Making change happen: How HRM professionals experience and deal with tensions in times of organizational change[1]

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Abstract: The ethnographic study shows tensions and conflicts that HRM professionals are exposed to during organizational change processes. They result from the fact that those responsible for HRM devote themselves to several projects at the same time, both short-term and long-term and of strategic nature. The study shows how HRM practitioners make change possible under these conditions and explains different 'resourcing' practices of HRM practitioners to deal with short-term-long-term tensions when resources are scarce. In conflict-laden situations, HRM practitioners use three resourcing practices to manage these tensions: situational reframing, organizational preframing and institutional deframing. The contribution builds a bridge between HRM practices, the HRM practitioners and HRM praxis and thus, extends our knowledge of HRM-as-practice.

Keywords: Change management, ethnography, HRM profession, short-term-long-term tensions, practice theory, resourcing

Wandel ermöglichen: Wie HRM Verantwortliche veränderungsinduzierte Spannungen wahrnehmen und wie sie damit umgehen

Zusammenfassung: Die ethnographische Studie zeigt Spannungen und Konflikte, denen HRM Verantwortliche während organisationaler Veränderungsprozesse ausgesetzt sind. Diese ergeben sich daraus, dass sich HRM Verantwortliche gleichzeitig mehreren Projekten, sowohl jener kurz- als auch langfristiger und strategischer Art, widmen. Die Studie zeigt, wie HRM Verantwortliche unter diesen Bedingungen Veränderungen ermöglichen und erläutert ‚resourcing' Praktiken, die bei Ressourcenknappheit zur Anwendung kommen. In konfliktbehafteten Situationen wenden HRM Verantwortliche drei ‚resourcing' Praktiken an, um mit den Spannungen umzugehen – ‚situational reframing', ‚organizational preframing' und ‚institutional deframing'. Mit dem Beitrag wird eine Brücke zwischen HRM Praktiken, der HRM Verantwortlichen und der HRM Praxis geschlagen und erweitert damit unser Wissen über HRM in der Praxis.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Change-Management, Ethnographie, HRM Profession, kurzfristige-langfristige-Spannungen, Praxistheorie, Ressourcen

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1. Introduction

In times like these, when companies are reducing staff, I can understand that employees don't feel appreciated. It happens when economic issues are prevalent—I get this. And the timing of the workshops, yes, I agree, there are probably things happening in this workshop that can't be explained rationally […] but are instead emotional reactions.

Lydia, local HR leader, general project meeting, 14 Dec 2020

Organizations' contextual environments demand continuous change, at a rate accelerating faster than ever before (Shani & Coghlan, 2021). As organizations navigate change, key actors such as HRM practitioners are forced to balance the ambiguous tensions and occupational challenges it triggers (Evans, 1999; Legge, 1978; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014), including role plurality and resource scarcity (Lewis, 2000). This need to balance is even more pressing when organizations decide to reduce employee costs by downsizing (Collings et al., 2021). During downsizing, HRM practitioners typically play an active role (Harney et al., 2018; Roche & Teague, 2012; Sahdev et al., 1999), which makes it harder for them to simultaneously balance organizational objectives and employees' interests and emotions (Caldwell, 2003; Legge, 1978; Watson, 2013b). Lydia, the local HR leader vividly illustrates in the epigraph above how HRM practitioners perceive employees' reactions and how these reactions create tensions. These tensions are profound, and are often outgrowths of the raison d'être of HR departments, which is "keeping the organization as a whole going on a long-term basis" (Watson, 2013a, p. 205). At the same time, these tensions challenge "time poor" HRM practitioners who have limited access to financial and other resources, and thus often find themselves in short-term focused "firefighting" mode (Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2021, p. 4).

A growing body of research has studied how HRM practices foster change in organizations (Brown et al., 2017; John & Björkman, 2015), yet we still know little about how HRM practitioners themselves respond to short-term–long-term occupational tensions generated by managing organizational change (Aust et al., 2015; Keegan et al., 2018; Keegan et al., 2019b). Practice theory (Bourdieu, 1972; Giddens, 1984) is one lens that has been used to understand how individuals balance tensions and, more importantly, how they respond to tensions in practice (Bednarek et al., 2017; Gylfe et al., 2019; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2021; Smets et al., 2015). At the professional level of HRM practitioners, however, we have scarce empirical evidence of how these practitioners respond to temporal tensions and which resources they enact. Knowing how HRM practitioners manage short-term–long-term tensions will help us learn how to more smoothly and successfully enact change in organizations. The study was therefore guided by the following research question:

RQ: *How do HRM practitioners respond to tensions that emerge when a long-term HR project conflicts with a short-term corporate project?*

This ethnographic case study is based on a 24-month research collaboration with the HRM practitioner team of a multinational enterprise (MNE). Using observational data and collaborative interactions, this study makes two contributions. First, it integrates theory on resourcing practices (Schneider et al., 2021) and HRM role tensions (Keegan et al., 2019a) to reveal how HRM practitioners respond when confronted with temporal, occupationally situated tensions. Second, it shows how HRM practitioners conceive of

their function and how they perform it in practice (Björkman et al., 2014), and by doing so reveals that the HRM practitioner's role is dynamic and that practitioners need to individually and collectively balance circumstances that are partly out of their control (Ulrich et al., 2013). Thus, it extends our understanding of how tension-laden professions deal with change in organizations (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) and makes transparent what this understanding means for HRM professionals in practice.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Tensions and related responses in the field of HRM

Advancing technology, changes in demographics, and competitive pressures are forcing organizations and its actors to navigate through change (Cameron, 2015; Stouten et al., 2018). Studies show that weak technical solutions are not necessarily the cause of failed change projects; instead, the cause of failure is often the human side of change (Oreg et al., 2011). Typically, HRM practitioners build an organization's internal capacity so that it matches or leads the external pace of change (Gerpott, 2015), with HRM practitioners enacting a change-champion role (Ulrich et al., 2012) to enable change at three levels: the institutional (changing patterns), initiative (making things happen), and individual (enabling personal change) level (Ulrich et al., 2012). While organizational change can improve an organization's external position and its internal capacities, it can also create tensions for its actors, since it is often accompanied by contradictory management goals, labor scarcity, low employee motivation, and managerial politics (Keegan et al., 2019a). In addition, the HRM profession itself is highly tension-laden, operating under time and resource pressure (Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2021) that is exacerbated during organizational change such as downsizing (Collings et al., 2021; Roche & Teague, 2012). Tensions, "constructed in the micro-interactions through which people *perform* their contradictory tasks and roles" (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017, p. 434), are elements that seem logical in isolation but are inconsistent when brought together (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Tensions thus result from the need for "differentiation *and* integration" and "continuity *and* change" alike (Keegan et al., 2019b, p. 84). For HRM practitioners, specifically, seeking to balance both employee and management demands (Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2021; Watson, 2013a)—that is, employee well-being *and* performance (Keegan et al., 2019b, p. 84)—"the challenge lies not in removing or resolving the ambiguities in the role but in learning to live with them" (Guest & King, 2004, p. 421).[2]

While we know that HRM is a tension-laden profession, studies on how HRM practitioners respond to these tensions are still scarce (Aust et al., 2015; Keegan et al., 2019b). Keegan et al. (2019a) detail a variety of proactive and defensive responses HRM practitioners can use to "rethink existing polarities" of tensions (Keegan et al., 2019a, p. 85), and Collings et al. (2021) underscore how important proactive responses are when practitioners are confronted with short-term-long-term tensions. The existing limited understanding of response strategies of HRM practitioners corresponds to an acknowledged research-practice relevance gap in HRM (Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2021), prompting calls to investigate how knowledge derived in practice can contribute to practitioners' knowledge (Bleijenbergh et al., 2021; Guerci et al., 2019).

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2 For an insightful overview on tensions prevailing in HRM see Wright et al. (2018).

2.2 Resourcing practices to accomplish organizational change

Practice theory is a useful lens to study how HRM practitioners conceive of and perform their role in practice because it focuses on studying individuals' everyday practices (Bednarek et al., 2017; Smets et al., 2015). More specifically, practice theory sees the "doing of social phenomena as the core unit of analysis" (Wenzel & Stjerne, 2021, p. 3) and conceives of "thinking" and "doing" as an inseparable duality that actors enact (Wenzel & Stjerne, 2021, p. 3). Practice theory allows researchers to address the micro-foundations of organizational phenomena while also recognizing the wider social context that organizations are embedded in (Loscher et al., 2019, p. 116). Rather than just mere descriptions of what people actually do, practices are meaning-making, identity-forming, and order-producing activities and represent a general "practice turn" in the social sciences (Schatzki et al., 2005). Whittington, for example, introduced the concept of practices, praxis, and practitioner to the strategy literature (Whittington 2006), which Björkman et al. (2014) developed into an "HRM-as-practice" research agenda. HRM-as-practice (Björkman et al., 2014) stresses the importance of understanding the interplay of the empirical context of *HRM practices* (in this study, the impact of downsizing on change endeavors); the *HRM practitioners* (in this study, HRM practitioners enacting a change-champion role); and how practices and practitioners interact in emerging, persisting, and dissolved practices in organizations through situated social activities—the *HRM praxis* (Björkman et al., 2014). This practice-oriented view studies the actors who produce and recreate practices as enacted when responding to specific situations (Wenzel & Stjerne, 2021, p. 4).

Because resource scarcity especially heightens individuals' experience of tensions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), understanding resources and how HRM practitioners use them to respond to tensions in practice is necessary. The resourcing perspective is interested in how individuals make assets useful -that is, how they turn potential resources into actual ones (Feldman & Worline, 2012)- and sees resources which "are created and recreated in action" (Feldman, 2004, p. 307) as dynamic and practice-oriented rather than static. Building on the above understanding, resourcing is viewed as allowing organizational actors to achieve organizational change. Schneider et al. (2021) identified three resourcing practices individuals (frontline service workers) use when tensions arise: *situational reframing*, which "creates resources to restore a frame previously damaged by the tension, and aims to 'turn around' a specific situation" (Schneider et al., 2021, p. 1313); *organizational preframing*, which enables actors "to anticipate that a prescribed organizational procedure will likely lead to tensions and to proactively create resources to alter these procedures or their meanings" (Schneider et al., 2021, p. 1313); and *institutional deframing*, which "challenges a dominant principle […] by drawing on an institutionalized meaning (e.g. practitionerism, the principle of fairness, etc.) that is equally or even more dominant" (Schneider et al., 2021, p. 1313). Using practice theory, and more specifically, an HRM-as-practice approach, to study how HRM practitioners respond to temporal tensions helps us to understand how HRM practitioners can more smoothly and successfully manage change.

3. Research Design

The researcher conducted an ethnographic study (Watson, 2011) and collected data on, from, and around the TenseCo[3] HRM department using observations, recordings of meetings and interactions with HRM practitioners, and complementary documents. Access to the case company was facilitated via a collaboration agreement (action research) that the researcher entered into with TenseCo. The researcher had extensive previous work experience in the HRM field, which helped to both gain field access and understand the language and practitioner world, including its challenges and HRM practitioner tensions.
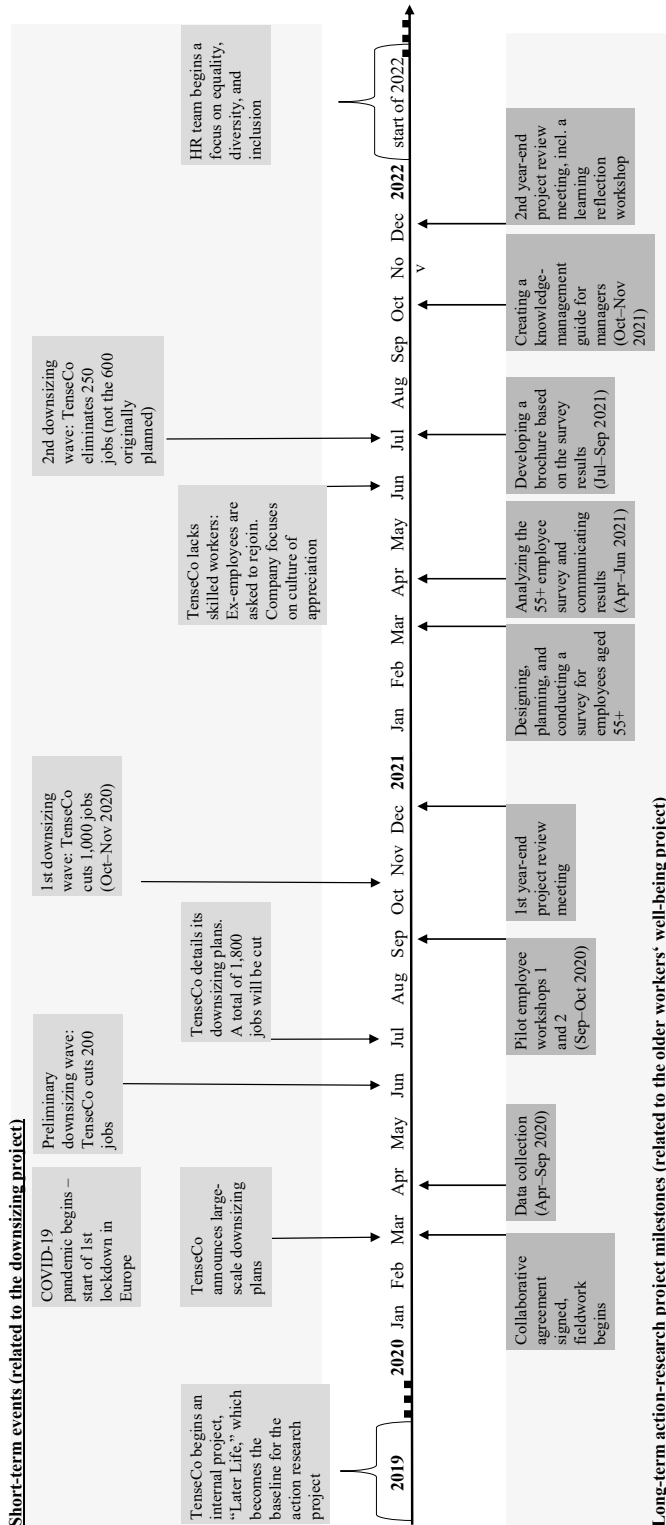
3.1 Case setting

TenseCo is a large manufacturing organization with over 20,000 employees, most of them based in the German-speaking regions of Europe. The fieldwork started in March 2020 when the local HRM department and the researcher signed a collaboration agreement with the aim of improving the working conditions of older manufacturing workers at the local site (the long-term change project titled "older workers' well-being project"). Data was compiled until March 2022 at one local manufacturing site. The researcher was granted access to members of the HRM department as well as to employee statistics, including demographics, qualification levels, and salary data. This data collection was the baseline for multiple activities (for an overview, *see Table 1, "Project event timeline"*) that the HRM practitioners, in collaboration with the researcher, conducted throughout the collaboration.

At the start of the research collaboration, the HRM department expected that one-third of its manufacturing staff would retire within the next ten years. The department therefore wanted to implement measures to help prevent as many of these workers as possible from retiring early, and the preventive measures it considered included increasing its appreciation of older workers, raising their potentials, and facilitating knowledge-sharing among the workforce. Shortly after the project began, the organization unexpectedly announced that it would downsize 1,800—or one-third of the local employees—by 2023. This short-term change project (the "downsizing project") considerably impacted the HRM practitioners and created tensions for the long-term change project ("older workers' well-being project"). First, many of the older manufacturing workers were laid off. Second, the high level of uncertainty the announcement created among the workforce made it difficult for HRM practitioners to proceed with the long-term project as planned. Third, the announcement shifted HRM practitioners' priorities from the long-term project to handling layoffs and holding conversations with the employees whose jobs were cut. HRM practitioners were engaged in a tension fuelled confrontation demanding a balancing act between competing goals of the downsizing project and milestones of the older workers' well-being project. The downsizing announcement presented HRM practitioners with multiple occasions in which they needed to respond to tensions, either by ignoring/keeping them latent or by actively discussing and mitigating them through marginal compromises. The author recognized a total of 22 episodes of the interplay between these short-term-long-term tensions (see *Figure 1* for an overview).

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3 To preserve the anonymity of the case-study company and its employees, the researcher has masked names and other contextual features. The nature and temporal sequence of events, however, have been faithfully reproduced.

Table 1: Project event timeline

Short-term events (related to the downsizing project)

Long-term action-research project milestones (related to the older workers' well-being project)

Short-term events (related to the downsizing project):
- TenseCo begins an internal project, "Later Life," which becomes the baseline for the action research project (2019)
- TenseCo announces large-scale downsizing plans
- COVID-19 pandemic begins – start of 1st lockdown in Europe
- Preliminary downsizing wave: TenseCo cuts 200 jobs
- TenseCo details its downsizing plans. A total of 1,800 jobs will be cut
- 1st downsizing wave: TenseCo cuts 1,000 jobs (Oct–Nov 2020)
- TenseCo lacks skilled workers: Ex-employees are asked to rejoin. Company focuses on culture of appreciation
- 2nd downsizing wave: TenseCo eliminates 250 jobs (not the 600 originally planned)
- HR team begins a focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion (start of 2022)

Long-term action-research project milestones:
- Collaborative agreement signed, fieldwork begins (2020)
- Data collection (Apr–Sep 2020)
- Pilot employee workshops 1 and 2 (Sep–Oct 2020)
- 1st year-end project review meeting
- Designing, planning, and conducting a survey for employees aged 55+
- Analyzing the 55+ employee survey and communicating results (Apr–Jun 2021)
- Developing a brochure based on the survey results (Jul–Sep 2021)
- Creating a knowledge-management guide for managers (Oct–Nov 2021)
- 2nd year-end project review meeting, incl. a learning reflection workshop

Timeline axis: 2019 | 2020 Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec 2021 Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct No Dec 2022 | start of 2022

3.2 Data & analysis

The data come from a 24-month research collaboration and consist of company data related to the short-term and long-term projects, 38 recorded project meetings, transcripts (about 900 pages in total), and multiple field notes and observations reflecting on the progress of the collaboration project that were written up within 24 hours of each encounter. Meeting recordings were transcribed and uploaded for data analysis. The meetings were conducted in German, and therefore the transcriptions and analysis were also done in German, while the researcher translated the quotes into English. Because the COVID-19 pandemic prevented the team from meeting in person, most meetings were conducted online via MS Teams. Meeting participants always had their webcams on so that the researcher could observe non-verbal aspects of the conversations such as facial expressions and body language. All data were saved and coded in NVivo 12. For an overview of all material, *see Table 2*.

Table 2: Data sources

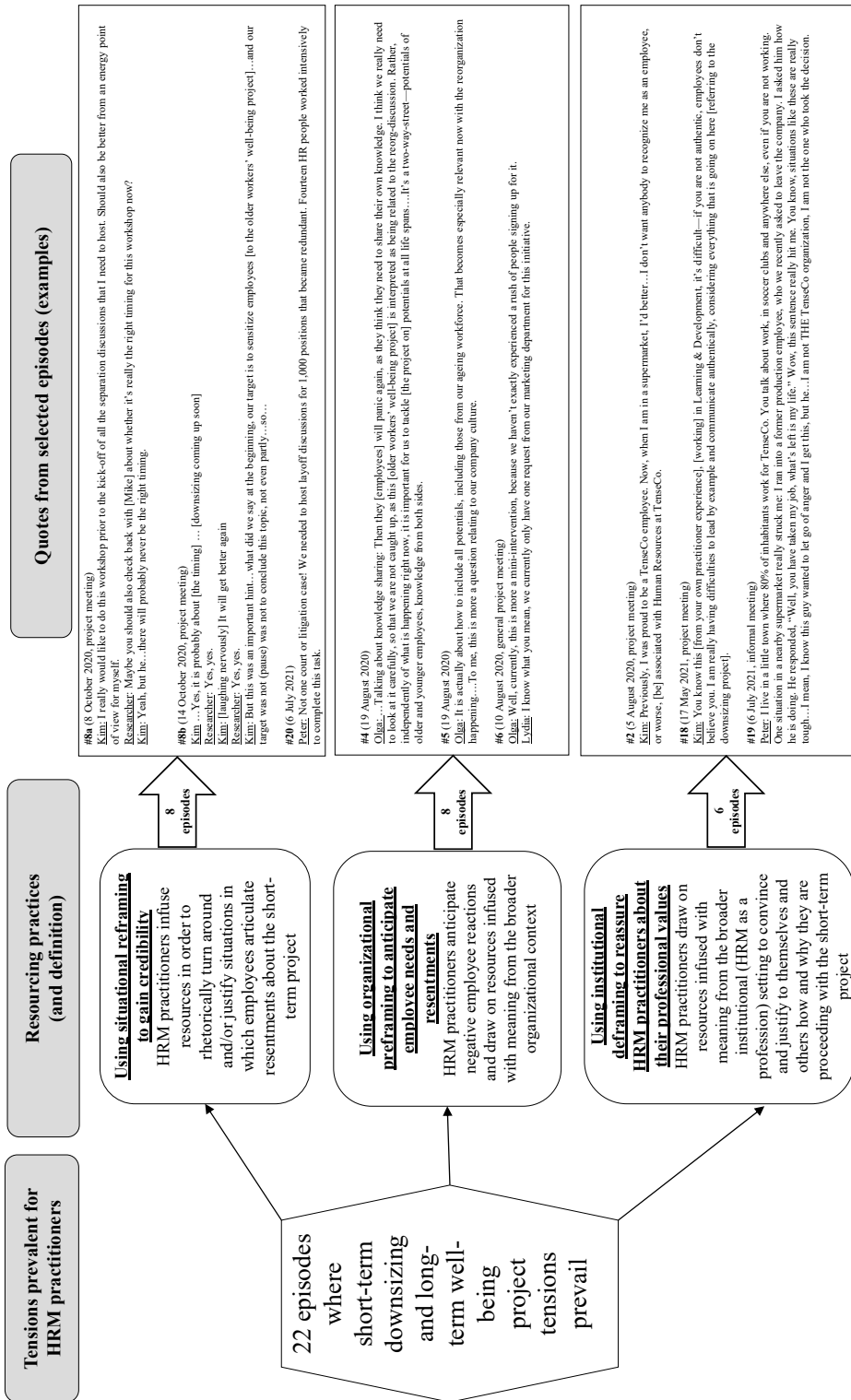| Data category	Description: Summary of selected data and collection timeframe	# of meetings
Meetings with TenseCo HR project team relating to the older workers' well-being project (N= 38) *The duration of all transcribed meetings amounts to over 45 hours (summed up), with approximately 900 pages of transcription in total*	**General project meetings** Typically 1–1½ hours long, from July 2020–March 2022	8
	Project 1: Designing, planning, and conducting a survey for employees aged 55+ Project focus from January 2021–March 2021	10
	Project 2: Analysing employee survey results & communicating actions Project focus from April 2021–June 2021	9
	Project 3: Developing a brochure focused on later-life careers Project focus from September 2021–January 2022	7
	Project 4: Creating a knowledge-management guide for managers Project focus from October 2021–November 2021	4
Workshops with TenseCo Employees relating to the older workers' well-being project (N= 2)	**Pilot employee workshop** Project focus from September 2020–October 2020	2

Data category	Description: Summary of selected data and collection timeframe	# of materials
Internal HR and company-wide workshop material relating to the older workers' well-being project and the downsizing project (N= 20)	**Internal review of workshop material** from May 2020–October 2021	4
	Internal assessment of workshop material June 2020	2
	Developing company-wide downsizing-related workshop material August 2020–September 2020	4
	Pilot employee workshop: Preparing workshop material August 2020–October 2020	10
Email exchange with HR project team (content-related items) (N=34)	**Exchanging project ideas, project updates, ideas for focus areas, sharing of scientific papers, discussing issues related to TenseCo's project** April 2020–March 2022	34
Field notes (incl. those from participant observations) (N = 80)	**Drafted field notes after each interaction with the HR project teams and after each interaction with TenseCo** March 2020–March 2022	80
Interviews (N=4)	**Interviewing selected HR project members to ask about the practical impacts of the research cooperation** June 2020–April 2021	4
Internal and external documents (N=52)	**Project 2: Initiating a survey for employees aged 55+** January 2021–April 2021	15
	Project 3: Analysing employee survey results & communicating actions April 2021–May 2021	7
	Project 4: Developing a brochure with focus on later-life careers June 2021–January 2022	10
	Analysing employee data (headcount, salary, competency and skills level) June 2020	4
	Collecting news and media articles related to the downsizing project March 2020–September 2021	16

Data category	Description: Summary of selected data and collection timeframe	# of materials
TenseCo HR core project team **(N=5)** The ethnographic work portrays five HRM practitioners working closely on both the older workers' well-being project and the downsizing project	**Lydia** is the local HR Leader of TenseCo, and together with Olga she kicked off and was the HR project leader for the older workers' well-being project.	
	Olga is the local Learning & Development Leader for TenseCo. She played a key role in initiating the older workers' well-being project. During the project, she was promoted internally and moved to a corporate role. From then on she was not part of the HR core project team.	
	Kim is a local Learning & Development Specialist at TenseCo. During the research cooperation she was given additional responsibility for diversity & inclusion management. The older workers' well-being project was part of a diversity & inclusion focus.	
	Peter is a local HR Manager at TenseCo and was responsible for the operations of the downsizing project.	
	Mike is a local Learning & Development Specialist TenseCo who works closely with Kim. He facilitated one workshop entitled "Enhancing life span potentials" and afterwards delegated the topic to Kim.	

The researcher attended regular project meetings, was involved in email and data exchanges, hosted and facilitated workshops with employees, and had regular informal conversations with organizational members in which they articulated their viewpoints on the project as well as their work and the company more broadly. Additionally, the researcher kept a diary to document experiences, observations, and reflections (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009). The project provided an opportunity for the researcher to consider her own positioning, reflexivity, and reflecting, informed by the notion that "informants' experience and their understanding of those experiences" (Gioia, 2021, p. 22) should be at the forefront. It was achieved by giving voice to HRM practitioners who are "knowledgeable" (Gioia, 2021, p. 22) about their work and about how they respond to tensions. The author followed three iterative data analysis steps based on an abductive mode of analysis that continuously moved between the data and literature. First, the empirical data was reviewed, with a focus on prevailing tensions for HRM (inspired by Wright et al., 2018). Second, 22 episodes were identified in which short-term–long-term tensions were "visible" (Tuckermann, 2019) which the researcher coded as these situations included conflicts between investing in exploiting established activities, such as downsizing activities, versus allocating resources and exploring new ideas for the older workers' well-being project. Third, resourcing strategies were identified that HRM practitioners mobilized to confront short-term-long-term tensions. Inspired by the framework of Schneider et al. (2021), who studied resourcing strategies of frontline service workers, the researcher clustered all instances from the 22 episodes in which resourcing strategies prevailed. The researcher coded the dominant resourcing strategy at each tension point, identified the specific actions that made up this resourcing, and identified eight episodes of *situational reframing*, eight episodes of *organizational preframing*, and six episodes of *institutional deframing*.

Figure 1: Representative data illustrating resourcing strategies

Tensions prevalent for HRM practitioners	Resourcing practices (and definition)	Quotes from selected episodes (examples)

22 episodes where short-term downsizing and long-term well-being project tensions prevail

Using situational reframing to gain credibility
HRM practitioners infuse resources in order to rhetorically turn around and/or justify situations in which employees articulate resentments about the short-term project

8 episodes

#8a (8 October 2020, project meeting)
Kim: I really would like to do this workshop prior to the kick-off of all the separation discussions that I need to host. Should also be better from an energy point of view for myself.
Researcher: Maybe you should also check back with [Mike] about whether it's really the right timing for this workshop now?
Kim: Yeah, but he…there will probably never be the right timing.

#8b (14 October 2020, project meeting)
Kim: …Yes, it is probably about [the timing] … [downsizing coming up soon]
Researcher: Yes, yes.
Kim: [laughing nervously] It will get better again
Researcher: Yes, yes.
Kim: But this was an important hint…what did we say at the beginning, our target is to sensitize employees [to the older workers' well-being project]…and our target was not (pause) was not to conclude this topic, not even partly…so…

#20 (6 July 2021)
Peter: Not one court or litigation case! We needed to host layoff discussions for 1,000 positions that became redundant. Fourteen HR people worked intensively to complete this task.

Using organizational reframing to anticipate employee needs and resentments
HRM practitioners anticipate negative employee reactions and draw on resources infused with meaning from the broader organizational context

8 episodes

#4 (19 August 2020)
Olga: …Talking about knowledge sharing: Then they [employees] will panic again, as they think they need to share their own knowledge. I think we really need to look at it carefully, so that we are not caught up, as this [older workers' well-being project] is interpreted as being related to the reorg-discussion. Rather, independently of what is happening right now, it is important for us to tackle [the project on] potentials at all life spans.…It's a two-way-street—potentials of older and younger employees, knowledge from both sides.

#5 (19 August 2020)
Olga: It is actually about how to include all potentials, including those from our ageing workforce. That becomes especially relevant now with the reorganization happening.…To me, this is more a question relating to our company culture.

#6 (10 August 2020, general project meeting)
Olga: Well, currently, this is more a mini-intervention, because we haven't exactly experienced a rush of people signing up for it.
Lydia: I know what you mean, we currently only have one request from our marketing department for this initiative.

Using institutional deframing to reassure HRM practitioners about their professional values
HRM practitioners draw on resources infused with meaning from the broader institutional (HRM as a profession) setting to convince and justify to themselves and others how and why they are proceeding with the short-term project

6 episodes

#2 (5 August 2020, project meeting)
Kim: Previously, I was proud to be a TenseCo employee. Now, when I am in a supermarket, I'd better…I don't want anybody to recognize me as an employee, or worse, [be] associated with Human Resources at TenseCo.

#18 (17 May 2021, project meeting)
Kim: You know this [from your own practitioner experience], [working] in Learning & Development, it's difficult—if you are not authentic, employees don't believe you. I am really having difficulties to lead by example and communicate authentically, considering everything that is going on here [referring to the downsizing project].

#19 (6 July 2021, informal meeting)
Peter: I live in a little town where 80% of inhabitants work for TenseCo. You talk about work, in soccer clubs and anywhere else, even if you are not working. One situation in a nearby supermarket really struck me: I ran into a former production employee, who we recently asked to leave the company. I asked him how he is doing. He responded, "Well, you have taken my job, what's left is my life." Wow, this sentence really hit me. You know, situations like these are really tough…I mean, I know this guy wanted to let go of anger and I get this, but he…I am not THE TenseCo organization, I am not the one who took the decision.

4. Results

The HRM practitioners in this study used situational reframing, organizational preframing, and institutional deframing to respond to tensions. This section presents episodes portrayed as interactions to tell "stories of change" by characterizing "particular actors" and "revisit[ing] them as conversations [that] shape and are shaped by the unfolding processes" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014, p. 282), thus making explicit the situated, unfolding, and temporal nature of HRM practitioners' practices. *Figure 1* presents representative data illustrating resourcing practices to respond to tensions, along with HRM practitioner quotes.

4.1 Using situational reframing to gain credibility

HRM practitioners used *situational reframing* to gain credibility by rhetorically turning around and/or justifying a situation so they could attend to short-term corporate projects and achieve compromise on the temporal tensions from conflicting projects (i.e., downsizing versus older workers' well-being). In this practice, HRM practitioners infused resources and re-established their employee orientation to navigate situations in which employees articulated their resentments about the short-term project.

Episode 8a illustrates this practice well. Mike, a local Learning & Development Specialist, hosts a pilot workshop for high-potential employees (referred to internally as a "talent group") and ask them how the organization and its members could show more appreciation to its older workers. The atmosphere during the workshop is tense, with employees questioning its timing and openly expressing their concerns that "the company" should have asked these questions earlier (i.e., before announcing downsizings). During a debriefing with the researcher after the workshop, Mike suggests handing over the second, already scheduled pilot workshop to his colleague Kim, another local Learning & Development Specialist who he believes is better qualified to lead it because she focuses on diversity management. Based on the employees' response to the first workshop, the researcher discusses her concerns with Kim to make her aware that employees are pushing back. The researcher asks her whether hosting a second workshop is appropriate, since it is scheduled just a few weeks after downsizing has been announced and just a few weeks before it will be carried out. Kim responds by justifying the situation – *see Figure 1, Episode 8a.*

Kim is fully involved in the downsizing (i.e., she hosts employee exit conversations), planned to start just a few days after this discussion, and she expects that these conversations would drain her energy. For her, scheduling a workshop focusing on the long-term project before she executes the short-term project is better. By continuing with the workshop as planned, Kim "turns around" the downsizing situation, which she believes would be difficult for both, herself and employees, and showcases her employee orientation and her desire to give her best by being there for employees. Even though the researcher explains that the climate during the first workshop was tense, and that employees use it to vent about their jobs being at risk, Kim decides to proceed with the second workshop because of her loyalty to employees -she wants to be of service to them- and as she believes that proceeding with the workshop would allow her to devote more of her energy and attention to the downsizing project afterwards. At the same time, she may have underestimated employees' highly emotional reaction to the situation (i.e., not knowing

whether they or their close colleagues would lose their jobs). The second workshop, unsurprisingly, again provokes employee criticism, and in a debriefing after the workshop Kim and the researcher discuss why many of the participants left early or did not speak up – *see Figure 1, Episode 8b*.

This was another instance of situational reframing, because even though Kim is aware of how palpable the upcoming downsizing was for participants in this workshop, she reassures both herself and the researcher that this tense situation would improve and at the same time reframes the purpose of the workshop. Kim believes that she would gain credibility for the long-term project by introducing the topic to employees, regardless of whether the timing might be inappropriate. By scheduling and going ahead with the workshop, Kim moves the long-term project one step forward during a tense time.

Another instance of situational reframing occurred with Peter during an informal talk in Episode 20. Peter, an HRM practitioner who coordinated the local downsizing activities, was discussing in hindsight the downsizing project in terms of process and his own perceptions. He reframes the mandate to downsize as a means for the HRM team to gain credibility with the management team, explaining that while it was a tense and difficult time for the team (and employees more broadly), it was also a success that helped the HRM team to bond – *see Figure 1, Episode 20*.

According to Peter, the short-term project was flawless since zero employees sued TenseCo as a result of broad-based downsizing activities. Employee litigation was a key performance indicator for the downsizing and its success (zero employee lawsuits) showed how positively management viewed HRM's handling of the project. Still, as Episode 8a makes clear, the short-term downsizing project created tensions for the long-term older workers' well-being project and caused resource conflicts. HRM practitioners were engaged in two projects that required their time and, more importantly, their emotional attention and resources. By claiming that the downsizing was a "success story," Peter made clear how important it was to the organization that the downsizing was executed flawlessly. The success of the short-term project was also a sign of operational excellence, which helped HRM practitioners gain credibility and devote more resources and attention to the long-term project after the first wave of downsizing (*see Table 1*) even though, from a business point of view, the older workers' well-being project was less important after downsizing because many older workers' jobs were eliminated.

4.2 Using organizational preframing to anticipate employee needs and resentments

In *organizational preframing*, HRM practitioners sought to anticipate employee reactions and proactively showcase their attention to older workers' well-being and employee needs and resentments more broadly. In this practice, HRM practitioners expecting negative reactions from employees responded by drawing on resources infused with meaning from the broader organizational context.

HRM practitioners use the resourcing practice of organizational preframing in several episodes, such as Episode 4. Throughout the collaboration, HRM practitioners specifically targeted older workers by offering them developmental opportunities, which showcase their willingness to invest in employees. Organizational preframing allow HRM practitioners to anticipate employee resentments such as towards the downsizing project. Olga, a local Learning and Development Leader, notes that employees, currently, are assessing HR activities in relation to the downsizing project – *see Figure 1, Episode 4*.

HRM practitioners are continually assessing and anticipating the impact the downsizing project is having on employees and their perceptions of the older workers' well-being project. For example, Olga anticipates that employees would "panic again" when they hear about the knowledge-sharing project because they might see it as being connected to the downsizing project (i.e., a project intended to preserve organizational knowledge when employees leave the organization). Olga's anticipation of these employee reactions is a resourcing strategy she uses to explain to the researcher (and herself) that HR needs to be aware of downsizing and anticipate employees' sensitivity to it when planning activities.

While carrying out the older workers' well-being project, HRM practitioners continue to assess and anticipate the impact of the downsizing project. For example, during the same meeting in August 2020, Olga explains that the project was closely related to the company's overall intention of enhancing its culture of appreciation towards employees – *see Figure 1, Episode 5*. Olga perceives the older workers' well-being project as being embedded in a broader organizational context and recognizes that the downsizing project might impact the older workers' well-being project. By anticipating the employees' reaction, Olga is able to use this knowledge to keep the long-term project on track.

Episode 6 shows that HRM practitioners are not always successful at anticipating employees' reactions. During a general project meeting, Olga mentions the low numbers of managers and employees signing up for workshops to discuss team changes following downsizing (referred to internally as "survivor workshops") – *see Figure 1, Episode 6*. A few days later, Kim informs the researcher via email that the "survivor-workshop" initiative will be postponed to September at the earliest, for three reasons. First, HR needs more time to conceptualize the workshop; second, "Corporate TenseCo" is planning a "bigger, unified framework" for dealing with the surviving managers and employees; and third, HR have determined that the employees might not be ready for such workshops, since so few employees have signed up and the timing is too soon after the downsizing (17 August 2020, email). To the researcher's knowledge, these workshops were never discussed further nor is it clear whether they even took place.

4.3 Using institutional deframing to reassure HRM practitioners about their professional values

HRM practitioners' *institutional deframing* practices were aimed at following through on the short-term project while at the same time temporarily questioning and *de-emphasizing* the long-term older workers' well-being project. In this practice, HRM practitioners sought to maintain their own institutionalized meaning as HRM professionals (i.e., being truthful, being authentic) without disillusioning employees or key organizational stakeholders. HRM practitioners draw on resources infused with meaning from the broader institutional setting. This is to justify their attending to the short-term project and temporarily de-emphasizing the long-term project, with the intention of picking up on the long-term project again when conditions were more favorable.

HRM practitioners use this resourcing practice in several episodes during the collaboration to reassure themselves about their professional values, as Peter does in Episode 19 when talking about a situation that collides with his professional values – *see Figure 1, Episode 19*. Even though this encounter takes place outside of work, the former employee identified Peter, an HRM practitioner, as a delegate of the organization and explicitly blames him for having lost his job. Peter distances himself from the company's actions

using institutional deframing and positions himself as carrying out the management team's mandate, not his own.

Peter is not alone; other members of the HRM team were confronted with situations in which their professional values are threatened too. Episode 2 illustrates how challenging it is for Kim to be identified as an HRM employee – *see Figure 1, Episode 2*. Kim uses institutional deframing to deal with this situation, reassuring herself in a discussion with the researcher that this feeling is likely temporary and noting that before the downsizing, she was proud to work for TenseCo. Months after this conversation, in Episode 18, Kim continues to reflect on how exposed she feels as a local Learning & Development Specialist. This position, according to Kim's own professional values, requires authenticity to be credible with employees in workshops and trainings – *see Figure 1, Episode 18*. Kim seeks to draw parallels between her experience and the researchers' to reassure herself that HRM practitioners' downsizing conversations spill over into their broader professional role, especially hers as a Learning & Development Specialist.

These episodes illustrate the tensions that arise for HRM practitioners when attending to both short-term and long-term projects and how these tensions can impact practitioners' professional values, since employees might link the tasks HRM practitioners have to carry out—such as communicating downsizing decisions—to the person engaged in this activity. Throughout the collaboration, the researcher saw multiple instances in which HRM practitioners articulated that the downsizing conversations and the time they took were exhausting and, more importantly, were an emotional burden. While this emotionally challenging short-term project was carried out, HRM practitioners de-emphasized the importance of the long-term project. In these instances of institutional deframing, HRM practitioners drew on resources infused with meaning from the broader institutional (HRM as a profession) setting to convince and justify to themselves and others how and why they were proceeding with the short-term project. For Kim, institutional deframing allowed her to respond to this tension-laden situation by sharing her concerns with someone knowledgeable (the researcher, whom she believed would understand her situation, since the researcher had herself hosted downsizing conversations before) and used these conversations to reassure herself as she suggested that her professional values were at risk.

5. Discussion

This study finds that HRM practitioners engaged in three different resourcing practices to manage short-term-long-term tensions: situational reframing to gain credibility, organizational preframing to anticipate employee needs and resentments, and institutional deframing to reassure themselves about their professional values. This study advances our understanding of resourcing because it shows how HRM practitioners use practices to create resources they can use to respond to occupationally situated tensions (Keegan et al., 2019a) and tension-laden situations (Schneider et al., 2021; Smets et al., 2015) that arise when attending to short-term and long-term projects. This study also adds to HRM-as-practice research (Björkman et al., 2014) by showing how HRM practitioners conceive of and perform their function in practice (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022; Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2021). In doing so, it extends our knowledge of the dynamic role of the HRM profession (Gerpott, 2015) in change projects, especially when short-term corporate change projects jeopardize long-term HR projects.

5.1 Integrating resourcing practices and HRM role tensions

HRM practitioners used *situational reframing* by infusing resources into a situation in order to rhetorically turn it around and/or justify it as a response to employees articulating resentments about the short-term project. In carrying out the short-term downsizing project, HRM practitioners strengthened their position within the organization and with the management team by reinforcing their technical ("how to carry out a task") and legitimating function ("how to gain authority and credibility") (Watson, 2013c, p. 25). By navigating the occupational tensions resulting from the conflicting short-term and long-term projects, the management team likely saw the HRM practitioners as "strategic business partners" (Ulrich et al., 2013) who exhibited operational excellence during business-critical times. Steering contradictory situations requires strong employee relationship-management, employee well-being (Guest, 2017), and project-management skills (Cheng et al., 2005). In other words, individuals in these situations need to be able to sequence various demands and balance priorities to pursue long-term goals. In this study, HRM practitioners used situational reframing to put the management-mandated short-term goal center stage, while temporarily neglecting or overlooking critical employee feedback and postponing the long-term goal of re-establishing employee orientation until circumstances were more favorable.

Organizational preframing enabled HRM practitioners to anticipate employees' needs and resentments (i.e., whether certain HR policies and practices lived up to key stakeholders' expectations) by drawing on resources infused with meaning from the broader organizational context. HRM practitioners' proficiency and occupational experience in dealing with multiple stakeholders (John & Björkman, 2015) helped them respond to occupational tensions, especially when goals conflicted, as they often do in change-management projects (Francis, 2003; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Organizational preframing takes a "both/and" (Smith & Lewis, 2011) rather than an "either/or" approach (Evans, 1999). More specifically, the findings show that a "paradox mindset" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 385) helped the HRM practitioners in this study to "shift their expectations from rationality and linearity to accept paradoxes as persistent and unsolvable puzzles" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 385). Although attending to short-term goals such as downsizing was difficult and required delicacy, it allowed HRM practitioners to keep their long-term goal of the older workers' well-being project alive.

HRM practitioners in this study also used *institutional deframing* by drawing on resources infused with meaning from the broader institutional setting to convince and justify to themselves and others how and why they were proceeding with the short-term project. The results of this study show that HRM practitioners used institutional deframing as a means to reassure themselves of their professional values (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2013b), which were challenged by the management team's downsizing mandate. Occupational tensions that HRM professions are confronted with (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Watson, 2013b) intensify when resources become scarce (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), which forces them to choose from among unfavorable priorities. In these instances, the HRM practitioners used HR-initiated, long-term projects to reassure themselves about their professional values when temporal tensions challenged these values. Collaborating with the researcher (Bleijenbergh et al., 2021; Guerci et al., 2019) was one means HRM practitioners in this study used to comfort themselves about their professional values and to infuse resources in their pursuit of long-term HR-initiated projects. The ethical di-

mension of HRM (Winstanley & Woodall, 2000) and HRM practitioners' understanding of what a good HRM practitioner is (i.e., Benkhoff, 1997) helped them navigate these tension-laden situations. When short-term goals conflict with their professional identity standards (Burke & Stets, 2009), HRM practitioners can reassure themselves by prioritizing identity projects that are congruent with their perceptions, which thus help them navigate disturbing situations (Burke & Stets, 2009). In this study, the older workers' well-being project helped HRM practitioners confirm their identity standards at a time when the short-term project threatened them.

5.2 Extending our knowledge of the dynamic role of the HRM profession

To better understand "how HR actors become more effective and influential organizational agents" (Björkman et al., 2014), this study focused on how HRM practitioners responded to the short-term-long-term tensions that they typically encounter when engaging in change management. It uses the lens of HRM-as-practice (Björkman et al., 2014) to add to the practice perspective on tensions (Bednarek et al., 2017; Sheep et al., 2017), extending our knowledge of how the HRM function conceives of and performs its role in practice (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Pritchard, 2010). This study shows the dynamic role of HRM practitioners, both individually and as groups, expanding our rather static perspective of the HRM role such as the one that sees HRM practitioners as change champions (Ulrich et al., 2012). HRM practitioners dynamically respond to tensions, moving between practices in different "streams of interactions" (Smets et al., 2015) both in "situated social activities of individuals and [in] groups involved in HRM work" (Björkman et al., 2014, p. 125). This dynamic movement enables HRM practitioners to balance conflicting, and even contradictory, change projects. This study underlines how important it is to understand this interplay at three levels: at the empirical context of *HRM practices*; at the individual and collective level as *HRM practitioners*; and how these factors interact in emerging, persisting, and dissolved practices in organizations through situated social activities—the *HRM praxis*. The literature suggests that practitioners keep tensions latent or ignore them (Keegan et al., 2019a, 2019b; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018); we found, however, that HRM practitioners also actively discuss and mitigate tensions, and work on marginal compromises. Thus, this study shows that HRM practitioners both proactively and defensively respond to short-term-long-term tensions in practice (Collings et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2018) which enabled their sensemaking. Sensemaking can be understood as the pursuit of order creation and coherent understandings is best understood as a prerequisite that enables change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Weick, 2010). In line with action research conducted by Lüscher and Lewis (2008) who found that middle managers who finally accepted tensions as paradoxical enabled their sensemaking, this study with HRM practitioners finds that enacting the three different resourcing practices and navigating through these during different stages of the change projects was a means of sensemaking to them. Making use of resourcing practices in a highly dynamic way helped HRM practitioners respond to tensions and consider both/and possibilities to attend to both the older workers well-being project as well as the downsizing project, which is well in line with paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

5.3 Practical implications

This study builds on previous research by adding to our knowledge of how the HR function deals with increasing ambiguities, pressures, and conflicts driven by different role and stakeholder demands (Farndale et al., 2011; Hailey et al., 2005; Mäkelä et al., 2013) and, by helping to bridge the scholar-practitioner gap (Bleijenbergh et al., 2021; Guerci et al., 2019). While this study investigated resourcing practices as a response to tensions provoked by downsizing and is independent from the COVID-19 pandemic, these findings could also be relevant for practitioners dealing with the "reality of external market conditions […] that may force HR into a reactive position" (Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2021, p. 4-5)[4] Table 3, below, presents an overview of practical implications, concisely revealing what practitioners need to know when confronted with short-term–long-term-tensions.

Table 3: Practitioner notes

» **Making occupational tensions transparent helps HRM practitioners to confront challenges in the field**
  – Workshops with HRM practitioners to investigate their resourcing practices as a response to occupational tensions could expand their collective tacit knowledge across HRM teams
  – During emotionally tense times (i.e., downsizing), HRM practitioners might need additional individual and collective support (i.e., counselling or coaching)
» **Increasing the legitimacy of the HRM role in occupationally tense times**
  – Despite its emotional downsides, downsizing might be an opportunity for HRM practitioners to increase their legitimacy (i.e., by showcasing operational excellence)
  – HRM practitioners who need to deal with short-term corporate projects while pursuing long-term HRM projects should communicate to management the complex and dynamic role of HRM (extending the knowledge of how HRM roles are typically portrayed)
» **Support through scholar-practitioner collaborations**
  – Long-term projects—especially HR projects—are often at risk of being sidelined. Scholar-practitioner collaborations may help HRM professionals to pursue long-term projects by increasing commitment on both sides
  – Researchers could introduce "paradox theory" and a "paradox mindset" to HRM practitioners, thus expanding their toolbox so they can confront tensions more proactively

5.4 Limitations, researcher's reflection and future research

The results are based on a single case study conducted in Western Europe. Whether the results can be extended to other countries and settings need to be verified in additional studies, and thus is a noteworthy limitation of the study. As outlined in detail in the Research Design section, most meetings were held virtually. While the data set is rich, virtual communication potentially prevented the researcher from engaging in more-informal observations, such as "water-cooler" conversations, with HRM practitioners.

This ethnographic study was carried out during a 24-month action research collaboration the author conducted. Combining ethnography with action research requires the researcher to "analyze every relevant aspect to the process, including themselves and the

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4 For an insightful overview of external reactions towards organizational downsizing plans see Berninger et al. (2018).

style of gathering and writing information" (Gobo & Molle, 2017, p. 65) and thus, asked the author to reflect on and consider her own positioning and reflexivity. Action research demolishes the myth that the researcher is only witnessing as a "superior outsider" (van Maanen, 2011), and makes field access possible (Zhang et al., 2015).

Leveraging practice theory this study enriches our understanding of the dynamic role of HRM professionals in practice. While ethnographic studies on HRM professionals (i.e. Watson, 2013b) elucidates on tensions and associated response mechanism rather statically, engaged scholarship (van de Ven, 2007), such as action research (Shani & Coghlan, 2021), provides a suitable alternative that enables a deeper understanding of the rather dynamic requirements of HRM roles. To enrich research on the dynamic role of HRM professionals the author underscores the necessity for more collaborative research in the applied field of HRM (see also Bleijenbergh et al., 2021; Guerci et al., 2019). This would not only extend our understanding of the dynamic role of the HRM profession (i.e. by doing research *with*, not on or for people, Shani and Coghlan (2021) but also increase our understanding of occupational identities of tensions-laden professions, and even use action research as a means to identity development (i.e. Yuan & Burns, 2017).

While non-temporal tensions were not the focus of this paper, the researcher observed that multiple tensions prevailed during this collaboration. Future research should investigate additional tensions when carrying out change projects in HRM scholar-practitioner collaborations. Such research would increase our understanding of how HRM practitioners deal with and engage in organizational change projects in practice. While this study explored HRM practitioners, additional studies are needed to investigate how the findings of this study can be extended to other tension-laden professions, such as those in the care (nurses, doctors) and educational (teachers, lecturers) sectors, which are also typically confronted with larger-scale temporal short-term–long-term tensions (Quinane et al., 2021).

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