Humanizing organizations: The professional role of HRM in organizational transformation

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Abstract: The trend towards digitalization continues, calling for a reconsideration of what defines work, organizations, and society. This also encompasses the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) and its professional ethos, including the competencies and ways in which HRM asserts and professionalizes its field of expertise against other competing professions and new technology. Drawing from Diversity Management, we reconstruct the path of professionalization taken by HRM in the past and provide a conceptual framework. Using the two examples of People Analytics and Remote Work, we illustrate how HRM as a profession can claim responsibility for a particular problem in the face of an emerging technology and gain a new terrain and professional jurisdiction. Based on these current examples, we discuss the legitimacy of HRM and argue for its conceptualization as a profession dedicated to people in the changing world of work—a view that is fundamentally different from the idea of HRM as a business partner.

Keywords: human relations, organizational transformation, professional sociology, digitization, people analytics, remote work

Humanisierung von Organisationen: Die professionelle Rolle des Personalmanagement in organisationalen Transformationen

Zusammenfassung: Der Trend zur Digitalisierung erfordert ein Überdenken dessen, was Arbeit, Organisationen und Gesellschaft ausmacht. Dies umfasst auch die Rolle des Human Resource Managements (HRM) und des zugrundliegenden Professionsverständnis, einschließlich der Kompetenzen und der Art und Weise, wie sich das HRM gegenüber anderen konkurrierenden Professionen und neuen Technologien behauptet und weiterentwickelt. Ausgehend vom Diversity Management rekonstruieren wir den Professionalisierungspfad, den das HRM bereits eingeschlagen hat, und entwickeln die konzeptionellen Grundlagen für weitere Überlegungen. Anhand der zwei Beispiele People Analytics und Remote Work veranschaulichen wir, wie HRM als Profession seine Zuständigkeit für ein bestimmtes Problem angesichts einer aufkommenden Technologie behaupten sowie neues Terrain gewinnen kann. Anhand dieser aktuellen Beispiele diskutieren wir die Legitimität von HRM und plädieren für ein Verständnis von HRM als Profession, die sich dem Menschen in der sich wandelnden Arbeitswelt verschreibt, was sich grundlegend von der Sichtweise von HRM als Geschäftspartner unterscheidet.

Stichworte: Human Relations, Organisationale Transformation, Berufssoziologie, Digitalisierung, People Analytics, Remote Work

1. Introduction

In the past decade, work has been substantially reconfigured in relation to digital technologies (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) and is now inextricably intertwined with the digital. This change bears consequences not only for the individual worker but also for HRM as a profession. While some see this as an opportunity for HRM to gain influence, others question its continued legitimacy, calling for a problematization of what constitutes a profession and a consideration of potential ways forward. In light of increasing quantification, human enhancement technologies, and automation (e.g., Andrighetto, Baldissari & Volpato, 2017; Bloomfield & Dale, 2015; Bui 2020) that can lead to experiences of dehumanization (Bell & Khoury, 2016; Taskin et al. 2019), scholars have drawn attention to the need to "re-humanize" HRM practices (e.g., Al-Amoudi et al., 2017; Petriglieri, 2020; Taskin & Ndayambaje, 2018). We join these scholars in arguing that a focus on the *human* as the core of the HRM profession is at stake in the current (digital) transformation processes of organizations.

Our argument is structured as follows. We start by giving a short historical background to the emergence of HRM and reconstruct the path to professionalization that HRM has followed up to now in the context of past organizational transformations. Using Diversity Management as guiding example, we describe the revitalization of HRM as an existing profession. Inspired by the landmark contribution by Abbott (1988), we develop a relational understanding of professions, i.e., professions are groups that have gained jurisdiction to work on a specific problem and defend their area of expertise against other competing professions as well as technology. Subsequently, we consider two recent scenarios to reflect on the role of HRM against the backdrop of current organizational (digital) transformations. In the first scenario, we explore the ramifications of People Analytics; in the second, we turn to workplace design and the trend towards Remote Work. In the final part we discuss the ways in which the legitimacy of HRM as a profession is challenged and whether HRM is still equipped with the right competencies to support organizational transformation and help employees transition into the digital era. We conclude with a strong plea for HRM as profession that stands up to technology and at the same time uses it for its own professional concerns, so that the human retains its significance in HR practices.

2. Humanization and HRM as a profession: A framework

"Up to now, the personality has come first; in the future, the organization and the system will come first." These are the words of Frederick W. Taylor (1911, p. 4), the founder of Scientific Management at the beginning of the 20th century. Taylor called for voluntary subordination to a rational association of purpose (i.e., the organization) in which the individual must be completely absorbed in the performance of their (work) duties. Consequently, people were seen as means or resources that should be used as effectively and efficiently as possible.

In retrospect, it can be said that Scientific Management has reduced the human to mere objects or tools thereby dehumanizing them. More generally speaking, "organizational dehumanization" is defined as the process, experience, or attitude by which the human worker "feels objectified by his/her organization, denied personal subjectivity, and made to feel like a tool or instrument for the organization's ends" (Bell & Khoury, 2011,

p. 170). Such a definition builds on an understanding of "humanness" as defined by uniqueness (including sensibility, rationality, maturity) and human nature (including individuality, emotional responsiveness, and depth) (see also Haslam, 2006).

In response to the suppression of individual human needs and desires as exhorted by Taylor, the Human Relations movement— usually associated with the Hawthorne Studies of the late 1920s and early 1930s (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939; Walter-Busch, 1989) —can be seen as an attempt to "humanize" work by finding ways to incorporate human needs and desires into the organization, rather than suppress them. In other words, while Scientific Management tried to overcome the effects of informal organizing and human differences, Human Relations approaches tried to account for them and find ways to align them with the purposes of the organization, thereby defending and protecting human differences and special needs.

Employees dedicated to ensuring these objects worked in "welfare departments" to mitigate the negative consequences of thoroughly rationalized organizations and work to improve the working conditions of industrial workers (Mormann, 2019). As pointed out by Kaufman (2008), among others, the emergence of the modern HRM department can be traced back to the advent of industrial welfare and is historically closely linked to the Human Relations movement. Individual companies began to provide their employees with a range of workplace and family amenities, such as cafeterias, medical care, recreational programs, libraries, and company-provided housing. In order to coordinate these new offerings, new positions were created including "social secretaries," "social workers," or "factory nurses" giving way to a particular professional group that would take on the problem of defending and protecting human needs and differences, emotional and cognitive abilities, and differences known today as Human Resource Management (HRM). This problem construction and the development of appropriate problem-solving approaches was in some ways a unique feature of this professional group and helped establish the reputation of HRM for balancing competing organizational and individual needs while also ensuring fairness and protection. However, the professionalization of HRM did not happen in isolation.

The point of the classic *The System of Professions* (Abbott, 1988) is that you cannot write the history of a single profession, medical, advocates or HRM alike, because what happens to each profession is so strongly shaped by what happens in neighboring professions. So, as the title suggests, it's not about a single profession, but always about the *system* of professions. Professions exist because they are groups that succeed in gaining sovereignty and control over a field of work. However, Abbott is not concerned with a universal explanatory model; rather, his historical case studies aim to show "how professions grow, divide, merge, adapt, and die" (Abbott, 1988, p. xiii). Different professions compete for their share of responsibility for a pressing social problem such as recognizing human needs and individuality and aligning them with organizational objectives.

Following Abbott (1988), we describe HRM as a profession that has acquired the competence to deal with a particular problem. It defends these tasks against organizational and technological developments and attempts to compete with other professions. This means that the HRM profession is always susceptible to changes in its central tasks. Further, we emphasize that the problems dealt with by professions are not a "given" and clearly defined. Rather, problems are culturally shaped by professions and through intellectual change become obsolete or renewed. This means that what is understood by

"human needs and individuality" can and has changed significantly over time, and will likely change in the future.

The HRM profession, as the history of the development of personnel work in organizations shows, is oriented to "*humanness*." We ask, however, whether humanness is currently being given sufficient attention in HRM or whether we are seeing a resurgence of Scientific Management ideals in the form of a "digital Taylorism" that creates new grounds for organizational dehumanization (*The Economist*, 2015; see also Petriglieri, 2020; Taskin et al., 2019). In this new form, the (robotic) pursuit of efficiency and conformity creates organizational realities with no room for emotion, spontaneity, or creativity. As such, it creates realities that oppose, rather than support, the values that drive the reinvention of organizations in the 21st century (e.g., Laloux, 2016). At the same time, HRM as a profession is challenged by emerging technologies that not only promise to automate manual and strenuous labor but also threaten to disrupt the work of highly skilled knowledge workers, such as engineers and doctors (Susskind & Susskind, 2015). For example, data analytics and other emerging technologies that provide insights into workers' productivity and potential raise the question of whether we still "need" HRM—and, if we do, whether HRM is equipped with the right competencies to help organizations and employees to align their interests and transition into the digital era.

Thus, HRM is faced with a triple challenge. Firstly, new technologies challenge the legitimacy of HRM per se. Secondly, other professions (e.g., line managers, controllers, IT experts) come into play, competing with HRM for tasks and responsibilities. Finally, new forms of digital Taylorism increasingly create new grounds for dehumanization. As a response to this challenge, we would like to outline scenarios that illustrate the legitimacy and, indeed, necessity of HRM as a profession dedicated to the human in the changing world of work.

3. Avenues for professionalization amid organizational transformations: past and future

To illustrate a potential path forward for HRM, we firstly take a look back into the history of the professionalization of HRM and then outline scenarios for the future. In the following section, we draw from examples of Diversity Management, People Analytics, and Remote Work to show how HRM has been able to assert itself, or can do so in the future, as a profession whose expertise lies in defending and protecting human needs and individuality and aligning organizational and human goals.

3.1 Reinventing a profession in the wake of societal problems: Diversity Management

Dobbin and colleagues (Dobbin, 2009; Kelly & Dobbin, 1998) reconstructed the spread of the idea of equal opportunity among US corporations. They described the emergence of Diversity Management in this context from a perspective in which the HRM profession played a leading role. As research has shown, the professional group played a key role in the adoption of everything from paid maternity leave to sexual harassment training (Dobbin & Kelly, 2007; Edelman 1992). The HRM profession has been able to considerably expand its area of competence in terms of positions, budgets, and topics. Many topics and tasks have been placed on the agenda of the HRM profession—yet they all revolve around the problem of discrimination against people, and thus leave out valuable individual competencies (Mormann, Hasse, & Arnold, 2022).

The background for the emergence of Diversity Management is the Civil Rights movement and anti-discrimination laws in the United States in the 1960s. Until then, HRM experts had primarily focused on compliance with trade union requirements. Discrimination against union members was to be prevented by issuing guidelines on recruitment, remuneration, and promotion (Dobbin, 2009, p. 52). Later, HRM experts adapted these guidelines in the course of meeting corporate legal requirements. The adaptation refers, for example, to the revision and addition of anti-discrimination clauses to employment contracts, but also to job advertisements that primarily addressed Black people or women, or to cooperations with selected universities in personnel recruitment. Relying on their professional knowledge, the HRM profession repurposed forms and procedures from traditional personnel work.

Instead of leaving the field to the lawyers, HRM professionals put equal employment opportunity and affirmative action on their own agenda, using their knowledge and skills to reinvent their profession. Sutton and Dobbin (1996) have pointed out that two professional groups have played distinct roles in the institutionalization of Diversity Management: labor law specialists, whom they characterize as "settlers," and HRM experts, portrayed as "explorers" (Sutton & Dobbin, 1996, p. 808). Lawyers, as members of an established profession, tend to be conservative and slower to respond to new challenges. HRM experts acted more entrepreneurially, adapting their tested knowledge on the one hand, and experimenting with new practices on the other, because they were not bound to specific doctrines. With this approach, HR successfully defended its legitimacy and even gained new ground by taking responsibility for a new area of expertise.

We chose the example of Diversity Management to illustrate how HRM has succeeded in positioning and reinventing itself as a profession in the past. However, this type of "success" is by no means permanent. Some argue that Diversity Management is currently in the process of becoming detached from the original goal of equal opportunity and is primarily associated with marketing capabilities (Sun, Ding, & Price, 2020) or seen as window dressing (Marques, 2010; see Schoen & Rost, 2021); moreover, in practice, one can see a shift in attention to issues of sustainability as an overarching theme, which then includes diversity issues. However, we conclude that "defending ground against other professions" and "identifying new terrain" are central to a profession's scope and responsibility and the demarcation of ownership.

3.2 Defending ground against other professions and technology: People Analytics

The role of performance evaluation was central to Taylor's original principles of Scientific Management and has been made even more accurate, efficient, and accessible by new digital technologies. Digital forms of performance monitoring include the collection of human capital metrics to assess the performance of individuals. The software programs and algorithms are essential to the implementation of human capital rankings, contribute to a competitive culture, and exert constant pressure to improve performance in the workplace (e.g., Evans & Holmes, 2013). Looking at new technological developments in HRM, one can get the impression that HRM is primarily oriented towards Taylor's principles of organizing (Turan, 2015), with the humane taking a back seat in the management of the organization's most important resource. However, if HRM continues to be primarily oriented in this way, it will deprive itself of its own legitimacy as a profession.

Using the example of People Analytics, we want to explain how new possibilities for collecting and processing HR-relevant data can shape HRM as a profession in the future. People Analytics can be a powerful tool for HRM and line managers alike to receive real-time information. Originally set up as a technical unit to analyze data about workforce engagement and retention, it has grown rapidly with the wide adoption of cloud HR systems and can now provide data on all aspects of workforce planning, talent management, and operational improvement (e.g., DiClaudio, 2019).

What seems to be at stake with these new data possibilities is twofold. On the one hand, People Analytics is based on the idea that human work can be quantified, measured, and optimized to increase efficiency, as proposed by Taylor's Scientific Management (see above). To this end, universal criteria and standards were established against which workers were measured. Similarly, People Analytics applies a universal data model against which real-time worker data can be compared. While this provides transparency and can also serve as feedback for the employees themselves, it misses individual differences and circumstances that might lead to deviations from the expected data model. As such, People Analytics tends to "reduce" the human workforce to its standardized measurable elements, fostering a binary yes/no (0–1) mindset. In a parallel with the criticism that the Human Relations movement has leveled at Scientific Management, it can be argued that Work 4.0 or Big Data approaches (including People Analytics) tend to neglect the individuality, diversity, and social needs of the workforce.

On the other hand, People Analytics as a data-driven application can shift the task focus of the HRM profession towards controlling personnel and measuring their contribution to business performance. People Analytics, and data analytics more generally, give organizational leaders access to metrics that help them understand what drives results. This makes the HRM profession partly irrelevant, especially as organizations move ownership of People Analytics outside HRM departments and into multidisciplinary teams of data specialists or line managers (Deloitte, 2017, p. 100).

If HRM is to retain its decisive role as a profession that adds value in decision-making processes, it seems necessary to broaden its scope from an internal view of data to highlight the relevance of people data for business issues. The profession would also be well-advised to invest in its ability to interpret data and provide situation-specific contextual information that is relevant for decision-making. As new findings suggest, an educated "guess" by experienced managers can outperform data analytics (Acar & West, 2021). Based on data of 122 companies, the study explored decisions on innovation screening—that is, which innovations to pursue for development. Such decisions, like talent management or other HRM issues, are marked by high uncertainty, because it is unclear whether data from the past can predict future success. The study revealed that relying on data did not prove to be the most efficient way of making a decision. As the authors elaborate: "Managers who relied on their instincts together with some simple heuristics made decisions that were just as accurate but were undertaken much more quickly. That is, heuristics and gut feelings offered a better tradeoff in terms of decision-making speed and accuracy" (Acar & West, 2021, online resource).

A decisive moderating factor in the accuracy of the decision turned out to be the managers' prior experience and domain-specific knowledge. When managers had no domain-specific knowledge, relying on analytics proved a good alternative. This example illustrates that human assessment of a situation is still valid. In fact, it can outperform

simplified analytics when the situation is complex and uncertain. This suggests that HRM could take advantage of People Analytics as a supporting or assisting technology, especially among junior HR managers who might not have enough domain-specific knowledge. Ultimately, decisions about the human workforce should be made by humans. This point is echoed by a recent study by Grotenhermen et al. (2020), who note that human decisions receive higher acceptance rates compared to fully automated decisions—despite the fact that automated systems operate more objectively, by comparing the workforce against universal standards.

In light of these exemplary findings, we conclude that the emergence of People Analytics offers HRM numerous opportunities as a profession, but it also requires changes in competencies and skills for HRM. These include an active role in deciding which measures to apply and what data to collect. In addition, skills are needed to interpret the data, contextualize it with domain-specific knowledge, generate additional value in data-driven analytics for decision-making, and ensure privacy protections and human workforce integrity by moving away from a simplistic focus on efficiency and cost and instead advocating for strong forward-looking development of individuals' diverse talents.

3.3 Identifying new terrain: Remote Work

Digitalization creates new opportunities for collaboration and the delivery of work and in this sense, the prospect for HRM to identify new terrain. In many organizations, the home office "experiment" enforced by the global COVID-19 crisis made flexible working arrangements in terms of both time and place more popular. Initially, the biggest challenge for companies transitioning to working from home was maintaining business continuity, which created the demand for a digital transformation. Collaboration and work processes had to be redesigned to complete tasks virtually (Collings et al., 2021, p. 3) putting the emphasis of the transition primarily on *technology*. As a result, it has been the professional responsibility of IT experts: equipping every employee with a laptop, ensuring cloud computing to provide remote access to organizational documents, and installing applications for videoconferencing. Questions of HRM remained in the background. However, as reports and research findings about the Remote Work experiment begin to appear, it is becoming clear that Remote Work is not a question of technological infrastructure alone, but a "problem" field in which the HRM profession is responsible for ensuring that work remains "humane."

For example, a recent report by Microsoft (2021) compares collaboration trends in Microsoft 365 over the period of 12 months (February 2020 to February 2021). The report suggests that "The digital intensity of workers' days has increased substantially, with the average number of meetings and chats steadily increasing." The report found that time spent in meetings has more than doubled, the number of chats per week has increased by 45 percent, with 42 percent more chats per person *after hours*, and a significant increase (66 %) in working on documents (viewing and consulting documents, working on shared documents, creating documents) compared to before the crisis. The report also notes a "high pressure to keep up"—suggesting that employees feel a need to reply instantly and be "always on." Seen critically, the shift towards digital work and technology tools has turned workers into "machines" who must respond at the click of a mouse. But workers' high productivity comes with a "human cost," as the report suggests: 54 % of

the workforce feel "overworked" and 39 % "exhausted" (Microsoft, 2021; see also Kelly & Moen, 2020).

In a similar vein, another study based on personnel and analytics data of more than 10'000 employees in an Asian IT service firm (Gibbs et al., 2021) suggests that the high productivity during lockdown was achieved by spending significantly more time in front of the screen. Overall, the reports converge in noting high rates of exhaustion and fatigue among employees. The latter is due not only to increases in the intensity of digital work, but also to the urgency and speed of virtual work, which can lead to higher burnout rates and declining motivation and engagement (e.g., Fauville et al., 2021).

Several studies in recent years have examined Remote Work and its impact on productivity (Allen et al., 2015), as well as the positive and negative consequences for worker well-being (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), including the effects of work–family conflict, social isolation, distracting environmental conditions, job autonomy, and self-direction on the productivity, work engagement, and stress of employees working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Galanti et al., 2021). While remote work has proliferated and become "the new normal", the potential and current role of HRM as profession in shaping these new virtual and hybrid forms of working has rarely been addressed.

This gives rise to call on HRM as profession to actively shape these new working conditions and to ensure that questions of productivity, diversity, and employees' well-being do not become responsibilities of the individual alone but remain a core responsibility of the employing organization (see Boekhorst, Hewett, Shantz, & Good, 2021). Issuing policies that regulate but also protect remote and home office workers is one example of how HRM can actively identify new terrain and responsibilities, thereby ensuring that organizational transformation serves the ideal of a humane world of working for the benefit of the individual, the organization, and society at large.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Digitalization has upended elementary organizational practices of doing business, opening up the possibility to work anytime, anywhere and to augment human decision-making by drawing on data analytics. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the many advantages of a digital world of work. Yet, it has also revealed the challenges and potential downsides of an increasingly digital world dominated by technology and data models that tend to build on simplified models of human behavior. Such trends call for an HRM profession to balance out one-sided views and complement them with a strong focus on the human dimension of the workforce, its individuality, diversity, and social needs. Ultimately, such a humanistic view will enable organizations to reinvent themselves and transition into the digital age. To make sure that HRM as a profession continues to play a central role in shaping a humane organization in the future, we have identified two areas for action: the profession's *scope and responsibility* and the *demarcation of ownership* vis-a-vis automated technology and other professions.

It is important to point out that our argument for HRM as a profession differs from authors who want to see HRM positioned as a business partner or profit center within the organization. This view is exemplified in the following quote: "There has never been a better time for HR to create greater strategic value, as the potential for meaningful workforce insights and analytics comes within reach" (DiClaudio, 2019, p. 43). It may be true that the timing is favorable for a *strategic* shift as suggested in the quote. However, in our

paper, we argue for a *professional* shift *to people* as a crucial step to ensure organizational transformation in the wake of digitization and other societal developments. It is true that the use of People Analytics in HRM can make HR-related decisions objective, transparent, and data-driven (Shrivastava et al., 2018). But if HRM experts merely rely on machines that work for them, or work like machines themselves, the profession will offer no added value in the future and will be indistinguishable from other professional groups such as controlling and data science. HRM experts who work in a human-centric way, however, will be able to stand out as a profession and continue to add value—or more precisely, create *new* value—for the employees, the organization, and society at large.

This is not to say that HRM should not use technology at all. Rather, HRM as a profession should take its own stance in the course of digitalization and change in the world of work. For example, HRM should appreciate and exploit the technological potential of performance appraisals to create a numbers-based foundation for dialogue. "This dialogue," as Taskin and Ndayambaje (2018, p. 295) argue, "ought not to mainly consist in intellectual debate, but first and foremost in listening to one another's concern." In this context, Turkle's reflections in *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Turkle, 2016) are also illuminating, raising awareness that a flight from conversation and towards technology ultimately undermines our relationships, creativity, and productivity.

If topics and trends such as Remote Work or People Analytics are only deployed unilaterally, that is, in the service of organizational aims, then HRM is likely to render itself obsolete as a profession. While traditional professions such as doctors and lawyers claimed a function for society from the outset—for example, in the form of ensuring legal security or health—organizational professions as HRM, which only emerged in the context of organizations, initially focused on genuine organizational concerns (Gibel et al., 2021, p. 147). As illustrated by the example of HRM, organizational professions not only develop proposed solutions for their employers, but at the same time map the societal problems to which these solutions relate in the organization—or, at least, foreground such problems as relevant issues. We have discussed diversity management as an exemplary case in this context (see 3.1). In their area of responsibility (e.g., recruitment, performance evaluation, workplace design), HRM experts can and should always ask how the world of work can also be designed in a humane way and how human needs can be taken into consideration to ensure sustainable well-being.

To conclude, current organizational changes including technological developments are putting pressure on HRM as a profession. This cannot be glossed over. Countering the increasing dehumanization of organizations was once the reason for the emergence of HRM departments and the professionalization of HRM experts. Such awareness for the humane should become the focus of the professional work of HRM once again. The possibilities of digitalization should be tamed in this context, but at the same time HRM as a profession can and should develop competencies, as we have illustrated, to stand up for the human in the world of work, to defend its area of responsibility for the "human" in resource management, and to develop it further by claiming responsibility and demarcating ownership.

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