

*"I didn't have a traditional career trajectory...": the route to credibility in the HR profession*

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“I DIDN’T HAVE A TRADITIONAL CAREER TRAJECTORY ...”: THE ROUTE TO  
CREDIBILITY IN THE HR PROFESSION.

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## “I DIDN'T HAVE A TRADITIONAL CAREER TRAJECTORY ...”: THE ROUTE TO CREDIBILITY IN THE HR PROFESSION.

The HR profession is self-doubting, poorly regarded by others and stuck in reactive, operational and compliance modes - despite much rhetoric about the need to be strategic. There are instances, however, where it has broken out of this low level work, and successfully become business partners at the 'top table'. This paper explores the career trajectories of HR professionals that are at senior levels of their organisation, are influential, strategic and are at the top table. What characterised these non-traditional HR careers was extensive experience outside of HR, different titles such as “people and capability”, mentors, and close working relationship with CEOs. Successful professionals tended to have unitarist outlooks that helped resolve many tensions and ambiguities in the HR role.

### **Introduction**

For many years the Human Resource profession has been seen to be underrepresented in the senior echelons of organisations. In this paper we explore the routes to success for senior executive HR professionals to establish their credibility on the senior leadership team. This is a preliminary report from current research that explores the impact of contextual factors behind the patterns of success and failure that the HR professional experiences in reaching membership of the executive team.

HR professionals have had difficulty in achieving the promise of Human Resource Management (HRM) as promised by Beer, Spector et al (1984), escaping the more reactive, operational roles, redolent of the handmaiden and administrative experts of Storey (1992) and Ulrich's (1997) respective typologies). Credibility and capability gaps partly explain these circumscribed roles (Legge, 1995). Threats to power might be another reason. But how to overcome these barriers is less well known. This qualitative study, involving senior executive HR directors and their colleagues explores the career trajectories of successful HR professionals working at the top table and the organisational dynamics that have allowed HR people to sit there.

### **Literature review**

Beer et al (1984), with the Harvard framework, promoted the contribution that the effective management of people can make to competitive advantage of organisations. This provided the

rationale for strategic HRM and the case for it to move beyond the personnel admin function. In the intervening 30 years key authors have explored the difficulties that the profession has in reaching these goals (Legge, 1978 and 1995; Guest and King, 2004; Caldwell, 2004 and 2011). A common theme has been that establishing the transition from personnel to HR is easier in theory than in practice in a profession beset by self-doubt and repeatedly exploring its role (Ulrich et al, 2013). Note that this paper uses the term HR to refer to the organisational function rather than either the set of activities and practices, or a distinctive philosophical approach to managing people (Guest and King, 2004; Farnham, 2010).

Wright et al, (2001) observe HR has constantly been concerned about its reputation and effectiveness. They illustrate by using Drucker's observation in 1954 that *'the constant worry of all personnel administrators is their inability to prove that they are making a contribution to the enterprise'*. This is reinforced by Guest (1998) highlighting articles such as Skinner's 'Big hat, no cattle' article (Guest and King, 2004) and Hammonds 'Why we hate HR' (2005) that strengthen this perception of the HR function. In between these observations Legge (1978) had explained the same worry in terms of ambiguities and vicious circle.

Twenty five years on from Legge's (1978) original work, Guest and King (2004) found that her vicious circles were still relevant. Hammonds (2005) contends that HR are *'not the sharpest tack'* Legge explains this in the vicious circle that the perceived lack of status, leads to talented people leaving when they see limited career prospects or they avoid the function, which subsequently leads to a lack of new skills and consequently lack of status. Hammond's next charge of *'efficiency in lieu of value'* is explained by Legge as the uncertainty over the criteria for success. This, mirrored by Caldwell's lack of specificity in defining performance outcomes (2011), leads to poor prioritisation and lack of strategic focus, thus becoming involved in reactive tasks. Line managers then trap them in another vicious circle by giving them more reactive work (Guest and King, 2004). Legge's (1995) description of HR's ambiguous position as part of management but having responsibility for employees reflects the next charge of *'not working for you'*. This is also highlighted by Sheehan et al

(2014) and Caldwell (2011) in the role tensions inherent in being adviser to line management but also having to constrain line managers in order to protect 'corporate assets' (Hammonds, 2005). His final charge of '*the corner office doesn't get HR*' is also relevant to this study. This is explained by Legge's vicious circle of not involving HR in decision making, which leads to problems that result in firefighting and stop gap measures, which in turn reinforces the reactive nature of the job and gives a bad impression to line managers of HR's strategic ability. They then do not involve HR strategically.

The success or failure of HR practices is often not in direct control of HR when they are implemented by line management. Ineffective implementation or lack of ownership by line managers if they have not been involved in the design of practices further complicates who to credit or blame (Wright et al, 2001). The uncertain contribution of the HR function to organisational performance forms one long-standing problem. Although the relationship between HR activities and performance is well researched, the contribution of the HR function is not (Guest, et al, 2003; Purcell et al, 2009; Heggarty and Wright, 2010; Becker and Huselid, 2010).

Some wishful thinking by HR managers also seems to occur. They consistently rate HR as more effective than line managers think they are (Wright et al, 2001; Payne, 2010; Caldwell, 2011). In fairness, and on the plus side, those in the boardroom are generally positive about HR's involvement in influencing and business planning (Caldwell, 2011). Collings and Wood (2009) found that HR representation at board level has risen in large UK companies and has remained stable in MNCs (Collings and Wood, 2009).

Wright et al (2001) and others (Guest and King, 2004; Payne, 2001) have taken Ulrich's suggestion of asking HR's customers to rate the effectiveness of their contribution. HR tends to be perceived as effective in their basic, operational roles but as Caldwell (2011) points out these sit uneasily with contributing to the business in a strategic role.

Legge's final related ambiguity is the uncomfortable role tension (Sheehan et al, 2014) that comes from being seen as part of management while having responsibility for employees. Beer et al's (1984) initial model of HRM concerned HR in developing individual and societal as well as

organisational wellbeing (Woodall and Winstanley, 2004) but the shift in roles in the Ulrich models away from the employee champion and advocate to focus on organisational delivery raises the question of the responsibilities of HR in protecting the interests of employees (Caldwell, 2008; Keegan, and Francis, 2010; Shipton and Davis, 2008; Marchington 2015). In sum, HR credibility is hindered because of ambiguity about HR success or failure. It could be because the HR function was not delivering, the staff / line relationship is poor, or because HR or line managers do not understand the other's role (Becker and Huselid, 2010). It could also be because what constitutes success is unclear (Legge, 1995).

The Ulrich model currently dominates professional debates about the role of HR (Keegan and Francis, 2010). It concentrates on delivering the organisation's objectives through people. The model has evolved to a more strategic focus for HR as organisations depend more on the softer aspects such as talent (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2009; Ulrich et al, 2010; Ulrich et al, 2013). In a sense, Ulrich's vision for HRM provides a possible resolution to Legge's vicious cycles (Guest and King, 2004). Although Ulrich provides the US, unitarist, best practice perspective, his HR roles including strategic positioner, credible activist, innovator and integrator perhaps reflect the positive framing of her ideas. However neither the Legge depressive story, nor the Ulrich aspirational story really describe how HR professionals can become strategic and influential.

These aspirations are reflected in Boselie and Paauwe's (2005) findings that personal credibility and delivering effective HR increases reputation but that whereas their line colleagues want more strategic contribution from HR, HR considers business knowledge is more critical to contributing to the financial position of the organisation. There is a paucity of research to explain how HR build their credibility, business knowledge and develop the skills to contribute strategically. Despite a number of qualitative studies there are few that explore the HR practitioner and their career, and when they do it is from a specific perspective such as the different gendered experiences such as barriers to success as men or women (Cornelius & Skinner, 2008) or career patterns (Costa & Gianecchini, 2007).

Caldwell builds on Guest and Bryson (Caldwell, 2011) in expressing concern that with increasingly qualified HR professionals there is no evidence that there is the more innovative or progressive approach that Legge (1978) suggested was required to break out of the traditional personnel roles into innovators. This perhaps reflects the suggestion that the skills of the HR function provide the 'hygiene' factors whereas the need for change agent skills (Boselie and Pauwwe, 2005; Ulrich et al, 2013) and innovation is more appropriate to organisation development (OD) skills. This may be seen as in conflict with the more conservative skills of HR (Schein, 2010). It is with the final question of how successful HR professionals acquire the credibility with their colleagues and become successful in a more strategic role that we designed our study.

### **The Study**

This study builds on previous work in the UK exploring the role of HR, which found that in many organisations there were very capable senior HR executives playing strategic roles but that the profession naturally defaulted to an operational reactive way of operating (ref). This study sought a different context to explore the related question of what characterises the career trajectories of senior HR people who are strategic, influential and credible, and who do not default to operational and reactive work. The current research took place in a similar Anglo-American business culture – but one that had not been as seriously affected by the GFC – the context of the previous research.

This paper reports on preliminary findings on the aspect of understanding the HR directors' acquisition of capability and credibility. Of the 35 interviews undertaken in this study 20 were with senior HR executives and 15 of their senior line colleagues from 24 organisations in the financial, distribution, NGO, public and government sectors. Fourteen HR professionals were members of the executive committee and reported to the CEO while four reported to members of the committee. All line managers were members of the senior management team (SMT) including three members who were the CEO. One third of the sample were men who were split evenly between HR and line management roles, 14 of the women were from HR and 8 were senior line managers. The sample were drawn mostly from senior HR executives known to the HR Institute of New Zealand (HRINZ), or through LinkedIn groups, they subsequently nominated their colleagues to provide a line manager



perspective. An interpretive, constructivist approach (Schwandt, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) enabled the researchers to explore the experience of both the HR professional and their line counterparts with a view to understanding rather than quantifying. The semi-structured interviews were face to face in the interviewee's workplace, a naturalistic setting (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and one by telephone. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours.

The interviews were structured around the three core sections of questions: firstly organisation context and how it related to people (external issues with a major impact on the organisation recently? key priorities for the organisation and the impact on people and management? relative importance of people? changes over time and lessons from the past?); secondly the HR function (its role in strategic decision making, HR structure and positioning, its effectiveness, the barriers and what else it should be doing and support needed?); and finally, the subject of this paper, the HR executive's career journey up to the present position (what brought you here, key events, influences and valuable experiences?). They were loosely structured to allow for the digressions common in interviews (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). The interviews were transcribed and loaded into Atlas-ti software before their initial analysis using inductive coding to build main themes (Lewins and Silver, 2007). The next section draws on these to explore the different stages of career trajectories as they emerged.

## **Findings**

### *Diverse early starts from outside HR*

Few of the interviewees set out on a clear path to an HR career. Mostly graduates, but whilst some had gained relevant degrees for business such as a bachelors in commerce, economics or psychology, other interviewees had degrees ranged from theology to agriculture and food science. The range of initial qualifications also mirrored their early careers where taking a first step into HR was the exception. Some of these gave early indications of where the speaker would eventually land:

'I started my working life as an OT [occupational therapist] - what my purpose is about and who I am is that I relish helping individuals, teams and organisations find out about their potential and being an OT was helping people to discover that they could more for themselves that they realised'

(14) and 'joined a trade union, the hard edge of HR and its problem solving aspect always interested me' (female tier2)

But others 'ended up working in a bakery as a sales and marketing and hated it, then a parcel company and hated it'; 'So I worked in hospitality initially and worked my way up from operational hospitality'; 'Predominantly my time has been servicing customers and running call and contact centres' (female tier 2); 'I was a catholic priest but very briefly and then I worked in retail banking' (male tier 2); 'I started life as a chartered accountant'; 'the first half I ran the squeezezy salad cream and ketchup line on the B shift, double day shift' (female tier 3).

*Strong and challenging formative learning experiences outside of HR*

Their main formative learning had been through the experiences that they had been exposed to:

'My first career was not working in an HR function - I led teams in an operational function so you need to do time in an operational or manufacturing, you need to have been in the front line - that's where you learn the most' (female tier 2)

'I learned most in fast, hard-nosed environments. The factory was male dominated there were no women managers, the unions and the management were quite keen to see me fail' (female tier 3)

'I also have to really come to grips with major understanding of the ICT strategy and the organization's finances ...Actually it's been a really huge learning curve – I would say that the first year I was in serious learning mode and stepping up to the mantle' (female tier 2)

*Early career success outside of HR, supported by good coaches and mentors*

For several that learning started very early in their career with considerable responsibility: 'there was I, 25, the clinical leader of the team, been asked to manage this and I had no management experience whatsoever. And she said to me, "Don't worry. It's not that hard. You've got all the skills around people. I will make sure you're looked after."' (female tier 2).

Much early experience came with consultancy and contracting roles, from working for one of the 'big four' to small niche consultancies and own businesses. 'I went into consulting – a partner

in a consulting business – and again exposed to heaps ‘(female tier 2); ‘I’ve spent some time contracting...I like the variety, I like the ability to step into an organization with fresh eyes’ (female tier 2); I was approached by a recruitment consultant to go and work in their change management practice which they were growing’ (male tier 3).

One of the important development experiences that many HR directors mentioned was working with someone that had influenced them often a boss, the CEO, colleague or as a coach or mentor:

‘She mentored me, basically. She supported me in having to make tough decisions. She supported me in the transition from colleague to manager. She actively supported that. She took me aside and taught me the next day when I walk into the room and I’m now the manager, this is what I could expect and she absolutely spot on’ (female tier 2).

‘I’ve had a number of opportunities to have mentors and coaches ... really valuable’ (female tier 2)

‘really good leaders which you learn different things from at different times ... one who is just sheer vision and passion and ability to think strategically, one was really tough, I’d say a bully, but ... actually I learned so much from her that’s been invaluable and I think rounding me out has been much more practical’ (female tier 2)

#### *Formal HR study but often late in life*

Although most HR directors at some point in their careers had gone back and studied either for a formal HR qualification or other business related degrees, they reported that most of their learning had come from experience.

‘I did courses in IR and remuneration and got myself the basic tickets’; ‘I did a couple of HR like Organizational behaviour and HR papers and then I did my HR Diploma’; ‘post-grad finance course’; ‘I did my MBA’; ‘INSEAD, the exposure, development and investment, it was amazing’; ‘I had the privilege of going and doing the exec education programme at Dartmouth’

#### *Late career experience outside HR including acting CEO*

During the period of the fieldwork at least three of the HR directors were the acting CEO. All the senior HR executives had been exposed to other areas outside the HR function. Many had come from other disciplines and had had considerable operational experience. Several of those at tier 2 had taken on additional roles as well including the CIO, communication, processes and business planning, which was reflected in their job titles. When asked about future roles, some were too new in their role to have yet thought about it but two had definite roles in view - the COO and the CEO.

*Good personal and social capital*

Many showed enjoyment and enthusiasm for their work, rather than raw ambition. They also had good relationships with their CEOs and others. Many of the appointments developed from previous relationships with the organisation or CEO, which demonstrated amassed career or social capital (Caldwell, 2010) through their networking and connections.

In discussing how the executives arrived in their current roles it was always talked about in the passive voice with no mention of career ambitions to be a part of the senior team. Many of them had arrived in these roles following consultancy work or through having known the CEO in a previous role and part of the discussion also reinforced why they enjoy their job.

‘that’s what I really love about my role and that’s what sold it to me if I’m honest. You know, kind of working across that sector finding out what people stuff we can solve together.’ (female tier 3).

‘I came here 2.5 years ago at a third tier level to be GMHR and within a couple of months the new CE of the time, restructured and put my role [CPO] and the CFO and CTO at 2<sup>nd</sup> tier ... she said, we were going through this big transformation, I need my people person, my money person and my technology person at my side’ (female tier 2)

These comments also highlight the positive relationship with the CEO: ‘we have fantastic relationships - and that's respect, belief and trust in us’, ‘you have a lovely relationship to explore and develop your CEO with so that’s a role that HR can genuinely play, also coaching supporting the

executives in the same way', 'there's no question that CE gets it and she saw myself and my colleagues as being at her side through this journey'.

*Psychological distance from HR profession*

Several of the HR professionals agreed with the sentiments of the literature that is critical of the HR profession. They were concerned about the propensity of the function to become absorbed in the minutiae of processes and practices.

'I have been in HR for 20 years and I'm always disappointed with it as a profession, I don't know what stops us and I really struggle with that because the people I work with I have a huge respect for. They are bright people, well qualified, very capable, very smart people, they are business astute and often will say we don't understand the business - I don't see that, , not with the GMs I have grown up with, they have bright, bright people and good business people so what stops them from having that influence? (Male tier 2)

One director recalled that a major turning point for him was when he had been seconded to another division to run the strategy and planning function and observed the HR director presenting a board paper 'I got to observe HR presenting back to the business and was horrified, people that even to this day that I have a huge respect for, but I just watched them not follow the business process, not doing a business case, not budgeting, not talking to the exec members and getting their buy in before putting in the pitch, just basics ...' (Male tier 2)

*Structural distance from traditional HR though new job titles*

The HR function was seen as being about the old personnel type of role and their role was more about organisation development and change management and for many this was symbolised by the job title not containing HR, 'one step away from star wars character. Chief People Officer'; 'Deputy Director, Work Program and Strategy'; new groovy title – 'I'm general manager people and performance.' Also People and Capability, People and Processes.

‘ [CEO] decided to move his GMHR on because he knew my background he said well you’re here anyway, you’ve mapped all the processes .... made me an offer I couldn’t refuse (female tier 2)

‘I made the decision to move out of HR specific roles. It was all about branding and all about seeing that actually I could apply the same skill sets and the same tools and the same knowledge but under a different position title and get a lot more graft.’ (female tier 2).

‘I was bought in here because of my experience in change, culture change, engagement and that end of the HR spectrum as opposed to payroll and negotiations. So that’s allowed my conversation with executive to be far more strategic and conceptual – my background has come through more an OD path than a traditional HR path’ (male tier 3).

This also suggests that they do not take their identity from ‘admin expert’ role of HR but the originally intended strategic role, distancing themselves i.e. using ‘they’. ‘HR people get in the way themselves, noisy and difficult and require a lot of cajoling, they are their own worst enemies’ (male tier 2). The different job titles also signal the symbolic distancing from the HR job title ‘an embarrassment to say you’re in HR because the broad perception... is this process junkie’(female tier 2) as well as their own labelling of themselves as ‘coming from an OD depth of experience’; ‘My success is I’m a delivery girl’; ‘I am the brand of [organisation]’; ‘so you’re not this marginalized outsider and you don’t get labelled that HR chick’ (all female tier 2s). The impact of position on identity is also apparent ‘you are a director of this company and you are there to represent the HR function ... I thought he’s right, I am director first and then HR’ (male tier 2). *A focus on strategic HR organisational development, and delegation of traditional HR functions*

HR executives were involved in the longer term decision-making but also focussing on change programmes, leadership, diversity, and OD leaving the traditional HR admin function to the ‘process junkies’. In particular many of them made a clear distinction between the HR delivery that they had delegated to their team and OD type work that they retained, seeing it as having a longer term impact. ‘OD is about how you formulate strategy and galvanize a lot of disparate people with different roles and functions to work toward a common goal. To me is quite different from HR’, ‘my OD team has longer term work – whereas the HR team might roll through work on a daily or weekly basis’.

## **Discussion**

Several main trends emerge that have serious implications for HR educators and practitioners. Those heading up the HR function at a senior level in organisations are likely to have come from somewhere other than HR. They are likely to have had formative experiences outside of HR, and to have had limited, but some, formal HR training. They did, however, have early career success, good mentors, and social capital, such as in the form of relationships with CEOs. They are enthusiastic about their work. They have psychologically and formally distanced themselves from traditional HR functions. Many have also successfully broken free from Legge’s (1995) vicious cycles and ambiguities.

An over-riding theme that came through was a strong unitarist view. Few expressed concern about the tensions between being both an employee champion and an organisational change agent. A wider business view solves the ambiguity of who they represent and reduces the role tensions by not being required to act in interest of employees. In several cases a unitarist view that organisational and individual interests converge is apparent (Sheehan, 2014). This was represented in discussions about soft HR issues such as engagement and leadership development. This could of course mean that pluralist perspectives lack voice (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Marchington, 2015).

The women returning to studying at a later stage in their careers reinforced Chevenet and Tremblay’s findings that womens’ investment in their education and experience were strong predictors of managerial progression and Tharenot, Latimer and Conroy’s that this was greater than men’s (in Costa and Giannecchini, 2007).

Like Caldwell (2010) the HR executives were taking a change agent role with a considerable amount of their energies engaged in a more OD perspective. Their teams deal with the 'hygiene' factors by running the HR delivery effectively which reflects Boselie and Pauwe's (2004) perspective that the executives would only gain credit for strategic and change oriented roles provided the delivery was in place. Schein (2010) contends that HR and OD are different roles seeing the skills and attitudes required as different and in conflict until such time that they both evolve and align, this study suggests that in some of these organisations the successful HR executive has been able to combine these in their executive role.

In this study the participants were able to contribute at the strategic level demonstrating that, as Caldwell's (2011) points out, they have achieved the long sought after strategic influence, and also support his findings of a positive evaluation of the extent that the CEO takes HR seriously.

### **Conclusions**

The preliminary picture that emerges from the research is a relatively healthy one of capable, confident HR executives taking their place, fully contributing to running their organisations alongside their line colleagues. This study also provides a potential contribution to the paucity of literature on the successful careers of HR professionals working at an executive level. In order to reach this position they have been able to break Legge's cycle of lack of skills and status through unconventional career paths with a measure of business focussed experience. This has also enabled them to be more creative with their ideas, freeing themselves from the traditional administrative role in line with Legge's deviant innovator role (Caldwell, 2011). Their common experiences of consultant experience, involvement in change management and taking a more OD role, whilst making sure that their team runs the operational function of HR effectively, demonstrates the value of this study. The findings have major implications for the development of subsequent generations of HR leaders from the perspective of education providers and professional bodies, individuals as they set out on their careers, as well as organisations in recruiting, selecting and developing their potential contribution through planned organisational experiences and appropriate guidance.



Limitations: this is a study in one country but these trends are also visible in the practitioner literature in others. It is dominated by the public and not for profit sectors although counterbalanced with major private organisations from which similar themes emerge. This is a report of preliminary findings.

Further development of this aspect of the study will include in depth analysis to bring out wider insights into the working relationships of line managers and the HR function and how they have used the learning from their careers. It will also involve further comparative interviews in another country.

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