

Human Resource Management in Sri Lanka: A Profession or a Skilled Occupation?

Adikaram A. S.^{1a}

Ranasinghe K. M. E. N.^a

^aDepartment of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo

Abstract

While there is no doubt about the importance of Human Resource Management (HR) for businesses around the world, the debate continues as to whether HR is a profession similar to medicine, engineering, accountancy, and law. The aim of this paper is to compare and contrast the attributes of a profession identified by Greenwood (1957) with HRM discipline, to identify whether HRM is a profession or a skilled occupation in Sri Lanka. Employing qualitative research methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 top HR professionals, and secondary information was gathered from websites and documents related to Institute of Personnel Management Sri Lanka as well as Association of HR professionals, which are the known professional bodies related to HR in Sri Lanka. The findings indicated how the HR in Sri Lanka does not appear to possess many criteria of a profession, indicating the need for HRM discipline in Sri Lanka to acquire and demonstrate systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes and a professional culture. According to the interview information, HR can be identified as more of a skill-based occupation in Sri Lanka, where the success of an HR personnel is said to depend more on his or her inherent skills and abilities (vis-à-vis the systematic knowledge). Hence, it is clear that, at the moment, HR in Sri Lanka appears to be more of an occupation with specialized skills and distinct competencies rather than a profession with attributes of a profession.

Keywords. Human resource management, Profession, Occupation, Skill

1. Introduction

Human Resource Management (HRM or simply HR) has become a key function in organizations, designed to maximize employee performance to meet the employer's strategic objectives (Johnson, 2009). HR personnel undoubtedly play a unique role at the intersection of people and business issues (Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, & Younger, 2009).

HR is a product of the human relations movement of the early 20th century when researchers began documenting ways of creating business value through the strategic management of the workforce. The function was initially dominated by transactional work, such as payroll and benefits administration. Yet, over time, due to globalization, company consolidation, technological advancement, and further research, the scope of HR expanded. Hence it is clear how today, with businesses facing enormous changes, HR personnel must do more than manage employees' terms and conditions (Ulrich et al., 2009). In this milieu, presently, HR departments and units in organizations are typically responsible for an array of responsibilities and activities ranging from employee recruitment, training and development, performance appraisal, rewarding (Paauwe & Boon, 2009) managing change, mergers,

¹Corresponding Author. Email: agamwarige@gmail.com

acquisitions, succession planning, to industrial and labor relations (Klerck, 2009). There is no doubt that the bar has been raised for HRM.

In this background-while HR does not have a history such as medicine, engineering, accountancy, and law-today HR has become an equally recognized discipline with much scope, importance, and demand. However, though there is no doubt about the importance of HR for businesses around the world, a debate exists as to whether HR is a profession similar to other disciplines such as medicine, engineering, accountancy, and law. This has been a debate that had gained much interest of scholars, researchers as well as the HR professionals in the recent past (Balthazard, 2014; Fanning, 2011; D. Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013). Even though research has indicated that HR increasingly meets the criteria of a profession (Ulrich et al., 2013), whether this is true in the Sri Lankan context remains a mystery.

In practice, it can be seen that most top HR personnel in Sri Lanka have come to the field from a non-HR background, and moreover, from various other academic and professional backgrounds. Yet, when it comes to other professions such as medicine, engineering, accountancy, and law, it is a prerequisite to possess specific qualifications and educational standards in the relevant field to enter the profession. These academic and professional qualifications act as the initial entry boundary to those professions, thereby ensuring that not anyone and everyone can step into the profession without being a true professional in the area. Not only the entry qualifications but especially in terms of holding the top professional positions in these disciplines, the qualifications and professional background play a vital role. However, it does not seem to be the same for the HRM profession in Sri Lanka, where it can be identified that there are no entry qualification barriers as such. More importantly, the majority of the top HR professionals have come to the field from non-HR backgrounds and non-HR educational and academic qualifications, thereby giving the impression that anyone can perform HRM. In this context, the question arises as to how can individuals from different disciplines easily enter the field and perform the specialized tasks therein? If anybody can perform the HR tasks without a specific HR body of knowledge/theory, experience and expertise, is it more due to the skills these individuals possess that are needed to perform the HR tasks? Can anybody perform the complex and specialized tasks that HR personnel is required to perform? What are the prerequisites to enter the field? All these questions point toward the main issue whether, in this background, HR is a profession in the sense other professions such as medicine, engineering, accounting, and Finance? Then, is HR a profession (as opposed to being just an „occupation“) or is it a skill?

It is this puzzle that we aim to unravel and solve in this study by exploring whether HR can be seen as a profession or whether it is actually a skill (or a skilled occupation) in the Sri Lankan context. This understanding will help in identifying the status of HR professionals and the HR occupation in Sri Lanka and in identifying the future needs and the road map to making HR more professional, an endeavor the international HR fraternity has embarked on. Moreover, with the authority and the recognition established professions gain, it is also important to understand the standing of the HRM occupation. This is especially important in a milieu, where HRM is struggling to gain its rightful position in the organizational hierarchy.

In what follows, we attempt to explain what a profession and an occupation means, drawing from related frameworks and theory. Then we move on to the presentation of the methodology employed for the study. Finally, the findings and discussions are reported with the conclusion of the study.

2. Profession vs Occupation

The dilemma as to what is a profession and what is an occupation has persisted for long (Brante, 2011). The debate of „profession or occupation“ exist for many careers such as translators/interpreters (Katan, 2009), librarians (Goode, 1961), Nursing practitioners (McMurray, 2011) and Safety and health personnel (Ferguson & Ramsay, 2010). However, there does not seem to be a universally agreed upon definition of what constitutes a “profession” or an “occupation”. According to Merriam Webster’s dictionary (n.d.), a profession is “a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation” and occupation is “an activity in which one engages”, “the principal business of one’s life”, or “the holding of an office or position”.

Going beyond these broader definitions, many scholars have attempted to define and arrive at features of a profession (such features of an occupation could not be found) or attempted to differentiate a profession and a non-profession, even though such attempts are criticized as ineffective (Klegon, 1978). For example, Klass (1961) identifies the need for attributes such as conception and birth in a university, legal status, the governance and remuneration as criteria of a profession. Freidson (2001) (as cited in Balthazard, 2014) defines six dimensions of professionalism as (1) a body of knowledge and skills derived from abstract concepts and theories, (2) recognition as a profession, (3) professional autonomy and internal control, (4) an occupationally controlled labour market requiring training credentials for entry and career mobility, (5) an ideology of service, and (6) limited external controls. There are other scholars such as Fanning (2011) who too had attempted at identifying characteristics of a profession and then moving on to comparing these characteristics against HRM profession. According to Greenwood (1957), distinguishing attributes of a profession is 1) systematic theory 2) authority 3) community sanction 4) ethical codes and 5) a culture. While Greenwood agrees that you cannot have a clear-cut boundary that defines a profession along these attributes, these can be used to explore whether a certain occupation is a profession. In a review of these attributes Brante (2011) identifies some common traits as theoretical knowledge, long education, examinations, licensing, specific association, organization, various types of control, collegiality, ethics, work for the common good, autonomy, discretion, and sometimes class position.

In attempting to understand whether HR is a profession or not, it was thought important to compare these characteristics against the characteristics of HRM. Hence, looking at these different characteristics specified by different scholars, we will use the 5 attributes of Greenwood to explore whether HRM is a profession or an occupation with specialized skills. These 5 attributes were selected because they contain many other characteristics discussed by other scholars such as Fanning (2011), Klass (1961) and Freidson (2001) (as cited in Balthazard, 2014).

3. Methods

Under the qualitative research methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 top HR professionals. The 16 HR personnel were selected using purposive sampling technique by identifying those who have been in the HRM field for over five years and who were willing to participate in the study. The experience of the participants in the HRM field was specifically considered in order to understand the background they come from, the skills they possess, the tasks they perform and their perception about the HR profession, to clearly identify the attributes of the HRM occupation. These participants consisted of 6 males and 10 females. In addition, secondary information from websites and documents related to Institute of Personnel Management Sri Lanka as well as Association of HR professionals, which are the known professional bodies related to HR in Sri Lanka, were analyzed. Collected data were analyzed using theoretical thematic analysis through the 6 phases suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The initial coding and the subsequent development of themes were carried out with Greenwoods (1957) five attributes in mind. Codes and themes were specifically compared against these attributes to understand the existence and non-existence of the attributes. For example, the theme qualifications was arrived at by combining the codes basic qualifications in HR, basic qualifications not in HR, advanced qualifications in HR and advanced qualifications not in HR. This was then compared against the attribute, „systematic body of theory“

4. Findings

As expected, it was interesting to note that only five out of the 16 participants were from an HRM educational background. The rest of the participants were from diverse backgrounds such as Law, IT, Agriculture, management and Finance and Journalism. This reiterates the argument we are attempting to build, which suggests that a top HR personnel does not necessarily have to have a pure HR background (education and experience) so as to enter, advance and retain in HR.

In order to delve deeper into this situation of HR in Sri Lanka and to explore the professional status of HR, a comparison was conducted between the findings from the in-depth interviews and the document analysis with the five attributes of Greenwoods (1957) to understand whether HR in Sri Lanka is indeed a profession.

4.1. Systematic Body of theory

According to Greenwood (1957), „body of theory“ means a „fund of knowledge that has been organized into an internally consistent system“ where, „[p]reparation for a profession, therefore, involves considerable preoccupation with systematic theory, a feature virtually absent in the training of the non-professional“ (p.66). Even though Greenwood does not necessarily talk about academic qualifications, he emphasizes the need for prolonged training, specialized knowledge and formal education. Knowledge and expertise has been highlighted and critiqued by other scholars too as a key attribute of a profession (e.g. Saks, 2012).

Professional background usually allude to the work experience and profession of an individual. The fact that, other than for five participants, others haven't prepared for HRM profession through gaining systematic theory and training in HR. Participants formal education has been in a wide variety of academic areas such as Psychology, Physical Science, Information Technology, Agriculture, and Banking. Only five participants had specialized in Human Resources Management within their Business

Management/Administration basic degrees or have gained other educational qualifications in HR. While these participants have entered the field of HR after their qualifications, other participants have worked in different other occupations/disciplines before entering HRM due to various reasons such as interest they have developed about HR, being placed in HR by the top management, and other circumstances.

While they have subsequently acquired qualifications in the field, they have entered, performed and advanced in the field without any education, academic qualifications or prolonged training in HR. In this background, even though the existence of a body of systematic theory in HR is not disputed, its importance and need to enter and perform in HR is thus questionable. This in a way problematizes the theory and knowledge of HR, where it can be seen that the body of systematic theory and knowledge are either not practiced or not vital for the practice of the occupation.

The participants indicated that they have mixed perceptions about the need to have a systematic theory and knowledge in order to be in the profession.

I have no HR background. My degrees are in banking, English, and psychology. I don't have any formal HR experience. Does that make me a good HR person? I think it makes me better because my HR is all practical HR. So I can always learn the theory but the practical part you need to do and learn. (Respondent 9, Female, 43).

The majority of the participants were of the perception that the background of the individual is irrelevant to the success of the top HR professional based on the individual's inherent skills, abilities, and talents. Hence, individuals stepping into the HRM profession from non-HR backgrounds were considered to be better HR professionals, as they believed that these individuals possessed these inborn talents and characteristics.

I think HR is an inborn talent. HR is always a challenge so I think that the interest and capacity of a person matters, no matter what background they come from. Everyone can do HR. (Respondent 10, Female, 35).

The research identified that it was perceived that the performance and success are very individualistic and that it varied from person to person based on their skills. Therefore, it was considered that the background is irrelevant as long as the individual fits the profile which the organizations were interested in, even when the individual is from a non-HR background.

In my view, the background doesn't matter, as long as you fit the profile which is needed and the experience. In terms of HR, you can teach the person the basics and train the person. No matter what background you have, accounting, a CIMA person etc. but if the person feels that they have the nag for HR and want to go ahead they can and may do so. (Respondent 4, Female, 40).

These viewpoints highlight the importance of skill over the systematic body of knowledge in the field of HR.

Moreover, it is also noteworthy that HR Meducation in Sri Lanka has proliferated over the years with many government universities (such as University of Colombo, University of Sri Jayawardenapura and University of Kelaniya), private universities, and many other educational and professional institutions offering HR Meducation. While the quality of these many programs would differ, it indicates to the demand in the HR Meducation on one hand, and the importance of such education on the other. However, even with such opportunities for individual to gain the required knowledge and expertise in entering the field, the fact that many still enter it without this knowledge raises concerns.

4.2. Professional Authority

Greenwood (1957) describes the basis of professional authority as the specialized knowledge that a professional will have which would highlight the layman's comparative ignorance. The power/ability to make decisions about the service the professional provides and the clients' subordination (as against customers' autonomy to make a decision) to professional authority is highlighted here.

Participants indicated that they mainly play two main roles as the Strategic Role and the Operational Role. It was identified that up until recently, they were involved in operational roles, however, with the developments and evolution in the profession, the top HR professionals are now moving into holding a strategic role within the relevant organizations which they operate in.

4.2.1 Strategic Role

The majority of the participants emphasized the importance of HR playing a strategic role within the organization. Formulating and developing HR policies and practices and being involved in the implementation process, stakeholder management such as managing the managers, employees, and potential employees, were identified as roles which are expected from a top HR professional. At the same time enhancing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of human resource in order to match with the organization's vision and mission and being the driving force of the organization can also be identified as expectations from this role. As Lemmergaard (2008) emphasize the role of an HR professional is no longer limited to the traditional HR activities but more focused towards strategic decision making of an organization and is a key individual in decisions made by the board.

I am part of the vision of the company, the business plan of the company, a part of the key decisions of the company. I am very much inspired by the fact that I am a part of the key decisions which the company makes. It is all for the business, not the people. The decisions we make are for the business which results in managing the people. This is what I see as what is expected from the role of a top HR professional. (Respondent 12, Female, 35).

However, only very few respondents stated of being engaged in this strategic role, while majority stated of their involvement in operational roles.

4.2.2 Operational Role

The role of a top HR personnel also includes handling operational activities of the HRM function and processes such as recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation management, and disciplinary procedures. It was

identified that as a top HR personnel one needs to oversee all these operational activities in order to ensure that it is a fair and equitable (or effective and efficient).

Anything people related is linked to me in some form, directly or indirectly. We look at the main areas of HR. People, make sure that people are looked after and that they retain. Ensure that the talent pipeline is maintained. Be risk conscious in carrying out the work, employee relations, disciplinary actions, misconducts, training and development activities and performance management. (Respondent 9, Female, 49).

It has to be noted that the role expected from a top HR personnel was dependent based on the organization and the industry which they operated in as well. There are some organizations which have identified and placed HR as a significant contributor to the key decision making of the organization thereby, allowing top HR personnel to play a strategic role in their position. Whereas there are some organizations which are still in the development stages in HR, hence, still require top HR personnel to be involved in conducting an operational role within the organization, thereby limiting the level of contribution which one can make at the strategic level. Therefore, it was identified that the role of a top HR professional and the expectations vary on various factors.

It is an evolving role. The HR function is interwoven to the business. It depends on what is the direction which the organization is heading. I have worked with 5 CEOs, each one's expectation is very different. At the same time, the life cycle of the organization is also important, which stage are you in is important, and expectations differ based on that and also on the business context. (Respondent 7, Female, 42).

All in all, looking at the statements participants made, it is difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of the existence and level of professional authority for HR personnel interviewed. Though some of the participants have shared details of upholding a strategic role within the company, there has been no substantial evidence to indicate that the responsibilities undertaken showcase a true ability to make decisions which are impactful to the organizations.

However, it can be said that the HR managers would not have the authority over customers as much as professions such as engineering, medical or IT professionals would have, especially given the fact that many interviewees have come to the occupation as laymen, indicating that they do not necessarily have a specialized knowledge as such when they entered the profession.

Moreover, it was seen that others in organizations also had some opinion or knowledge about HR and how HR should be practiced, indicating that HR did not really have the professional authority over the HR discipline (Greenwood, 1957). When one participant explained how she selected HR, she also indicated how others (laymen) in organizations have expectations and understanding of what HR should be.

When I was working, I always thought and felt that there were better ways to execute HRM activities than how it was currently being done. You know, when you are not in HR you can clearly see what is more appealing to the employees and all that. So, when I took up the HR position, I knew exactly what the people

wanted, because I was one of those non-HR people once. (Respondent 2, Female, 43).

4.3 Sanction of the Community

Community approval of the powers and privileges (either informally and formally) of the profession through granting them the control over its training centers, accreditation process, admission into the profession, as well as setting and evaluation of standards and performances, are identified as „sanction of the community“ by Greenwood (1957). However, it is seen that such community sanction is not evident in the profession of HRM in Sri Lanka.

The main „professional bodies“ of HRM in Sri Lanka can be identified as the Institute of Personnel Management of Sri Lanka (IPM), which was founded in 1959 and incorporated by an Act of Parliament (1976) and the Association of Human Resource Professionals (HRP) which is claimed as the only professional network of practicing HR professionals in Sri Lanka. There are also universities such as University of Colombo, University of Sri Jayawardenapura and the University of Kelaniya and other institutions such as Institute of Business Management, which provides education and training in HRM.

However, these two professional bodies nor the other universities and institutions do not have control over training in HRM nor any control over the admission of individuals into the profession. There is also no accreditation process nor any standards set for the performance of HR professionals in Sri Lanka, either through these bodies or otherwise, unlike in some other countries.

Moreover, a number of participants also mentioned how they came to the HRM occupation by accident.

The company which I worked in was growing and wanted someone who can develop the HR function who knew the business well. So they thought that I would be a good choice at that time. It was an Assistant Manager position in HR so, I took it up though I was doing management and finance work at that time. (Respondent 13, Male, 29).

Actually getting into HRM was not a choice. Basically, I wanted to become a banker, I joined just like a normal school leaver that was what was commonly done those days. We were given a basic general training. It was 3-week training, and after that, I was automatically posted to the HRM department. So, it was not a choice. (Respondent 6, Male 36).

These responses also indicate how easily people can come into the field without any qualifications or sanctions. Again, emphasizing how HR is not a profession *vis a vis* other professions such as medicine, law, engineering, architecture, accountancy where such ease of entry into the profession is absent and a need for strict academic qualifications, standards, training, registration, and accreditation is present.

4.4 Ethical Conduct

Professions would also have a „built-in regulative code which compels ethical behavior on the part of its members“ (Greenwood, 1957, p.69). There can be formal

as well as in formal ethical codes. However, in Sri Lanka, such a professional code of conduct for the HR profession cannot be found nor any sanctions for unprofessional behavior.

Even though no professional code of conduct exists, the interview discussions indicated that all participants believed that having a self-developed code of conduct was much needed to be an HR professional. They emphasized on being objective and maintaining a fair and credible personality which ensured that their ethical behavior is not questioned by the employees of the companies which they were employed at.

Credibility and showcasing a positive image among others in the organization were emphasized by the participants. So, it can be noted that in local practice competencies such as being fair, maintaining objectivity and integrity were highly expected from top HR professionals. Being professionals who get to deal with people on a day to day basis, it is a must that other people place their trust in the HR professional. The positive vibe one maintains and the relationships and networks which they build up will eventually lead to making the individual a credible person. At the same time, these competencies will allow the person to become credible and also enable the implementation of such needed activities. Thereby showing that whatever is promised will be delivered at the best level.

At the same time, it was also noted that having a strong moral sense and principles as an individual, showcasing transparency, credibility, trustworthiness, and friendliness was identified as other factors of consideration.

Fairness and integrity is a must if you want to stay in this industry. You cannot have people question you on what you do or how you do things. (Respondent 13, Male, 29).

However, while participants did indicate the importance of ethical conduct, there was no actual ethical practice explored. Hence, without any ethical code of practice and a testing of ethical conduct, whether these HR personnel walk the talk remains a mystery.

4.5. The Professional Culture

The existence of an organizational setting, professional associations, educational and research centers related to the profession are all part of a professional culture around which, formal organizations extend a filigree of informal groupings: the multitude of small, closely knit clusters of colleagues” (Greenwood, 1957, p. 71).

Taking the Sri Lankan context into account, it can be noted that IPMS Sri Lanka as well as HRP, provide this professional culture to a certain extent, where they are considered professional associations which also conduct fellowship, education, and research in HRM. However, these two organizations are the only such organizations. Given the profession has been in existence for a long-time period, the professional culture developed for the HR profession seems to be limited only to these two professional organizations.

The universities and the private institutions which offer programs in HR, are only limited to being educational institutions and do not contribute massively towards the

development of the professional culture persay, as the majority are mainly degree awarding entities. Also, these institutions do not have dedicated research being conducted in HR as well.

4.6. HR as a Skill

Almost all the participants persistently highlighted the importance of skills for HR over knowledge or qualifications in HR. They were of the perception that the background of the individual is irrelevant as long as they possess relevant skills, abilities, and talents.

So I started with a technical background, I was a technical person and moved towards HR. I do not have a formal HR background. The reason is the passion I have towards working with people and management. Understanding everything from the grass root level to the top and the ability to drive, motivate and improve people. (Respondent 11, Male, 47).

I thought that HR would suit me because of my personality. I am a person who is easy going and people come to me very often because they feel that I am open. Even my friends at the workplace used to tell that I can even talk to a lamp post and that I would do well in HR because of the personality which I reflected. (Respondent 2, Female, 43).

I now have 20 years of experience in my career. Out of which, 10 years was in HR and 4 years management experience where I headed the full spectrum of the HRM function. Mainly I have worked through my experience and knowledge gained, not through an academic qualification. I have been able to secure employment and advance through my career. (Respondent 4, Female, 40).

All these statements indicate the emphasis placed on skills in becoming an HR personnel over knowledge. While participants also highlighted various skills HR personnel needs such as business acumen, analytical skills, people skills and right attitudes, these skills will not be discussed in detail in this paper, as it is beyond the scope of this paper (see Arulraja & Opatha (2013) for a detailed account of skills needed for HR personnel).

5. Conclusion

Having a majority of the top HR personnel stepping into HRM field without or with minimum basic HR qualifications indicate how qualifications and academic knowledge (or possessing a systematic body of knowledge) really is insignificant to enter, progress and retain in the field of HR. According to the participants, the skills, attitudes, and abilities are the most important to be and thrive in the field of HR.

Given this background, HRM can be identified as more of a skill based occupation rather than a profession with the absence of 1) systematic theory 2) authority 3) community sanction 4) ethical codes and 5) a culture (Greenwood, 1957). However, with the importance placed on the field and the acceptance of the academic society, it is clear that HR is on its way towards being a fully-fledged profession.

6. Practical Implications

The findings thus indicate how the HR in Sri Lanka does not appear to possess many criteria of a profession, indicating the need for the profession in Sri Lanka to acquire

and demonstrates systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes and a professional culture. It is noteworthy how HR in many other countries have moved far ahead in terms of professionalism and has set a path that HR fraternity in Sri Lanka can follow in making HR a fully-fledged profession. Education (systematic theory) and certification as well as development of ethical code of conduct will be important in helping HR achieve professional maturity and the recognition it seeks as a profession. In addition, it is imperative that other barriers to HR becoming a profession be identified and dealt with (Wilensky, 1964). In this, professional bodies such as Institute of Personnel Management has an important role to play.

7. Directions for Future Research

Several new directions for future research are suggested by the findings of the current research. A sample of the current study was limited to 16 participants, the majority of the participants being from the private sector. However, future research can be conducted taking the governmental sector top HR professionals into account as well. At the same time, future studies can explore specific skills and attitudes needed for the HRM occupation.

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