



# Lost in Translation: The Human Resource Business Partner in a Scandinavian Context<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*Business partnerships and human resource transformation (HRT), marketed since the late 1990s as solutions for human resource management (HRM), have spread widely, mainly in US, Europe, and Scandinavian organizations. This paper problematizes the contextualization of the human resource business partner (HRBP) model, the key component of the HRT concept, in a global corporate group's Swedish HR function, based on an in-depth empirical case. The paper shows that the HRBP model created tensions and ambiguities for HR practitioners working as HRBPs in their daily work due to the mismatch between the objectives of this work role and the actual requested work, complicating their relationship with line managers. Broadly, this means that this management model does not fit the Scandinavian work context. A modified HRBP role is proposed to incorporate closer cooperation within the HR function.*

## KEYWORDS

*Contextualization / HRBP role / HRM work / paradox theory / qualitative / tension theory*

## Introduction

The contextualization of management concepts or ‘travelling ideas’ (Czarniawska et al. 2005) has often proven problematic in their transfer to national and corporate culture. The ‘travelling idea’ in this case is the management concept of human resource transformation (HRT), which has been introduced in many Scandinavian organizations as a solution for human resource management (HRM) work. The human resource business partner (HRBP) work role is a key component of the HRT model (Ulrich & Brockbank 2005). Although the HRBP role, or variations thereof, has become widespread in many private and public organizations in Scandinavia and the rest of the western world over the past 20 years, it continues to be a difficult concept to implement, according to several studies (Boglund et al. 2011; Gerpott 2015; Heizmann & Fox 2019; Keegan et al. 2019), as well as causing ambiguity in the relationship of HRBPs with line managers and the HR function (Bennett et al. 2023).

This paper addresses a knowledge gap concerning the contextualization of the HRBP model with an American origin in the Scandinavian and Swedish work context and how it affects HR practitioners’ perception of their work content, and the line managers’ expectations of HRM work. This study of the Swedish HR function in a global industrial corporate group (CG) with a strong Scandinavian identity has provided

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opportunities to study HR practitioners who work as HRBPs and how they perceive their mission, according to the HR management team defined in the HRBP role, with the tasks they must handle in their daily work.

The creation of the HRBP identity entailed tensions and paradoxes for the HR practitioners, as the ideal HRBP role and the actual work differed markedly, particularly regarding the model's focus on strategy development, business focus, and the long-term development of HRM concepts. In contrast to the prescriptions of this management model, practical HRBP work is mainly about solving day-to-day problems, supporting managers in personnel matters, and HRM administration, findings also supported by Wallo and Coetzer (2023).

This paper problematizes the HRBP role, addressing the importance of contextualizing management concepts. A paradox perspective (Smith & Lewis 2011) is used to explore the tensions and paradoxes embedded in the ideal HRBP work role in relation to practical HRBP work. The response strategies for addressing tensions and paradoxes in the CG's HRM work are discussed with reference to Keegan et al. (2019), using Jarzabkowski et al.'s (2013) model.

## Theoretical framework

The original Ulrich-inspired business partner model, of American origin, differs significantly from the more decentralized and delegated work organization in Swedish and Scandinavian organizations. Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries have a long tradition of established cooperation, a regulated relationship between employers and employees, and a high degree of delegated responsibility for line managers and employees in organizations (Boglund et al. 2011; Tengblad 2023; Tengblad & Andersson 2024). Research shows that the Scandinavian countries stand out for their equality in working life and orientation toward cooperation, with large power differences being seen as a problem.

According to Sapir's (2006) typology, the Nordic model refers to the economic and social models of the Scandinavian countries, which combine collective risk sharing and an openness to globalization. The model features a set of labor market institutions that include strong unions and employer associations, wage coordination, relatively generous unemployment benefits, and active labor market policies. The legal framework established in the late 1970s is also one of the foundations of HRM work in the Scandinavian countries. The labor legislation and collective agreements mean, among other things, that cooperation between unions and employers is a prerequisite stipulated in legal texts. Scandinavian HRM is also characterized by a soft collaborative approach that sees employees as active partners in long-term relationships based on investment in development activities (Bevort & Einarsdottir 2021). The Cranet study (Tengblad 2023) describes a clear Swedish HRM model characterized by HR as a separate and distinct domain operating as its own organizational unit; moreover, HR managers have a place in the top management team and are involved in developing overall strategies and formulating specific HR strategies. Another feature is low staffing, so various HR services are delivered by external suppliers and considerable personnel responsibility is delegated to line managers. The line managers, in turn, request more support from the HR function, especially affecting the role of HRBP and creating a very stressful work

situation for them (Tengblad 2023). A tug-of-war has therefore developed between HR practitioners and line managers about HRM administration (Häll et al. 2023). Wallo and Coetzer (2023) depicted HR practitioners' work in Swedish HR functions as varied, fragmented, reactive, and closely related to the line managers' work and demands. They also identified a gap between the work content required from HR practitioners and the work content required from line managers. In their study of Swedish HR practitioners in public and private organizations, Ferm et al. (2023) concluded that HR practitioners' identity was fragmented, scattered, and open to interpretation.

The term 'business partner' is used by management consultants, for everything from strategic and administrative tasks to consulting efforts. Business partnership, according to the Ulrich model (Ulrich & Brockbank 2005), entails the reconsideration of what HRM work is and how it should be evaluated. This means that the HR department's competence and working methods are undergoing a comprehensive change. The intention underlying the HRBP role is to enable HR practitioners to become strategic partners with line managers, to facilitate their achievement of stated business objectives (Ulrich 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank 2005), and to help companies implement workplace HRM strategies that are successful in the long term (McCracken et al. 2017). In Ulrich's model of HRM work, there is a clear division of responsibilities and powers between the HR function and the line managers, but these boundaries are repeatedly negotiated in practice. There is also a discrepancy between the HR practitioners' ambition to become strategic partners of the line managers and the line managers' own priorities, such as HR support and HR expert functions (Alvesson & Lundholm 2014; McCracken et al. 2017).

The literature has questioned whether existing, conventional HR managers really have the potential to assume the strategic HRBP role (Heizmann & Fox 2019; Keegan et al. 2018), which emphasizes competencies other than those that HR practitioners normally acquire through their work experience and educational background. The shift from HR manager to HRBP can be difficult, according to Heizmann and Fox (2019), in view of Ulrich's assumption that HR managers could become strategic partners of line managers in transitioning to a consultancy role. Heizmann and Fox (2019) also questioned HR's directly demonstrable contribution to the development of the business and the transfer of HRM administration to line managers.

HRM work is a very complex area of activity, and the normative Ulrich model, emerging from the US business environment, adds further complexity through its proposals for different work contents and working methods for the HR function. In addition, sensitivity is required in the contextualization of management models – here, the contextualization of the HRBP model to national and organizational work culture (Filatotchev et al. 2022; Oudhuis & Tengblad 2013; Skålen et al. 2005). Filatotchev et al. (2022) advocated an open systems perspective including multiple factors affecting the business environment as well as contextual factors defining the nature of governance problems and their solutions. They argued that business groups are embedded in the relational and cultural environments in which they operate and identified the need for a more contextually sensitive approach in management and organizational studies to examining the complex conditions in which organizations operate. Skålen et al. (2005) demonstrated that contextualization is an important prerequisite in implementing HRM and quality management concepts in an organization. The necessary contextualization is often overlooked by organizations, leading to less successful organizational change.

## Paradox theory

In the HRM literature, several researchers have used the lens of paradoxical tensions to understand the work of HR functions, HR practitioners, and the ambiguity and tensions inherent in HRM work (Gerpott 2015; Keegan et al. 2018, 2019; Link & Mueller 2015). Gerpott (2015) discussed the functionality of Ulrich's business partner model, the overemphasis on strategy work, and the downplaying of operational HRM work. Gerpott (2015) moreover believed that the model has led not only to tensions and paradoxes (Smith & Lewis 2011) in HR practitioners' work, professional identity, work content, and performance, but also to poor adaptation to real HRM work.

The theoretical framework applied here consists mainly of paradox theory (Smith & Lewis 2011), to highlight the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the contextualization of the HRBP role and the conflicting messages that HR practitioners working as HRBPs face between the ideal mission of this professional role and the actual expected practical work. Putman et al. (2016) have differentiated among five key concepts in paradox theory, namely, tensions, contradictions, dualism/duality, dialectic, and paradox. Of these five concepts, tension and paradox (Putman et al. 2016) will mainly be used to distinguish the incongruous messages that the respondents testify about. The focus of this study is on HR practitioners working as HRBPs, and on their relationship with line managers. In their daily work, they experience a range of tensions that, according to Putman et al. (2016), result in stress, anxiety, discomfort, and tension when making choices. These tensions occur in different work situations in CG when the HRBPs must manage work tasks that, according to their job description, are to be performed by the line manager or service center, or with the help of e-HR IT tools. They also face paradoxes, defined by Putman et al. (2016) as 'contradictions that persist over time, impose and reflect back on each other, and develop into seemingly irrational or absurd situations because their continuity creates situations in which options appear mutually exclusive, making choices among them difficult' (p. 72). In CG, the HRBPs grapple with the narrative and mission, outlined in the role document and set by the HR management team, that they must work at an overall strategic level, while line managers expect them to carry out more concrete tasks. Paradox theory lets us incorporate these aspects into the analysis. According to Smith and Lewis (2011), organizational tensions and paradoxes can be divided into four main categories representing core activities and elements of organizations related to tensions of learning, belonging, organizing, and performance.

In tensions of *learning*, 'learning paradoxes surface as dynamic systems change, renew, and innovate. These efforts involve building upon, as well as destroying, the past to create the future' (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 383). In the Ulrich model, there are opportunities to break new ground and expand the work content for HR practitioners. According to Ulrich (1997), Legge (2005), and Gerpott (2015), however, HR practitioners are conformists who feel secure in their established areas of knowledge, which the Ulrich model challenges by suggesting that HR can play a different role. The logic of the HRBP model is to transform the nature of HRM work toward innovative future- and value-oriented content.

In tensions of *belonging*, 'identity fosters tensions between the individual and the collective and between competing values, roles, and memberships' (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 383). According to Gerpott (2015), HR practitioners are torn between being advocates for employee interests and being the extended arm of the employer, and HR

strategy work is overemphasized in the Ulrich model. Tensions of belonging arise when HR functions struggle with their roles and with the attributes that define them.

In tensions of *organizing*, ‘structuring and leading foster collaboration and competition, empowerment and direction, and control and flexibility’ (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 383). According to Link et al. (2015), tensions of organizing occur particularly when HR departments decide whether to retain and delegate tasks to line managers or to outsource HRM administration and implement e-HR tools.

In tensions of *performing*, ‘plurality fosters multiple and competing goals as stakeholders seek divergent organizational success’ (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 383). This is illustrated by the spatial separation of HRM tasks in the ‘three-legged stool’ organization (Boglund et al. 2011) and the ‘tug of war’ between operational and strategic HRM (Keegan et al. 2018) as well as by the transfer of HRM administration and concepts to be implemented by line managers (Link et al. 2015). The introduction of the HRBP model showed, according to Bennet et al. (2023), that the concept created complex paradoxical tensions, undermining both expectations of and the implementation of the partner role, along with conflicting perceptions of the purpose and usefulness of the model. This led to problems concerning role distribution, purpose, and expectations that brought about organizational, learning/performance, and belonging tensions.

Based on Smith and Lewis (2011) and Jarzabkowski et al. (2013), Keegan et al. (2019) discussed how HR functions could respond to tensions and paradoxes, viewing paradoxes not as obstacles to be avoided, but as opportunities for HR functions to develop their operations. According to Keegan et al. (2019), there are four response strategies for conflicting demands and tensions, strategies that can be either defensive or proactive/adaptive. Defensive responses involve suppressing demands, resisting demands, or dividing contradictory demands spatially or temporally. In contrast, proactive/adaptive responses involve accepting that tensions and paradoxes are an inevitable part of HRM work and constitute an opportunity to embrace creative processes to find solutions by making adaptations in collaboration with line managers (Keegan et al. 2019).

A paradox perspective on HRM has been applied by Link et al. (2015) and Gerpott (2015) in relation to the HRT model and the HRBP work role. Link et al. (2015) problematized the tensions encountered when transferring HRM tasks to line managers, noting that line managers are playing an increasingly important role in executing and implementing HRM tasks, but without having the necessary skills, motivation, or time to act as advocates for employee interests. Gerpott (2015) discussed the shortcomings of the Ulrich HRBP model’s functionality and the model’s overemphasis on strategy work at the expense of operational HRM work, leading to paradoxical tensions (Smith & Lewis 2011) for HR practitioners regarding their professional identity, the renewal and change of work content, performance, and organizing.

## Research methodology

To achieve the present research aim, a case study design was selected. The main methodological references for this case study research were Yin (2006) and Miles and Huberman (2014), who emphasized seeking rich qualitative data and collecting concrete, contextual, and in-depth information. The case organization, CG, was chosen for its strong anchoring in the Scandinavian work culture and for having implemented the



HRBP model in full. The current case also provides access to HR practitioners and line managers, enabling empirical investigation of the HRBP model in a real work context that provides insight into the contextualization of this model. According to Yin (2006), a case study provides an opportunity to study a current phenomenon in its real context and to examine the relationship between the study object and its context. Case studies constitute a good approach when seeking answers to ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, and this study explores how the HRBP model is applied in practice and why it encounters difficulties in actual application. Furthermore, a critical approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000) has been applied in the present analysis to challenge a highly influential model of HRM work and its contextualization in Scandinavian HRM work practice and to question presupposed truths and solutions.

### Setting of the case and data collection

The data were collected in 2017 and 2018, eleven years after the start of the transition to an HRT-oriented HR organization in the Corporate Group (CG). In 2017, CG had around 100,000 employees globally, of whom 19% were women, including 25% of the managers. CG conducted production in 18 countries and sales in some 190 markets (CG Annual and Sustainability Report 2018). At the turn of the millennium, a global organization was introduced, and CG’s executive management team demanded coordination of the HR function with CG’s global structure. CG’s HR executive management team then chose to introduce an HRT-oriented organization (Ulrich 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank 2005) to coordinate and restructure all HR departments, HRM processes, and HRM working methods. The largely unilateral introduction of the HRT-inspired model also resulted in new occupational roles for CG’s HR practitioners.

The studied organization is a large global division of CG and represents a large organization originally formed in Sweden with strong roots in Scandinavian work culture. The data were collected in two production facilities in Sweden and in central staff functions (i.e., HR and the line organization) also located in Sweden. The HRT-inspired model of HRM work has thus been operationalized in CG since 2007, and the studied CG units were selected for possible interviews at different organizational levels in the HR function and the corresponding line organization.

The fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkman 2009) and observation/shadowing (Czarniawska 2007). The 20 respondents (10 women and 10 men) comprised senior HR managers, HRBP managers, and HRBPs ( $n = 10$ ); their clients, that is, the line managers ( $n = 8$ ); and shadowed HRBPs ( $n = 2$ ) (Table 1). The respondents in the HR function and the line organization were chosen from the overall organizational level and the first-line level, coming from parallel ‘streams’ in the respective functions, to get the views of both the HR and line managers. Thirteen respondents were selected in cooperation with HR personnel working in the organization and five through personal contacts with senior HR managers. The shadowed HRBPs were selected through voluntary participation.

Two interview guides with five main question areas were developed and adapted to HR and line managers, respectively, to highlight the HR work on both sides. The interviews took the form of dialogues with mutual exchange of experiences and information and knowledge sharing. This interview methodology means that knowledge

about the studied practice is constructed and exchanged in an interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. It is a conversation with structure and a purpose and in this case with mutual knowledge of the field of work (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Two HRBPs were shadowed during a normal random workday, during which notes were taken continuously. The interviews lasted 1.5–2 hours each; they were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Governing HRM documents (i.e., HRBP role descriptions and programs for HRBP training) and company information in CG annual reports were also studied.

**Table 1** The distribution of respondents and their organizational affiliation/level

| HR organization   | Line organization  |
|---|--|
| Senior Center of Expertise managers at the corporate group level – <b>three</b> (three women) |  |
| Senior HR managers at the group operational level – <b>three</b> (two women, one man)         | Second-line managers in central functions at the group operational level – <b>five</b> (four men, one woman) |
| Senior HRBP managers in a production plant – <b>three</b> (three women)                       | Second-line managers in production plants – <b>two</b> (two men)   |
| HRBPs in production plants – <b>three</b> (two men, one woman) out which two were shadowed.   | First-line managers in production plants – <b>one</b> (one man)  |
| <b>Total: twelve</b> (nine women, three men)  | <b>Total: eight</b> (one woman, seven men)   |

## Data analysis

The method used for analyzing the transcribed data was in line with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), allowing the research questions to be developed through a distillation process of seeking relevant patterns. A six-step design process was applied in which the initial coding extracted the themes and led to the next step, that is, identifying the main themes. A “paradox lens” (Smith & Lewis 2011) was then used to analyze the main themes in terms of tensions between the ideal HRBP role and the practical HRBP work. The statements in the interviews were divided into five categories, four of which are related to Smith and Lewis’ (2011) categories of learning, belonging, performing, and organizing. The fifth category comprised statements about other circumstances mentioned in the interviews. Key phenomena and main themes in the data were then identified, yielding relevant patterns used to critically evaluate insights, and condensed into the following:

- T1 – Tensions between the ideal HRBP role work *and* actual HRBP work
- T2 – Tensions between the expected competence according to the HRBP role *and* the HRM competence necessary for HRBPs to perform their actual work in CG

Both T1 and T2 can be related to the ideals and practices of the HRBP role, constituting the overarching theme of this paper. The response strategies for addressing tensions and contradictions in HRM work in CG are discussed with reference to Keegan et al. (2019), using Jarzabkowski et al.’s (2013) model, and from a critical perspective (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008) regarding the Ulrich-inspired model and its conceptualization in CG.

## Pre-understanding and reflections about the methodology

The author, who collected all the data, has extensive work experience in various HR roles and worked in several CG companies before 2005. After 2005, she worked as an interim HR manager and line manager in other corporate groups. This experience has provided in-depth knowledge of HRM solutions and working methods in various business groups and in CG, in particular. This experience also provided an opportunity to discuss the HR function's prerequisites, conditions, and working methods from an insider's professional perspective. Semi-structured interviews and shadowing were the main data collection methods in this study.

The concepts of competence, knowledge, and skills have become intertwined in CG documents, where they were not clearly defined. In CG, Keen's (2003) 'competence hand' concept has been applied, which includes the coordination of skills, experience, contacts, and values. According to Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005), competence is a 'fuzzy' concept and is always situated in a particular cultural context: 'The competences required of an occupation include both conceptual (cognitive, knowledge and understanding) and operational (functional, psycho-motor and applied skill) competence' (p. 39). The understanding of competence, according to Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005), will be applied in this context.

The results and analysis in this study have been influenced by the author's experience and in-depth understanding of the context, challenges, and conditions of the HR profession. A critical approach was applied in each step of analyzing the empirical material and in the review processes by other researchers in the Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg.

## Findings

CG has central joint functions and several business areas as well as global organizations for manufacturing, technology development, and purchasing. The HR function is structured in the same way, meaning that there are both central global HR units and local HR functions at the factory level. In the early 2000s, CG had a decentralized and autonomous HR organization, which in 2007 was transformed into a centralized organization with a standardized and process-oriented way of working, in accordance with an Ulrich-inspired model of HRM work. This change project included CG's entire HR organization, whose HR practitioners were introduced to new professional work roles and working methods.

## The strategic HRBP role in CG

Before 2007, the HR professional role focused mainly on the softer, social side of HR work in direct contact with co-workers and line managers to resolve a range of ad hoc and transactional work tasks and more complex HR issues. After the introduction of the HRBP role in 2007, the target of the work focus changed to HR strategy, finance, leadership, HR statistics, and following up HR metrics. According to CG's role-description document (The Corporate Group 2006), the HRBP role, based on the Ulrich model,



put high demands on the job holder. It required life and leadership experience, considerable business acumen, strategic thinking, knowledge of all HRM areas, and a value creation focus as described in the Ulrich model, which was emphasized for the HRBPs in CG. Many respondents stated that this was a needed change to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of management. According to two senior HR managers, ‘we must relate to finance and the business’s performance requirements’ and ‘we must add value to gain legitimacy’, which reflects the new objectives and the changed competence requirements and way of working.

However, this evolution toward greater organizational legitimacy has had negative consequences as well, because several HR practitioners did not recognize themselves in the changed objectives for HR work or in the required competence and experience. A senior Center of Expertise manager explained:

When they [i.e., CG’s HR executive management team] defined the HRBP role, they removed the ‘fluff’ [i.e., the social and employee-oriented tasks] – it is the line managers who take care of this today, the human aspect has been forgotten in HRM work ... HR has lost its soul, and the job has become too technically and financially oriented.

The HRBPs would also coach line managers on leadership issues and work directly through the line-management teams on HRM strategies, implementing HRM policies and guidelines, and translating business and operational decisions into HRM actions. Many HRBPs lacked experience of leadership and knowledge of operations and business, which led to difficulties in coaching the line managers and in working on equal terms as members of the management teams.

A senior HR manager said that it was ‘impossible to see similarities between the former HR manager role and the HRBP role’, indicating that the HRBP role was a completely new and different work role for HR practitioners.

### **The HRBP role from the individual HRBP’s perspective**

The individual HRBP’s prior experience did vary widely, ranging from specialist (e.g., staffing consultant managers) to broad generalist background. This variation in experience affected the matching of the HRBP role’s requirements and the opportunity to shoulder the business, leadership, and operational focus of the HRBP role.

Only a few HRBPs had first-hand leadership experience, and according to one senior HR manager, ‘It is not credible not to have one’s own leadership experience in relation to line managers and to be the process owner of “leadership” in the organization’. This deficiency also meant that it has been difficult for HRBPs to assert themselves in the management teams.

In their day-to-day work, HRBPs experienced conflicting messages between their actual work content and how the role document described what they were to do, especially at lower organizational levels. One shadowed HRBP said: ‘We are supposed to work more with strategies, but we are entangled in HR administration as the service centers’ and line managers’ self-service tools do not have enough functionality and the line managers are not using them as intended’. Another HRBP said:



You are pressured by things that happen and by people when they have to resolve some kind of error [e.g., production disturbances] to keep our error levels down, and there is a lot of ‘here and now’ ... and you are not really involved in the long-term visionary work. According to a shadowed HRBP:

It is important that I add value. It is a balancing act to get them [i.e., the line managers] to use the service center. I’m part of the management team and we have signed a ‘handshake’ [i.e., service-level agreement] between the production managers and myself. I show my distribution of work tasks to the production managers, and we discuss how they want me to use my time.

Creating the HRBP identity proved very difficult for the individual HRBPs, as the role requirements were unclear and difficult to meet and did not match the line managers’ expectations. The shadowed HRBPs had various duties, and strategic HR work had a low priority because of all the ‘here-and-now’ tasks and the line managers’ need for immediate help. A conclusion from the interviews is that the requirement for deep knowledge of HRM combined with business acumen and operational knowledge is unrealistic for the average HRBP to meet, since they often lack business and operational knowledge.

### **The paradoxical HRBP role**

According to CG’s HRBP role document (The Corporate Group 2006), the HRBP should not work much on HRM administration. In practice, it was another matter, and the empirical results indicate a very different picture compared with the ideal, according to one senior HRBP manager:

There is a romanticized image of HR work that is not always realized in CG. The HRBPs want to avoid HRM administration and may consider doing this job for just two years! If the individual HRBP, then, is not getting development opportunities, he or she will be looking for a new job. In my opinion, we have not succeeded in the SDM [i.e., service delivery model, the HRT-inspired subunit organization] and we see the results in the personnel turnover of HRBPs. There are a lot of tasks that HRBP should not be doing, that the service center should be doing instead, since the line managers turn directly to the HRBPs. They want a personal contact, not to call a number in the center. The line managers have got too much administration. The HRBPs must balance this, and it requires sound judgment to say no or redirect the task.

The narrative of what HRBPs should work on created unrealistic expectations for HR practitioners, who became frustrated when they had to work on support and administration, resulting in a high staff turnover.

According to the division of HRM work in CG’s Ulrich-inspired model, traditional HRM knowledge and ‘know-how’ are found in the competence center (center of expertise) and the service center, which are separated from the HRBPs. This fragmented organizational structure is creating additional challenges for them. Another weakness that also now affects HRBP credibility is the focus on strategy, business knowledge,

operational knowledge, and leadership expertise, which in practice, functionally and traditionally, are the line managers' domains and nothing that HR practitioners normally have experience of.

According to one senior HRBP manager, 'the refinement of the HRBP role and the fact that financial aspects have become important are positive', while another senior HRBP manager asked, 'What, then, is HR strategic work? For example, is the rehabilitation of employees not strategic?' These quotations illustrate the conflict between the new and old work contents and identify what constitutes strategic HR work. They also illustrate the need to maintain the value of traditional HRM skills and knowledge. One line manager commented on HR's lack of business and operational knowledge, saying that 'HR does not understand the business and they prefer to work in their own areas'" There is a need to highlight and differentiate the competence requirements of HRBPs, and to identify what competence is important for their practical work. From the HRBP managers' perspective, many different demands must be fulfilled, some of which are conflicting. According to a senior HRBP manager:

The business perspective is important, and our collective agreements [with the unions] are important. We have become the company's representatives instead of safeguarding the [collective] agreements that both parties have signed. It is HR's task to find the balance between them and to ensure that the dynamics work. The HR control function and the HR basics must work before getting to HR strategies.

The ideal HRBP role in CG provided opportunities to enter new areas of work, but the individual's educational background and professional experience were limitations, creating insecurity and feelings of inadequacy.

## Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to critically discuss the contextualization of the HRBP role by highlighting the difficulties faced by HR practitioners working in accordance with the objectives of this work role, doing this through the lens of paradox theory (Bennett et al. 2023; Keegan 2019; Smith & Lewis 2011).

HRBPs in CG faced several tensions and paradoxes in managing the mandate of the HRBP role and line managers' expectations of HRM work. The mission of the ideal HRBP role also greatly influenced what the HRBPs believed they would be working on, creating frustration and disappointment when these expectations were not realized in practical work situations. Unsurprisingly, the line managers were also reluctant to take on HRM administration, as it increased their workload and reduced their time and energy available for leadership challenges. Several interviewed line managers also indicated that they wanted closer personal support from the HR function and the HRBPs, in line with the findings of Häll et al. (2023).

From the interviews and shadowings, two tensions – T1 and T2 – were identified as the most pertinent. These stemmed from an overarching tension created by the conflict between the unilaterally introduced normative model of HRBP work and actual work content, which was far less strategic.

## **T1 – Tensions between the ideal HRBP role work and actual HRBP work**

CG's ideal HRBP role focused on HRBPs as members of management teams and thus developing HR actions to meet business challenges and being proactive in HR strategy development and HRM metrics. The ideal HRBP role was inspired by the Ulrich model, which challenged HR's traditional work and knowledge areas. The gap between the ideal work role and the actual practical work created tensions of *belonging/identity/learning* (Smith & Lewis 2011) for the HRBPs in CG, in line with Keegan et al. (2018), Bennet et al. (2023), Wallo and Coetzer (2023), and Ferm et al. (2023). The HR practitioners working as HRBPs thus experienced conflicting messages about their mission in relation to their work role and actual work content, as the governing HRBP role document differed from both the practical HRM work targets and the line managers' expectations. The HR practitioners also had to position their professional identity as HRBPs in CG in terms of their own abilities, competence, experiences, and self-confidence in relation to other professional groups in organizational interplay, creating *belonging/performing* tensions (Smith & Lewis 2011). These were described by Heizmann and Fox (2019) as difficulties in discursively creating the HRBP identity, due to power structures and preconceived notions about tasks and assignments in the organization. To mitigate criticism, the CG's HR function established service-level agreements to meet the line managers' needs. The strategy work has also been toned down and local HRM administrative units have been re-established. However, one important gain was that HRBPs had become members of the line-management teams.

## **T2 – Tensions between expected competence according to the HRBP role and HRM competence necessary for HRBPs to perform their actual work in CG**

According to the CG role document, the HRBP role is a senior work role that requires life and leadership experience, business and operational knowledge, strategic thinking, and knowledge of all HRM areas. There was generally an obvious gap between the competence and work experience of the HR practitioners working as HRBPs and work experiences of the HR practitioners working as HRBPs and the competence requirements of the HRBP role. Besides, many HR practitioners lacked leadership experience, as well as business, and operational knowledge, since the dominant educational background in Sweden for HR practitioners is behavioral and social science (Tengblad 2023). These conditions created *learning/performing* tensions (Smith & Lewis 2011) for HR practitioners in CG. Moreover, the HR practitioners stayed in their own comfort zone, as they were unsure of both the strategy work and how to handle new work areas. Heizmann and Fox (2019) proposed that Ulrich's prescriptive vision may require more than HR practitioners can deliver, due to expanded knowledge requirements derived from a broader power/knowledge perspective. Overall, this has led to a loss of credibility for the HRBP role in CG.

Adaptations on a local level were made of the HRT-inspired model and the HRBP role to the requirements of the line organization, which partly dissolved the subunit

organization in the CG. Other response strategies (Jarzabkowski et al. 2013; Keegan et al. 2019) were to recruit former production managers to the HR function to cover the need for operations and business' experience.

Ulrich et al. (2005) argued that a different work content and status was possible for the HR function/practitioners. CG's business partner model aimed to raise the status of HRM work and to transfer HRM administration to self-service/e-HR tools for line managers and employees. However, this was not easily accomplished, as it required certain prerequisites to be successful. Initially, the HRBP model should have been contextualized within CG's Swedish work and organizational cultural context (Filatotchev et al. 2022; Oudhuis & Tengblad 2013) and anchored in the line organization instead of, as was the case here, being unilaterally decided on and implemented by the HR function. The line managers were simply faced with predetermined decisions about the implementation of a new HRM model without having been more than peripherally involved in formulating it, even though the changes had major direct consequences for their work. HRM administration was thus transferred to the line managers, who were asked to use the shared service center and e-HR tools to enable HR practitioners to become more involved in the business and to work on strategy development. The mission and work content of the HRBP role were countered by line managers who did not believe that the HRBPs had the right skills for this partnership, a finding also supported by Keegan et al. (2018) and Heizmann and Fox (2019). Another prerequisite was that HRBPs need knowledge of business and operations, which is outside the body of traditional HRM knowledge. Not having this knowledge made it difficult to become real partners of the line managers. This calls into question whether it is possible for Swedish HR practitioners to become real partners of line managers according to the Ulrich model, due to the requirement gap between the Ulrich model and the experience and competence of most Swedish HR practitioners. In the studied HR units in CG, it was up to the individual HRBPs to acquire leadership, business, and operational experience. As the HR practitioners generally lacked such experience, this deficiency needed to be remedied through active training efforts. As a compromise in CG, former line managers (i.e., production managers) were recruited as HRBPs to ensure that these skills were present in the HR function. In this way, the HRM knowledge with experience in leadership and business knowledge were supplemented.

## Implications

Implementing the HRBP role in CG has not been successful regarding work content and competency requirements, so the following measures are suggested. The HRBP model needs to be contextualized before being introduced, considering country-specific organizational solutions. The HRBP role also needs to be adapted to the local HR function's actual mission and organizational level. It has also proven difficult to find HR practitioners who have both business and HR knowledge, so stronger support is needed from other HRM experts, now located in the service and competence centers.

Table 2 presents a proposed redefined HRBP role/model to meet the need for improved coordination, collaboration, and knowledge exchange within the HR function, combined with the needs/requirements/tasks of the line organization.

**Table 2** Proposed redefinition of the HRBP role

| HRBP model                                 | A proposed HR (team) partner                         |
|--|--|
| Senior position                            | Varied positions                                     |
| Focus on HR strategic issues               | Both strategic and operational                       |
| Business and operational skills emphasized | HR focus on contextual knowledge                     |
| Individual work role                       | Member of an HR team with supplementary competencies |

Instead of trying to find or develop HR practitioners who can meet the extremely challenging competence requirements of HRBPs, a small HR team can fulfill this role by working closer to operations and having better contextual knowledge than a shared service center can have. In short, is the fragmented three-unit organization proposed by Ulrich really the best way to deal with complexities and tensions in the HRM field? More teamwork within HR would make the work demands easier to handle, which in turn could make the line management more satisfied with HR than in this case with the overwhelmed HRBPs and the detached shared service center.

### Limitations and future research

As the studied HRM practice offers a complex organizational context, this study has been limited to one division of CG and two of its Swedish production sites, and to the strategic HRBP role. The other work roles and HR units, according to the HRT-inspired model, are outside the scope of the study but are equally important for HRM work. The other work roles and subunits could be the subjects of further studies exploring how HR knowledge-sharing and HR internal collaboration are dealt with in practice in a fragmented HRM organization, as well as how the HR work area develops through outsourcing and digitization. The study contains empirical data from one group of companies which may limit its generalizability, but which nevertheless creates an understanding of the complexity of this management model and may apply to other similar organizations. The results have therefore also been checked against recent research. In addition, this corporate group is well rooted in the Scandinavian work culture and the ‘Swedish model’ and represents how large private organizations have organized their HR functions.

### Conclusion

The objective of this study was to critically discuss the contextualization of the HRBP role in CG’s business environment. The main conclusions of the study are that introducing the Ulrich-inspired HRBP role in CG involved tensions and paradoxes for HR practitioners in creating the professional HRBP identity and hindered collaboration with line managers. Furthermore, the study shows the crucial importance of contextualization within, in this case, the Scandinavian democratic way of working and the delegated responsibility for HRM work to line managers. Furthermore, the focus and competence requirements of the HRBP role were not aligned with practical HRM work or with the HRBPs’ actual experience and educational background. The study also shows that their

role created ambiguity and disappointment for HRBPs due to the actual work content, and that they became intermediaries for the shared service center and e-HR tools in collaboration with the line managers.

Several Scandinavian HRM researchers have identified insufficient correspondence between the HRBP model and practical HRM work (Ferm et al. 2023; Wallo & Coetzer 2023). The present results indicate that average Swedish HR practitioners cannot fulfill the model's knowledge requirements due to their educational background and work experience. In addition, there are also major shortcomings in the contextualization within the Scandinavian work context, which means that the HR business model has been 'lost in translation'.

A proposed modified HRBP role and closer cooperation within the HR function, that is, a team partner organization, is therefore necessary to meet the need for collaboration within the HR function and the line organization's mission for the HR function.

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