

## Human Resource Management as a Corporate Profession

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to distinguish human resource management (HRM) as a new corporate profession following detailed definitions of related concepts on professionalization. The methodology adopted in this thesis is documentation analysis from literature review. It can be divided into three sections. First, it introduces the background and development of professions. Second, it provides an overview of the key terminology used throughout the thesis, including the key concepts of professions, professionals and professionalization. Third, it examines the notion of corporate professions, which is as an emerging trend in the field and to which HRM currently belongs. Finally, it concludes contents discussed in this research and its implications to research in HRM field.

**Keywords:** Human Resource Management, Corporate Profession

## **Human resource management as a corporate profession**

### **1. Introduction**

There has been a widespread and continual debate about whether or not human resource management (HRM) is making a bid for professional status and whether or not HRM is a full profession, compared with well-established professional careers (Davis & Simpson, 2016; Storey, 2014; Dent & Whitehead, 2013). The rationale for studying HR as a new emerging profession is linked to the basic study of establishing what a profession is in a specific area. In doing so, the author defines a profession according to different channels of literature and categories HRM as a new corporate profession based on its main characteristics. Although professions traditionally have a national focus and jurisdiction (Richardson, 2017; Cooper and Robson, 2006), the emergence of corporate global professions (Ramachandran et al., 2016; Paton et al., 2013) raises the prospect of 'imported' professionalization tendencies.

### **2. Definitions of Professions, Professionals, Professionalization**

#### **2.1 Professions**

Professions are occupations which tend to exercise a high degree of control over producers and their production. From this perspective, a profession is a group of people who work within a common and recognized practice which commands a theoretical knowledge base and an ethical code for which education and training are needed. Entry into the practice is controlled by the group itself, a phenomenon known more broadly as the property of 'self-regulation'. Freidson (1994, p126) defines the notion of 'self-regulation' as "an occupation that controls its work, organized by a special set of institutions sustained in part by a particular ideology of expertise and service."

Furthermore, Freidson (2001) called the power of a group in relation to its own work as “occupational control”, which differentiates the distinguishing feature of professions from the early Anglo-American focus on expertise and altruism.

Meanwhile, other scholars (Flexner, 2001; Forsyth and Danisiewicz, 1985; Freidson, 1984; Greenwood, 1976) have a tendency to define professions based on their defining characteristics, sometimes referred to as the trait approach or attribute model. For instance, Eraut (1994) points out that there are three key features of a profession: expert knowledge, service and autonomy. Plus, in some scholar’s view, a profession is typically viewed as having certain characteristics which include a service orientation, a code of ethics, a body of knowledge, an educational track and educational requirements, the backing of a professional association, credentialing by testing or licensure of competence, and continuous professional development and learning (Liljegren and Saks, 2016; Malhotra et al., 2006). Locke (2004) describes “classical professionalism” as consisting of three conditions – “professional knowledge, autonomy and altruism”. These definitions convey guidance in distinguishing whether an occupation is a profession or not.

From a more skeptical perspective, Wright (2008) examines the profession as an “outcome of a strategy aimed at gaining monopoly control over work and exercising power over others.” This view pertains to the power-conflict model. In contrast, Bailey (2011) argues that a profession is an entity that “serves the needs of the public” thereby embodying a more altruistic or at least ‘public interest’ outlook. Also, Evetts (2011) asserts that compared to non-professional occupations, professions involve distinct ways and means of organizing work and workers, compared to organizational centric entities.

## **2.2 Professionals**

In the description of professions, people who have a command of knowledge and exert

power in the profession are professionals. The concept of a professional is generally adopted to judge a practitioner's work behavior and to indicate a remarkable performance (Gold and Bratton, 2003). Specifically, Wilensky (1964) emphasizes two distinctions for professionals: one is the systematic knowledge or professional skills gained only through dedicated training; another is the professional practitioner's compliance with a set of professional standards. In addition, professional values emphasize a shared identity based on competencies produced by education, training and discipline and sometimes guaranteed by certification or licensing. Attention to discourses addresses questions of how professionals conduct themselves to establish the legitimacy of their activities (Ackroyd, 2016). With regard to professional relations, Evetts (2011) believes that professional relations are characterized as collegial, cooperative and mutually supportive and relationships of trust characterize practitioner-client and practitioner-employer interactions. Organizational researchers also pay attention to how professions become mobilized by broader political influences that shape their roles and work (Reed, 2016). This latter perspective reflects the observation that professionals' daily life is increasingly positioned by organizations which are examined as a mediating space between broader social forces and the reality of work (Dent et al., 2016).

### **2.3 Professionalization**

Abbott (1988) argues that professionalization is intended to promote professional practitioners' own occupational self-interests in terms of salary, status and power as well as the monopoly protection of an occupational jurisdiction. Fournier (1999) considers the appeal to 'professionalization' as a disciplinary mechanism in new occupational contexts. Thus, professionalization plays a role in attempts to rationalize, reorganize, contain and control the work and practitioners. In addition, Wittorski (2008) refers to professionalization from three directions: one is from the profession perspective - the

constitution of a group of people sharing the same activities; one is from training perspective - the development of competences of a professional by its education; one is from the efficiency perspective - the fact of ‘putting in movement’ individuals within work contexts.

In many countries, there are so called “professional projects” to promote the development of professionalization (Muzio et al., 2011; Evetts, 1998). According to Muzio and Kirkpatrick (2011), the notion of the ‘professional project’ aims to translate resources into an institutionalized set of social and financial rewards. On the one hand, such projects are usually focused on processes of educational and legal closure by which groups seek to control entry to and competition within labor markets. On the other hand, professionalization projects aim to ensure some degree of ‘institutional autonomy’ to regulate their own issues (Evetts, 2009). Ultimately, the objective of a professional project is to achieve degrees of regulation over a field of practice, both with regard to controlling the supply of expert labor and the production of producers (Ackroyd, 2016). However, success will mainly rely on the professionals in occupations, such as their knowledge base and wider legitimacy disclosure (Brint, 1994).

Regarding different modes of professionalization, there are the ‘Continental’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ varieties (Collins, 1990). In the former, the state power in professional development is dominated, whereas the latter emphasizes ‘the freedom of self-employed-practitioners to control work conditions’. Such differences have important implications for understanding the relationship between professions and organizations. In the Anglo-Saxon model, a profession is not totally controlled by the state or within any bureaucratic framework shaped by the state (Collins, 1990). By contrast, a ‘Continental’ mode is one in which professions have been forced to seek status and power through state organizations, focusing on the acquisition of credentials (linked to university education)

and achievement of high office.

### **3. Corporate Profession**

#### **3.1 Corporate professions as an emerging trend**

Recently, in the context of globalization and internationalization, many scholars have identified the presence of a new type of corporate professions (Brock, 2016; Higgins et al., 2016; Singh, 2016). Concerning the functions of management, it is not only being employed to control and discipline the work of practitioners in organizations but also is adopted by professionals and associations themselves as a strategy both in the career development of particular practitioners and in order to improve the status and respect of a professional occupation and its prominence (Noordegraaf, 2016; Kirkpatrick et al., 2015).

More market pressures often leads to more community-based practices such as multidisciplinary teams and cooperative working which are consistent with occupational forms of professionalization (Brock, 2016). All the pressures from different aspects in the market result in redefining professionalization (Evetts, 2016; Hall, 2014; Flood, 2010), which is no longer emphasizing the conflict between professions and organizations but instead emerging professions use the organization to gain power. In other words, it is not to claim exclusive jurisdiction of the activities that the traditional role of professionals played as a gatekeeper (Malek et al., 1992). In a meantime, there is a rise of certification requirement in order to promote credibility of professionals (Cohen, 2012; Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis, 2012). The two obvious conflicting trends can be explained by the emergence of the 'organizational' or 'managerial' professional which is a mixed class of professional through redefinition of professions. Emerging professions no longer emphasize arbitrary expertise relied on certified and privileged professional associations

but instead champion less visible codes of knowledge and practices, connect to organizational objectives and strategies (Egener et al., 2012). In this sense, more dynamic strategies and practices in organizations are leading to new forms of organizational or corporate professionalization (Hodgson and Muzio, 2015; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Muzio et al., 2011). These are characterized by distinctive strategies, approaches, connotations and comprehensions that depart in significant ways from the established professions (Ramachandran et al., 2016; Paton et al., 2013).

In the practice of professions, changes to the political economy have driven professional bodies to reshape themselves to corporate priorities for membership, financing and relevance (Evetts, 2003; Greenwood et al., 2002). In reality, many expert occupations continue to chase professionalization to promote their status and influence in organizations and the wider society (Saks, 2016; Paton et al., 2013). Typically, analysis professionals in knowledge economy refer to the proliferation of new 'expert occupations' (Muzio et al., 2013), where their adopted strategies and tactics deviate far from those of established professions such as law and medicine (Singh, 2016; Reed, 2016). In particular, with emphasis on monopoly, controlling and self-regulation in traditional professionalization, it is seen to be unattractive and unattainable for new expert labors in modern society (Abbott, 2014; Brint, 1994). Here, the term of 'corporate professionalization' has been developed to describe such professions as HRM, consultancy and marketing (Thomas and Thomas, 2013; Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011)

A further indication of the term 'corporate' professionalization emerges from the changing strategies of professional associations themselves (Kirkpatrick et al., 2015). Such changes have been especially marked in the UK, where some firms embraced the strategy of competency-based qualifications, changed its code of ethics while also

experimenting with new forms of ‘organizational professionalism’ (Egener et al., 2012; Suddaby et al., 2009). Such new knowledge-intensive occupations are expected to succeed through innovation, entrepreneurship and active engagement with the markets (Brock, 2016). Indeed, the success of these new occupations has derived from the crisis of professionalization as an occupational template and its shift to more entrepreneurial and managerial forms of organization (Brock, 2016; Dent et al., 2016; Dent and Whitehead, 2013). A key feature of such corporate professions is the increasing recognition of the importance of employing organizations as sites of professional formation and regulation. This has created a series of new policies and practices, such as corporate membership schemes and training courses, which are designed to engage with corporate interests (Suddaby and Viale, 2011). Such new professional strategies might serve to extend occupational control into new areas but may also lose some autonomy because they need to subject to the market and to the interests of its most powerful corporate members (Hodgson et al., 2015). These new corporate professions are organizational based professions, which gain power from hierarchical status (i.e. strategic assets) rather than societal status (i.e. social assets).

As a matter of fact, there is a shift of logics from emphasizing the role of professionals as gatekeepers of knowledge necessity to new stress on the added value of expertise. In this respect, corporate professionalization is achievable and attainable, however, everything has its price-including the empowering of corporate interests and the weakening of democratic and collegial principles associated with traditional professionalism. Even though the result may be good in terms of membership and its influence, it comes at the expense of effective professional discretion (Paton et al., 2013).

There are various discussions on the topics of how traditional professions have adapted to new managerial impact within organizations by theorists (Higgins et al., 2016;



Carrington et al., 2013), using the language and symbols of professional practice to explain the adaptation to the ruling dialogue in management (Krausert, 2016; Ramachandran et al., 2016). More recently, a different argument has emerged: that professionalization as an occupational strategy may, nonetheless, be possible even in the context of these new expert occupations, albeit at the price of significant concessions to managerialism (Noordegraaf, 2015). This has been characterized in the literature as a new distinct form of ‘corporate professionalism’ (Thomas and Thomas, 2013; Muzio et al., 2011) that may be contradicted with traditional professionalism in three key respects.

Specifically, corporate professions increasingly initiate organizational membership schemes so that organizations can be certified in exchange for employees’ commitment to be engaged in professional codes of conduct and to promote professional membership and status in their workforce (Paton et al., 2013; Muzio et al., 2011; Evetts, 2011), whereas traditional professions are more concerned with licensing and regulation individual practitioners (Suddaby et al., 2009). In some cases, for example, management consultancy, corporate members are authorized to issue professional qualifications, subject to scrutiny by the professional association (Muzio et al., 2011). It is an advantageous marketing practice, providing associations a direct route to a large number of potential employees and also becoming a recognition of organizational dominant site for professional activities. Second, while traditional professions examine the technical mastery of knowledge and skills, corporate profession have developed alternative establishment, emphasizing competences, transferable knowledge and experience (Young and Muller, 2014). Principally, such new regimes are increasingly conducted by corporations themselves and structured with multiple entrance and qualification levels. Third, the wide range of activities in corporate professions is more centered on international dimension (Dickmann et al., 2016; Evetts, 2009).

Thus, the focus of corporate professions is very much on transcending the boundaries to develop international standards, qualifications and codes of practice (Evetts, 2014). Overall, all of these changes indicate how corporate professionalization increasingly succumb to the interests of large employer organizations, recognizing that corporations now constitute the key sites and vehicles for professionalization (Suddaby and Muzio, 2015; Suddaby et al., 2009). As discussed above, for the corporate professions, unlike the traditional professions, the aim is to build a consensus around their professional status through marketing their activities to corporations that employ or use the services of their members, emphasizing the commercial benefits of supporting professional membership and accreditation in their area (Wilkinson et al., 2016).

In fact, the influences of the corporate involvement for practitioners in organizations are profound (Paton et al., 2013). The professional is not only controlled by corporate bureaucracy and an embedded career structure, but also by a professional association that itself is increasingly subject to the agenda of employers and clients (Ivanova, 2015; Greenwood et al., 2002). Practitioners in such corporate professions are thus increasingly reliant on their employers as the route and body through which professional progression becomes possible, to decide whether they need and how they can be professionalized, and indeed for the determination of what counts as professional knowledge and codes of ethics in their workplace (Flood, 2010). Hence, here, professionals may expect to suit themselves to their employers' interests both directly and indirectly, respectively, as part of their employment contract and via the 'corporate capture' of their professional associations (Paton et al., 2013; Greenwood et al., 2002).

In practice, professionals in corporate professions play the essential role in institutional work because professionals are the key human capitals and the "first asset" within the organizations (Suddaby and Viale, 2011). Taking the institutional climate into account,

as key drivers of the organizational changes, corporate professionals are capable of reshaping social structures of hierarchy and status by using their expertise and legitimacy to challenge obligatory order in the organizations (Child, 2013). In other words, professionals possess competencies such as maintaining or reshaping organizations and are qualified to advance institutional work (Adler et al., 2008). With the application of expert knowledge into new organizational fields, professionals create new identities and new strategic relationships with institutions, who in turn, facilitate their professionalization project (Wilkinson et al., 2016). In addition, professional projects are more closely connected to institutional projects compared with the state projects in the context of globalization. Similarly, professionals have cooperation with universities and corporations (Beaton, 2016). Thus, it is a better way to understand professionalization both considering the importance of professional service firms and the body of knowledge of the professions itself (Brewster et al., 2015; Suddaby and Viale, 2011).

Some believe it is undesirable and unachievable for professionalization with the emphasis on monopolistic market closure, restrictive practices and self-regulation, however, the emergence of new corporate occupations are expected to be professionalized through new features such as innovation, entrepreneurship and active engagement with the market (Hansen and Swart, 2015; Hodgson et al., 2015). In fact, new knowledge-based occupations show the significance of redefining professionalism (Evetts, 2012) and the necessity of managerial forms of organization (Storey, 2014). Specifically, the result of interviews conducted in professional associations show that professionalization processes are guided by new conceptions of professionalism and supported by some creative strategies and tactics (Muzio et al., 2011).

In practice, there is a rise of new forms of expert occupations, corporate professions that have few of the attributes of traditional professions because their organizational and

contractual position are far removed from traditional professions (Ackroyd, 2016). Indeed, emerging corporate forms of professionalization use large organizations to dominate the production and delivery of professional services, which are more dependent on and connected to the market (Vogt and Hoyle, 2016; Brock, 2016). In short, the new emerging professions provide new perspective to analyze professions and organizations in modern society. Connected to managerial professions is how a professionalization project appears and how it works in the process. In the following section, HRM will be described as an example of a corporate profession.

### **3.2 Human Resource Management as a corporate profession**

Human resource management refers to the policies, practices, and systems that influence employees' behavior, attitudes, and performance, which is crucial for providing value to organizations where HR practitioners are located (Noe et al., 2006). HRM can be broadly defined as one of a number of modern expert occupations and corporate professions that is engaged in a process of professionalization (Ulrich et al., 2013). In a successful strategy for organizations, valuable resources are not easily replaced and copied by competitors, because they are the result of a unique and competitive development path. HRM as a key player in the creation and development of a highly productive workforce, lies in the center of the debate on the competitiveness of businesses. Competitive advantage is set up within the business-environment interaction and the development of resources and responses superior to that of competitors (Zikic, 2015).

Today, HRM is gaining enough power to be a profession (Gold and Bratton, 2003), more accurately, it is a new emerging profession which can also be called a 'corporate profession' (Higgins et al., 2016; Hodgson et al., 2015). HRM can be viewed as a profession because there is a defined body of knowledge, testing and certification are

available, a code of ethics exists, it is a full-time occupation, and it has the support of a national association. The reasons why it is a profession are even stronger today with a well-established certification (Cohen, 2012; Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis, 2012) and defined educational guidelines embraced by growing numbers of professionals, students and academicians.

According to the relevant literature, emerging professions do not necessarily have a conflict with organization but instead use the organization as an important site to gain power (Muzio et al. 2013; Suddaby and Viale 2011). In fact, such expert occupations, for example - HRM, consultancy and marketing- are expected to abandon traditional forms of professionalization and to develop alternative occupational strategies and regulations, exhibiting more entrepreneurial and market-led types of behavior (Reed, 2016). On the contrary, some processes of professionalization are clearly elaborating certain occupations on a new model of corporate professionalization that utilizes a set of distinctive tactics especially designed to fit for the characteristics of its knowledge base, work profile and organizational structure (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Wright, 2008). HRM increasingly subscribes to such a model, prioritizing the ability to provide efficient and effective expert services which can add economic value and increasingly aspiring to do so globally rather than nationally (Singh, 2016), reflecting the transnational footprint of corporations as clients and employers (Evetts, 2003).

As firms represent the key vehicle for professionalization (Suddaby and Muzio, 2015; Wagner et al., 2014), any long-term development in HRM, including the process of professionalization, must be primarily articulated in term of the organizations that, as employers and clients, dominate this field of activity and behavior (Muzio et al., 2013; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011). Emerging professions, for example, HRM, consultancy, and marketing, do not use the state to organize themselves but instead they may use global

capital- international consulting firms or professional service firms-to gain competitive power for professional status (Evetts, 2011; Muzio et al. 2011). However, it needs some certain stages for HRM to become a full profession (Balthazard, 2014; Balthazard, 2015), which reflects moving track of its concepts experienced a shift from personnel management to HRM as well as its functional switch from administration to strategic outlook (Hansen and Swart, 2015).

A growing swathe of literature claims that organizations increasingly rely on intangible assets such as HR because of their competitive advantage (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2013; Marler, 2012). Here, one key shift for HR roles is from functional to strategic asset in organizations as the most important assets in organizations are their people. From a strategic approach, it requires both managers and HR professionals reconsider the meaning of HR and a new perspective of how HR creates added value in organizations (Noe et al., 2006). Strategic HR management views workers as the most valuable resource for an organization and the concept of 'human capital' allows HR to present the value of people management in strategic terms-as a source of competitive advantage (Reilly and Williams, 2016). In particular, HR's strategic architecture means that HR professionals with strategic competencies assist the organization to become high-performance and strategically aligned firms, which finally result in strategically focused employee behavior (Saha and Rowley, 2014). With a changing and more demanding organizational environment, an HR function trying to improve its game so that it can make a genuinely strategic contribution. There is a general emphasis on maximizing the contribution of people resources to the success of the organization and on strategic integration of people management initiatives to deliver organizational benefits (Reilly and Williams, 2016).

The development of an organization and the development of its employees' capabilities are mutually dependent (Berman, 2015). There is a positive relationship between a high

performance HR system aligned with the strategy of the organization and firms' financial performance (Becker et al., 2015), which reflects HR professionals in firms play a key role in assisting to improve the performance of the organizations. Therefore, companies continuously encourage their employees to develop work knowledge and skills in order to increase a company's core competitive advantage. In this respect, a favorable environment for value creation and necessary resources should be provided; authority and power should be delegated appropriately to employees; scientific and effective motivation systems could be designed to motivate employees through material and social awards based on the fair assessment of their capabilities, behavior, and performance, as strategic HRM can bring adding-value into organizations while actualizing self-value (Jackson et al., 2014). In turn, when corporations maintain a dynamic relationship with the external environment, HRM practices and policies are able to create a competitive advantage more smoothly. Collectively, effective HRM practices enhance the performance at both individual and organizational level, which have increasingly been promoted as the strategic role of work in a complex and turbulent environment requiring innovation and creativity. No matter whether performed in the public sector or the private sector, there is a promising environment for HR practitioners and arguably for the professional associations that have emerged to represent interests in this field (Farndale and Brewster, 2005). It can be argued that the strategic importance of HR practices and their contributions to the organizational performance are receiving increasing recognition worldwide (Hansen and Swart, 2015; Jackson et al., 2014).

In respect to human resources professional theme, it joins up with the neo-Weberian study of a number of other professions in organizational settings, as well as the wider international context. This is highlighted by Swart and Kinnie (2010) who identify the interrelationship between the nature of knowledge assets (inputs), HR practices and types

of organizational learning (outputs) in Professional Service Firms, which draws attention to the important role played by HR practices in supporting organizational learning, in particular, through the development of specific types of knowledge assets which act as inputs into the learning process. Studies of such areas have frequently been linked to the neo-institutionalist approach, as exemplified by research by Adamson, Manson, and Zakaria (2015) on the new professional group of executive remuneration consultants in the United Kingdom. This work helpfully enhanced academic understanding of their professionalizing project by placing it within a macro institutional framework (Kaiser et al., 2014). From a neo-institutionalist perspective, Harrington (2015) has considered the position of wealth management professionals across Europe and elsewhere. It demonstrates how local practices and ideas could develop into transnational institutions- thereby reasserting the theoretical importance of interactions between professionals, their clients, peers and organizational contexts on the specific field of international finance. This underlines the ongoing power of even newly evolving professions on a global stage. There is an important question that, as a potential profession, where does HRM stand in the process of professionalization? However, the bigger question about HRM profession is whether or not there are certain inherent characteristics of HRM that preclude its entry into what can ultimately be differentiated as a licensed profession (Russell and Russell, 2016). This is an important consideration because the labelling of HR as a semi-professional could depict either its evolution to some full professional status later or the structural constraints of an occupational status unlikely to ever gain licensure and social closure (Bassi et al., 2015; Ulrich et al., 2013).

From literature, at least in some degree, HRM as an emerging new managerial profession has adopted strategies, tactics and methods compared to established professions such as law, medicine and accountancy, however, it also experiences different paths towards



professionalization in the context of organizations. HRM is conceived as one of the examples of occupations developing towards organizational professions (Ackroyd, 2016), through its professional associations to achieve closure on its chosen occupational domain (Hodgson et al., 2015). Also, HRM has identified as example of ‘knowledge work’ or ‘expert occupations’ (Reed, 2016; Muzio et al., 2011), in part, because its control strategy is a market-based one and it is increasingly becoming international, global and business orientated (Dent et al., 2016).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In summary, this paper provides conceptions on professions and concludes by locating HR as a corporate profession. It details relevant definitions of professions and gives rise to contemporary notions of new corporate professions. Moreover, whereas traditional professions and organizations were once seen in contraposition to each other, organizations are now viewed as breeding grounds for new types of corporate professions that gain their power, and to a lesser extent, legitimacy from the contribution they can make to organizational and corporate success. This transformation in professional identity has implications for the traits based notions of professions because new corporate professions rely less on licensing and closure and more on certifications and strategic assets deployed within an organizational setting. In short, the paper brings together perspectives and analyses from sociological and organizational theories on the professions and professionalization. Particularly, they are relevant to understanding the contemporary globalized world of professional work and its organizations.

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