committee is reviewing this research.

14. Contact Details:

Should you have any concerns in relation to this research study please do not hesitate to contact the supervisory team:

Name:

E-mail:

Name:

E-mail:

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and considering the possibility of participating in my research.

Consent form

This is a consent form with certain points of clarification concerning your participation in the research. This is to ensure you are both comfortable with the process and aware of your rights throughout the discussion.

1. Do you accept to participate in the research project as an interviewee through one-to-one discussions?

Yes: _____ No: _____

2. Have you read the information sheet?

Yes: _____ No: _____

3. Are you comfortable with the overall area of investigation of this research?

Yes: _____ No: _____

4. Are you aware that you can withdraw from the research at any time during the process?

Yes: _____ No: _____

5. Are you aware that you can refuse to answer a question without any explanation needed?

Yes: _____ No: _____

6. Are you aware that all information provided will be regarded as confidential and your identity will remain anonymous throughout the project unless you decide otherwise?

Yes: _____ No: _____

7. Are you aware that comments of yours may be used as quotes for the purpose of supporting the research and that these comments will be used anonymously unless instructed otherwise by yourself?

Participant

Signature: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Researcher

Signature: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E *UPR16 form*

FORM UPR16

Research Ethics Review Checklist



Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Postgraduate Research Student Handbook for more information)

Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information		Student ID:	91271
PGRS Name:	PGRS		
Department:	PBS	First Supervisor:	Dr Pete Scott
Start Date: (or progression date for Prof Doc students)			
Study Mode and Route:	Part-time <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MPhil <input type="checkbox"/>	MD <input type="checkbox"/>
	Full-time <input type="checkbox"/>	PhD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Professional Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/>

Title of Thesis:	Exploring the HR Role and Professionalisation: HR Practitioners as Aspirant Professionals?
Thesis Word Count: (excluding ancillary data)	87,859

If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study

Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).

UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:

(If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: <http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/>)

a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>

Candidate Statement:

I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)

Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC): E133

If you have *not* submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:

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