Corporate professional stratification in human resource management: a sequential multi-method Hong Kong and United Kingdom analysis

Abstract

The rise of corporate professions reignites a longstanding sociological debate concerning the structure of intra-professional relations within purportedly collegiate entities. However, unlike the classic case of independent professions, research has yet to examine how corporate professions stratify occupationally. The omission is surprising since the motivational prospect of corporate practitioners climbing an embedded career ladder engenders what one might reasonably refer to as 'stratification by design'. Theoretically, while scholars demarcate several types of intra-professional relations within independent professions (e.g. extraction, protection, imperialism), how far such arrangements transpose to a corporate professional context lacking occupational autonomy remains uncertain. Addressing the research gap, our study corroborates sequential multi-method Hong Kong and United Kingdom data to examine intra-professional stratification in human resource management, a role engendering a distinctly organisational rather than independent professionalising form. Three discerning research questions guide our investigation. First, how are documented human resources certification criteria structured by membership level and competency composition? Second, to what extent do the stipulated competencies reflect empirical practice? Third, on what organisational, occupational, and demographic grounds do 'elite' human resource practitioners claim superordinate status? Across both case contexts, our study finds that while strategic competencies assume a higher certification status than administrative competencies, preserving routine maintenance remains an indispensable organisational activity. The exception concerns a group of predominantly executive-level practitioners abstaining from administrative duties, raising questions about their functional integration and whether the ascendancy of managerial logics over professional logics produces a *compromised* form of occupational imperialism.

1

Introduction

The distribution of tasks and responsibilities within professional hierarchies remains a

longstanding topic of sociological interest (Abbott 1981; Brydges et al. 2022; Freidson 1985;

Kirkpatrick, Dent and Jespersen 2011). In contraposition to the widely held image of

homogeneity within expert groups (Ladinsky and Grossman 1966; Parsons 1939),

professional hierarchy and stratification are not only common but increasingly prevalent

(Adams 2020; Kirkpatrick, Zardini and Veronesi 2023; Waring 2014). Take Ackroyd and

Muzio's (2007) study of English law firms. It details a form of internal organisational closure

whereby equity partners exercise increasing control over the employment conditions of

expanding cohorts of high-value-adding subordinates to *extract* mounting financial surpluses

(ibid.). Meanwhile, in medicine, Friedson's (1985) re-stratification thesis points to the

emergence of 'knowledge' and 'administrative' elites aiming to *protect* clinical excellence in

the face of de-professionalisation pressures.

When transposing these classic examples to the rising terrain of corporate professions,

one encounters even more stratification diversity. A theorised product of professionalisation

'from above' (i.e. domination of forces external to the group, McClelland 1999) and 'control

from a distance' (i.e. the discursive construction of 'appropriate' professional identities and

conducts, Fournier 1999), the prospect of corporate practitioners climbing an *embedded*

career ladder produces what one might reasonably refer to as 'stratification by design'.

Despite employers governing *"the route and body through which professional progression*

becomes possible" (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013 p. 237), practitioners purportedly accept

such corporate encapsulation because it enhances their organisational status and offers

rewards for good performance (Evetts 2003). However, in the absence of internal

organisational closure (Ackroyd and Muzio 2007), how those reaching the apex of *corporate*

professional association relate to subordinate peers remains unclear.

2

In theory, as managerial logics infiltrate professional logics (Kirkpatrick, Zardini and Veronesi 2023), the determinants of corporate professional authority derive less from status credentials (e.g. licensure, certification status) and more from one's formal (management) position (i.e. hierarchical seniority). Accordingly, a disjuncture could arise between the legitimising discourse motivating corporate practitioners to climb a *professional* career ladder and the *managerial* reality of organisational practice. Respectively, just as corporate professional status replicates hierarchical power in certified form (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013), the stipulated competencies governing certified progression disciplines practitioners to work hard (Evetts 2003). By implication, far from *resisting* the imposition of managerial logics onto professionalisation logics (Adams 2020) or exercising some independent *occupational autonomy* (Freidson 2001), employer agendas comprise an integral part of corporate professional identity.

While extant stratification research has focused on the fortunes of well-established collegiate professions, whose intra-professional relationships vary by organisational independence (e.g. medical doctors in a hospital, veterinarians in a practice), less is known about the conterminous case of corporate professions, which also lack occupational autonomy. Bridging the gap, one of our study's most important contributions lies in examining what a professionalisation project entails for a role engendering a distinctly organisational rather than independent professionalising form. Theoretically, while the prospect of corporate practitioners climbing an embedded career ladder may motivate incumbents to work hard (Evetts 2003), it also compromises their potential to leverage the trappings of career promotion. In contrast, scholars of independent professions recognise the economic and symbolic agency of elite professionals to 'control' (Larkin 1983), 'protect' (Freidson 1985) and 'extract value' (Ackroyd and Muzio 2007) from subordinate peers.

3

Cognisant of the occupational and organisational differences between independent and corporate professions, our selection of human resource management (HRM) for empirical purposes adds insight by covering one of the most recognisable and established corporate activities (Syrigou and Williams 2023). Moreover, accepting that organisational-based (Bévort and Poulfelt 2015) human resource (HR) practitioners lack the occupational autonomy of their more independent counterparts (Butler, Chillas and Muhr 2012), they exalt managerial-professional hybridity forms by design rather than evolution. Tangentially, since females constitute the bulk of the HR workforce, the role provides an appropriate context to consider gender (among other demographic factors) as a stratification determinant. Extant corporate professionalisation studies tend to privilege analysis of managerial and professional logics. Hence, among our study's three discerning research questions, we include consideration of occupational, organisational and demographic variables shaping intra-professional relations.

First, to corroborate the fundamental notions of 'corporate capture' and 'stratification by design', how does professional standards documentation structure by certified membership level and competency composition? By documenting the all-encompassing and multi-tiered structure of HRM's professional membership criteria, our first question aims to illuminate how corporate professional association instils the disciplining/motivational prospect of career laddering (Evetts 2003) while embedding a holistic/hoarding approach to professional association (Kessler, Heron and Dopson 2015). As Paton, Hodgson and Muzio (2013 p. 238) note in the conterminous case of project management, the stratification of corporate professions breaks "*with the classical collegiate model of professionalism as a cadre with one entry point and allegedly equal levels of competence and lays open the possibility for a polarised and fragmented occupation*".

4

Second, to establish the empirical authenticity of corporate professional progression, to what extent do the stipulated HR competencies reflect empirical practice? Extant studies of corporate professional association tend only to investigate the documented expression of corporate professions (e.g. Collins and Butler 2020; Veldman 2013). They tend not to substantiate the empirical authenticity of such claims. Critically, if the aim of 'corporate capture' is to instil the disciplining logic of professionalism (Evetts 2003), one might observe a disjuncture between the motivational claims of professional progression and the workplace reality of frontline practice. Hence, our study aims to distinguish rhetoric from reality (Kipping, Bühlmann and David 2019) by examining whether the desired competency descriptors motivating HR practitioners to progress their *professional* careers realistically reflect organisational requirements.

Third, on what organisational, occupational and demographic grounds do 'elite' HR practitioners claim superordinate status? While managerial and professional logics likely influence the structure of intra-professional stratification (e.g. Adams 2020; Kirkpatrick, Zardini and Veronesi 2023), they need not necessarily comprise the only factors. For instance, commentators increasingly note how demographic factors such as age and gender also exert influence (Gorman 2015: Segovia-Pérez et al. 2020), particularly in a female-dominant role such as HRM. Suddaby and Muzio's (2015) review of the English legal profession supports such demographic consideration. Their study identified a striking gender demarcation between predominantly male controlling partners and predominantly female rank and file workers.

Cognisant that comparative studies of professions remain relatively rare (Brock Leblebici and Muzio 2014), we aid theoretical generalisability by replicating our research in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom (UK), adding an insightful international dimension. Compositionally, our two selected cases provide comprehensive knowledge, having reached

5

the standard professionalisation milestones witnessed by the HR role more generally

(Farndale and Brewster 2005). For instance, in both of our case contexts, HRM represents a

distinct occupation maintained by a certified practitioner body enjoying Regional (European

or Asian) and World (i.e. the World Federation of People Management Association

[WFPMA]) affiliation. At the same time, commensurate with the respective people

management association (PMA) - Hong Kong's Institute of Human Resource Management

(IHRM) and the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) – offering

mass certification, our study includes analysis of all certified levels, providing a basis to

inform commensurate professionalisation circumstances (among which at least 90 such

professionalisation projects exist globally, based on WFPMA membership figures).

We continue our paper as follows. First, we summarise the literature on corporate

professionalisation and intra-professional relations, paying attention to their HR

contextualisation. We then detail our study's methodological properties before presenting the

research findings. After discussing the key findings, a conclusion section rounds off the

paper.

The competing discourses of HR professionalisation

There has long been a debate about the nature and content of what constitutes a professional

occupation. *Idealistically*, society entrusts professions to reshape symbolically and materially

a client's 'call for help' by placing it within a given scenario and applying objective

responses that reorder *'given existential or epistemic conditions'* (Olgiati 2010, p. 816).

Whether such professional performances involve actions concerning individuals (i.e. the

classic *liberal* case) or actions concerning organisations (i.e. the contemporary *corporate*

case) depends on the broader institutional context key mobilising agents encounter (Suddaby

and Muzio, 2015). One material implication of *corporate* professionalisation's rise is that

managers and administrators prosper from their ability to control their inhabited bureaucratic

6

machinery by addressing key organisational problems (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008).

Accumulating 'strategic' rather than 'cultural' assets (Savage et al. 1992), corporate

professions become capitalism's legitimising functionaries, serving sectional, not general,

interests (Dahrendorf 1964). However, cognisant that not everyone is enamoured by the

encroachment of private values onto public affairs (Leicht and Fennel 2001; Reed 1996),

some clarification is required when assessing the material implications of intra-professional

polarisation among frontline practitioners caught up in capitalism's substructure.

While there remains some debate as to how far HRM can claim 'true' professional

status (see summaries by Author 2024; Farndale and Brewster 2005), it remains incumbent to

note that no profession configures exactly like any other, and on many standard traits (e.g.

associational representation, professional membership, code of ethics) HRM can at least

claim 'semi-professional' status, even if it lacks licensure. Institutionally, the associational

entitlement of *certified* HR practitioners to exclusively use a particular professional title (i.e.

post-nominal designations) states publicly that only qualified personnel should perform HR

activities (Wiley 1995). In a competitive market, such certified assurance is critical because it

is difficult for employers to tell a genuine professional from the growing field of people

claiming to be professional. However, the risk of convincing employers to hire certified

practitioners is that it potentially limits the supply of available practitioners in the field,

which could drive up wages (ibid.). Alternatively, by certifying desired standards of practice,

PMAs can help organisations save the time and costs of thoroughly investigating the

background of every individual who applies for a job to determine their abilities (Aguinis,

Michaelis and Jones 2005).

Clearly, employers have a vested interest in determining how HR practitioners

progress professionally and contribute to organisational performance. Institutionally, akin to

other corporate professions – e.g. project management, consultancy and executive search

7

(Muzio et al. 2011) - HRM veers towards a commercialised legitimacy claim than a state-sanctioned one (Gilmore and Williams 2007). As Nicklich, Braun and Fortwengel (2020) elaborate, while classic professions have often relied on strong regulatory embedding in state regulations and licensure, organisations primarily anchor corporate professions, which, acting as large employers, provide the principal arena in which their professionalisation project unfolds. However, the HRM case adds intrigue because, while HR practitioners could claim a mandate on regulatory compliance, such as instructing colleagues to operate within the boundaries of employment law, they do not require HR certification to authorise such compliance. Instead, the requisite power derives from secondary sources (i.e. state law) rather than primary associational ones (Bailey 2011). By implication, even if employers stipulate HR certification as a desired or essential person specification (Aguinis, Michaelis and Jones 2005), they need not relinquish managerial authority over the organisational application of people management expertise.

From an intra-professional perspective, the source of HRM's legitimacy claim matters because it mandates the type of state *versus* market assets (Krause 1996) practitioners wield over organisational decisions, including resource distribution and client relations (Suddaby and Muzio 2015). However, one danger of HR succumbing to the 'gatekeeper' source of professional legitimacy is that the state, rather than the profession, controls the practitioner's work (Bailey 2011). Conversely, the danger with HR siding with managerial prerogatives is that associational representatives shape practitioner identities around corporate agendas (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013). On balance, commensurate with the HR role's broader transformation from personnel management to strategic HRM (Lundy 1994), corporate affiliation seems to have gained ascendancy in popular discourse (Marchington 2015). Hence, one can reasonably posit that discourses of business partnering, value-added, and leadership will assume a higher certification status than more traditional notions of proficiency,

8

regulatory compliance, and trust (Gunawan, Aungsuroch and Fisher 2019; Hope-Hailey, Farndale and Truss 2005). Whether the desired competency descriptors motivating HR practitioners to excel in their jobs realistically reflect organisational requirements or merely provide a performative function remains a separate matter.

The iterative purification of intra-professional stratification

Accepting that polarising relations stem from the use of occupational power orientated downwards (Brante 1988), the rise of corporate professions elongates the hierarchical division of labour, acquiring legitimacy not from within the role's practitioner base but 'from above' among managerial and employer interests (McClelland 1999). Despite threatening to erode such traditional professional traits as autonomy and expertise (Evetts 2003), the practitioner appeal of such corporatisation resides in incumbents' opportunity to climb an embedded career ladder. In contrast, professionalisation 'from within' (McClelland 1999) engenders a more spontaneous and indigenous mobilisation source founded on associated practitioners' tacit skills and knowledge.

Despite the contrasting indigenous versus exogenous forms, both professionalisation routes produce highly stratified practitioner groupings established from the local versus managed accomplishments of an extended labour process. For instance, when documenting the classic case of medicine, Abbott (1981) notes how the highest-status professionals tend to deal with issues furthest removed from human complexity, receiving pre-digested and predefined problems referred to by 'subordinate' peers. Conversely, the lowest-status professionals tend to capture problems from which one cannot remove human complexities. The referral process of successive iterative purification thus entails senior practitioners withdrawing from precisely those problems the public values (ibid.).

While all professions need an internal order to safeguard jurisdiction in an increasingly marketised environment (Alvehus, Eklund and Kastberg 2020), established

9

professions such as medicine and law have proven adept at drawing on symbolic and

economic resources to protect their professional turf from external interference (Alvehus,

Avnoon and Oliver 2021). The resulting outcomes need not distribute evenly. In the case of

medicine, for instance, Friedson's (1985) much-cited *re-stratification* thesis points to the

emergence of 'knowledge' and 'administrative' elites established to retain clinical excellence

in the face of de-professionalisation pressures. By 'buffering' the rank and file from an

increasingly bureaucratic and marketised workplace, medical elites purportedly *protect*

subordinate peers from managerial reform, while maintaining their status differential.

Conversely, in law, Muzio and Ackroyd (2005) argue that defensive actions protect

senior lawyers' status and earnings rather than rank and file workers. Materially, the resulting

polarisation takes a more *extractive* form and demarcates between a shrinking elite of

partners, who manage and regulate the activities of their peers and enjoy a disproportionate

share of its associated rewards, and a rapidly expanding cohort of salaried professionals,

excluded from many decision-making processes and who confront supervised work and

deteriorating employment conditions (ibid.).

When explaining differences in the type of intra-professional relationships forged

within the medical and legal professions, organisational circumstance provides an important

mediating factor. For instance, while the legal profession typically organises within an

independent professional organisation (e.g. the partnership governance form), medical

experts usually belong to a large-scale bureaucratic organisation (e.g. a hospital). The

organisational distinction draws attention to the embedded agency paradox, which refers to

how actors can influence change when their actions, intentions, and rationality are all

conditioned by the institution they wish to modify (Daudigeos 2013).

While professionals claiming internal organisational closure (e.g., lawyers in a

partnership) likely command more labour process discretion than those confined to

10

bureaucratic settings (e.g. doctors in a hospital), both practitioner groupings can utilise their

economic and symbolic resources to "*maintain the ambiguity of their professional work,*

since 'outsiders' never really get to engage with the core work process" (Alvehus, Avnoon

and Oliver 2021, p. 240). In contrast, lacking both organisational independence and

occupational autonomy, corporate professions have neither had to resist the intrusion of

managerial logics onto professionalisation logics nor gained internal organisational closure.

Instead, emerging from within organisational contexts, they produce hybrid forms by design.

     Despite the occupational and organisational distinctions, the prospect of intra-

professional stratification nevertheless prevails because by motivating appropriate work

identities (Fournier 1999), practitioners achieving corporate objectives gain career promotion

and reward (Evetts 2003). However, while practitioners reaching the apex of corporate

professional association may enjoy more prestige than those situated on a lower rung, such

superior status may not convert to any isolated occupational advantage. Instead, evidence

suggests that elite corporate practitioners adopt a 'liminar' form (Paton and Hodgson 2016;

Reed and Thomas 2021), which means being mindful of corporate interests when acquiring

the positional trappings of professional-managerial seniority (Schneider 2007).

     Accepting that HRM lacks the same degree of epistemological formalisation and

state-backed regulation as its more independently established counterparts (Butler, Chillas

and Muhr 2012), the 'extractive' and 'protective' strategies observed in law and medicine

may not travel and, at best, only assume a compromised form. For instance, modifying the

'extractive' situation observed in English law firms (Ackroyd and Muzio 2007), elite HR

practitioners could apply a 'task complex' skillset (Johnson 2009). Here, elite HR

practitioners deploy subordinates to add corporate value by applying non-standard,

unpredictable, and unanalysable practices that resolve core organisational problems (Reed

11

1996). However, it seems unlikely that any resulting gains will accrue a direct pecuniary elite advantage since incumbents lack the requisite organisational closure.

Alternatively, akin to the 'protective' situation observed in medicine (Freidson 1985), elite HR practitioners could pursue a 'task continuity' strategy (Johnson 2009). Here, hierarchically generated rules and procedures that standardise, monitor, and enforce required HR performance facilitate superordinate control given the role's high degree of task specificity (Stanton et al. 2010). Operationally, HR practitioners add organisational value by maintaining competence in 'nuts and bolts' activities and ensuring smooth internal operations. Thus, compared to the extractive approach, elite HR practitioners maintain their hierarchical importance by securing lower-order functions such as onboarding, booking time off, and assuring compensation, raising concerns only when things go wrong, such as a missed pay packet. By dealing with day-to-day problems that can otherwise quickly escalate, HR protects the organisation from potentially damaging legal and administrative failings.

A third instrumental strategy elite HR practitioners could pursue while safeguarding corporate integrity concerns 'occupational imperialism' (Larkin 1983): acquiring high-status roles and skills while delegating undesirable tasks to subordinate groups (Kirkpatrick, Dent and Jespersen 2011). As Wright (2008: 1063) contends, the demarcation of a business partner/internal consultancy role within the HR function lends credence to such a prospect: "*serving to undermine any pretence to a unitary and cohesive occupational identity, the bifurcation between routine transactional and strategic transformational activities encourages competition within the HR profession between different sub-groupings*". In labour process terms, HR's technical, administrative, and strategic differentiation seems highly amenable to the type of internal rationalisation facilitative of such elite practitioner demarcation.

12

One notes, for example, how, in the UK at least, the HR role has not only enjoyed a near doubling of practitioners from 248,000 in 2001 to 458,000 in 2023 (91% increase) - but classifies into two (2001-2010) and, subsequently, three (2011 onwards) distinct practitioner categories (see Table 1, Office for National Statistics, 2018; 2024). While practitioners assuming 'managerial and directing' positions outweigh their administrative counterparts fivefold, it remains unclear what the respective roles practically entail and how they interrelate. One mediating factor concerns the prospect of technology automating and displacing routine clerical activities (CIPD 2020; IHRM 2018), conditional upon broader labour market conditions (Autor, Levy and Murnane 2003). For instance, just as firms operating with less latitude to set low wages (i.e. high minimum wage, extensive collective bargaining) will create fewer low-end jobs, a large pool of unqualified labour seems a precondition for employment polarisation (Grimshaw, Bosch and Rubery 2013).

TABLE 1 here

In our study, since both the UK and Hong Kong share similar levels of technology and, via their historical connection, 'liberal' wage-setting institutions, one posits that firms from both cases will have reasonable latitude to create low-end jobs. Theoretically, an occupational bifurcation between high-skilled analytical work and low-skilled interpersonal service jobs could materialise (Autor, Levy and Murnane 2003), hollowing out the middle. If so, one might need to reconsider the proposition that certified practitioners *uniformly* benefit from corporate professionalism's heightened status and rewards (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013) since different work categories may thrive or falter. Instead, commensurate with the addition of a formal "manager and director" HR classification (Table 1), the prospect of occupational imperialism seems the most likely form of (compromised) elite HR advantage.

13

METHOD

Corroborating sequential multi-method Hong Kong and United Kingdom data, our study

addresses three discerning research questions concerning intra-professional stratification

within the hitherto unexplored *corporate* professional domain of HRM. First, how are

documented human resources certification criteria structured by membership level and

competency composition? Second, to what extent do the stipulated competencies reflect

empirical practice? Third, on what organisational, occupational, and demographic grounds do

'elite' HR practitioners claim superordinate status?

Philosophically, our study adopts a critical realist perspective that preserves a

scientific attitude towards social analysis while recognising the importance of actors'

meanings (Bhaskar 1989). The realist ontological outlook accepts that reality exists beyond

one's sense perceptions but is typically accessed using concepts and social structures subject

to dispute amongst various commentators (Zachariadis, Scott and Barrett 2013).

Methodologically, we combine documentary and survey evidence to compare different

perceptions while building statistical profiles of HR practice across two comparable

jurisdictions. In other words, while documentary evidence provides the *formal* associational

position of normative HR practice, the empirical authenticity of such criteria requires

validation. Hence, by surveying practitioners' workplace experiences, we test how far the

desired competencies resonate in practice. Respectively, while the documentary material

provides an open, unobtrusive and uncontaminated method that others can verify (Platt 1981),

the survey of HR practitioners tests its empirical feasibility within an *applied* context.

Procedurally, we describe our study as a sequential multi-method analysis where the

findings of each step condition the subsequent step's focus. As Creswell (2014) explains, the

logic governing a sequential multi-method approach is that a single data set is insufficient,

one must address each question consecutively, and each type of question requires different

14

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

kinds of data. Applying the sequential logic to our comparative study, creating a certified HR

practitioner survey (step 2) depends on the documented content of certification material (step

1). Then, having established how far the certified criteria resonate in practice (step 2), we can

consider their most discerning properties by practitioners' demographic, organisational, and

occupational statuses (step 3).

Concerning our study's comparative dimension, to corroborate the related notions of

corporate capture and stratification by design, we began by examining how our two sets of

certification criteria (CIPD 2010a, b, c, 2013a, b, c, 2015a, b, c; IHRM 2010) structures by

membership level and competency composition. Specifically, how many structuring levels?

Which practices do association interests consider 'elite' (high membership level) versus 'rank

and file' (low or middle membership level)? What does the discursive content of the HR

certification criteria reveal about how the association wants to present itself at different levels

of professionalism?

Second, after analysing the defining HR criteria, we operationalised the core

components into a survey of HR practitioners to examine their empirical resonance. Hence,

the composition of our survey questions (step 2) depended on the results of the preceding

document analysis (step 1). The resulting survey questions comprise seventeen core

certification criteria (eight items each from Hong Kong and the UK, plus one shared item, see

Tables 3 and 4) operationalised into a single instrument deployed among both sets of

participants alike. We then compiled the resulting survey responses (615 UK and 172 Hong

Kong) by average time practitioners spent on each activity - from '1' (low) to '5' (high) - and

via an exploratory factor analysis (using a principal component extraction method and an

oblimin rotation[1]) to demarcate the most discerning HR activities.

Third, we deployed multiple regression analysis to ascertain how the resulting

activities structure by practitioners' organisational, occupational, and demographic

15

circumstances. Again, stage three analysis depended on the results of stage two since we used

the latent factor profiling to apply the multiple regression analysis. One downside of our

approach is that we could not control the composition of the underlying factors. Hence, to

help build an overall picture of certified HR practice, we make recourse to all contributing

independent variables contextualised by supplementary descriptive data. Given our study's

exploratory nature, the stepwise process of entering/excluding the independent variables into

the regression model was appropriate. It resulted in the following *statistically* significant

variables: hierarchical position (categorical: executive, managerial, specialist, generalist),

time spent on HR (% total time), HR certification level (categorical: Fellow,

Chartered/Professional, Associate), years of HR certification (banded), years of HR

experience (banded), and gender[2] (categorical: Male, Female), see Table 5 and Table 6[3].

Finally, having piloted the survey among CIPD and IHRM representatives to iron out

any coding (e.g. agreeing to remove salary bands) and language (agreeing to present the

Hong Kong version of the survey in English: an official language used daily in the

workplace) issues, an email containing a link to an electronic survey was sent to a

representative sample (by stratified certification status) of the respective membership,

achieving a completion rate of 59.5% and 56.4%, respectively. The IHRM sample comprises

3% Fellows, 46% Professional, and 51% Associate. The CIPD sample comprises 21%

Fellows, 32% Chartered, and 47% Associates.

Findings (1) Documented *and* empirical manifestation of corporate capture

Empirically, the first point noted about the documented structure of our two analysed sets of

HR certification criteria is that consistent with the notion of 'stratification by design,' both

comprise three all-encapsulating certification levels: Associate, Chartered

(CIPD)/Professional (IHRM), and Fellow. The respective PMAs have also created a non-

certifiable foundation membership category (CIPD 2019, IHRM 2022) to encourage

16

engagement among prospective and inexperienced HR practitioners. However, since these

two entry-level avenues do not offer *post-nominal designations*, they fail to attract the same

degree of institutional recognition as the corresponding *certification* scheme. Nevertheless,

such developmental prospect is commensurate with the associational adoption of a

hoarding/holistic strategy (Kessler, Heron and Dopson 2015) and seems designed to 'capture'

(Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013) the career prospects of all practitioner grades.

Compositionally, accepting that the UK's HR certification scheme entailed three

minor revisions over the period detailed, Table 2 shows that in both case contexts, the

substantive ordering of certified HR progresses from technical competencies at Associate-

level to administrative competencies at Chartered/Professional level and, finally, to strategic

leading competencies at Fellow-level. Connotatively, the hierarchically arranged membership

ordering suggests associational interests privilege a corporate/market (i.e. strategic) vision of

professional HR over a state/bureaucratic (i.e. administrative) one. While the documented

claims of professional HR progression may inspire administratively focused HR practitioners

to acquire strategic leading competencies, it remains uncertain whether employing

organisations will utilise them in practice (see section 2 findings).

TABLE 2 here

Meanwhile, at the individual competency level, the documentary evidence suggests

that, compared to Abbot's (1981) iterative purification notion, the content specificity of HR

certification criteria becomes increasingly *abstract* rather than *pure* as it progresses. For

instance, a lower-rung competency statement detailing the ability to "*maintain administrative

records*" seems less circumspect (and, by definition, more routinised) than a higher-level one

stipulating the ability to *"use insight to challenge and shape executive thinking around the

risks and benefits of decisions or planned strategy"* (CIPD 2012: 11). Likewise, the

17

experiential demands of occupational progression move from relatively concrete Associate-

level knowledge requirements (e.g. specific knowledge acquisition and qualifying exams) to

more vaguely articulated Fellow-level experiential requirements (e.g. years of 'senior' HR

experience) without detailing what such seniority entails.

Irrespective of how realistic such desired competency statements are as a

manifestation of empirical practice, the descriptors are interesting as they lay the foundations

for associational interests to appeal to their practitioner base. By promising practitioners that

certified HR offers an opportunity to move away from the more mundane reality of routine

maintenance (lowest certification rung) to the more exciting strategic leading activities

(highest certification rung), the certified membership scheme reinforces the aspirational

qualities of professional alignment without going into too much compositional detail (since as

noted above the criteria are so abstractly articulated).

Findings (2) Professional HR in practice

To establish how far the documented HR certification criteria resonate in practice, we

analysed practitioners' self-reported experiences. Empirically, by *mean* rank time certified

practitioners spend on each level of HR activity, the descriptive data reveals that

administrative tasks consume most time (4.09 in Hong Kong, 3.98 in the UK), followed by

leadership (3.97 and 3.94, respectively), strategy (3.55 and 3.74, respectively), and basic

operations (2.9 and 2.47, respectively).

Aside from analysing the survey responses at an individual question level, we also

built profiles of HR practice using exploratory factor analysis. Accordingly, by latent factor

profiling, the eigenvalues with scree test indicated the extraction of four UK components,

accounting for 67.37% of the data variance, and three Hong Kong components, accounting

for 69.69% of the variance.

18

As shown in Table 3, the first UK profile comprises five items that load onto what we label 'strategic HR'. The second profile then comprises five items that capture 'basic operations.' In contrast, the third profile comprises seven items that load *negatively* onto professional administration, which we label 'avoid administration'. Finally, the remaining profile comprises two items that capture 'leadership', one of which also appears on the 'strategic' profile.

TABLE 3 here

Next, as shown in Table 4, the first Hong Kong profile comprises seven items that load onto what we label 'strategic leadership'. It conflates the corresponding 'strategic' and 'leadership' UK profiles. The second profile comprises the same five items that formed the UK's 'basic operations' profile. Finally, the factor profile comprises six items that load negatively onto professional administration, which, as per the UK equivalent, we entitle 'avoid administration'. Overall, our two sets of factor profiles are remarkably similar. The main difference pertains to the Hong Kong data merging the otherwise separately demarcated strategic and leader profiles (UK).

TABLE 4 here

What then of the factor profiling's implications for HR's professionalising authenticity? Given accompanying descriptive data, bar the 'avoid administration' profile, core knowledge, and administrative activities remain standard across the role (i.e. they represent the 'rank and file', including among strategic leaders) consuming certified practitioners' most time, followed by leadership, then strategy. Hence, the pattern of self-

19

reported HR activities observed by our study is dissimilar both to the demarcation posited in

the classic firm-level administrative versus strategic HRM divide (e.g. Lo, Macky and Pio

2015; Lundy 1994) *and* the corresponding certification criteria (e.g. CIPD 2015a, b, c; IHRM

2010, 2011). Instead, accepting the role's widespread administrative prevalence (descriptive

data), the basis of occupational task demarcation occurs between a strategic/leader group, a

basic operative one, and a somewhat intriguing 'avoid administration' profile.

Otherwise, the item composition of our two sets of factor profiles resonates with those

who express caution with HRM's strategic preoccupation (Hope-Hailey, Farndale and Truss

2005; Marchington 2015) and its detriment to the preservation of routine maintenance

(Syrigou and Williams 2023). From a 'corporate capture' perspective (Paton, Hodgson and

Muzio 2013), the core certification criteria may provide only a rhetorical function to

legitimise professional progression. Even among practitioners assuming strategic and

leadership responsibilities, a large swathe of administrative and legal compliance activity

consumes their time (cross-tabulated descriptive data). The exception concerns the 'avoid

administration' profile, which emerges equally in the UK and Hong Kong data and begs the

question of what sort of practitioners belong to such distinct profiling.

Findings (3) Relative organisational, occupational and demographic contribution

Concerning the independent variables predictive of each certified HR practitioner profile and,

by implication, the basis of corporate professional stratification, our study's multiple

regression analysis shows that organisational position (i.e., hierarchical seniority) makes the

most contribution. For instance, organisational position (e.g., executive, managerial)

contributes to all four UK factor profiles (Table 5) and two of three Hong Kong ones (Table

6). Theoretically, the fact that a participant's organisational position makes a greater

contribution to HR's factor profiling than professional status (e.g., certification level, years of

20

certified membership) suggests that managerial logics trump professional logics (Kirkpatrick, Zardini and Veronesi 2023) in deciphering the role's empirical structure.

TABLE 5 here

Notably, certification status appears only to positively predict the UK's 'strategic' profile (by Fellow and Chartered professional membership) and negatively the UK's 'basic operations' profile (by years of certified membership). Similarly, among Hong Kong participants, just as the most recently certified HR practitioners (by years of membership) negatively predict the 'strategic leadership' profile, the two most highly certified (i.e., Fellow and Professional) and professionally established (by years of certified membership) variables negatively predict the 'basic operations' profile. While the findings make substantive sense, they do little to suggest that gaining certified membership exerts much countervailing pressure on one's organisational position when ascertaining their relative contribution to certified HR activity.

TABLE 6 here

Otherwise, in the UK, while less than one 'year of HR experience' (Exp4) contributes most to the 'basic operations' factor and negatively to the 'leadership' one, the negative correlation between 'time spent on HR' and 'basic operations' corresponds with the descriptive data. Such mundane practice appears confined to a reasonably inexperienced and lowly qualified contingent of UK and Hong Kong practitioners. Meanwhile, aside from organisational position (i.e., hierarchical seniority), gender (males) predicted the UK's 'avoid administration' and 'leadership' profiles. Commentators report similar male-female

21

demarcation in other such professional occupations as architecture (Sang, Dainty and Ison

2014), information technology (Segovia-Pérez et al. 2020), and law (Hagan 1990). However,

the observation that no similar gender demarcation emerged among the Hong Kong sample

begs the question of why and whether the UK should do more to rectify the situation,

especially since the HR role commands the requisite recruitment and selection remit.

Discussion

Our study addressed three discerning research questions concerning intra-professional

stratification in a hitherto underexplored corporate professional domain (HRM). First, as a

measure of 'stratification by design', we examined the extent to which HR certification

structures by membership level and competency composition. Second, evaluating the

motivational *versus* rhetorical claims of such embedded career laddering, we examined how

far the certified criteria resonate in practice. Third, cognisant of contrasting managerial and

professionalisation logics, we examined how the most discerning HR practices structure by

practitioners' demographic, organisational, and occupational statuses.

       First, as a documented statement of certified intent, our study found that a strategic

(market) rather than administrative (state) HR identity prevails across our two cases. For

instance, the document analysis revealed how strategic leading activities assume a higher

certification status than their administrative counterparts. Lending credence to Marchington's

(2015) claim that HR could be too busy looking up in its quest for legitimacy, associational

HR prioritises strategic leading competencies over more traditional administrative ones.

Moreover, when delving deeper into the competency statements governing practitioner access

to different levels of professional membership, it appeared that task progression within

certified HR moves not from human disorder to iterative purification (Abbott 1981) but from

routine administration to greater abstraction. In other words, the substance of administrative

competence is far less circumspect than the content of the more varied 'big picture'

22

connotation of corresponding strategic claims. Theoretically, one explanation behind this seemingly inverted iterative purification outcome reflects associational and corporate entities drawing on the HR role's rhetorical and performative (Kipping, Bühlmann and David 2019) claims to inspire HR practitioners to work hard (Evetts 2003).

Second, while the documented structure of certified HR corroborates the prospect of corporate capture replicating hierarchical power in certified form, it does not correspond in practice. Instead, in both case contexts, the empirical practitioner profiling combines administrative and strategic activities into the core 'rank and file' and then splits between an elite group of certified practitioners avoiding core HR tasks and a further group performing basic operations. Intra-professionally, rather than practitioner elites 'protecting' the core rank and file (as per the re-stratified medical profession), they form the rank and file, with 'basic operations' making up new entrants. By implication, in neither Hong Kong nor the UK does empirical practitioner profiling resonate with the documented structure of corporate capture. Instead, we observe a core rank and file grounded in routine maintenance and two peripheral entities. Such practitioner factor profiling raises the question of how associations decipher their certification criteria and balance rhetoric with reality. Supporting documentary evidence (CIPD 2012, 2018; IHRM 2010, 2011) suggests that while associational interests engage with corporate interests to help inform desired competency specification (e.g., via focus groups, survey responses), the decision ultimately resides with the PMA.

Third, the practitioner status variables predictive of the most discerning factor profiles suggest that occupational influence derives less from professional status and more from managerial position. Consistent with the notion of managerial logics infiltrating professional logics (Kirkpatrick, Zardini and Veronesi 2023), hierarchical seniority seems more influential than professional status (e.g. certification) in determining HR's latent factor structure. Otherwise, demographics (i.e. gender) predict 'leadership' and 'avoid administration' in the

23

UK, whereas HR experience matters more in Hong Kong. However, a more comprehensive study should investigate the entity's finer-grained practitioner composition (e.g. social class, Gorman 2015) to establish whether any other discerning polarising source materialises and the degree of pecuniary differentials (i.e. salary). At the same time, whether the strategic and administrative competency demarcation identified in our Hong Kong and UK comparison prevail in other, more exclusive, HR professionalisation cases[4] (Author 2016) demands investigation and represents a limitation with the present study's 'mass-certification' focus.

What, then, are the implications of our findings for the established notions of protection (Freidson 1985), extraction (Ackroyd and Muzio 2007), and imperialism (Larkin 1983)? First, despite the HR role's dominance of managerial and director positions (Table 1, UK data), our survey evidence suggests that administration remains the most widely performed activity, despite the overall proportion of formal HR administrators (43,000) comprising a fifth of their managerial/director counterparts (215,000, UK data). Hence, at the organisational level, the HR function's weighty administrative load does not seem conducive to the type of higher-order value-adding reported in the archetypal legal sector (i.e., extraction, Ackroyd and Muzio 2007). Instead, our survey evidence points to a consolidating rather than elite-subordinate relationship (akin to protection), comprising a large rank and file of predominantly routine maintenance practitioners (assuming some strategic and leadership responsibility) and a group of entry-level basic operatives.

However, given the technological know-how to automate and outsource HR activities (Pritchard and Symon 2011), one must question the long-term viability of such administrative workload. For now, even though industry insights from the two cases suggest that reduced administrative time provides one of the key benefits of HR adopting technology (IHRM 2018), enabling practitioners to "*undertake more strategic, value-adding work and to focus on the more 'human' side of their role*" (CIPD 2020: 15), the function's administrative

24

prevalence suggests otherwise. At the same time, just as HR's high administrative content likely compromises the *selective* technological routinisation of highly specifiable activities, the prevalence of a relatively small group of inexperienced (UK) and lowly qualified (Hong Kong) 'basic operations' personnel limit the scope for substantial technology efficiency.

The 'avoid administration' profile thus provides our study's most intriguing grouping and could reflect the role's task complex value-added source or merely the comprised advantage accruing to semi-professional elites (i.e., partial imperialism). In the first instance, Dupret (2017) suggests that such 'invisible' work activity could reflect vital engagement signs with the complexity of work situations rather than essential task avoidance. If so, it might denote a potential source of 'knowledge' elitism (Freidson 1985), with incumbents representing HR's interests in response to ongoing workplace trends and threats (CIPD 2020). In the second instance, the 'avoid administration' profile could manifest an economic 'rent' on the role's semi-professional female-dominant practitioner base, especially in the UK. It remains possible, for instance, that practitioners from the 'avoid administration' profile use their relatively high status (predominantly by organisational position) to delegate undesirable tasks to subordinate groups while claiming the most interesting work.

Either way, given that the current study only examined macro-level employment data and community-level practitioner insights, research should examine how the present study's HR practitioner profiles relate to one another *within* organisations. Tangential case study evidence among a subsidiary of a multinational company in the financial services sector (Author 2020) offers tentative insight into how the macro trends observed in the present study might prevail in organisational form. Akin to this study's intra-professional relations focus, it observes a stratified HR departmental structure containing a tiered hierarchy of HR practitioners: from specialists to generalists, down to a call-centre operation. Conversely, organisations that maintain a 'generalist' HR model (ibid.) lend credence to this study's 'high

25

administrative' prevalence. In both cases, having corroborated the distributive outcome of

compromised elite practitioner formation among two distinct HR professionalisation cases,

researchers should remain mindful of how its non-elite counterbalance also matters since the

latter contingent ultimately defines the role's contribution.

Conclusion

Our study has transposed a longstanding intra-professional relations debate from the classic

cases of law and medicine to the rising terrain of corporate professions. Corroborating

sequential multi-method Hong Kong and United Kingdom data, our study's focus on HR

professionalisation made three substantial contributions to theory.

First, we found that the documented structure of HRM's certification criteria

engenders what one might reasonably refer to as 'stratification by design'. In both Hong

Kong and the UK, we found that the leading PMAs have created a multi-tiered professional

membership scheme comprising three certified levels. Theoretically, such a multi-tiered

certification arrangement serves a dual purpose. First, commensurate with the notion of

professionalisation 'from above' (McClelland 1999), it 'captures' the career prospects of an

entire occupation and facilitates associational and employer control. Second, instilling the

motivational prospect of practitioners climbing an embedded career ladder achieves 'control

from a distance' (Fournier 1999), potentially enhancing employee productivity.

Consequently, a disjuncture materialises between the motivational effects of certified

HR practitioners achieving greater professional recognition (e.g., progressing from Associate

to Chartered status) and the organisational reality of frontline practice. At the same time,

compared to Abbot's (1981) iterative purification notion, we observed how the content

specificity of progressive HR certification criteria becomes increasingly *abstract* rather than

pure as it progresses the career ladder. Our explanation behind this seemingly inverted

outcome is that associational interests draw on HR's rhetorical claims to motivate

26

professionalising HR practitioners while a more mundane experience prevails in practice. Hence, from our study's HR professionalisation perspective, 'corporate capture' seems to be embedded only in documented form rather than in practice.

Second, consistent with managerial logics infiltrating professional logics (Kirkpatrick, Zardini and Veronesi 2023), our study found that organisational position (i.e., hierarchical seniority) contributes more than professional status to determining the structure of HR practice. However, accepting that one cannot control the structure of the emergent factor profiling used in our study, we considered adjacent descriptive to build a more complete picture of certified HR practice. The descriptive data demonstrates how the prevalence of routine maintenance shapes HR practice, even among practitioners assuming strategic leading roles. At the same time, we note how, in the UK, gender subtly predicts the latent factor profiling with males assuming more senior positions. Crucially, by surveying certified HR practitioners, our study has advanced extant studies of corporate professional association, which tend only to investigate the documented form of corporate professions.

Third, on the question of occupational stratification, the fact that a group of relatively senior practitioners (by organisational status) avoids routine maintenance (i.e., professional administration) provides a tentative basis to consider how established variants of intra-professional relations (e.g. protection, imperialism) among independent professions convert to the more confined (i.e. embedded agency paradox) corporate professional domain. Here, the presence of what we entitled an 'avoid administration' profile raises the prospect of senior HR practitioners trying to achieve a *compromised* form of occupational imperialism. If so, as the HR role evolves technologically, it will be interesting to see how the 'avoid administration' contingent thrives in the future since it is potentially the only group amenable to a more task-complex expression.

27

References

Abbott, A. (1981) 'Status and Strain in the Professions', *American Journal of Sociology,* 86/4: 819-835.

Ackroyd, S., and Muzio, D. (2007) 'The reconstructed professional firm explaining change in English legal practices', *Organization Studies,* 48/5: 1-19.

Adams, T. L. (2020) 'Professional employees and professional managers: conflicting logics, hybridity, and restratification', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 7/1: 101-115.

Aguinis, H., Michaelis, S.E., and Jones, N.M. (2005) 'Demand for certified human resource professionals in Internet-based job announcements', *International Journal of Selection and Assessment,* 13/2: 160-171.

Alvehus, J., Avnoon, N., & Oliver, A. L. (2021) 'It's complicated': Professional opacity, duality, and ambiguity - A response to Noordegraaf (2020). *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 8/2: 200-213.

Alvehus, J., Eklund, S. & Kastberg, G. (2020) 'Organizing professionalism – new elites, stratification and division of labor', *Public Organization Review*, 20/1: 163-177.

Autor, D.H., Levy, F. and Murnane, R.J. (2003) 'The skill content of recent technological change: An empirical exploration', *The Quarterly journal of economics,* 118/4: 1279-1333.

Author (2016)

Author (2020)

Author (2024)

Bailey, M. (2011) 'Policy, professionalism, professionality and the development of HR practitioners in the UK', *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 35/5: 487–501.

28

Bévort, F., and Poulfelt, F. (2015) 'Human resource management in professional services firms: Too good to be true? Transcending conflicting institutional logics', *German Journal of Human Resource Management,* 29/2: 102-130.

Bhaskar, R. (1989) *Reclaiming Reality: a critical introduction to contemporary philosophy.* London: Verso.

Brante, T. (1988) 'Sociological approaches to the professions', *Acta sociologica*, 31/2: 119-142.

Brock, D. M., Leblebici, H., and Muzio, D. (2014) 'Understanding professionals and their workplaces: The mission of the Journal of Professions and Organization', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 1/1: 1-15.

Brydges, M., Dunn, J. R., Agarwal, G., and Tavares, W. (2022) 'At odds: How intra-professional conflict and stratification has stalled the Ontario paramedic professionalization project', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 9/3: 333-347.

Butler, N., Chillas, S., and Muhr, S. L. (2012) 'Professions at the margins', *Ephemera: theory and politics in organization,* 12/3: 259-272.

CIPD (2010a) *New Associate Member Criteria from 2010.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2010b) *New Chartered Member Criteria from 2010.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2010c) *New Fellow Member Criteria from 2010.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2012) *HR Profession Map Our Professional Standards.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2013a) *Associate Member Criteria membership criteria.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2013b) *Chartered Member Criteria membership criteria.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2013c) *Fellow Member Criteria membership criteria.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2015a) *Associate Member Membership requirements.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2015b) *Chartered Member Membership requirements.* London: CIPD.

29

CIPD (2015c) *Fellow Member Membership requirements*. London: CIPD.

CIPD (2018) *The Professional Map and your professional development.* London: CIPD.

CIPD (2019) People Profession find your level. Available at:

https://peopleprofession.cipd.org/find-your-level (accessed 20 Aug 2023)

CIPD (2020) *People Profession 2030 A collective view of future trends*. London: CIPD.

Collins, D., and Butler, N. (2020) 'Success and failure in professional projects: the nature,

contours and limits of consulting professionalism', *British Journal of Management,*

31/3: 457-469.

Creswell, J. W. (2014) *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. London: Sage.

Dahrendorf, R. (1964) 'Recent changes in the class structure of European

societies', *Daedalus* 93/1: 225-270.

Daudigeos, T. (2013) 'In their profession's service: how staff professionals exert influence in

their organization', *Journal of Management Studies,* 50/5: 722-749.

Dupret, K. (2017) 'Working around technologies - invisible professionalism?', *New

Technology, Work and Employment,* 32/2: 174-187.

Evetts, J. (2003) 'The sociological analysis of professionalism: Occupational change in the

modern world', *International Sociology,* 18/2: 395–415.

Farndale, E., and Brewster, C. (2005) 'In search of legitimacy: personnel management

associations worldwide', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 15/3: 33–48.

Faulconbridge, J. R. & Muzio, D. (2008) 'Organizational professionalism in globalizing law

firms', *Work, Employment and Society*, 22/1: 7–25.

Fournier, V. (1999) 'The Appeal to "Professionalism" as a Disciplinary Mechanism', *Social

Review,* 47/2: 280–307.

Freidson, E. (1985) 'The Reorganization of the Medical Profession', *Medical Care Review,*

42/1: 11–35.

30

Freidson, E. (2001) Professionalism, the Third Logic. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gilmore, S., and Williams, S. (2007) 'Conceptualising the "personnel professional" A critical analysis of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's professional qualification scheme, *Personnel Review*, 36/3: 398-414.

Gorman, E. H. (2015) 'Getting ahead in professional organizations: individual qualities, socioeconomic background and organizational context', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 2/2: 122-147.

Grimshaw, D., Bosch, G., and Rubery, J. (2013) 'Minimum wages and collective bargaining: What types of pay bargaining can foster positive pay equity outcomes?', *British Journal of Industrial Relations,* 52/3: 470–498.

Gunawan, J., Aungsuroch, Y., & Fisher, M. L. (2019) 'Competence-based human resource management in nursing: A literature review'. *Nursing forum,* 54/1: 91-101.

Hagan, J. (1990) 'The gender stratification of income inequality among lawyers', *Social Forces,* 68/3: 835-855.

Hope-Hailey, V., Farndale, E., and Truss, C. (2005) 'The HR department's role in organisational performance', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 15/3: 49–66.

IHRM (2009) *Body of Knowledge.* Hong Kong: IHRM.

IHRM (2010) *Professional standards guide.* Hong Kong: IHRM.

IHRM (2011) *Career development guide.* Hong Kong: IHRM.

IHRM (2012) *Benchmarking study of HR strategy and practices*. Hong Kong: IHRM.

IHRM (2018) *Adoption of Technology in HR Management in Hong Kong Context.* Hong Kong: IHRM.

IHRM (2022) *Certificate in Foundational Skills.* Hong Kong: IHRM.

Johnson, P. (2009) 'HRM in changing organizational contexts', In G. Wood and D. G.

Collings (eds), *Human Resource Management: A critical introduction,* pp. 19-37.

London: Routledge.

Kessler, I., Heron. P., and Dopson, S. (2015) 'Professionalization and expertise in care work:

The hoarding and discarding of tasks in nursing', *Human Resource*

Management, 54/5: 737-752.

Kipping, M., Bühlmann, F., and David, T. (2019) 'Professionalization through symbolic and

social capital: Evidence from the careers of elite consultants', *Journal of Professions*

and Organization, 6/3: 265-285.

Kirkpatrick, I., Dent, M., and Jespersen, P. K. (2011) 'The contested terrain of hospital

management: Professional projects and healthcare reforms in Denmark', *Current*

Sociology, 59/4: 489-506.

Kirkpatrick, I., Zardini, A., and Veronesi, G. (2023) 'Management reforms, re-stratification

and the adaptation of professional status hierarchies: The case of medicine in publicly

owned hospitals', *Public Management Review*, 25/11: 2231-2254.

Krause, E. A. (1996). *Death of the Guilds: Professions, states, and the advance of capitalism,*

1930 to the present, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ladinsky, J., and Grossman, J. B. (1966) 'Organizational consequences of professional

consensus: lawyers and selection of judges', *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 11/1:

79-106.

Larkin, G. V. (1983) *Occupational Monopoly and Modern Medicine*. London: Tavistock.

Leicht, K., and Fennell, M. L. (2001) *Professional work: A sociological approach*. Malden:

Blackwell Publishers.

32

Lo, K., Macky, K., and Pio, E. (2015) 'The HR competency requirements for strategic and functional HR practitioners', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 26/8: 2308-2328.

Lundy, O. (1994) 'From personnel management to strategic human resource management', *International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 5/3: 687-720.

McClelland, C. E. (1990) 'Escape from Freedom? Reflections on German Professionalization 1870–1933', in R. Torstendahl and R. Burrage (eds) *The Formation of Professions: Knowledge, State and Strategy*, pp. 97-113. London: Sage.

Muzio, D., & Ackroyd, S. (2005) 'On the consequences of defensive professionalism: Recent changes in the legal labour process', *Journal of Law and Society*, 32/4: 615-642.

Muzio, D., Hodgson, D., Faulconbridge, J., Beaverstock, J., and Hall, S. (2011) 'Towards corporate professionalization: the case of project management, management consultancy and executive search', *Current Sociology,* 59/4: 443–464.

Nicklich, M., Braun, T., and Fortwengel, J. (2020) 'Forever a profession in the making? The intermediate status of project managers in Germany', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 7/3: 374-394.

Office for National Statistics. (2018) EMP04: Employment by occupation. Available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentande mployeetypes/datasets/employmentbyoccupationemp04 (accessed 20 June 2023).

Office for National Statistics. (2024) Nomis: Official Labour Market Statistics. Available at https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/ (accessed 10 Jan 2024).

Olgiati, V. (2010) 'The concept of profession today: A disquieting misnomer?' *Comparative Sociology,* 9/6: 804-842.

Parsons, T. (1939) 'The professions and social structure', *Social Forces,* 17/4: 457-467.

33

Paton, S., & Hodgson, D. (2016) 'Project managers on the edge: Liminality and identity in the management of technical work', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 31/1: 26-40.

Paton, S., Hodgson, D., and Muzio, D. (2013) 'The price of corporate professionalisation: analysing the corporate capture of professions in the UK', *New Technology, Work and Employment,* 28/3: 227-240.

Platt, J. (1981) 'Evidence and proof in documentary research: 1 Some specific problems of documentary research', *The Sociological Review*, 29/1: 31-52.

Pritchard, K., and Symon, G. (2011) 'Identity on the line: constructing professional identity in a HR call centre', *Work, Employment and Society,* 25/3: 434-450.

Reed M.I. (1996) 'Expert power and control in late modernity: an empirical review and theoretical synthesis', *Organization Studies*, 17/4: 573-597.

Reed C and Thomas R (2021) 'Embracing indeterminacy: On being a liminal professional', *British journal of management*, 32/1: 219-234.

Sang, K. J., Dainty, A. R., and Ison, S. G., (2014) 'Gender in the UK architectural profession:(re) producing and challenging hegemonic masculinity', *Work, Employment and Society,* 28/2: 247-264.

Savage, M., Barlow, J., Dickens, P., and Fielding, A. (1992) *Property, Bureaucracy and Culture: Middle Class Formation in Contemporary Britain.* London: Routledge.

Schneider, M. (2007) 'The nature, history and significance of the concept of positional goods', *History of Economics Review,* 45/1: 60-81.

Segovia-Pérez M., Castro Núñez, R. B., Santero Sánchez, R., and Laguna Sánchez, P. (2020) 'Being a woman in an ICT job: an analysis of the gender pay gap and discrimination in Spain', *New Technology, Work and Employment,* 35/1: 20-39.

34

Stanton, P., Young, S., Bartram, T., & Leggat, S. G. (2010) 'Singing the same song: translating HRM messages across management hierarchies in Australian hospitals', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21/4: 567-581.

Suddaby R. and D. Muzio D. (2015). 'Theoretical perspectives on the professions'. In L. Empson, D. Muzio, J. P. Broschak and C. R. Hinings (eds). *The Oxford handbook of professional service firms*, pp. 25-47, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Syrigou, A., and Williams, S. (2023) 'Professionalism and professionalization in human resources (HR): HR practitioners as professionals and the organizational professional project', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 10/2: 151-164.

Veldman, J. (2013) 'Politics of the corporation', *British Journal of Management,* 24/S1: 18–S30.

Waring, J. (2014) 'Restratification, hybridity and professional elites: questions of power, identity and relational contingency at the points of 'professional–organisational intersection', *Sociology Compass*, 8/6: 688-704.

Wiley, C. (1995) 'Reexamining professional certification in human resource management', *Human Resource Management*, 34/2: 269–289.

Wright, C. (2008) 'Reinventing human resource management: Business partners, internal consultants and the limits to professionalization', *Human relations,* 61/8: 1063-1086.

Zachariadis, M., Scott, S., and Barrett, M. (2013) 'Methodological implications of critical realism for mixed-methods research'. *MIS quarterly*, 37/3: 855-879.

---

[1] Retaining components with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0, the study conducted Harman's single-factor test to examine the potential for common method bias, having deployed a cut-off Kaiser-Meyer Olkin value of 0.7 and passed Bartlett's test of sphericity.

[2] In both cases, approximately two-thirds of certified HR practitioners identify as female.

[3] We report only the statistically significant findings. Thus, while we included participants' age (banded) as one of our demographic variables, it exerted no discernible effect.

35

---

⁴ And among internally orientated labour markets unable to set lower relative wages (Grimshaw, Bosch and Rubery 2013).

36

Table 1 HR practitioner numbers, UK, various years, 2001-2023

Year	HR category	Nos. 000's	% change previous era	% Since 2011
	Original Classification			
2001	Training & industrial relations managers	119	n/a	n/a
2001	Industrial relations officers	121	n/a	n/a
	Total 2001	**240**	n/a	n/a
2006	Training & industrial relations managers	160	34.5	n/a
2006	Industrial relations officers	139	14.9	n/a
	Total 2006	**299**	24.6	n/a
	Updated Classification			
2011	HR managers and directors	131	n/a	n/a
2011	HR and industrial relations officers	122	n/a	n/a
2011	HR administrative occupations	31	n/a	n/a
	Total 2011	**284**	**n/a**	**n/a**
2016	HR managers and directors	177	35	35
2016	HR and industrial relations officers	147	20	20
2016	HR administrative occupations	23	-26	-26
	Total 2016	**347**	**22**	**22**
2020	HR managers and directors	221	25	69
2020	HR and industrial relations officers	163	11	34
2020	HR administrative occupations	39	70	26
	Total 2020	423	**22**	**49**
2023	HR managers and directors	215	-3	64
2023	HR and industrial relations officers	200	23	64
2023	HR administrative occupations	43	10	39
	Total 2023	**458**	**8**	**61**

Sources: Calculated from Office for National Statistics (2001-2018) and Nomis, Official Labour Market Statistics (2024)

Table 2 Headline certification criteria for CIPD and HKIHRM

Membership	CIPD 2010	CIPD 2013	CIPD 2015	IHRM 2010
Associate	Deliver HR functions	Practical and technical HR knowledge	Competence in HR or L&D	Technical Knowledge and Application
Chartered/ Professional	Deliver policies and Plans	Business partner	Business Partner	Functional knowledge and integration
Fellow	Leadership role and strategic position	Strategic Leaders	Deliver HR strategies	Strategic Leadership

Source: CIPD 2010a, b, c, 2013a, b, c, 2015a, b, c; IHRM 2009, 2010

Table 3 Oblique-rotated[a] four-component model[b] for UK participants[c] (N=615)

'In my work, I must…'	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Make strategic decisions	.802			
Contribute to the organisation's HR vision	.781			
Influence HR strategy	.738			
Keep informed of best practice HR	.596		-.413	
Apply basic HR knowledge		.897		
Apply basic HR skills		.868		
Conduct simple tasks		.849		
Administer standardised procedures		.761		
Perform repetitive tasks		.743		
Continuously improve HR processes			-.801	
Utilise HR technology			-.758	
Maintain administration			-.714	
Ensure legal/regulatory compliance			-.598	
Apply expert HR knowledge			-.581	
Encourage employees HR support			-.577	
Supervise others				.833
Apply leadership skills	.544			.610
% variance	30.53	22.36	8.58	5.91
Cumulative variance	30.53	52.88	61.47	67.37
Eigenvalue	5.19	3.80	1.46	1.00

[a]Extraction: PCA, Rotation: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.
[b]Rotation converged in 12 iterations.
[c]KMO=.862, Bartlett's test of sphericity meets necessary assumptions.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
...

Table 4 Oblique-rotated[a] three-component model[b] for HK participants[c] (N=172)

'In my work, I must…'	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Influence HR strategy	.929		
Make strategic decisions	.895		
Apply leadership skills	.786		
Contribute to the organisation's HR vision	.719		
Supervise others	.705		
Keep informed of best practice HR	.562		
Encourage employees HR support	.496		-.491
Apply basic HR knowledge		.921	
Conduct simple tasks		.899	
Apply basic HR skills		.893	
Perform repetitive tasks		.872	
Administer standardised procedures		.868	
Maintain HR administration			-.817
Continuously improve HR processes			-.811
Utilise HR technology			-.778
Ensure legal/regulatory compliance			-.698
Apply expert HR knowledge			-.626
% variance	36.51	22.78	10.40
Cumulative variance	36.51	59.29	69.69
Eigenvalue	6.21	3.87	1.77

[a]Extraction: PCA Rotation: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.
[b]Rotation converged in 8 iterations.
[c]KMO =.848, Bartlett's test of sphericity meets necessary assumptions.

Table 5 Summary of Stepwise Regression Analysis, UK participants (N=615)

Scales	Strategy	Basic Operations	Avoid Administration	Leading
R^2	.30	.09	.19	.24
$\beta_{1st\ predictor}$	***1.22 Seniority 1	***-.3 MemYear 1	***.01 TimeOnHR	***1.42 Seniority 2
$\beta_{2nd\ predictor}$	***.78 Seniority 2	**.38 Exp 4	***.25 Gender	***1.41 Seniority 1
$\beta_{3rd\ predictor}$	***.52 Cert 1	**-.24 Seniority 1	***.49 Seniority 1	***.58 Seniority 3
$\beta_{4th\ predictor}$	***.01 TimeOnHR	*-.003 TimeOnHR	***.35 Seniority 2	*-.22 Exp 3
$\beta_{5th\ predictor}$	***.46 Seniority 3		*.22 Seniority 3	*.16 Gender
$\beta_{6th\ predictor}$	***.26 Cert 2			
F	12.948***	4.369*	6.244*	3.893*
DF	6, 608	4, 610	5, 609	5, 609

Notes: Exp = years HR Experience, TimeOnHR = time spent on HR, Cert = Certified designation, Seniority = hierarchical position, Gender = male, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Table 6 Summary of Stepwise Regression Analysis, HK participants (N=172)

Scales	Strategic leading	Basic Operations	Avoid Administration
R^2	.38	.28	.27
$\beta_{1st\ predictor}$	***.5 $_{Exp\ 1}$	***-.71 $_{MemYear\ 1}$	***.01 $_{TimeOnHR}$
$\beta_{2nd\ predictor}$	***.65 $_{Seniority\ 2}$	**-.44 $_{Exp\ 2}$	**.27 $_{Seniority\ 2}$
$\beta_{3rd\ predictor}$	***.57 $_{Seniority\ 1}$	**-1.16 $_{Cert\ 1}$	*.25 $_{Exp\ 1}$
$\beta_{4th\ predictor}$	*.004 $_{TimeOnHR}$	*-.32 $_{Cert\ 2}$	
$\beta_{5th\ predictor}$	*-.28 $_{MemYear\ 4}$		
F	4.815*	4.571*	5.955*
DF	5,166	4, 167	3, 168

Notes: Exp = years HR Experience, TimeOnR = time spent on HR, MemYear = Years of Membership, Cert = Certified Designation, Seniority = hierarchical position, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.