The Dynamics Of Professionalization: Whither The HRM Profession?

*Stream 8: Human Resource Management Phenomena – HRM and beyond*

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Introduction

For nearly 20 years, the term ‘Human Resource Management’ (HRM) has been used to conceptualise a particular approach to managing the employment relationship and, frequently, as a contrast to Personnel Management. As a domain of professional work, HRM and its professional association of the CIPD have made significant advances both in the terms of the influence of some of the main ideas, the status of HRM practitioners, and their professional organization, the CIPD. However, some doubts remain as to the influence and status of HRM. This paper explores HRM as a profession and the way a profession is given meaning, is socially constructed and reconstructed through ongoing social relations, talk, and practice. It will be demonstrated that since the HRM profession is a socially constructed phenomenon, much of the future of the profession is in their own hands but not theirs alone. Although we are concerned primarily with the current status of the HRM profession against a framework of an ideal type of professionalism, the subsidiary debate over the competing claims for the advance of HRM will also be briefly explored. First, the characteristics of professional work will be explained, leading in turn to an assessment of the social forces changing the HRM profession. The sociological analysis of professional knowledge will be investigated with a view to extending it to incorporate a more dialogic approach to knowledge construction based on the works of Wittgenstein and Bakhtin. We will suggest that HRM professionals cannot escape the relational and interdependent aspects of their ongoing existence where meaning is made by the mutual co-ordination of utterance and supplement. It will be argued that, amidst what Shotter (1995) called a ‘chaotic welter of impressions’, HRM professionals seek to make with others a ‘landscape of enabling-constraints relevant for a range of next possible actions’, the importance of HRM practice as the source of many ideas that provide the future direction of the profession comes to the fore.

The word professional is often used to judge a person’s work behaviour and to signify a superior performance. For example, “She handled the problem in a very professional way”. Many managers and non-managers work in a ‘professional’ way, but for our purposes, we adopt one sociological approach and assign a precise meaning to profession. As Hodson and Sullivan (2002) explain, a profession is a knowledge-based occupation with high status that has four principal characteristics: specialized knowledge, autonomy, and authority over other subordinate occupational groups, and a degree of altruism (p. 282). Every occupation has a body of knowledge, but it is the esoteric knowledge monopolized by professionals that gives a profession this particular ‘hallmark’. There are three dimensions to the knowledge base of a profession: theoretical knowledge, occupation-related information and processes. Thus, for example, HRM professionals normally have a foundation of theoretical knowledge in industrial psychology, sociology, and employment law. The second dimension of the HRM professional’s knowledge base is detailed occupation-related information or know-how applied in the work setting. This part of the knowledge base includes specific information related to the key HRM functions of HRM, including HR planning, recruitment and selection, appraisal, rewards management and training and development. The third dimension of the knowledge base, means or processes, is how HRM professionals accomplish what they do (Squires, 2001). These can involve problem solving, negotiating, communicating and training processes. HRM processes are learned in post-graduate applied courses or informally in the workplace. The knowledge base of the HRM profession is constantly expanding and the professional must stay abreast of current developments.
The second principal characteristic of a profession, autonomy, means that professionals have the discretion to select the relevant knowledge or process for accomplishing what they do. HRM professionals justify their autonomy in managing the employment relations by their mastery of the knowledge base and HRM decision-making. The third principal characteristic of a profession, authority, refers to the willingness of subordinate occupational groups to comply with the instructions from power holders such as HRM professionals when required to do so. In the HRM professional-line manager relationship, for instance, the HRM professional is usually assumed to have the authority to advise the line manager on the aspects of employment law and its impact on the employment contract. Professional associations play an important role in maintaining the authority of the profession. In Canada and Britain, CHRP associations in each province and the CIPD seek to reinforce the profession’s claims to authority by establishing ‘professional designations’ and discouraging the appointment of HRM specialists without a CHRP or CIPD designation. Finally, professionals espoused concern for others, altruism. This fourth principal characteristic of a profession involves self-sacrifice and a duty to follow a code of ethical behaviour in all aspects of their work. For example, in all dealing with employees the HRM professional is expected to treat information obtained as confidential. These four principal features of a profession, as a mode of analysis, neglect how professionals can monopolize, collectively restrict access and mystify professional knowledge to maintain professional power. As Hodson and Sullivan (2002) point out the four ‘hallmarks’ of a profession represent “an idealized model that imperfectly describes reality” (p. 288). Although idealizing contemporary professionals, the four characteristics do make a useful starting point for us to explore the status and developments in the HRM profession.

The nature and status of the HRM profession, as of other professions, has to be analysed in the context of the wider debate on HRM. Over the last two decades, as others attest, the HRM model, both among its advocates and its detractors, came to represent, one of the most contentious signifiers in the managerial discourse (Storey, 1989; 2001). Since the seminal collection edited by John Storey in 1989, the HRM discourse has focused on the nature and ideological significance of various ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ normative HRM models; the significance of macro and global structures in shaping and reshaping the HRM arena; the links between HRM and organizational performance; and the importance of ‘knowledge management’ and learning in the workplace (Bratton et al. 2003). Studies have found a direct connection between ‘bundles’ of ‘best’ HRM practices and organizational performance (Baker, 1999; Buyens & De Vos, 2001; Hutchinson et al., 2000; Purcell, 1999), exposed familiar tensions and paradoxes in the HRM model (Sparrow and Marchington, 1998) and provide evidence of ‘take-up’ of individual HR practices by British, Canadian and U.S. organizations (Storey, 1995; Millward, et al., 2000; Betcherman, et al., 1994; Ichniowski et al., 1996). And a noticeable feature of the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey was the number of organisations in the UK that used Human Resources within a job title. There was evidence that HR professionals were collectively attempting to raise their collective standing by title changes and qualifications requirements. For example, the survey by Hoque and Noon (2001) found that the job title of HR did make a difference. In contrast to personnel specialists, HR specialists were more qualified and were more likely to involved in strategic planning. In particular, HR specialists were associated with sophisticated HRM practices such as personality testing, attitudes surveys and off-the-job training. Despite being unable to discern whether such practices were introduced as part of coherent approach to HRM or as a ‘bundle’ which enhance and support each other (Cooke 2000, p.5), it could be speculated that HR specialists were perceived by others as ‘more credible professionals’ (Hoque and Noon 2001, p.18). Relatedly, the
apparent involvement in strategic planning is a key claim for advocates of HRM and for strengthening the professional standing of HR professionals.

More recently, weight has been added to the claim that a strategic role for HRM has positive organisational or value-added benefits. In North America, Gordon Betcherman and his colleagues (1994) and Casey Ichniowski et al. (1996) provide some evidence that when a coherent ‘bundle’ of HR practices are aligned with organizational strategy higher performance levels result. In the UK, work by David Guest and his colleagues has attempted to explain how the link between HRM and performance occurs (Guest et al. 2000). The basic model explains the positive effects HR practices on performance achieved by ensuring and enhancing the competence of employees, tapping motivation and commitment and designing work to encourage contribution. All these elements are needed for positive responses from employees that then lead to positive outcomes. In addition, there will be low absence and low turnover rates (p.2). This is the ‘high road’ version of HRM which can be aligned to other claims relating to the ‘High Performing Work Organisation’ advocated buy the International Labour Organization and recently supported by evidence from various case studies (Ashton and Sung 2002). High-level skills and high discretion in the performance of work allow a decentralization of decision-making to those people closest to customers. Associated with such a view is the importance given to informal learning, especially within self-managed teams.

However, there are several doubts surrounding these claims. First, there are some difficult methodological challenges associated with the research (Betcherman, et al., 1994), not least the problem of developing reliable and valid measures of HR practices and disaggregating what actually constitutes ‘superior performance’ (Truss, 2001). Rhetoric in HRM has been an interest of critics such as Legge (2001) who, along with other detractors (for example, Keenoy, 1999; Thompson and McHugh, 2001), has expressed doubts about the HRM-organizational performance claims. She questions, for instance, the direction of causality in the HRM-performance link and argues that much of the research in this area “is at best confused and, at worst, conceptually and methodologically deeply flawed” (Legge, 2001, p. 31). Moreover, however organisation performance is measured, the complexity of each organisation in terms of its own history, culture and experience makes a simple link between a set of HRM practices and performance problematic.

A second concern with the strategic role of HRM professionals is at the level of practice and implementation. Guest (2000, p.26) found in a survey of over 1000 managers and Chief Executives, that while those that adopted ‘high commitment’ HRM practices showed a positive link to business performance, most respondents (90%) did not put people issues as a top priority; marketing and financial matters had much greater importance. This highlights a key point about strategy-making and implementation; even when business strategy and HR strategy is given full consideration, there a number of possible paths or choices open to the decision-makers, including cost factors, mergers and acquisitions, technology, marketing. Coleman and Keep (2001) point out that even where strategic management is taken seriously, in most cases in the UK, the focus is on profit maximization and cost minimization and this makes HR issues a third or fourth order consideration. Training, for example, is seldom considered either as an input or as a direct outcome of strategic considerations. Perhaps most significant in terms of evaluating the collective authority and standing of the HRM profession was the finding by Taylor (2002) in a national survey of 2500 employed people, that there was little evidence of a ‘coherent human resource management agenda’ (p.7) and a ‘significant’ gap between the rhetoric and the reality.
There are also a variety of views of those on the receiving end of HRM practices. It is argued that the voice of such recipients has been under-represented (Mabey et al. 1998), and workplace accounts of the delivery of HRM goals such as greater commitment and unified culture, there is little evidence of success and mostly disappointment. Guest (1999) sought to counter this view with a random sample of 1000 employees in the UK, which found that ‘a large proportion of the UK workforce’ seemed to ‘like’ HR practices (p.22). Once again there are methodological doubts about such claims (Legge 2001). There are data, however, on the effects of ‘down-sizing’, work intensification resulting from new work and organization designs, and IT, such as email and cell phones, which are alleged to cause stress, depression and other mental disorders (Bratton and Gold, 2003).

The HRM Profession

Although it would seem that HRM professionals have some way to go to match the professional status of their finance colleagues, from the perspective of the sociological approach, HRM specialists have endeavoured to enhance their status through professionalization. This process can be understood as the effort by this group of management specialists to raise their standing through adopting the four principal characteristics or ‘hallmarks’ of the professions to a greater extent (Hodson and Sullivan, 2002). In the UK, one important step in professionalizing is the strengthening of the HRM’s professional organization. In the last 5 years, there has been a significant increase in growth of the professional organization. Following a merger between the Institute of Training and Development and the Institute of Personnel Management to form the Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD), membership has grown by over 50% to reach 115,000 in January 2003 with hopes of reaching 119,000 by June 2003. More significantly, however, is the attempt to strengthen its claim to professional status, vis-à-vis employers, other corporate professionals, the policy makers and the general public, by lobbying for a charter to become the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), which it achieved in 2000. In Canada, professionalization has taken the form of nationwide advertising in the business press of the merits of hiring HR professionals with the Certified Human Resource Profession (CHRP) designation. The campaign appears to be having some impact for according to one of Canada’s top 100 employers, Hewlett-Packard (Canada), the company “actively seeks out candidates with professional designations, whether it’s a CA, CMA or a CHRP … The (CHRP) designation is very much a positive in the eyes of a company like ours” stated Hewlett-Packard’s CEO, Paul Tsaparis (The Globe and Mail, February 12, 2003, p. C7).

Another important part of the process of professionalization is standardizing the body of professional human resource management knowledge and competences that members of the profession should know and possess. Developing national standards help to increase the HRM professional’s status and authority with line managers in the organization. In the UK, the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM), the forerunner to the CHRP, has for forty years acted as a qualifying association for those aspiring to become professionally qualified personnel/human resource specialists. To become a member of the professional association, an applicant had to, among other things, pass the Institute’s examinations. And student members are required to hold academic qualifications and be pursuing professional courses approved by the Institute (Farnham 1984). In Canada, new national standards and more consistent requirements for CHRP designation have been introduced in March 2003. The development of national standards will be familiar to UK observers: national examinations to assess academic knowledge; a national directory of
CHRPs; a code of ethics; and a recertification every three years as a demonstration of currency in the HRM field. Establishing a code of ethics expresses the relationship between the HRM professional, other managers and non-managers in the organization. A code of ethics also helps neophytes learn the professional culture from the more experienced HRM professionals.

A critical assessment of the HRM profession needs to ask the question, to what extent is professional membership growth and official recognition concomitant with HRM’s professional power? By power we mean the ability of an individual professionals or group to influence or change the behaviour of others. The occupational groups who possess the most valued and esoteric knowledge, undertake the most challenging and complex cognitive tasks, possess the largest organizational resources, and serve the most prestigious clients are likely to be the most powerful (Hodson and Sullivan, 2002, p. 290). According to Dietrich and Roberts (1997), the starting point for professional power is the experience of decision-making complexity by potential clients and their ‘bounded-rationality’ (Simon 1972). Clients are ‘incapable of pre-thinking all the issues involved with a decision because of the complexities involved’ (p.16). Such complexity provides the core requirement and ‘power basis’ for professionalism. Therefore, clients faced with ignorance and ‘information asymmetry’ seeks the services of those with specialized knowledge and expertise. Such recognition has the effect of strengthening professional autonomy and authority and highlights the relational and socially constructed features of professional work. Professionals cannot escape the relational and interdependent aspects of their ongoing existence. To explicate this view requires reference to what Gergen (1995) refers to as a ‘relational nucleus’, where meaning is made by the co-ordinated actions of at least two persons. Any action or ‘utterance’ taken by one person has no meaning unless it is responded to or ‘supplemented’ by another. Thus, according to most approaches to social constructionism, meaning is made by the mutual co-ordination of utterance and supplement and a failure to find co-ordination is a failure to find meaning.

Professional authority is accepted by subordinate groups when it is meaningful and consistent with the goals of the organization; consistent with the self-interests to do so; and persuasively communicated (Barnard, 1968 and quoted in Farnham, 1984, p. 69). In other words, professional authority will continue to be accepted, through a succession of positive co-ordinations over time. The offerings of a service by one person in the form of provider of specialized knowledge or skilled action becomes sensible when responded to positively by another because it satisfies particular needs, desires and interests within a particular situation. The outcome of such processes, replicated many times in many situations, may well lead to an impression of order, stability and permanence which make the reality of professional work. Included in such a reality may be the working up of a particular way of talking and other practices within a particular context, the establishment of practices within special locations to develop expert skills, ensure continuity and protect the status acquired. Wittgenstein (1953) might have recognised such moves as a particular ‘form of life’ with its associated ‘language game’. Crucial to participating in the game is an ability to learn the language of a profession and, most importantly, to make use of it within the associated practices. It is the ongoing use within a community of practice, which provides a sense of order and permanence for a profession; it makes the professional world. There is a tendency towards what Bakhtin (1981, p.270) refers to as a ‘unitary language’, the purpose of which is ‘to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world’; where unification and centralization are achieved through the power of ‘centripetal forces of language’ which further produce what is deemed to be ‘correct language’ and a system of ‘norms’ that advance official recognition and a particular ‘world view’. Professional power and status, often by recognition from
significant others such as the state, is established through greater organisation and institutionalisation as closure is attempted (Witz 1992).

The accumulated utterances that feed positive co-ordinations provide a necessary grounding for the formation of professional knowledge. Over time, through increasing embellishment within specialised locations, such knowledge, too, becomes ‘foundational’ in the professional world and a feature by which boundaries between different activities can be claimed. Command of a professional knowledge is deemed a necessary credential for new entrants to professional life and advances in knowledge provide a rationale for such notions as Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and Lifelong Learning. A professional’s claim to be expert in such knowledge can be said to contribute the status and power of a profession in two ways (Potter 1996); firstly, such claims serve to build credibility as a set of facts (i.e. this is what I know and this is what I can do) and secondly, the claims do something (i.e. make a case for a recommended course of action, establish authority, legitimate particular outcomes, etc). The latter works rhetorically to persuade others, contributing to a profession’s ideology in a bid to gain the political and economic resources to establish and sustain status, often in opposition to competing ideologies (Freidson 2001). The positioning of professionals by themselves and by others as the recognised experts with necessary credentials also underpins the high value placed on individualism within professional practice (Boreham 1983) and the unique circumstances of such practice and how it may be judged or controlled.

Centripetal forces of power work to produce further unification leading to the construction of an ideal-type of professionalism” (Freidson 2001) against which, in Table 1, we attempt to locate HRM.

HRM would appear to have made some advances towards an ideal-type of professionalism but status and influence are not established against objective criteria. Recognition is tied to organisational requirements for performance where others, especially managers, whose positive response is a necessary condition for status, are able to question HRM expertise in reducing uncertainty. The variety of possible responses result in hierarchical formations of status between the extremes of high and low road HRM. A key factor for HR professionals is the extent to which they can establish clear boundaries of jurisdiction (Freidson 2001) for their practice based on particular epistemological foundations of professional knowledge that provide authoritative sources of influence.

Following Ryle (1949/1984), it has become customary to distinguish between ‘knowing-that’ and ‘knowing-how’. Eraut (2000) refers to the former as ‘public knowledge or propositional knowledge’. Such knowledge is explicit, communicable and since it has ‘foundational status’, it forms the content of formal learning programmes that lead to certification and professional accreditation. It can also be formally stated in abstract terms and abstraction distinguishes the professions from other groups (Abbott 1988). Neophytes are accepted into the realm of a profession by proving their understanding of theories and models and their application within a range of practical situations. The progress from novice to expert requires the development of situational knowledge or ‘know-how’, within a field of practice, mostly involving informal learning through authentic activities through a ‘cognitive apprenticeship’ (Cheetham and Chivers 2001; Wilson, 1993). From a situated
cognition perspective, the apprenticeship format allows novices to enter the virtual world of professionals. This situated framework dates back to the medieval guild system, but numerous examples of this practice exist in the most traditional and powerful professions (Wilson, 1993). In law it is through a cognitive apprenticeship – clerking – that neophyte lawyers learn law practice. Similarly, doctors in their internships and residencies acquire the situated experience and professional culture on which their professional autonomy, authority and power is built. Eraut (2000) refers to this situated cognition as ‘personal knowledge’; it is that knowledge which has been drawn from public knowledge but is more extensive, accumulates over time as tacit knowledge and is based on impressions of ‘episodic memory’. However, as Abbott (1988, p.9) argued, control of a profession ‘lies in control of the abstractions that generate the practical techniques’ and ‘…. only a knowledge system governed by abstractions can redefine its problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems…’. What is the nature of the abstractions in HRM?

Much of the literature on the professions is principally concerned with distinguishing the professions from other knowledge-based occupations. The inequality of power within the professions has received less attention. With regard to this phenomenon, Halliday (1987), makes a useful distinction between scientific and normative professions. In the former, the abstractions are derived empirically from observation and experimentation, epitomised by the natural sciences. In the latter, abstractions are concerned primarily with matters of value relating to how people should be behave. In between, there are professions that include both, referred to as syncretic. Crucially, when it comes to everyday situations, Halliday distinguishes between technical authority relating to expertise in performing challenging tasks and providing specialized knowledge and, moral authority relating to the specification of norms that guide behaviour. It is argued that the ‘exercise of moral authority in the name of expertise’ is based on professional knowledge that is ‘normative (or syncretic)’ with the consequence that ‘its potential breadth of influence’ is greater (p.40). Thus in formal organisations, it is frequently those professions that provide moral authority, often disguised as technical advice, which gain most influence and whose voices will be heard and proceed to dominate, e.g. corporate finance and law. In contrast, the HRM professional in many organisations is less likely to maintain his or her authority because they do not have sole control over the sources of professional knowledge. By seeking to establish its status on semi-scientific grounds but without control over the sources of a unifying body of knowledge that defines the differential distribution of power, technical expertise can be challenged by other professions and others thereby undermining both the power and status of HRM practitioners. In such a situation, HR practitioners face ongoing precariousness (Caldwell 2001). In order to advance, HRM needs to develop the normative basis of its professional knowledge to provide a source of moral authority.

Building on our discussion above, as well as the foundational sociological arguments of Abbott (1988), Watson (1977) and others, we would argue that a consideration of historical trajectories provide a sense of the origins of professionalization and of the opportunities for strengthening or weakening the professional characteristics of HRM. The historical roots of HRM professionalization can be traced back to the contingencies affecting management in the post-World War II era, in particular, developments in the regulatory, economic and social aspects of employment relations. It was the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations (1968), chaired by Lord Donovan, which strengthened the professional characteristics of HRM. In the context of relatively full employment, the Commission was concerned mainly with promoting the orderly and effective regulations of union-management relations. While conceding that the scope of the human resource (personnel) function had expanded, the Commission admonished senior managers
for failing to devise and implement personnel policies: “Even if a personnel manager has the ability to devise an effective personnel policy, the director responsible for personnel (if there is one), or the board as a whole, may not listen to him [sic]” (Royal Commission, 1968, p. 25). The Commission recommended the negotiation of ‘factory’ collective agreements as an instrument to make union-management negotiations more orderly “with some legal stimuli” (Wedderburn, 1986, p. 48). By 1979, an eminent observer of union-management relations documented the growth of professionalization among personnel specialists since the Donovan Report, and concluded “employer associations now rely less on lawyers and accountants and more on officers with industrial relations skills” (Clegg, 1979, pp. 99-100). The formalization of workplace bargaining and a multitude of labour laws had the effect of giving personnel /human resource specialists the quasi-exclusive right to engage in the challenging task of negotiations and an expansion of occupation-related knowledge base. In the sociological sense, a process of professionalization occurred in the personnel occupation group.

Over the last twenty-five years, the contingencies affecting management have profoundly changed. Suffice to note here is the decline in UK trade union membership, between 1976-80 and 1996-2000, from over 12 million to just over 8 million, or 37 per cent; a contraction of union density from 55 per cent, to 34 per cent (Bratton and Gold, 2003, p. 404); the contraction of collective bargaining and strike activity; hostile union legislation; and an increasing tendency for employers to compete in a union-free environment. Running parallel with (and not unrelated to) these union-management changes has, of course, been the ascendancy of the human resource management (HRM) model. Whereas professional expertise in negotiating and conflict resolution skills and knowledge of labour and employment laws maximized HRM specialists’ autonomy and authority in the 1960s and 1970s, the political and ideological shifts, the value of ‘strong’ leadership supported by an ‘individualistic culture all contributed to weakening the HRM profession. It is atypical for an occupational group to deprofessionalize itself (Hodson and Sullivan, 2002), although the practice of ‘outsourcing’ HRM services may be interpreted in this light. By outsourcing HR services, such as employee counselling, legal services, training and compensation, the HRM professionals’ exclusive right to perform challenging work and control access to specialized HR-related knowledge is exacerbated. Moreover, outsourcing and the ‘omnipresent’ nature of HRM means that if line managers do demonstrate a direct relationship between HR practices and valued organizational outcomes, the HRM professional cannot claim the success, which may further weaken or eliminate the professional traits of the HRM professional (Legge, 1995).

The ‘substitutability’ of the HRM professional suggests that deprofessionalization will accelerate, with HRM specialists exercising less control over employment relations and organization decision-making. However, the notion of social constructionism would also suggest a role for countervailing emergent trends. Three developments may strengthen and enhance the autonomy and authority of the HRM professional: information communication technology (ICT), workplace learning and HR measurement. The construction of new knowledge or what Gouldner (1979) calls “cultural capital” and managerial practice associated with these three developments has many consequences, not least of which is intellectual hegemony and obsolescence among professionals who either find that their acquired esoteric knowledge is viewed favourably by others or who cannot keep pace with the new knowledge.

The first development that may raise the collective standing of the HRM profession is ICT. The technological theory of social change is widely used to speculate on future
changes in work and we use it here to examine changing degrees of professionalization. ICT, it is argued, acts as a catalyst for change in organizations leading to new organisational forms, work and skill requirements. As a study by Foresight (2000) suggested, the application of ICT in such emerging fields of biotechnology will involve ‘multi-disciplinary teams’ which will require an ability to ‘understand each others ‘language’, and future business and education strategies need to take account of the need to develop these teams’ (p.4). HR professionals will need to consider their role in relation to emerging ‘hybrid’ professionals and the part they can play, for example, as facilitators, in cross-discipline teams. Technological developments create renewed pressure for specialization and HR professionals, like all other professionals, face pressure to acquire a new body of professional knowledge and a repertoire of techniques that relevant others need and value. As knowledge-based organisations grow with a concomitant focus on work-related learning and knowledge management there appear to be sufficient potential for professionalization of HRM.

The second related development that may strengthen the status of the HRM profession is workplace learning. Arguably the most powerful discourse on management currently is the one that posits that a well-trained workforce, continuously learning is crucial for sustainable competitive advantage. Within the discourse formal and informal learning in the workplace is seen as an important factor in determining positive organizational outcomes. As Boud and Garrick (1999) point out, with the development of ‘knowledge workers’ within high-tech ‘knowledge economies’: “The imperatives of work means that an understanding of learning issues is needed at all levels” (p. 2). The shift to a ‘soft’ HRM model, which is predicated on the need to appropriate employees’ tacit knowledge and encourage innovation and change, emphasizes important issues for management, not least of which is ‘knowledge management’, ‘strategic learning’ and ‘learning organizations’. The extent to which this social technology is used within organizations to increase the reflexivity of labour processes underscores the importance of adult learning theory and reinforces the HRM professional knowledge base.

The third development in professionalizing the HRM professional is HR measurement. It has been suggested that the greatest challenge facing HRM professionals is identifying and using credible evaluation methods and convincing senior and middle management that HR activities do contribute significantly to organizational outcomes or the ‘bottom-line’. There is nothing new in this demand. Peter Drucker suggested almost two decades ago that HRM professionals and their departments should demonstrate strategic capabilities, needing to “redirect itself away from concern with the cost of employees to concern with their yield” (1985, Wall Street Journal, and quoted Phillips, 1996, p. 5). More recently, the President of the Ontario HRM Association stated that demonstrating a positive link between HRM practices and organizational performance “is central to the future growth and success of our profession” (Juniper, 2003, p. 9). To claim membership of the ‘strategic team’ and to maintain their professional relevance and status, HRM professionals it seems need to demonstrate the added value of HRM professional knowledge and practices. As Juniper argues “it gives us a chance to look for opportunities to contribute to the bottom line in our businesses… where we’ll get the biggest bang for our HR buck [and] metrics provide a vital link back to the business strategy” (ibidem). Despite the recent accounting-related scandals in some U.S. companies, stock-option abuses, and other nefarious activities, competing accounting professionals are unlikely to willing demystify the financial knowledge of their own profession or to make accounting practices more transparent so they can share with the HRM professional. And, as others have argued elsewhere, (e.g. Armstrong, 1989) finance practices, such as the use of stock options for chief executives and rewards contingent upon
meeting ‘hard’ short-term financial targets, serve both to undermine variants of the ‘soft’ learning-oriented HRM model and occupational strategies for strengthening HRM’s professional collective authority and standing.

In making such moves, we would also suggest that moral authority also derives from HRM’s involvement with others. Indeed, following Shotter (1993), we suggest that such involvement provides a way of knowing in practice that precedes all others. However, to do this justice requires a re-examination of the dominant view of the professional, what Taylor (1995) refers to as a ‘subject of representations’. This view is a highly individualized view of a professional as a person able to picture the outside world inside his/her head. Each person has a ‘mind’ as the centre of consciousness and this provides the source of all action. Further, representations within the mind, while they may be about others and even one’s own body, remain independent of such objects in a classic Cartesian split. This enables professionals, in their dealings with the activities of their concerns, to follow what Shotter (1997) refers to as the ‘way of theory’. While Shotter acknowledges the importance of the way of theory in our lives, it can prevent a fuller understanding of knowledge, our identities, awareness and consciousness because it excludes our ongoing bodily existence with others in relationships and it is here that we suggest that HR professionals can jointly with others pursue moral authority. To explore this, the works of Wittgenstein and Bakhtin will be employed.

For Wittgenstein (1953), the reality that we wish to explain, understand and ‘see’ is always ‘there’ before us as we live our lives in practice. Thus HR professionals, as they engage in work with others, are always participants in action and as they do so, are sensitive to the particularities of the situation, context and sensibilities of relevant others. Understanding exists in the practices that occur and enables HR professionals and others ‘go on’ with each other. That is, they make ‘responsible’ sense to each other and all this is ‘right in front of my eyes’ (Wittgenstein 1980, p.39). It is, however, always possible for misunderstanding to occur and Wittgenstein explains both misunderstanding and understanding by reference to ‘the background’, an unarticulated phenomenon that is present in any situation (Taylor 1995). It is present in the embodied activities of professionals as they engage in practices: ‘It is carried in patterns of appropriate action which conform to a sense of what is fitting and right’ (Taylor 1995, p. 171).

HR Professionals, who work in this way, are responsive to the sensitivities of a situation, organizational culture and norms; they are, however, unable to articulate such understanding in an intellectual or deliberative way; it is simply a way of ‘going on’ because it is the form of life within which a professional has developed (Shotter 1994). The important point here for their professional knowledge is that, in their day-to-day activities with others, it could be said that they know how to act because of their training and acquisition of knowledge and experience, communicable and/or tacit. It could also be said that they act as they do because such knowledge is embodied in how to be an HR professional, providing they have the background understanding such that they know how to ‘go on’, including power relations within the organization. Bakhtin (1993), too, was concerned with participative experience with others, a point that provides the core elements of HRM work. Following Bakhtin, HR professionals occupy and participate in ‘once-occurrent Being-as-event’ in which life is experienced ‘concretely’. An HR professional’s life proceeds as a continuous series of events, shared with others. The way it is shared has been referred to as Bakhtin’s Dialogism (Holquist 1990), a key feature of which is his use of ‘utterance’, which is fundamentally linked to or positioned in relation to something else – a response from others. For Bakhtin (1986) any utterance is a response to other
utterances: ‘Any speaker is a respondent...he (sic) is not...the one who disturbs the silence of the universe’ Bakhtin (1986, p. 69).

One particular feature of Bakhtin’s work would seem to have special relevance to the claims of HR professional expertise resting upon the foundations of abstracted ideas and theories, ‘All attempts to force one’s way from inside the theoretical world and into actual Being-as-event are quite hopeless’ (Bakhtin 1993, p.12). This would suggest that expertise in the theoretical knowledge of a HRM, valued as it may be within the confines of the HRM world, risks reducing others who are not part of that world to objects. According to Bakhtin (1990), a flesh-and-blood, embodied ‘presence’ is crucial to the process of meaning-making which provides the ‘organic woveness’ in a shared world, “…only the other human being is experienced by me as connatural with the outside world and thus can be woven into that world and rendered concordant with it” (Bakhtin 1990, p.40).

We have argued in this paper that the power of professionals to act is derived from the construction of coordinated patterns of meaning that accumulate over time, giving a sense of reality, truth, permanence and stability. It has also been shown that legitimacy is granted to professionals by the possession of esoteric knowledge, autonomy, authority and a degree of altruism. It is, however, within practice with others that professionals must continually find ways of reasserting their status as a professional and for their voices to come into contact with others. The extent of deprofessionalization or what Rinehart calls “professional proletarianization” (2001, p. 91) of the HRM profession is highly significant for the HRM specialist, those representing the profession and for those of us teaching and researching the discipline. In the classic sense of establishing their own working rules, HRM professionals ultimately have little control over the goals, policies, and notions of autonomy and altruism are at best tenuous. HRM professionals, as part of the salariat, sell their labour power and are subject to varying degrees of organizational control (Rinehart, 2001). However, as an occupational group claiming to possess specialized knowledge and authority appertaining to the management of employment relations, then HRM specialists can be accorded professional status. The HRM profession is vulnerable to being deprofessionalized because of the complex interplay of contingencies, processes and ambiguities. For HRM professionals to retain their authority and status the nature of their professional work needs to maintain a large element of indeterminacy; expertise will not be enough. And to find the moral authority to influence events in organisations, a focus on the locus of practice may reveal new ways of ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ their work. However, as we have hopefully shown in this paper, there is nothing inevitable about this because the appropriation and codification of specialized knowledge can be diffused across the organization to non-specialists or para-professionals. Failure will result in HRM professionals’ authority and standing to be marginalized or inconsequential in their employing organizations.

Jeffrey Gold
John Bratton

March 2003
References


Bakhtin, M.M. (1986), *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, C. Emerson (ed), University of Texas Press, Austin.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1990), *Art and Answerability*, Translated by V. Liapunov, University of Texas, Houston.


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<th>Friedson’s Ideal Type Criteria</th>
<th>HRM in the UK</th>
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<td>specialized work that is grounded in a body of theoretically based, discretionary knowledge and skill that is given special status;</td>
<td>Cross-disciplinary theoretical underpinning for all HR activities and ongoing attempts to improve practice. Dissemination of developments in knowledge via journals, conferences, electronic media, etc. No unified HRM theory and debates about whether such a theory can ever be formed. Generally low status at strategic levels of decision-making. Emerging evidence of high commitment/performance from HR activities and the trend towards knowledge production and management could enhance status.</td>
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<tr>
<td>exclusive jurisdiction created and controlled by occupational negotiation;</td>
<td>Continuing debates regarding who practices HRM – HR function v. line manager responsibility. Specialised practice of some techniques. Considerable growth of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) with chartered status since 2000. However, exclusivity not yet achieved; there is no regulation of a licence to practice.</td>
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<td>a sheltered position with labour markets based on qualifying credentials of the occupation;</td>
<td>CIPD does not regulate the point of entry for HR practitioners. Movement into HR may frequently occur through internal promotion. Growing requirement of CIPD qualifications and the professional journal, <em>People Management</em>, is a key location for HR recruitment. Variegated character of HRM prevents total sheltering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a formal training programme to provide qualifying credentials;</td>
<td>CIPD Professional Qualification Scheme delivered throughout the UK. National standards regulate overall content at three levels – support, practitioner and advanced practitioner. Growing number of Masters programmes in HRM and related areas usually delivered by academic HRM departments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>an ideology that asserts a commitment to doing good and quality.</td>
<td>CIPD code of professional conduct for members with internal disciplinary procedures for malpractice. Expulsion from CIPD possible but this could not prevent a continuation of practice.</td>
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i The breakdown of figures for 2002 is as follows:

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<table>
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<tr>
<td>Total members</td>
<td>105,153</td>
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<td>Full</td>
<td>35,465</td>
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Grad  20,497
Non-studying Licentiates, 12,568
Associates, and Affiliates
Students  36,623

ii This particular feature of social constructionism is derived from the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, which will be covered in more detail later in the paper.

iii Freidson’s (2001) ideal-type of professionalism is composed of five interdependent elements – a. specialized work that is grounded in a body of theoretically based, discretionary knowledge and skill that is given special status; b. exclusive jurisdiction created and controlled by occupational negotiation; c. a sheltered position with labour markets based on qualifying credentials of the occupation; d. a formal training programme to provide qualifying credentials; and e. an ideology that asserts a commitment to doing good and quality.

iv Key elements of the way of theory, according to Shotter (1997) are an urge 1. to bring unity to things, 2. in terms of a belief, supposition, hypothesis, or theory, 3. formulation in a set of hierarchical related elements, 4. thought that represents states of reality, 5. cognitive manipulation to produce other representations of logically possible states.