

# Hidden in plain sight? The human resource management practitioner's role in dealing with workplace conflict as a source of organisational–professional power

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## Abstract

This article examines the perceived importance of human resource (HR) practitioners' role as 'organisational professionals' at national and organisational levels. Informed by institutionalist theory and drawing upon interviews at national and organisational levels, a dissonance is identified in the degree to where HR's non-substitutable expertise lies. It is concluded that HR's role in dealing with workplace conflict is under-recognised at national level as it does not fit with the proactive 'strategic' narrative seen to be what HR needs to achieve to be influential. At organisational level, however, conflict management is a source of power because, unlike many other HR roles—valued as they may be—conflict management is the role that can least be substituted by non-specialist HR practitioners because of its unpredictability.

## KEYWORDS

conflict, HR function, HR profession, institutional theory

**Abbreviations:** CIPD, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; ET, employment tribunal; HR, human resource; HRM, human resource management; MNC, multinational corporation; RBV, resource-based view; TUC, Trades Union Congress; UK, United Kingdom.

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**Practitioner notes****What is currently known about the subject matter?**

1. Human resource management (HRM) is identified as an 'organisational profession'—as opposed to an 'occupational profession'
2. In the United Kingdom, the HR profession is successfully led by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development which defines the occupation by defining the knowledge and behaviours of would-be entrants to the profession

**What this paper adds to this?**

1. This article asks what are the core non-substitutable resources that qualified HR professionals call on to justify their position
2. Empirical research conducted at national and organisational levels identify a mismatch with what is deemed essential
3. At organisational level, expertise in dealing with workplace conflict is identified as the most important resource held by HR professionals, while this is downplayed at national level

**Implications of the study findings for practitioners**

1. This article raises a practical question about the extent to which HR practitioners may be undervaluing an important aspect of their HR work

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the role that human resource (HR) practitioners *should* perform in organisations (Kochan, 2007; Ulrich, 1998); the role that they *actually* perform in organisations (Legge, 1978; Watson, 2002) and the dissonance between these two positions (Legge, 2005; Thompson, 2011; Vincent & Hurrell, 2020). Still others have written about HR and the institutional power resources it deploys to promote its interests at a national level (Pauwe & Boselie, 2007); and many more such studies that consider the power dependency relationships existing for HR practitioners at organisational level (Farndale & Hope-Hailey, 2009). To understand the role of HR fully in its social and economic context, however, it would be useful to consider how these prescribed and actual roles play out at national and organisational levels simultaneously. This article critically evaluates the content of HR practitioners' work in their national and organisational contexts in the United Kingdom (UK). What emerges is empirically novel: that the role that appears as irreplaceable at organisational level is out of sight at national level.

Drawing cascaded evidence from policy documentation, national-level interviews and two comprehensive organisational UK case studies, we find that while HR's role in dealing with day-to-day workplace conflict is *in plain sight* at organisational level; it is absent in national-level strategists' and opinion-formers' narratives. The disjuncture has theoretical implications. In attempting to demonstrate legitimacy, the HR function faces different institutional forces at national level than it does at organisational level. The split generates an institutional complexity for the HR function, whereby a gap emerges between the national and organisational ontological domains. By reframing an institutionalist theory of professions spanning both national-level articulations and organisation-based practices, our paper's significance lies in appropriating the most important, non-substitutable, aspects of HR activity. Three inter-related research questions guide our analysis. First, what non-substitutable activity defines HR as a profession? Second, how is HR professionalisation manifested at national level and organisational level? Third, how might we reconcile any substantive differences between manifestations observed at these levels?

The article proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the contribution of institutionalism as the conceptual framework in which to consider the process of professionalisation. HR, as an organisational profession, is then examined within this framework. Following a summary statement of the key research questions, the article outlines the methodology before presenting the findings. The resulting analysis of interview, document and case study data then identifies the reasons why organisation-level dependence on HR expertise on workplace conflict is not replicated at national level. The concluding discussion considers the theoretical implications of the findings.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

That human resource management (HRM) emerged in the UK in the late 1980s as a normative project to transform itself from its prior *personnel* nomenclature is well documented. Through the lens of institutionalism, the transformation is associated with a resource-based view (RBV). Here, HRM demonstrates its utility to organisational stakeholders by abandoning its prior 'welfarist' orientations in favour of becoming a more strategic, proactive managerial function aiming to 'leverage' the distinct human contribution of any particular workforce to achieve competitive advantage (Allen & Wright, 2007; Barney, 1991). While this view became orthodoxy by the 1990s, it was not without its critics. If the strategic RBV of the functions of HRM was to empower HR practitioners, then it had to be demonstrated that (1) the vision was empirically true and (2) that HR practitioners alone had the expertise to deliver the vision. Many have subsequently questioned the validity of the former claim—particularly versions of HRM associated with the 'high-performance work systems' variant (Ramsay & Scholarios, 2000). On the latter point, some have questioned whether abandoning HRM's previous incarnation in favour of a newer utilitarian version could be a self-defeating project undermining HR's autonomy to promote something more than just shareholder value (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Francis & Keegan, 2006; Kaufman, 2007).

All this said, it is fair to say that the dominant version of HRM associated with the RBV is one of utilitarian instrumentalism (Legge, 2005). It largely follows a US-centric approach and has been influenced by Ulrich (1998), whose writing has been particularly persuasive as a practitioner narrative and widely adopted as the best-practice model of HRM in business schools.

Frequently missing in the debate about the virtues of various normative models of HRM has been the descriptive-behavioural question (Legge, 2005) of what HR practitioners do. For instance, Marchington (2015) has questioned whether HR's quest for strategic influence has been at the expense of relinquishing roles that may be of greater value: sustainability, stakeholder engagement, advocacy, transactional support activity and relative independence from senior management. The controversy brings in the issue of the situational power (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Pennings, & Schneck, 1971; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) of the HR practitioner and ties up with a wider understanding of what knowledge resources HR practitioners can claim as being unique and, by implication, resource dependent. The distinction inevitably brings in consideration of the individual power resources held by professionals and of the mobilising capacity of institutions in a process of professionalisation. For HRM, in the UK, no discussion about professionalisation can be complete without considering the role of the *Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development* (CIPD). As a professional association, the CIPD attempts labour market closure by strict membership criteria, including the requirement to meet threshold levels of specific knowledge and behaviour to its professional standards. The content of such standards is therefore important, as will be seen below.

### 2.1 | Institutionalism and professionalisation

Professions—as institutions—are influential both in the way that they attempt to shape organisational practice, and how and why these attempts succeed or fail. Reciprocally professions are themselves shaped by other institutional practices, particularly state institutions, and the interest groups that compete to influence state institutional policy.

A fundamental concept in institutionalism is isomorphism. Isomorphism is the notion that behaviours within and between institutions are pre-disposed to follow a consistent logic because of pre-existing structures and relationships (Scott, 1991). An isomorphic logic is not necessarily rational or equitable but based upon established norms within and between sets of actors within the institutional setting. Isomorphism does not mean that all organisations will respond in identical ways or even that they will automatically comply. Indeed actors, or a series of actors within the system, could exhibit deviant behaviour in defiance of the norm. Similarly, external changes altering the balance of relations within the system could affect the power resources of one or more groups within the system by a process of 'decoupling' (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2013). Such changes or imbalances could set in train what one might otherwise define as irrational behaviours of actors or groups within a system and cause dissonance between the espoused values of groups and their actual behaviours.

Isomorphism can be further sub-categorised, following DiMaggio and Powell (1983) into coercive, normative and mimetic isomorphism. Coercive isomorphism is where an unconditional imperative for certain action exists: obvious examples include state regulation or the economic power of monopsony within a supply chain. Normative isomorphism is the influence of specific narratives permeating inter-organisational networks: dominant ideas narrowing the field of choices available. Finally, mimetic isomorphism entails influence through imitation: 'best practice'.

The conceptual application of isomorphic structures and processes, we argue, are also simultaneously operating at more than one level: at the national level of 'the profession' and organisational level of the practitioner. The distinction implies the active engagement with the idea of ontological dualism as is consistent with critical realism: that structures can exist in a stratified manner, each level with its own domain but each level underpinned by a deeper logic (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Fleetwood, 2014; O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014). This cross-level dynamic is not insignificant. Battilana (2006) offers a useful reminder how institutionalism needs to retain a recognition of agency within an otherwise over-dependence on structuralist determinism and Leca and Naccache (2006), employing a critical realist approach, identify how 'institutional entrepreneurs' navigate across institutional levels in a 'non-fusional' manner: each level being inter-connected, yet relatively autonomous. To understand how these levels may play out in the present study context, it is now necessary to consider the 'professionalisation' project in HRM.

## 2.2 | HRM as organisational profession

HRM could be defined as an 'organisational profession' (Evetts, 2013). Alternatively, the term 'managerial profession' (Higgins, Roper, & Gamwell, 2016) and 'commercialised profession' (Hanlon, 1999) have also been used to distinguish HR's organisational status from those traditional occupations (lawyers and surgeons) more popularly associated with the term 'profession'. Thus, for those traditional 'occupational professions' (Evetts, 2013), legitimacy is bound up with their association with a Durkheimian role in society as bridge between state and market, with a collegiate basis for association, with autonomy of control over entry into the profession and associated control over licence to practice and control over defining the content of ethical conduct of members (*ibid*). Organisational professionals, in contrast, are bound by Weberian bureaucratic constraints of subordination to managerial authority, of being subordinate to state regulation and lower claims to barring entry into practice for those not controlled by the profession (*ibid*).

The idea that a particular managerial function could be considered sufficiently organisationally specialist, yet also possess assets applicable to all organisations suggests that either the specific function is self-evidently elemental to organisational life, or that some collective process exists in which to promote its members' interests. It also follows that an interdependence exists between a national-level professional organisation and the autonomous organisations in which HR practitioners operate. Critical to this connection is recognition that the key mechanism through which professionals exert influence is using the situational power that professionals seek to occupy within

organisations (Daudigeous, 2013; Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2011; Suddaby & Viale, 2011). It is the institutional complexity of these parallel systems that interests us here.

Paauwe and Boselie (2003) identify a range of isomorphic factors influencing HR's claim to 'strategic' influence and the factors they use are usefully incorporated into the schema, below. But in the present case, considering how such forces may operate *at different levels* is a new consideration. At the national level, for instance, the CIPD constitutes normative isomorphism: it leads an agenda for HRM and defines, through its *professional standards*, what being a 'professional' in HR requires. For the individual seeking membership of that profession, however, demonstrating the requisite (normative) knowledge, skills and behaviour looks like coercive isomorphism because it sees compliance as a condition of entry.

### 2.3 | National-level isomorphic imperatives in HRM

The first element of national isomorphic pressure for HR is the normative element of what constitutes 'good HR'. Many of the national-level normative isomorphic mechanisms can be adopted from the study by Paauwe and Boselie (2003): the influence of consultancies, business schools and professional associations. Three interrelating national institutions shaping HR as an organisational profession in the UK can be identified as particularly significant. The first national-level institutional influence is that of the CIPD. The CIPD is the most visible and prominent institution and could be identified as exercising normative isomorphic influence. The CIPD establishes standards, has a code of conduct and lays out the dimensions of what knowledge, skills and behaviours are expected of practitioners operating in the field. Crucially, it also reviews and revises its professional standards and so it would not be unreasonable to assert that adding or removing certain bodies of knowledge from the standards will potentially shape the knowledge of the wider profession. Thus, Gilmore and Williams (2007, p. 399) adapting the notion from Hanlon (1999) point out that the CIPD's influence, through the content of its outputs, has been one of promoting a particular vision of HR as 'commercialised professionalism'.

The second national-level influence is the coercive isomorphic influence of the state, particularly in the form of the legal framework for employment regulation. In the UK, the policies of the state have followed an approach to the issues of work, employment, management and labour markets consistent with that associated with national institutional arrangements of a liberal market economy approach (Hall & Soskice, 2001). The influence of unions, nationally, on shaping what HR may aspire to be, has been overshadowed by the more powerful lobbying interests of employer interests. Concomitantly, the narrative of worker welfare is subsumed under the narrative of flexibility, the needs of employers as 'wealth creators' and the management imperative (Beynon, 2014; Dickens, 2014).

Finally, there is the spreading of best practice in HR: mimetic isomorphism. Such dissemination is not all down to the CIPD's professional standards. The normative content of the standards also emerges from other sources. Such influences include the myriad forms of expertise, consultancies, business gurus and not least, business schools defining the accepted norms for HR practice. When combined, there has clearly been a symbiotic relationship between the CIPD needing educational/consulting institutions to promulgate its professional standards just as business schools continue to welcome the steady stream of income provided by CIPD accredited courses together with the prestige of the CIPD accreditation 'badge'. Contemporaneously, the influence of Ulrich's (1998) model of HR as a strategic business partner has assumed hegemonic status within management education (Francis & Keegan, 2006).

### 2.4 | HRM, isomorphism and organisation-level legitimacy

At the organisational level, while a high degree of overlap can be assumed to exist with what is occurring at the national level, the dynamics are different. At organisational level, a different set of institutional dynamics influence the HR practitioner's position compared to those prevalent at the national-institutional level. Judging purely by the

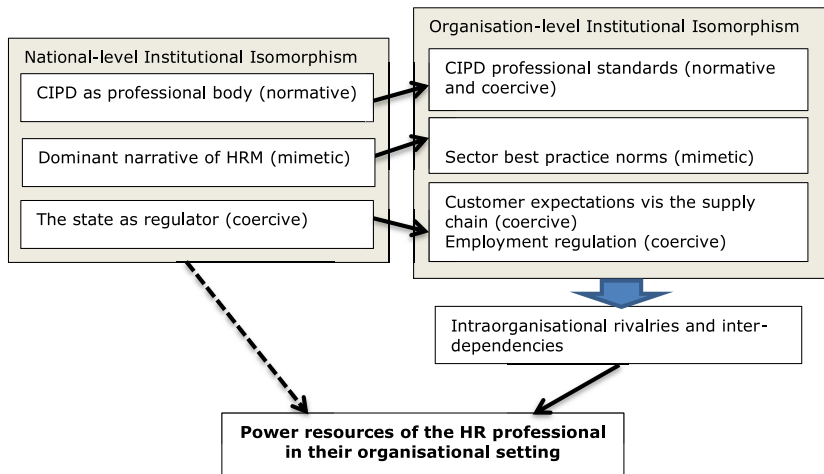


FIGURE 1 Institutional influence on HR: National and organisational

capacity to attract membership, the CIPD has a particularly strong influence on the HR profession in the UK: CIPD national membership is high in absolute and density terms by any international comparison and, while it is possible to practice in HR without membership, career progression in HR is strongly associated with CIPD membership in the UK. So, the normative isomorphic nature of the CIPD's influence can be said to be replicated at the organisational level.

A second source of influence would be the mimetic isomorphism generated from industry-specific institutional configurations. Employment relations practices vary considerably between sectors (van Wanrooy et al., 2013), creating substantial differences in the way that HR is conducted—at the most basic level, whether a core operating assumption is unitarism or pluralism (Heery, 2016). There is also substantial evidence of the crucial influence of supply-chain power-dependency relations as mediator of HR practice specific to industry sectors (Fisher, Graham, Vachon, & Vereecke, 2010).

Finally, the intra-organisational relationships with other non-HR colleagues would come into play. These could be inter-personal but also could involve tacit rivalries with other professional interests. Again, some replication of national-level issues is relevant here: for example, the consistent pattern of the rising influence of finance due to organisational as well as mimetic influences (Fligstein, 1987). Farndale and Hope-Hailey's (2009) single-organisation case study found that while having *situational power*, the HR department was limited in how much *resource-dependent power*<sup>1</sup> it could yield when competing against other intra-organisational interests.

More specifically, the debate around HR's relative influence within an organisational setting has largely centred around whether HR has a position on the senior management team within an organisation. The difference at organisational level is due, partly, to the extent to which HR can claim resource dependence. That is, the extent to which the HR professional has something (knowledge, skills and expertise) that others in the organisation are dependent upon. Conversely, the existence of conflicts that may arise between HR and rival functions, not least functional line management, have a long heritage (Dalton, 1950; Legge, 1978). Figure 1 provides an overview of the national/organisational institutional dynamics potentially in play. It is interesting to note that although the HR literature has used the notion of resource dependency, it has largely focussed on how HR may be needed to tap into the innate human capital contained within the workforce: that the resource is the workforce itself. But does HR, as a function, contain unique characteristics that make its presence a resource?

As noted above, institutionalist research has pointed to the ability of professions to take advantage of state regulation, as national-level coercive isomorphism to suit its ends, and this has been applied specifically to the HR

profession (Abbot, 1988; Bailey, 2011; Baron, Jennings, & Dobbin, 1988). So even while the broad national-level narratives described, above, have translated into a deregulatory imperative, regulatory change still occurs sporadically via other external 'shocks' on, for example, equality (Dickens, 2007). As a result, what may appear as coercive isomorphism (employment regulation) may contain a degree of normative isomorphism in this element that can enhance the perceived value of the HR practitioner.

To summarise, professionalisation is a process shaped by institutions both nationally, as a project to create a tangible demarcated occupation, and at organisational levels. The two levels are interdependent, but they are not identical. The research questions posed are as follows: What non-substitutable activity defines HR as a profession? How is HR professionalisation articulated at national and organisational levels? How might one reconcile resulting differences between the two positions?

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

The data reported in this study are from a project investigating the professionalisation of HRM, and evidence is taken from the first and final stages of a mixed-method approach (Bryman, 2006).<sup>2</sup> The research strategy follows the logic of critical realist methodology recognising the existence of multiple realities at different levels (Hurrell, 2014) and having some significance in the study of work and organisations (Fleetwood, 2014). In this study, a cascaded approach was employed, from the national-level down following an abductive logic (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018) which began by privileging the CIPD's definition of HR professionalisation as the most credible national-level institution able to make a claim to legitimacy. As such, the starting point for the professional framework already exists as a secondary data source: the CIPD professional standards, establishing a documented reality of intent. The subsequent analysis cascaded downwards from what these standards prescribe the HR professional to aspire to, to the perception of national-level stakeholders, to the workplace level.

Thus, we analysed national-level institutional issues through documentary analysis of policy statements, supplemented by interviewing key national-level stakeholders. These included interviews with the CIPD, national employer organisations, trade associations, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and trade unions (see Table 1). We conducted 15 interviews from 11 institutions. Interviews typically lasted 45 min and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Questions addressed to national level participants focused on the external factors shaping work and employment, the role and status of HR generally and the desired properties of HR as a profession within organisational settings. Overall, the national-level interviews sought to build a view of the strategic narrative of what HR, as a coherent entity, needs to achieve to be influential. Where relevant, we triangulated the views attributed to elite interviewees with official policy documentation.

A series of organisational case studies were then established, taken from a national survey of CIPD members. Initial selection was from those volunteering to participate, but further case studies were selected based on snowballing from initial contacts. Semi-structured interviews were carried out among a purposive sample of individuals within each case study, selected via the initial organisational contact.

Nine organisational case studies were conducted, involving a total of 30 interviews of 28 individuals (two were interviewed twice). Data reported here come from the two most comprehensive case studies: comprehensive being in terms of capturing a full spectrum of HR practitioner experience and also the inclusion of participants without an HR role in the organisation. While other case studies did not precisely replicate the main findings from the selected two, and in some cases introduced interesting and different findings on other aspects not reported here, none of the other case studies contradicted the findings presented here; and none offered the same level of triangulation between the range of individual participants in the selected two.

The selected organisations constitute contextually different HR scenarios. The first case study was a subsidiary of a multinational company (MNC) in the financial services sector. It had union recognition agreements covering one section of the workforce due to the honouring of employment relations policy of one of the pre-merger legacy

TABLE 1 Interview participants and case study profile

Level	Organisation	Number of interviewees
National	CIPD	3
	Employer organisations (3)	3
	Trade associations (3)	3
	Trade unions (4)	6
<b>Organisational case study: Financial services MNC</b>		<b>Interviewee</b>
Head of HR (UK)		Male (CIPD fellow)
Chief Finance Officer (UK)		Male
Head of Operational Development		Female
HR Business Partner		Female (CIPD member)
HR Business Partner		Female (CIPD member)
HR Business Consultant		Female (CIPD member)
HR Business Consultant		Female (CIPD member)
Employee Relations Manager		Female (CIPD member)
Employee Relations Adviser		Female (CIPD member)
HR Contact Centre Manager		Female (CIPD member)
<b>Organisational case study: Hotel group</b>		<b>Interviewee</b>
General manager		Male
HR Director		Male (CIPD member)
HR Manager (region)		Female (CIPD member)
HR Officer		Female (CIPD member)
HR Administrator		Female (CIPD associate member)

Abbreviations: CIPD, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; HR, human resource.

organisations. The HR function was organised on a stratified approach. Below the HR Director were 'business partners' who were embedded into functional departments as all-round HR advisers to senior managers. Below this was a dedicated HR departmental structure containing a tiered hierarchy of HR practitioners: from specialists, to more generalist, down to a call-centre operation used as a 'gateway' for general HR enquiries. The second case study was a medium-sized mid-range hotel chain. As common for hospitality, it was non-unionised, experienced much labour turnover in the lower-skilled grades and had a complex range of job categories and departments. HR was organised around a 'generalist' model in that all were expected to deploy a wide range of HR-related skills depending on seniority and level of training.

The 24-month timeframe over which we collected both national and organisational data, and the stability amongst most of the interviewees and employees taking part in the study, allowed distinct institutional influences to be related to each other, to identify a national strategic narrative of professional HR and to explore the issue of resource dependency at organisational level. One key question asked of all participants in all organisational case studies was: 'what HR activity is the least capable of being done by a non-HR generalist or external consultant?' This particular question was crucial in comparing organisation respondents' perceptions to the national-level narrative of 'strategic business partner'. It proved critical, therefore, in



being able to disaggregate the themes emerging from organisational isomorphic rationale in contrast to the national-level ones.

Analysis of interviews in all cases was by inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emergent themes from interview questions were established by the two researchers conducting the interviews. They were discussed and agreed.

## 4 | FINDINGS

### 4.1 | HR and legitimacy at national–institutional level

At national level, the view expressed by institutional stakeholder interviewees about the role of HR tended to be informed by sector or company examples of good or bad practice. Inevitably, these views reflected sectional interests. Thus, employer lobby organisations wanted an HR function that could deliver the people aspects ‘aligned to business need’. They were alert to the regulatory environment and while they recognised that some internal expertise was a necessary evil in relation to regulatory compliance, they were concerned that HR should not be a compliance function. This view varied in strength and scope by the profile of the lobby group concerned. Small business lobby organisations took the most hostile view, conflating the issue of regulatory compliance to the professional jargon employed by ‘the HR industry’. The larger employers’ business lobby group, while having well-known views on regulatory issues, saw the role of ‘good’ HR as being about ‘arbitrage’ and not about being a gatekeeper. Such sentiment extended to the view of the CIPD itself, which should not misplace its role in its advocacy of the HR profession to that familiar topic of HR being represented at the most senior levels:

[The CIPD] shouldn't try to be a business organisation—we have business organisations—it's an organisation for professional leaders in HR, and we need one of those [...]. But in doing that, how focussed in on success for the wider business is [the CIPD] vis-à-vis cheerleading for the existence of HR at senior level? [...] [T]he answer to that is ... the HR Director is on the Board where the HR department has nailed the business case (employment spokesperson, business interest lobby group).

As for the organisational role for HR, a clear message that HR needed to demonstrate value in a strictly instrumentalist sense and that its self-proclaimed (here a direct reference to the ‘Ulrich model’) role in promoting employee welfare can be misplaced. From the same spokesperson:

How [...] you really drive the idea of HR as more than a compliance function for the business has to mean a bottom-line benefit. It can't mean HR's role being employee advocacy, for instance.

The TUC view was partly, but not entirely, an equal-but-opposite view to that of the employers’ lobby. For the TUC, the experience of HR for unions in organisations was mixed and varied from organisation to organisation. HR was clearly part of the formal opposition in disputes, but the CIPD was seen potentially as an ally in the promotion of certain workplace practices, and nationally there has been increased scope for sharing positions on workplace issues of mutual interest: the ‘decent work’ agenda, equality, diversity and work–life balance being prominent examples.

The view from within the CIPD was an awareness of the dilemmas facing the profession. One of these was a recognition that continuing to plead for executive-level status as an end in itself was futile, reflecting the view from the employer lobby. Another was that HR needed to be seen to be of value to ‘the bottom line’. But there was also a strong desire to be more than a utilitarian function. In the words of one participant involved in CIPD national policy,

the CIPD had to be promoting something more than a view of HR that was merely '...the bastard child of Adam Smith and Dave Ulrich'.

The period where the CIPD was promoting the HR profession to gain chartered status was viewed by some as 'utilitarian instrumentalism' (Legge, 2005), through its abandonment of previous more pluralist approaches (Gilmore & Williams, 2007). More recently, a shift could be detected in the CIPD's declared mission, and it is actively promoting 'better working lives' (CIPD, 2017) as a more socially engaging outlook.

At the national level, then, the isomorphic influences on what HR practitioners should be doing remains mostly defined by the established normative utilitarian RBV of HRM, with some caveats.

## 4.2 | HR and legitimacy at organisational level

At organisational level, many of the themes played out at national level were reproduced. However, the organisational context made for a significant difference and the interpretation of the regulatory compliance issue became not so much an issue of HR being too geared towards 'employee-advocacy', as was commented by the employer lobby at national-institutional level, but that of navigating an area where expertise was otherwise not present. Several issues relating to the roles and influence of the HR function in the organisation were asked, and some interesting findings materialised. For instance, there did not appear to be an insurmountable difficulty in simultaneously adhering to one of the CIPD's *professional standard* behaviours of having 'the courage to challenge' (senior management?) while also demonstrating what the CIPD was promoting at the time, the virtue of being 'business savvy'. We got an inconsistent picture on outsourcing or insourcing of certain HR activities (training featured prominently). We also got a range of HR 'projects' that were deemed to be of value in their own right. But nothing consistent.

What did produce the most consistent picture of the organisational position of HR was when the question posed related to knowledge-based resource dependence. We asked the question, of HR and non-HR managers: 'what HR activity is the least capable of being done by a non-HR generalist or external consultant?' The answers we got were surprisingly consistent across all organisational contexts though varied in strength and most prominently expressed in the two selected case-study organisations where non-HR managers and a full range of HR practitioners contributed. Much of the training, organisational development, communications, recruitment, selection, payroll and change management activities had experienced some degree of outsourcing, contracting-out as special projects or colonisation to other management functions, with varying degrees of success. What came back as the most irreducible and irreplaceable advice from HR was that of dealing with workplace conflict. It was expressed in several ways: dealing with disciplinary issues, grievances, reference to employment tribunals (ETs), regulatory compliance and 'doing investigations'. At the hotel group, it was expressed as follows by the HR manager:

I think certainly in terms of employment law you need to have that, you need to have a firm basis in employment law, I think without that you could get yourself in a lot of trouble. (HR Manager: Hotel Chain)

He elaborated. There was a danger that allowing line managers to deal with performance and disciplinary matters, unadvised by HR, carried the risk of (external) regulatory (non) compliance. In addition, the processes involved with such issues are, in themselves, fraught. Interestingly, it was commented that given the turnover issues commonplace in hospitality, that developing a reputation for bad termination (lack of procedural justice) could lead to recruitment problems in the future. The concern was not just the view of HR by HR. The following was how the general manager of the same company expressed his view of why this role could not be outsourced:

I think the biggest thing is legislation [...] Yes, some of it could be a management consultancy exercise but [...] you need to have somebody that's good at dealing with people, and sometimes management consultants are more about numbers. (General Manager: Hotel Chain)

In this particular context, there was an acknowledgement of the use made of additional external legal advisors as back-up. The need for intervention was also not just that line managers needed advice on something they felt out of their depth with. It was also a need for dealing with line managers who did not lack confidence but did lack awareness and knowledge of procedural justice. A general theme of the inconsistency of line manager inter-personal skills was also articulated. The clearest and most articulate comment on the non-substitutable need for in-house HR expertise on the theme of workplace conflict, in contrast to all other HR roles, came from an HR Officer at the hotel:

Can [non-HR managers] manage training themselves? Absolutely! Can they do the nice, fluffy meetings? Here's a certificate: I'll help you with these questions, absolutely! [However] What if someone raises a 17-page grievance, going into different, various discriminations they have suffered at various points and one day, you need someone with the background that understands that to go over that? (HR Officer: Hotel Chain)

At the financial services company, much of the day-to-day HR activity was expected to be serviced from the contact centre and much of the standardised advice was to refer the caller back to the written policy as a self-help activity. The manager of the contact centre reported that they typically received around 3000 calls and 3000 emails per month and this ranged from payroll enquiries through to employment relations issues. Where advice from this source did not resolve the issue, help would be delegated up. Directing those in more senior positions to direct their enquiries through this process was an acknowledged tension.

As, by universal admission, employment relations/conflict situations were always perceived to be issues unable to be dealt with by referral to a handbook, advice was invariably fast-tracked to the most senior levels, before then being delegated to the specialist employee relations advisors available to deal with individual casework:

I don't know my way around the HR function at all, and so I rely utterly on the [HR] business partner for that as the front. That works perfectly well when they have the capacity. If they're not here, I can be scrambling around a little bit. (Chief Financial Officer: Financial Services MNC)

Among the middle tier specialist function, there was a noticeable perception that the *employee relations* specialist role occupied a kind of privileged position. The *employee relations* specialists, for example, both saw taking this specialist career pathway as one that offered more potential than moving to the hierarchically more senior business partner career route.

While there appeared to be a kudos around the *employee relations* specialist role in the case of the financial services company, paralleled by the support role in conflict management by the HR generalist in the case of the hotel group, this did not inherently signal any common approaches to the issue of workplace conflict. However, there was an awareness that 'getting it wrong' had potential consequences which would be outside the control of the organisation. The importance of the conflict management role did not mean a common approach to the issue of 'ethical gatekeeper'. The advice wanted from one senior executive was, for example, a risk-based evaluation of his options:

When I had someone who's a bit less experienced, I've done a lot of these sort of pieces of work, and they came back to me and said, this is the law, this is what you have to do. Actually, it's not quite so straightforward as that... What I want is someone to say, okay, I understand what you're

trying to do, these are the options you've got of how you do that, the risks associated after a recommendation, but to debate, so it works best when HR are helping me to achieve my objectives and making sure that I understand any risks I'm taking. (Chief Financial Officer: Financial Services MNC)

On the other hand, on the issue of the advice offered in support of workplace conflict casework, interviewees from HR in both organisations commented that they were willing to be robust in defence of due process if challenged. As such, they conflated consequentialist reasoning with the principle of procedural justice:

I once heard HR described as the ethical backbone of a company. I think in many cases, from an operational perspective, it's maybe the bottom line, it's, you know, the financial savings and we're sometimes the people that go, "just 'cause you can doesn't mean that you should". So they might not take your advice, they might do it anyway, but then comes the time when they have to explain it, you go, well, that was not what you were recommended to do. (HR Manager: Hotel Chain)

One interview respondent, an early career HR administrator at the hotel group case study, reflected that while her study of HRM at university was engaging and useful overall:

It doesn't get you ready in a way of disciplinaries and investigations. We didn't do employment law at all on my course, which is one of the major things in HR [...] so that would be one of the, like, most major things which I'm missing at the moment in my role. (HR Administrator, Hotel Chain)

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The research reported used multi-level case study work, in the context of institutional complexity. The first significant finding is that there are differences in the institutional dynamics that inform *what makes HR an organisational profession* at the national level and the institutional dynamics that inform the same question at organisational level.

Isomorphic processes involved in national-level profession-building projects (Judge, Li, & Pinsker, 2010; Slack & Hinings, 1994) are different to the isomorphic mechanisms at organisational level and that it might, therefore, be legitimate to compare the national-institutional power resources of the HR *profession* to the situational power resources of being an HR *professional* in an organisation. The application and development of institutional theory on *the study of professionalisation* have focussed either on national-level dynamics or of organisation-level studies but not in combination. Conversely where analysis on institutions has recognised the interdependent nature of stratified layers (Leca & Naccache, 2006), it has not been in relation to the subject here: the power resources of HR practitioners in the context of a professionalisation project.

From the evidence presented in this article, there now appears to be scope in considering how the dynamics of institutional isomorphism can operate differently at national and organisational levels and that comparing organisational-level dynamics are not merely a reproduction of national-level dynamics. Using findings from one level of analysis is unlikely, therefore, to provide a full picture of institutional reality. This insight is potentially of great significance.

A second significant finding is that the specific issue that divides national level and organisation level is that at organisation level the theme of dealing with workplace conflict is deemed to be the most important non-substitutable area of expertise held by HR practitioners, whereas at national level the role of HR in conflict has been downgraded by its omission from view. What is the evidence of this? First, it is just not an issue commented on by national-level stakeholders and where it is referred to, particularly by employer lobby stakeholders, the role of

gatekeeper for regulatory compliance was seen as overstated and misused. Further evidence, though, comes from the CIPD's professional standards and what has changed. Between the launch of new standards in 2004 (CIPD, 2010) and the launch of revised standards in 2012 (CIPD, 2012), a noticeable change has been the removal, as a stand-alone named standard, of 'employment law'. At the time of writing, the latest 2019 standards do not contain, again, employment law as a stand-alone body of knowledge required (even as an option) for those seeking qualification to be CIPD accredited HR professionals. Those aspects of employment law that remain within the standards (awareness of regulation) are distributed into other more generalist areas of knowledge.

So why has this role on workplace conflict been eroded at national level? The dominant model of HRM, mostly associated with Ulrich (1998), is that HR's unique contribution, if it is to make one, is to enable strategic alignment of labour deployment as a source of competitive advantage. The transactional day-to-day activities of 'personnel management' are deemed best delegated to functional line management, with HR advising and/or providing the training.

But conflict management is not an HR policy per se. At organisational level, conflict is managed by reference to the application of procedural justice and applied by functional line managers, who may or may not have the expertise or motivation to deal with it. The situation is further compounded by the coercive isomorphic presence of external jeopardy: that disciplinary, grievance and related policies need to comply with recognised external standards and, in particular, those recommended by the *Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service* (ACAS) or risk the uncertain outcome of an ET claim should an employee feel they have a case. For the general manager and the HR manager at the hotel group case study, the potential for managers experienced in their professional area to be trusted to deal with the unpredictable nature of a grievance was a source of uncertainty. So, conflict remains an important issue at organisational level.

The reason why there appears to be a dissonance on the issue of workplace conflict needs further elaboration. The dissonance observed is between the organisation-level assertion that this role is the one most associated with resource dependency and the national-level where it is mostly invisible as an activity thought to be seen as valuable. Thus, rather than the resource-dependent nature of HR in the conflict role being in defiance of national isomorphic forces, it instead seems to be so elemental that it is not worth promoting.

That the theme of conflict emerged from the organisational case studies, and was not an explicit research aim at the outset, makes for a more powerful abductive explanation. However, some consideration needs to be made to the extant literature on workplace conflict at the stage of analysis that it emerges from the study.

The reason for conflict seemingly disappearing as a national narrative for HRM has no single direct antecedent, but a strong factor has been the broader trend towards HR decentralisation over time. In the late 1970s, the role of personnel management/industrial relations specialists in conflict resolution was entrenched by the institutions associated with high levels of national-level collective bargaining and some pointed to significant (resource-dependent) expertise (Brown, 1981). In 2020, the most visible form of collective conflict (strikes) has been displaced as a variety of factors (legal, regulatory, labour market segmentation, capital mobility) have made this method increasingly difficult for unions. Yet, most scholars of workplace conflict do not place the strike as the start-point in understanding the origins and dynamics of conflict (Edwards, 1986; Kelly, 1998). Thus, conflict has been displaced from collective (the strike) to more individualised forms (the ET system and the associated juridification of employment relations; Colling, 2010; Kirk, 2018). HRs role in this complex process at organisation level will continue both where there are unions present and where they are not (Saundry & Dix, 2014). But at national level, 'industrial relations' have been relegated alongside the demise of national-level collective bargaining (Darlington, 2009), and this is reflected in the parallel demise of the industrial relations' experts on the side of HR.

Yet, this is not unitarism in Fox's (1966) classic articulation. Now, the workplace-level role of HR in conflict management would seem too retroactive for the national-level strategic narrative. This, then, feeds into a wider normative model of HRM (Legge, 2005), containing a more implicitly unitarist narrative (Bacon, 2003; Heery, 2016) that conflict can be designed out of organisations by careful recruitment and selection, education

and the management of culture, however futile that would seem to be to more critical writers (Thompson, 2011).

There is another factor at national level, however. At national level, the apparent absence of a narrative on conflict could be understood by considering what other national-level stakeholders want from HR. That is, that HR is a strategic business partner pursuing the RBV of the firm to extract value-added from the workforce. The latter would fit with the broader influence of 'financialisation' (Thompson, 2013) and, institutionally, of how finance as an occupation has sought to dominate organisational life (Fligstein, 1987).

Perhaps there is a parallel, in the relationship between national and organisational levels, to the notion of 'deviant innovator' (Guest & Woodrow, 2012; Legge, 1978) or with 'discursive ingenuity' (Watson, 2002), whereby the HR practitioner finds ways to pursue sub-agendas not sanctioned in formal organisational HR policy. In the present article, the deviance is not found *within* the organisation but *between* normative national-level content and organisation-level practice.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This article has sought to identify what attributes of HR practice are deemed important to claim legitimacy as an organisational profession at national level and at organisational level. More particularly, at organisational level, it further sought to identify what activity, if any, could claim to be an attribute that creates a resource dependency. Our study identifies a mismatch between what is considered to be the most important attribute for the process of HR professionalisation at national institutional level and the expert resources identified as least substitutable at organisation level. The reasons for this mismatch would seem to be the different institutional pressures operating at each level. At national level, the CIPD, for all its recent championing of important agendas on improving work and of working lives (CIPD, 2017), nonetheless seeks to position the role of HR in terms of its utility to dominant narratives of competitive advantage, vying for influence with other organisational professions in the environment of financialised capitalism (Fligstein, 1987; Thompson, 2013).

At national level, potential rivals operate in a narrative, in varying degrees, advocating the virtues of deregulation and of rational choice as being the arbiter of good practice. HR cannot hope to compete with these powerful agendas at national level with a conflicting narrative. So, it adapts its own *raison d'être* to the dominant narrative: HR can help achieve business goals through its understanding of being able to make the human factor, in organisations, count.

But at organisational level, while the human factor role is understood, it is more difficult to articulate into concrete outcomes. At organisational level, the institutional dynamics, while fed into by national-level institutions, are also affected by localised resource-dependent issues, and this is where different managerial functions vie for influence (Suddaby, Cooper, & Greenwood, 2007).

The prospect, in an organisational setting, of mobilising the notion of the human factor as a source of competitive advantage, as the CIPD's national claim would have it, does not have the same leverage. The dominant normative model of HR at national level is that to be more influential it will only do so by demonstrating its value as a strategic business partner. For the most part this has meant, at organisational level, that HR should be withdrawing from transactional activities. There was evidence of this in the case studies, though it was mixed: some outsourcing of HR activities and also some 'insourcing'. But a much clearer picture was emergent on HRs role on workplace conflict, where a strategic rationale is largely absent.

But the absence of conflict could also be because there are no metrics to support this role, or at least there are no primary sources, a point that echoes a critique made by Marchington (2015). Where there are metrics, the disproportionately high levels of successful ET claims in organisations with associated low levels of HR presence, particularly in small enterprises (Saridakis, Sen Gupta, Edwards, & Storey, 2008), the discussion is not centred around poor employer practices but of high levels of vexatious claimants and the solution being to restrict access to

such external processes. Perhaps, it is time to re-assess this. The downgrading of the recognition of workplace conflict, nationally, can perhaps coexist with its more prominent status at organisational level. However, as practitioners' organisational level knowledge is strongly influenced by nationally determined *professional standards*, a longer-term scenario of the disappearance of such knowledge amongst newer members could pose a longer-term problem for HR as a profession.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Note that use of resource dependency, here, is distinct from RBV mentioned above. See Salancick and Pfeffer (1977).

<sup>2</sup> The 'middle stage' was a national questionnaire survey of CIPD members—not used in this article.

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