



How the COVID-19 pandemic affected the role of Human Resources

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Abstract

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<p>Never before has the role of Human Resources (HR) been as crucial as it is today. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a significant threat to organisations worldwide, having an unprecedented impact on their most valuable assets, their employees. This study examined how the pandemic has impacted HR in nine separate organisations, aiming to gain insights on how the role of HR has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this research was to enhance the understanding on how the pandemic brought attention to new main focus areas within the field of HR and provide valuable suggestions for HR professionals moving forward.</p> <p>To give support to the empirical data, the theoretical framework provides an overview of the history and evolution of HR. The theoretical framework examines how HR has responded to similar situations in the past, and any resulting changes over the last century. It explores various HR typologies introduced from the Human Resource Management era (1980's -) and provide theoretical findings from recent research on HR and COVID-19. The theoretical framework provided a foundation to compare the findings from the empirical research conducted in this study.</p> <p>The primary data was collected using a case study, and nine semi-structured interviews were conducted. According to Ghauri & Gronhaug (2005, in Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 4), a qualitative research method is preferred when there are limited prior insights regarding the phenomenon. The choice of methodology enabled an in-depth analysis of the answers. The data was analysed by categorising the codes into themes that were linked to the role definition of Dave Ulrich's Champions model. The interviews were conducted in the timeframe of 5 months from December 2022 – April 2023.</p> <p>The research concludes that the roles that HR needs to play in an organisation experienced varying degrees of impact. The findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges, but also numerous opportunities for HR to gain status in organisations and to accelerate the development of their HR processes. This study provides development suggestions for navigating the post-pandemic challenges.</p> <p>The recommendations include development areas related to all the four role definitions of Dave Ulrich Champions Model, and addresses opportunities within digital transformation, enhancing leadership, communication, and employee wellbeing.</p>
Keywords COVID-19, human resources, change management, people management, organisational culture

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1 Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic turned workplaces upside down, and the impact of the pandemic in organisations globally has been unprecedented. It has threatened the health and safety of people and caused major disruptions to how people work and lives.

Last time when a major event greatly disrupted the business world was in 2007-09. Back then boardrooms relied on their CFOs to steer them out of the crisis. A good CFO was able to save the company, while a bad one could bury it (The Economist 2020). Is it now HR's turn to step into the spotlight and steer organisations successfully out of this crisis?

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged employees and organisations to their absolute utmost to overcome new daily challenges and barriers just to survive. The complexity and hugely disruptive nature of the crisis has affected how organisations must reposition and become more agile. It has led organisations to make numerous changes to the ways of working and how they support their employees within their organisation. The COVID-19 pandemic is fundamentally a human crisis, which highlights the essential role of HR in enabling organisations to manage through the crisis successfully (Collings & al. 2021, 819).

Undoubtedly, people are increasingly opting to work from home and demanding more flexibility in their work arrangement. This change, along with many other, has had a significant impact on the role of HR. The transformation is still ongoing, as organisational changes require time to fully manifest. While some companies have swiftly adapted to these changes, others are still navigating their way through.

There has been many global crisis' in modern history. What is unique with the COVID-19 pandemic, is the magnitude, and how it affected people in a much greater degree (Collings & al. 2021, 819-821). Therefore, it is argued that that the need of a strong HR function has never been more important (The Economist, 2020). The pandemic has presented the HR function and Human Resource executives with massive challenges, but also a unique opportunity to elevate the status of the HR function in organisations. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how HR functions need to find solutions to numerous problems, and how HR is responding to this crisis will likely define how HR will operate in the future (Colling & al. 2020, 819-820). Even though the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a global threat to people, its impact on organisations is still evident. The changes and challenges brought on by the pandemic continue to shape how organisations operate and adapt. It is crucial for organisations to recognise and address the lasting effect of the pandemic to navigate the post-pandemic era effectively. And it is fair to assume that HR will play a vital

role in managing these ongoing effects and support necessary adjustments. Has the COVID-19 pandemic re-defined the role, and will it set the trajectory for HR in decades to come?

Objective and research aim

It is assumed that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented HR with numerous challenges. The objective for this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the role of HR and identify key areas where organisations and HR have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. To support the objective of this study there is one main research question that has to be answered:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the role of Human Resources?

The outcome of this research should provide valuable insights and recommendation to HR practitioners on how HR can adapt their practices in response to this crisis going forward.

The data collect method for answering the research question, will be semi-structured interview with HR professionals. It will explore what challenges that affected the role of HR, but also if COVID-19 brought HR new opportunities for the role to evolve. These in-depth interviews will aim to gather data on how the pandemic affected HR role and find out if there has been significant changes, challenges, and opportunities for HR to evolve and elevate their status in organisations. The responses will be analysed and grouped into themes.

Structure of this thesis

This thesis contains five chapters in addition to this introductory chapter. These chapters are divided into theoretical framework, methodology, research findings, discussion and analysis, and conclusion.

The first chapter will go through the theoretical framework. Part one the theoretical framework will focus on the history and evolution of Human Resources. It is interesting for this study to see how HR has dealt with similar situations in the past, and if this has led to any significant changes during the last century. Additionally, it will go through some of the well-known HR typologies that has been introduced since the Human Resource Management era. This part is important to see how the scholars within HR has impacted the role of HR and participate to justify why Dave Ulrich's Champions model was chosen to define the "role of HR" in this research. The last part of the theoretical framework will look at recent research concerning HR and COVID-19. This is interesting to see if the recent research findings are aligned with the findings in the empirical research done in this study.

In the third chapter the choice of methodology will be presented and explain and justify the choice of methodology. It will also provide information on how the data was collected and analysed. This study will use qualitative research methodology to gather the data.

The fourth chapter will present the findings from the research interviews. The empirical study will consist of semi-structured qualitative interviews with HR professionals from different industries. This will enable examination on how the pandemic has impacted the role and responsibilities of HR in different industries. Additionally, the study will analyse whether or not the pandemic has elevated the status of the HR function in organisations, as well as the challenges and opportunities that have come as a result due to the crisis.

In the fifth chapter, there will be a detailed discussion about the findings from the empirical research. The results will be analysed and compared to the theoretical framework used in this study. This chapter will also give recommendations to HR professionals based on the findings from the empirical research.

The sixth chapter will conclude the major findings from this research and reflect on the outcomes.

Scope and delimitations

The scope of this thesis is extensive; however, to provide a more focused approach, the study will adopt a well-known typology, Dave Ulrich's Champions Model, to define the role of HR. By doing so, the study aims to limit the scope and establish a connection between the findings and this particular HR role definition.

2 Theoretical Framework

Since the early 1900's, the role of modern HRM has changed and evolved along with the name. Transforming from being welfare practitioners to becoming an important strategic function as business partners with a high stakeholder-centric focus. According to Hodges and Crabtree, we can divide the evolution of HRM into 5 stages (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4), where in the beginning it was a higher focus on the workers conditions and where the role had nothing, or very little to do with the overall organisational strategy evolving into a more strategic role with a high focus on the organisational strategies in organisations. To understand the philosophy, function, and practices of HRM, it is relevant to understand more about the evolution of the role and how it has brought us where the role is today. This chapter will discuss the five stages in the evolution of HR that have led to the current operations of Human Resources.

2.1 Evolution of Human Resources

According to Crabtree & Hodges (2021, chapter 4) "HR's role has continually changed and developed along with its name". Modern Human Resource Management (HRM) is of quite recent origin from the 1980's and onwards, but the development of the HRM we know today, can be traced back to the early 1900's. From the early beginning, HR's focus has shifted from being worker focused to become more aligned with the overall goals of the organisations and much more business focused since the conceptualisation. In the earlier stages HR was partially disconnected from with the overall organisational strategies and had a very micro level perspective on its tasks (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). This has gradually moved towards more business focus rather than people focus. The role is now more integrated with the overall strategy in organisations and has moved to a more macro perspective. Crabtree and Hodges (2021, chapter 4) have divided the evolution of HR into five stages:

- Stage one (1900–1940s): Welfare practitioners.
- Stage two (1940s–mid-1970s): Personnel Management.
- Stage three (mid-1970s–late 1990s): Human Resource Management.
- Stage four (2000–2020): Business Partnership.
- Stage five (2020–): Stakeholder-Centric.

The illustration from Crabtree and Hodges (Figure 1), shows a clear picture on how the focus has shifted through the evolution of HR. From a worker focus, where in stages one and two,

control and monitoring were the main drivers for Welfare Practitioners and Personnel Managers driven by the need for conformity, to a stakeholder-centric focus with were flexibility, driven by need of rapid adaptation in the organisation came in focus.

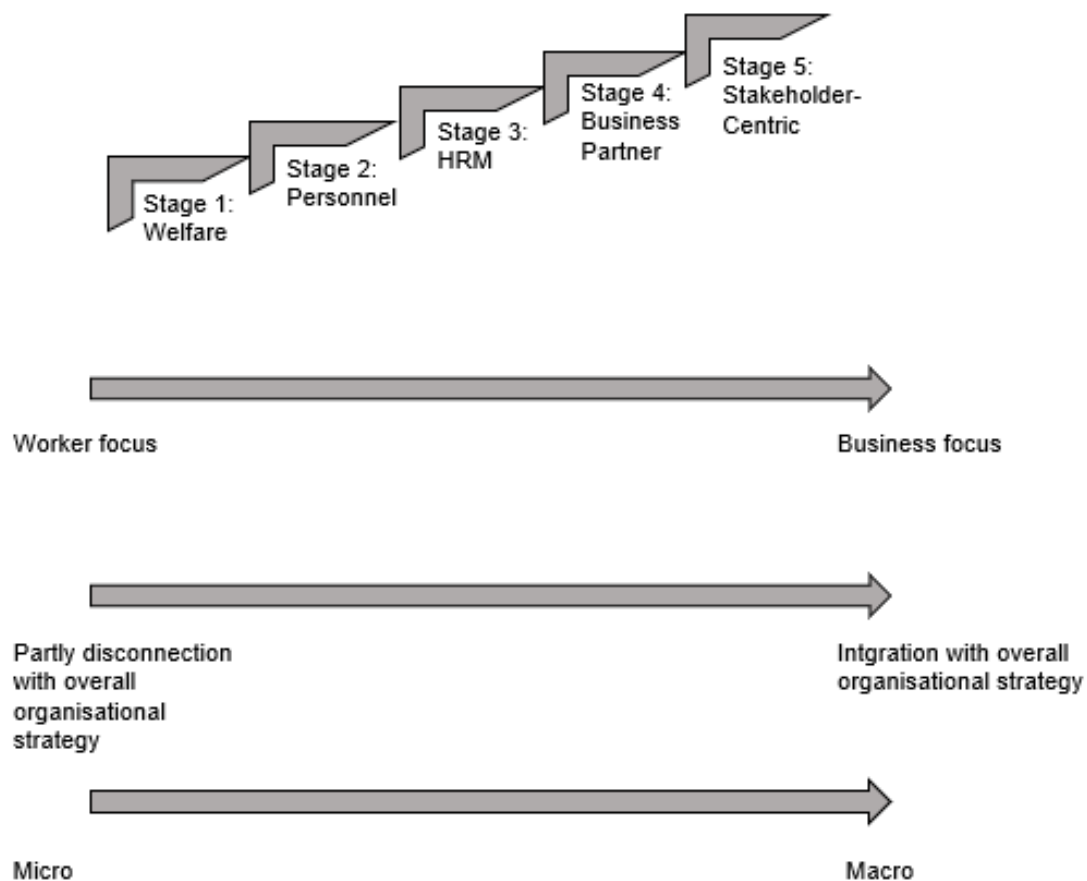


Figure 1. Evolution of HR (adapted from Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4)

Welfare practitioner & Personnel practitioners (1900's – mid 1970's)

From the conceptualisation of modern HRM in the late 19th century, a welfare practitioner role was established in organisations that felt morally obligated to improve worker conditions. The welfare practitioner role was usually a decentralised role, that quickly evolved into a broader role in the aftermath of the World War I (1914-1918) with focus on labour management and from the 1930's when new union laws came, to help the employer deal with unions (Dessler 2017, 49). After the second World War, it became an increase in the numbers of welfare practitioners, to help the organisations to e.g., increase outcome and

become more efficient. During this time, organisations started to establishing personnel departments to centralise employment-related activities and to oversee worker related practises such as scientific management. And during this this (1930'-1940's) it became a gradual shift from welfare practitioners to the personnel management era (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4)

The second World War led to challenges with labour shortage, turnover and productivity issue, and organisations needed to control worker productivity and increase efficiency. This was done by placing workers based to do tasks based on their abilities and implement even further initiatives to improving working conditions. (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4) During this stage, employment activities were aimed to meet organisations needs and foster employee harmony, making the initial shift towards HR's strategic involvement. However, the personnel managers were primarily focused on control and compliance, and had limited influence in the organisations (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4)

In the 1960' and 1970's, the personnel department began to develop increasingly defined procedures. The involved more structured involvement in recruitment, induction, and job-related training, and controlling employee numbers. The objective was to centralise and control these, adopting prescriptive approaches to people management with strict compliance to rules and regulations (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, Chapter 4). The emergence of new labour laws in the 1970's in various industrial countries, also increased the demand for the personnel departments shift focus also towards the legal aspects and ensure that the new regulation was aligned with their compliance models (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, Chapter 4).

Human Resources Management (mid-1970s – 1990's)

Until the 1980's human resources management was mostly known as personnel management (Valdarlier 2015, 465), but in the mid 1970's the concept of HRM was introduced. It was also from the end of this decade where the most prominent scholars within HR started to appear (Legge 1977; Tyson & Fell 1986; Storey 1992; & Ulrich 1997).

In the 1970's, significant changes occurred that transformed working environments. Globalisation increased international competition, de-regulations, increased employment legislation, changes in unionisation, advancements in technology and the shift from manufacturing to a service-based economy forced personnel managers to adopt a more holistic approach (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). Due to all these changes, HR needed to become more strategic, compared to in earlier models such as personnel

managers. This required a shift from being control and compliance-oriented function, to a transactional business function, gave a dramatic shift in perceptions and roles in HR, which was more about control and compliance (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4).

With all the industrial unrest and rapidly changing labour legislations in the 1960's and 1970's, the role of personnel management was to protect the organisations facing these challenges and carry out administrative tasks. In the HRM era, it was the period when scholars and organisations started to establish a connection between HR activities and business outcomes (Hunter, Saunders, Boroughs & Constance 2006, 4). Even though the concept of HRM was established in the 1970's, it was not before in the 1980's that HRM gained external recognition by academics and practitioners (Beardwell & Clayton 2007, 6).

The transition to HRM involved ensuring that individuals had the necessary resources including knowledge, skills, and capabilities they needed to work effectively to achieve both the short- and long-term organisational goals and support personal needs (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). HRM became the start of when HR activities would be integrated components in an overall HRM strategy. The stage of HRM was still managed on a micro level in the organisation, building on the previous stages of the evolution and performance management. However, it can be seen attempts of aligning the HR activities with the overall organisational strategy of in the initial stages of the HRM era, signalling the birth of strategic human resource management (SHRM) (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4).

There are many differences between HRM and Personnel Management era, but the main difference is that the view of employees changed. In the Personnel Management era employees were considered expenses. The Personnel Management era implied employees as expenses, while in HRM conveyed the view of employees should be managed as other organisational resources, and not as cogs in the wheel. This led to a new perspective/rhetoric, and a new way of thinking from managers (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4).

Human Resources business partnership (2000 – 2020)

In the business partnership era, human capital was put higher up on the agenda. This part of the evolution transformed HR from a traditional administrative cost centre to a dynamic strategic function (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). During the transformation of HRM, investing in human capital was considered worth the money. Activities to improve recruitment, retention and improve organisational performance became more important for many organisations. During the 1980's the focus and attempts to link HR activities to

business outcomes increased. Organisations started to acknowledge the complexity of interactions between all the parties involved in people management. This focus increased on developing individuals was to create a higher commitment and engagement from the employees (Hunter & al. 2006, 4-5). This meant that HR also had to become more strategic and participate on a more strategic level than before to have a bigger impact (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4).

Hunter & al. (2006, 11) is suggesting that the Human Resource Business Partner (HRBP) role derived from Dave Ulrich's four folded model from 1997, that suggested ways for the HR function to handle issues like lacking strategic analysis capability, ineffectively / inefficiently on delivering on basic tasks and that HR was unable to address the challenges that the new models in the 80's for HRM posed (Hunter & al. 2006, 11).

For a HR business partners (HRBP) to be successful, there are certain criteria's that should be met for the role to be able to meet the wanted outcome. Firstly, HR should be at the centre of the organisation, and be part of defining the future direction and shaping the means of obtaining the goals (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). According to Hunter & al. (2006, 27-28) key success factors for the HRBP to succeed are:

- Learn the business in and out.
- Build great and diverse relationships.
- Be at the leading edge of the business' thinking.
- Define, track, report and celebrate successes.

To be successful, HR must not only rely on business unit leaders, but also have their own understanding and knowledge of the means and needs of the organisation and align themselves accordingly (Hunter & al. 2006, 27-28). This means that they should have a good understanding of the strategic, financial, and operational aspects of the business. Additionally, they must build strong and diverse relationship with the key stakeholders within the organisation, to get a deep understanding of how HR might support the execution of the business strategy. Anticipating and knowing the organisations direction, and additionally interpreting its future requirements in terms of people is also essential for the role to achieve the credibility the role needs to get recognition and have a seat at the big table when the strategy for the organisation is mapped out (Hunter & al. 2006, 27-28).

To ensure that HRBP will gain influence and maintain a strategic focus, it is important that the basic HR functions operate seamlessly. In situations where the basic HR functions are not seamless, the credibility, impact and influence of HR function will diminish. This can

hinder HR's ability to effectively support the overall business goals and result in a more operation rather than strategic role. (Hunter & al. 2006, 31). Even though the HR Business Partner supposedly should be a strategic role, it has struggled to achieve this level of support, and is often become more an operational than strategic role. One reason for this is the lack of understanding from line managers on what the role of HRBP should deliver. It has been a challenge to define and specify exactly what the role should include of responsibilities and of what the role entails, which leads to line managers wanting operational support rather than strategic input. There is evidence that HRBP struggled in this era to gain the status they needed to execute their tasks. Studies with managers outside HR suggested that they did not believe in the value of the business partner role (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). This just proves that HR this late in the evolution of HR, they still struggled to gain the recognition the function might have deserved, and that HR itself need to be better on highlighting the importance and value it contributes with to organisations.

Stakeholder centric and beyond 2020's

The way HR's role will continue developing is difficult to predict, and there is much debate amongst HR practitioners and in the literature (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). For HR to be successful in developing their role and show their worth in the organisation it is important that the role continues to act proactively and are an active part of setting the course, rather than reactively where the focus is perceived to be mostly "firefighting" and taking orders. HR professionals must continue to strengthen their relationship and links with key stakeholders in organisations and be a key player that has influence enough to be able to participate in setting the course and future strategy for the organisation. In some organisations, HR do think they are part of the decision-making table, while in reality they have less influence than they think (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4).

In this phase of the evolution, HR has shifted focus towards building stronger connections with the line managers. In the future line managers will likely play an even bigger part in the employee's day-to-day work, and critics warn that this can lead to a greater distance between HR and the employees (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). Devolution of HR activities to line managers, will continue to be essential for HR to evolve and become an even more influential strategic player in the organisation, and will create space for HR to move to a transformational role (Crabtree and Hodges 2021, chapter 4). It will challenge HR to help some manager out of their comfort zone and to provide them with the time, skills, and capabilities to lead and do this work. If this is done successfully, it will free up time for HR to focus more on providing the tools and strategies going forward and be an impactful player in setting the course for the business (Crabtree and Hodges 2021, chapter 4).

To achieve this, HR needs to transition more towards supporting the line manager in a bigger degree than before. They need to give up some of the responsibilities that the role used to have directly with the employees with the day-to-day transactional focus, and support line managers executing these tasks. HR also needs to do a thorough, and continuous review of what kind of support they need to provide to line management and its relationship within the organisational development professionals. Capability, confidence, capacity, commitment, and self-reliance are according to Crabtree and Hodges (Crabtree and Hodges 2021, chapter 4) important keywords for this transformational process to give support. How can HR help managers develop their confidence in dealing with management issues and to ensure that they have the capacity to be involved in transactional HR activity? How can they ensure that the managers have the capabilities and confidence to take on activities that traditionally have been belonging to the HR department without it feeling like it has been off-loaded on them?

To succeed in this transition, HR must facilitate so that line managers can feel confident and take on the responsibilities that HR used to perform, while also overseeing that the tasks are performed optimally. HR should also be involved in optimising organisational effectiveness and ensure that the employees have the right environment to perform with balance between management supervision and their own autonomy to shape their work. Additionally, HR should oversee that wellbeing policies for all employees are in place, which will ensure that employees have a positive and healthy work experience (Crabtree and Hodges 2021, chapter 4).

There are critical voices that warn that there will be more distance between HR and the employees with the devolution of HR activities to line managers, administrative tasks will marginalise and make HR with less contribution to make (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). There is still a perception from line managers that HR should focus on more traditional personnel manager tasks rather than being involved with strategic decisions, and not “dump” these HR tasks on the line managers (Crabtree & Hodges 2021, chapter 4). To avoid this HR must ensure that they will be the trusted advisor and that they are heavily involved in policy development and designing the HR processes.

The potential for the fifth stage of the HR evolution, might lead us into an exciting world of e-HR, self-service portals to support their line managers, and a step back for HR from involvement in the day-to-day activities with employees. The proposed shift in HR's role requires HR to engage with leaders in a different way than before, and slowly step back from day-to-day delivery of service and reactionary firefighting. This can lead the HR function to

become more strategic, professional and a facilitator of change, and focus more on strategy, rather than daily operational activities.

The way forward for HR is to affect stakeholders and get more influence in strategic decision making. If HR succeeds with this reorientation, and maps the way forward for stakeholders, it will help the HR function to play a critical role in the overall strategic planning of organisational change and get more influence in organisations. It will also enable HR to engage stakeholders with desired goals and processes of change (Crabtree and Hodges 2021, chapter 4).

2.2 HR models and typologies

This sub-chapter will go through some of the main typologies from the 1970's. The reason for starting to evaluate the typologies from the human resources management (HRM) era, is that it was not until the late 1970s that organisations and HR professionals began moving towards more strategic positions and gained more influence within organisations. Before this, welfare practitioners and personnel practitioners had little strategic focus and influence in the organisations. Through the last decades, scholars have debated and suggested different classifications of the roles of HR in organisations. There is no universal agreed definition of HRM, and definitions of what the role should include has been widely debated for the last 50 years (Beardwell & Clayton 2007, 28). According to Bailey & al. (2021, 71) there are five widely known models. Legge (1978); Tyson & Fell (1986); Storey (1992); Ulrich (1997); & Caldwell (2001). In this chapter the main characteristics of these typologies will be discussed, to get an understanding of how the role of HR has been defined from an operational and strategic aspect.

For many years academics have been concerned with mapping out the roles that HR can play in organisations and develop typologies that help to explain and contextualise the different tasks and combine them into role orientations (Bailey & al. 2021, 71). The development of the HR role and these models explained in this chapter has provided useful frameworks according to which HR role and its organisational contribution can be evaluated and given a more holistic overview over the expertise needed and required for the role to have the most valuable impact for the organisation (Bailey & al. 2021, 78-79).

One of the main questions in this research is how the pandemic has affected the role of HR, and even though the scholars have exhorted the HR function to become more and more strategic, evidence from recent research show that HR has not become more strategic, and that the administrative role is still dominant (Bailey & al. 2021, 79). In this chapter we will

look at the most widely known typologies, and how HR has developed towards a more strategic approach to people management.

Legge's innovator model & Tyson and Fell's building site model

Karen Legge was one of the pioneers in defining the HR role. Even though Karen Legge's HR innovator model from 1978 is over 30 years old, it is still referenced amongst HR scholars. Legge focused on the various sources of power and control in organisations. She brought up the challenges that personnel managers faced with influence and power within the organisation, and suggested how HR professionals could gain more power and influence to affect change within the organisation (Bailey & al. 2021, 72). Her early work describing personnel managers as problem solvers, but also that they had an ambiguity in their role and needed more power and authority to overcome these ambiguities and get a stronger influence in the organisation (Guest & King 2004, 402). Legge suggested two main options that could affect the change and influence within the organisation for the personnel managers, and these were Conformist innovator and Deviant innovator.

The Conformist innovator accepts the existing organisational aims and adjusts his/her means to achieve them. The conformist innovator is using their HR expertise to improve organisational performance by accepting the already existing managerial value system and aims of the organisation and suggest improvements within it, rather than challenging it (Bailey & al. 2021, 72). The Deviant innovator "encourages radical change within the organisation by questioning prior assumptions" (Bailey & al. 2021, 72). The deviant innovator is seen as an internal lobbyist that is trying to persuade line managers and others to change their way of working at a fundamental level. To be able to make these changes and influence the organisational work the deviant innovator is reliant on external sources such as employment legislation that may challenge the current aims and goals and the dominance of the profit motive. (Guest & King 2004, 404)

Without the power from the external sources, the deviant innovator will find it difficult to succeed with the radical changes suggested, while the conformist innovator will be unlikely to make any meaningful change to the organisation (Guest & King 2004, 404). According to Legge, the HR function did in this period increasingly align itself with the goals of the organisation, which led to less emphasis on the interests of its employees. This was limiting the possibilities for more deviant innovation (Bailey & al. 2021, 72). Legge's model is useful for understanding the difficulties HR face achieving fundamental change. Legge pointed out the "problems arising from HR's relative powerlessness and marginalisation from the

decision-making processes”, as compared to other functions within the organisation such as finance (Bailey & al. 2021, 72).

In 1986, Tyson & Fell introduced more distinguished roles compared to e.g., Legge. While Legge (1977) had a more bi-polar approach, Tyson & Fell introduced a hierarchy for the HR role (Groblschegg, Thill, Venegas 2014, 99). Tyson & Fell argued that HR functions could play three distinct roles in the organisation and introduced a HR hierarchy. The roles they suggested was the Clerk of works model, the Contracts manager model, and the Architect model. The role of Clerk of works was focusing on personnel management as administrative support and paperwork. This role could include a short-term focus on daily activities of administration and employees (Bailey & al. 2021, 72). The Contract manager was found in workplaces where there was a strong union presence, focusing both on the operational work and focusing on managing unions, industrial relations and policy making (Bailey & al. 2021, 72). The Architect role, suggested that HR professionals could play a strategic role in the organisation, integrating the management of people into the core of the business (Bailey & al. 2021, 72-73). This meant that the personnel professionals (HRM) should participating in creating and building the organisation. In this typology, there is an early introduction of giving HR a more strategic role in the organisation, through the Architect role.

John Storey’s strategic/tactical model

In 1992, Storey added dimensions to the HRM roles (Groblschegg, Thill, Venegas, 2014, 100). According to Storey, the function or roles performed by the HR function could be presented on a two-dimensional chart (two axes). He examined the role of HR in the late 1980s in the UK and came up with four new functional roles for HR (Bailey & al. 2021, 73) These were interventionary and non-interventionary roles, and while the role of Handmaiden and Regulators were tactical roles in the organisation, the Changemaker and the Advisor role were more strategic (Figure 2). Storey’s model differs mostly from Legge and Tyson and Fell’s models due to the introduction of dimensions and that it was developed on an empirical model and did not have a hierarchy in his model (Bailey & al. 2021, 73-74). Storey also differentiated between “soft” and “hard” HRM and stated that “The hard one emphasises the quantitative, calculative, and business-strategic aspects of managing human resources in as “rational” a way as for any other economic factor” (Armstrong 2016, 10). While the softer version of HRM, focus more on communication, motivation, and leadership (Armstrong 2016, 10). A way of interpreting this literature, is that Storey differentiated “hard” and “soft” HRM to his model. E.g., the “hard” HRM may prioritise organisational interest over individual employee interests, while the “soft” HRM prioritises open communication, individual needs to obtain organisational goals.

Storey (1992, in Bailey & al. 2021, 73) defined four roles that HR should perform:

- The Advisor role comprised internal consultancy and gave advise to line managers without being interventionary.
- The Handmaiden role was reactive to line manager requests.
- The Regulatory role included involvement in the development and application of employment rules and policy.
- The changemaker role were both strategic and interventionary and concerned with SHRM and the management of change.

While the first three of these roles overlapped with Tyson and Fell's roles, the role of the Changemaker appeared to be new in Storey's model. Changemakers should have a strategic agenda that focuses on the reality of business performance and the softer HR interventions to enhance employee commitment and motivation (Caldwell 2001, 39-52). In the early 90s, Storey's study revealed that only two of the HR departments that participated in his study (n=15) were performing a Changemaker role. This can also be linked to Karen Legge's model and conclusion, that the deviant innovator was more difficult to execute within organisations, and not many of the large firms had yet given HR "freedom" to work with innovation and strategy in the early 1990's. With these dimensions and roles in the four-square model, they could be seen as an inspiration to Dave Ulrich's model that is well known (Bailey & al. 2021, 73). Caldwell concluded (2001) that HR has changed substantially since Storey's model was first developed, with certain roles growing and the Handmaiden model being remodelled. Also, the role of Handmaiden was changed to Service Provider by Caldwell (2001, 990). The term Handmaiden, which originates from a female servant or a personal maid, might have become a bit controversial to use in the 21st century. Regardless of the term used by Storey, the role can be seen as the predecessor to Ulrich's Administrative Expert.

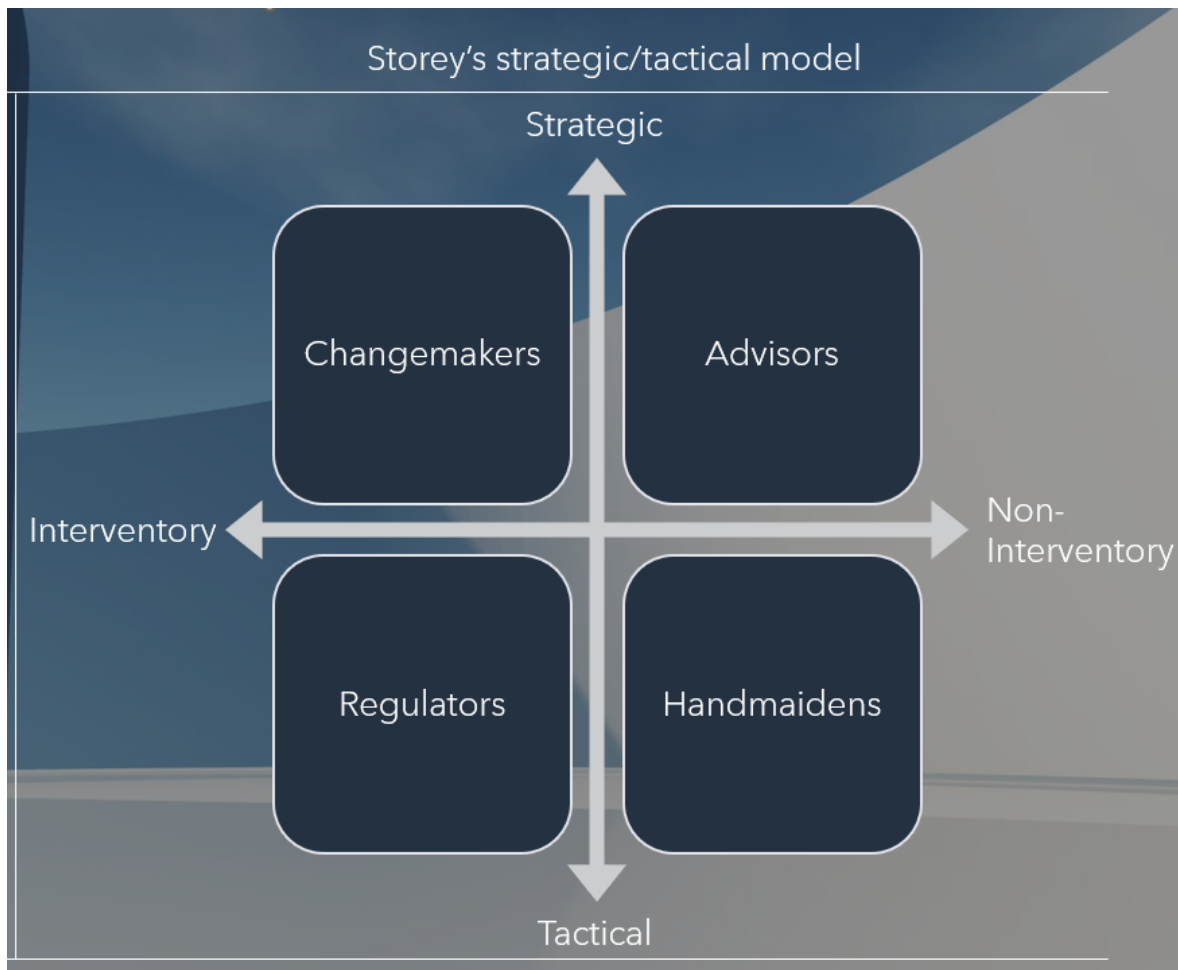


Figure 2. Storey's HR functional roles (adapted from Bailey & al. 2021, 73)

Dave Ulrich's HR Champions model

Among the different classifications and models, Ulrich's (1997) is the most widely recognised. Dave Ulrich argued that HR must be an active part in leading change, add value, and be active in setting the course for the organisation, and changed the focus for HR from being "only" an Administrative Expert taking care of practical day-to-day issues, to a strategic influencer in the organisation. Ulrich presented a framework that identified four key roles, all of which must be fulfilled for the HR to function optimally and to be able to make a real contribution and add the most value to the organisation. Ulrich's four metaphors to describe and define these roles are (1997, in Crabtree & Hodges 2021, Chapter 5):

- Strategic Partner – aligning HR strategies with business strategies.
- Administrative Expert – designing and delivering efficient HR processes.
- Employee Champion – involvement in employee concerns and needs.
- Change Agent – managing transformations and change.

Ulrich applied two dimensions in his model, where one is defining the future/strategic focus and day-to-day/operational focus. Ulrich's model put HR into a position where they should be more involved in the processes of the whole business, both strategic and operational, long-term, and short-term (Ulrich 1997, 25). This study will apply Ulrich's fourfold model to see how the pandemic impacted HR's role. Even though Ulrich's model is widespread and well known, a study by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) in the UK from 2003 showed that fewer than 30 percent of companies had fully adopted the model. This can also be related to the implementation time of the model since all four roles should be adopted and described, and that many HR professionals see themselves more as business partners and Change Agents (strategic) rather than operational, such as the Administrative Expert and Employee Champion (Beardwell & Claydon 2007, 25).

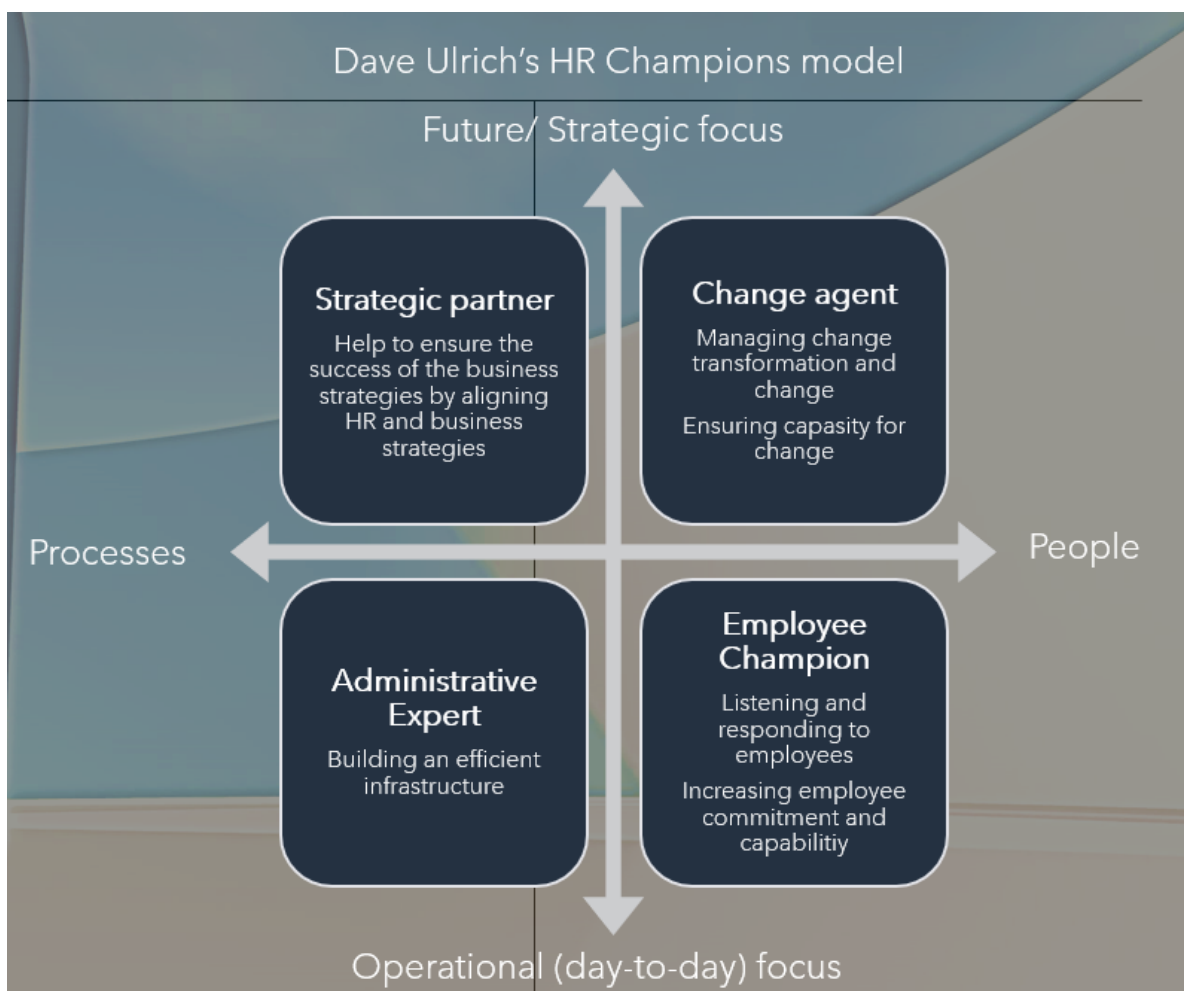


Figure 3. Ulrich's typology of HR functional roles (Ulrich 1997, adapted from Bailey & al. 2021, 74)

The notion of the Strategic Partner was introduced by Dyer and Holder (Armstrong 2016, 52), not by Ulrich as generally assumed, but the idea was popularised by Ulrich. This role

gave birth to the HR business partner that has become prevalent today (Bailey & al. 2018, 75). The role as a Strategic Partner assumes that HR becomes involved in participating in the process of defining the business strategy and aligning the HR processes with the overall organisational strategy (Ulrich 1997, 25). According to Ulrich, HR should do an organisational diagnosis to identify the HR practices that will support the overall strategy and make this strategy happen (Ulrich 1997, 25-26). By involving HR in strategic work, the organisation will benefit in several ways. The business can adapt to change faster from conception to the execution of new strategies, and the business can achieve better financial performance due to more effective strategy execution.

In an article from Harvard Business Review (1998, 128), Ulrich called upon HR professionals to take on the role of an architect in a new building. This is a metaphor for the HR strategist's aim to have a comprehensive blueprint of the organisation's structure and how its parts work together, just as an architect knows the composition of a building. The HR strategist should proactively identify methods for renovating the parts of the organisation that require improvement, like an architect's role in renovating a building. By acquiring this competence and knowledge, HR can act as a Strategic Partner and add value to the executive team, gaining confidence and making business sense (Ulrich 1998, 127-129). The term architect might have been inspired by Tyson & Fell, that included this role as the strategic HR in their theory.

Creating an organisational infrastructure has been considered one of the more traditional roles of HR. The metaphor used by Ulrich (1997, 26) is the Administrative Expert and is define by Ulrich as "to be efficient as Administrative Experts, HR professionals need to undertake activities leading to continual reengineering of the work processes they administer" (Ulrich 1997, 28). Ulrich suggested that HR should go from being administrators, to Administrative Experts (Ulrich 1998, 129). This meant that they needed to abandon the traditional image of rule-making police, but at the same time ensure that the routine work is done well. Ulrich suggested that HR should be more involved in finding and fixing processes so they could be done faster, better, and cheaper by e.g., leveraging technology. Improved efficiency will build HR's credibility, which can open door for the role to become more strategic. HR professionals should deliver and design efficient HR processes for training, recruitment, rewarding, and managing the flow of people through the organisation. This includes streamlining and automating the processes to support the organisation's infrastructure. This work includes reengineering HR processes to save costs and increase efficiency. This role should ensure that day-to-day operations are executed efficiently and quickly.

In organisations where intellectual capital is a critical source, HR professionals should be active in developing and supporting this capital. HR has a responsibility to ensure that employees feel committed to the organisation and contribute fully. The Employee Champion role in HR is to engage and involve themselves in the employees' day-to-day problems (e.g., support engagement and communication, employee and labour relationship, safety and wellness, and diversity and inclusion). The third role, Employee Champion, focuses on managing the wellbeing of individual employees by listening and responding to them and ensuring that they are aware of the strategic issues facing the organisation (Bailey & al. 2021, 75). Another important aspect is how HR is orienting and training line management about the importance about employee morale and how they can achieve that (Ulrich 1998, 129-130).

The fourth key role, based on Ulrich's classification, is the Change Agent/champion. This role supports, enables, and promotes the organisation's implementation of change by looking at organisational design, employee enablement, and talent management in change processes. HR professionals in this role help identify and implement processes for change. This can involve everything from changing tools and equipment to influencing behaviour and attitudes of individuals, introducing new work processes, and advocating cultural changes in an organisation (Bailey & al. 2021, 75). According to Ulrich (1998, 130-133), due to the rapid changes in the business world, companies need to change in order to stay competitive. HR professionals are key to serve as Change Agents and must understand the process of change and help make these changes happen. HR professionals play a critical role in initiating and leading change initiatives in organisations (Ulrich, Brockbank, Younger & Ulrich 2012a, 219). For HR to strengthen their position in the organisation, it is important that they also take ownership of change initiatives and sustain change over time, ensuring that the desired changes survive (Ulrich, Younger, Ulrich & Brockbank 2012b, chapter 6). This can be achieved through building commitment to those processes and ensuring that the change is happening as intended (Ulrich 1997, 30-31).

It can be concluded that Dave Ulrich's champions model is still very much relevant today. Although the model has evolved, and the four roles might be more commonly known as Strategic HR (Strategic Partner), HR transformation and change (Change Agent), HR delivery service (Administrative Expert) and Employee contribution (Employee Champion), or other terms, Ulrich provided clarity of focus that led to the efficiency of HR departments globally, and many organisations use it as a useful foundation for their HR work. In the table below (Table 1), it is summarised what are the main importance for the distinct roles in Ulrich's champions model according to an article written by Ulrich (1998, 125-134),

published in Harvard Business Review. Below is a summary of the most important focus areas for each role in Ulrich's model according to Ulrich (1998, 125-134). Table 1 will provide a connection and support to the findings in the empirical review.

Table 1 Dave Ulrich's Champions model - Summary (Ulrich 1998, 125-134)

Dave Ulrich's champions model - Summary	
Strategic Expert	Administrative Expert
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR should guide and drive discussion on how the organisation should be organised to carry out strategy. • HR must join forces with managers to systematically assess the impact and importance of initiatives and set clear priorities that are truly linked to business results. • To build confidence in the role, HR should be held responsible for defining organisational architecture, which should include to identify underlying models of the company's way of doing business. This also to add confidence for its role. • HR managers should propose, create, and debate for the best practises in culture change programs, appraisal, and reward systems to «renovate» the parts of the organisational architecture that need it. Initiate change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the efficiency of the HR function and the entire organisation. • Discover and adjust processes so they can be done better, faster, and cheaper. • HR should take advantage of technology to streamline HR work and reduce cost. • HR should build credibility by delivering flawless administrative processes. • HR should find new ways of organising work within the company and establishing centres of expertise. • Demonstrate the value of HR's administrative expertise to become a partner in executing strategy.

Employee Champion	Change Agent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making sure that employees are engaged and feel committed to the organisation and contribute fully. • Train line management about the importance of high employee morale and how to achieve it. • Provide the employees with the resources they need to meet the demands put on them. • Being the employees' voice in discussions with management representing the employees. • Addressing low employee morale by identifying and resolving causes such as unclear goals, unfocused priorities, and ambiguous performance measurement. • Recommending ways to improving morale problems, such as hiring the needed resources and redesigning work processes. • Offer employees opportunities for professional and personal growth. • Stand up for employees and helping to make sure they have a say in important decisions that will impact them with the management team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR professionals needs to help build the organisations capacity to capitalise on change. • HR Professionals can introduce change models to guide executive teams through processes. • HR should identify key success factors for change and assessing the organisations strengths and weaknesses regarding each factor. • HR can play a key role in facilitating cultural change by defining and clarifying the concept of culture change. This through voicing their opinions why this is important for organisational success. • HR can define processes for assessing current culture and the desired new culture and identifying alternative approaches to creating culture change. • To be effective as Change Agents, HR professionals need to define their purpose and mandate, and senior managers must lead the way.

Caldwell's change matrix

Caldwell (2003, 139-140) classified a Change Agent as "an individual or team responsible for initiating, sponsoring, managing, or implementing a specific change initiative or a complete change program" (Armstrong 2020, 108). As Ulrich mentioned (March 2012, min. 1-5), HR plays a critical role in initiating and leading change initiatives in organisations. For it to be successful, HR must build compelling cases for change that address the intellectual and emotional needs of stakeholders affected by the change. This includes effective communication with key stakeholders, identifying key influencers and decision-makers, and being prepared to address resistance to change. To drive business success, HR professionals must also ensure that the initiated changes are sustained within the organisation (Ulrich & al. 2012b, chapter 6).

Caldwell's model focuses on the HR role in managing change. He analysed both Storey's and Ulrich's models and argued that the role of the changemaker or Change Agent, as defined by Storey and Ulrich, has grown in both significance and complexity (Caldwell 2003, 983). However, he questions the influence HR has in this role, raising critical questions about whether traditional personnel practitioners can truly become Change Agents and if this poses new threats to the credibility, legitimacy, and professional status of a function that has already been marginalised by senior management in the past (2003, 986-987, 1001-1003)

Caldwell conducted in-depth research on managing change, which led to the identification of four potential roles. His model differentiates the nature of the interventions based on whether they are driven by HR vision or expertise and whether the change is transformative or incremental (Bailey & al. 2021, 78).

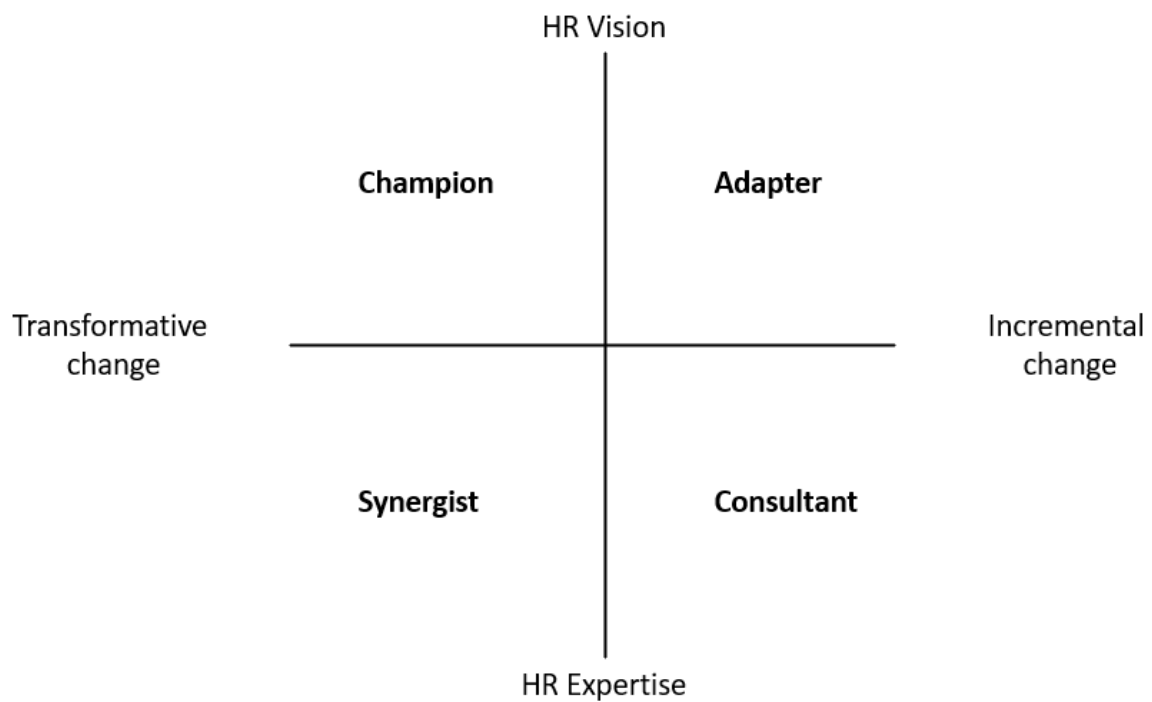


Figure 4 HR Caldwell's model (Caldwell 2001, adapted from Bailey & al. 2018, 78)

Caldwell concluded that the HR roles of expertise, such as synergist and consultant, run the risk of being taken over by non-specialists or outsourced by external providers due to the increasing fragmentation of business autonomy and HR expertise. On the other hand, this

presents an opportunity for HR to reposition themselves by focusing on strategy and change at the strategic level of the organisation (Bailey & al. 2001, 78).

Caldwell's HR roles

Champion	→	Change champions are high-level executives who lead strategic transformational change programmes.
Synergist	→	Synergists are senior internal or external HR professionals who strategically coordinate and integrate complex and large-scale change projects across the organisation.
Adapter	→	Change adapters are mid-level HR generalists and specialists who build support for change within business units and functions.
Consultant	→	Consultants are specialists, either internal or external to the organisation, who implement discrete change projects.

Figure 5 Caldwell's HR roles (Caldwell 2001, adapted from Bailey & al. 2021, 79)

The table below outlines the definitions and differentiation of strategic and operational roles in all five typologies that have been discussed in the theoretical framework. All the authors included in Table 2 are notable contributors to the field of HR typologies and evolution. It shows some well-known typologies in the HR world and also highlights how HR has evolved over time.

Table 2 Summary of the HR typologies and roles (Bailey & al. 2021, 71)

Author(s)	Operational roles	Strategic roles
Legge (1978)	Conformist innovator Problem solver	Deviant innovator
Tyson & Fell (1986)	Clerks of works Contracts manager	Architect
Storey (1992)	Regulators Handmaidens	Advisors Changemakers
Ulrich (1997)	Administrative Expert Employee Champion	Change Agent Strategic Partner
Caldwell (2001)	Adapter Consultant	Synergist Champion

2.3 Human resource management and COVID-19

HRM is about how people are managed, employed, and developed in organisations, and this has been highly impacted by COVID-19, and has generated significant challenges to Human resource practitioners (Hamouche 2021, 2). Human resource's role is to effectively utilise the human resources to serve strategic needs and reach the strategic goals of the organisation (Chapman, Sisk, Schatten & Miles 2018, 533).

HR implications due to COVID-19

HR professionals have a significant role to play during disruptions such as COVID-19, and according to Kim, Vaiman & Sanders (2022, 289), HR's objective is to ensure that their organisation survive and thrive through the disruption. HR professionals can help to deal with extra-organisational stress by providing professional psychological support, support managers in building and maintaining organisational resilience and provide employees with emotional and material support. HR need to play a significant role in implementing and formulating appropriate policies and ensure that these policies are sustainable (Kim & al. 2022, 285). HR who serves as "guardians of organisational culture," should be part of creating and maintaining a fitting culture that supports flexibility to the external environment. In addition it is important that they help the management group to formulate and implement policies and practises that reward collaboration and collectiveness (Kim & al. 2022, 285-290). Other threats such as lack of contacts with co-workers, decrease in physical activity or taking care of one's appearance and blurring the boundaries between work and personal life, can lead to many unwanted consequences for the organisational culture and employees (Grzelczak 2021, 409-410). Employers need to stay connected with their employees and their lives more closely during a crisis, and human resource departments and professionals have a key role in facilitating and supporting this transformation (Anjum & Rahaman 2022, 57-62). In this context, Dave Ulrich compares human resource professionals to first responders at a car crash in context to the COVID-19 pandemic. *"When there is a major car accident, the first responders on the scene do triage. They quickly work out who needs the most attention. It is not a perfect system, but it is necessary."* (Sheedy May 2020). He highlights that HR professionals need to be adaptable and able to quickly identify and address the most urgent problems within the organisation, just like how first responders assess the situation and act promptly in an emergency.

Hamouche's (2021, 2) literature review on the main implications and challenges the pandemic brought with it for HR, listed up strategic HRM, working conditions, staffing, performance management, training and career development, compensation management,

safety and health management and employment relationship as the main ones. (Hamouche 2021, 2-9) To ensure business goals in a time of crisis, it is important for organisations, including HR, to be strategically agile and re-allocate their resources and swiftly transform (Liu, Lee, & Lee 2020, 279).

Research on digital transformation (DT) in HR, confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic did stimulate the need for DT in HRM, and that it did enhance the processes within the organisation. A majority of the respondent in the study also agreed that e-HRM would continue to develop post-Covid and HRM in the organisations improved with DT during the pandemic (Al-Alawi & al. 2022, subchapter conclusion). In another research regarding the role and organisation of the HR function, the respondents agreed that before the pandemic, the HR function had started down the path of digital transformation, but the progress was slow. The pandemic highlighted the advantages of digitised HR (Minbaeva, & Navrbjerg 2023, 23). A quote from the qualitative study that was highlighted in the research paper from an HR executive was *“We had planned for this [the digitalisation of business processes] to last two years. It happened within six weeks.”* (Minbaeva & Navrbjerg 2023, 15). There was no evidence that HR drove the digital transformation process in Minbaeva’s & Navrbjerg research, but rather followed that process from far away. Minbaeva & Navrbjerg highlight in their research is that if HR wish to continue the digital wave that was created by the pandemic, they need to be more proactive and accelerate the digitisation of all HR business processes and systems (Minbaeva, & Navrbjerg 2023, 19).

Ulrich (March 2012, Min. 1-5) did a study that revealed that to be as efficient and effective as possible they highlighted that HR needs to be excellent at initiating and sustaining change. HR should be initiating change by helping the organisation build a case for why the change matters, overcome resistance, involve the right stakeholders, and articulate the decisions to start the change Ulrich & al. (2012, chapter 5). Secondly, they should also sustain change by institutionalising change through organisational resources, communication, continual learning, and organisation structure (Ulrich & al. 2007, 2). Ulrich (March 2012, 1-5 min) found that those professionals who are especially good at initiating change are also those who are seen as most effective. This initiation helps people understand and get more engaged in the change process and will also build credibility to HR’s work if implemented successfully (Ulrich, March 2012, min. 1-5)

Working policies, wellbeing, and productivity

During the COVID-19 pandemic, employee working conditions changed to ensure the business continuity, and for those organisations who had the option to work from home,

required their employees to do so (Aitken-Fox & al. June 2020). Studies show that remote work does have advantages such as increased job satisfaction, autonomy, and more flexibility in life. According to Andrulli & Gerhards (2022, 9), the higher the number of days an employee work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic (compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic), the higher was the employee's overall wellbeing, and this was related to higher autonomy and flexibility in working relations (Andrulli & Gerhards 2022, 9). Their study focuses much on workability and outcomes, wellbeing seems to focus more on the employees ability to perform their job and reach their colleagues rather than the psychological and physical aspects, but the study gives a clear indication that remote work did not decrease workability or productivity, even though they did conclude that the time and location (employees flexibility to work outside office hours and from wherever they want) could have a negative effect on the wellbeing. Their study did however not consider cultural and social aspects in the workplace. This study is relevant to confirm that productivity and workability was not so much affected by the pandemic (Andrulli & Gerhards 2022, 6-9). Another study on employee wellbeing and engagement during Covid, concluded that the pandemic has led to uncertainty for employees, that compromised their engagement and wellbeing, and to achieve employee engagement, managers should focus on facilitating remote working conditions so that the employees can reconcile work and family life in this scenario (De-la-Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez 2021, 12). This supports the fact that there are many definitions of employee wellbeing in the COVID-19 pandemic context.

One of the significant issues for HR to figure out going forward is adjusting current and new employees to the new working conditions and policies. As Carnevale & Hatak (2020, 184) emphasises in their research finding, is that it will be critical for HR to figure out how to resolve any potential misfit. People who thrived and flourished in the previous working environment, and experienced elevated levels of satisfaction, engagement, and wellbeing, might be challenged with all the drastic and rapid changes the pandemic brought. HR should apply the Person-Environment fit (P-E fit) theory and understand how the unprecedented changes are affecting and influencing the employees experience and P-E fit (Carnevale & Hatak 2020, 184). "P-E fit theory posits that individuals are attracted to and selected by organisations whose work environments reflect the same values, cultures, and work features as their own important beliefs, values, and desires." (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020, 184). If an organisation does not map out the P-E fit for their employees, it can become a "crash" with employees when e.g., selecting a new working policy that does not consider the people and environment aspects.

Regarding mental health and wellbeing, Carnevale and Hatak (2020) found in their study that measures that are taken to battle the pandemic, such as staying at home and working remotely, have led to increased feelings of loneliness and social exclusion amongst many employees. This is posing a risk to the mental health and wellbeing for certain employee groups, as well as the productivity of organisations (Carnevale & Hatak 2020, 185). A study measuring mental health after the stay-at-home order due to the pandemic, reported that 72% of the respondents in the study (N=834), said that their mood had changed after they got the order to stay-at-home. This was regardless of whether they actually worked from home or not. Out of these ~600 respondents, 85% said that their mental health/mood had worsened after they were sent home from the office (Conroy & al. 2021, 189).

Another large study on the psychological impact of COVID-19 on workers, concluded that the changes brought on by COVID-19 have had unprecedented impact on employee's mental wellbeing. They point out the loss of social support and isolation as some of the key triggers for this. The findings in this study emphasise the importance of making mental health treatment accessible and affordable. Some of the action points the study suggests, is that governments should address mental illness issues, with introducing remote and low-threshold psychological services (Alzueta & al. 2021, 566-567). Their global study focuses more on governmental actions but can be translated to organisations as well. Another study on mental health issues, found that employees during COVID-19 have significantly higher intentions to seek help when struggling with their mental health, rather than before the pandemic. (Bailey & al. 2023, 14) The same study concluded that this increase was related to digital health solutions, and that there was no significant change when it comes to seek help from a doctor. Bailey & al (2023, 13) suggests that organisations should encourage more interaction between colleagues working in a remote environment. In addition to regular meetings between direct line-manager and the employee, introducing wellbeing champions, who are employees in the organisation dedicated to support the wellbeing of staff, would be a great way to help employees feel more connected in a remote work situation.

The study also concludes that it is crucial for manager to provide sufficient support, facilitating regular conversations about mental health and provide information about the negative consequences of mental health problems. Organisations should also offer mental health trainings to foster positive attitudes towards mental health and promote and encourage employees to reach out to their line managers when support is needed (Bailey & al. 2023, 14).

To conclude, the pandemic led to an increase in mental diseases for their employees and put a higher pressure on organisations to provide extra support for their employees to ensure business continuity and reduce sick leaves.

Leadership and Communication

A study made by De-la-Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021, 10-11) that found that in times of uncertainty like COVID-19, communication should be based on a fluid two-way dialogue, and communication is positively related to employee engagement and wellbeing. A recent study highlights the crucial role of symmetrical internal communication in a time of crisis. This helps to manage the employees' experiences, and bring positive employee outcomes (Sun, Li, Lee & Tao 2021, 20-21). The study made by Sun & al. (2021, 20-21) confirms that symmetrical internal communication empowers employees and enhances their experiences and organisational identification during changes enforced by crises. Change is an emotional process, and the employees' emotions are an essential part of making organisational change succeed and favourable for the employees. In the context of COVID-19, symmetrical communication is key to bring a positive outcome of change (Sun & al. 2021, 21). The same study (Sun & al. 2021, 21) also suggests that symmetrical communication play a significant role in supporting employee wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to reduce technostress (Zito & al. 2021, 12). The study made by Zito & al. (2021, 1-15) focuses on the role of communication in reducing a particular type of stress that rose from the use of technology during the remote working caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Zito's & al. (2021, 12) study highlights the importance of communication and training and its role of managing stress and reducing technostress and other psychophysical disorders. Communication acts as a protective factor against the negative effects of technostress and helps mitigate the perception of stress caused by new technology and support the employee's wellbeing while reducing technostress. Communication is also a key factor with enhancing self-efficacy, which contributes to individual wellbeing. (Zito & al. 2021, 14-15). Another factor pointed out by Sulaiman, Ahmed & Sabbir (2020, 84), was that what makes an employee least productive, is the thought about the employee's job being insecure, and the most important thing that HR can do in a time of crisis with the magnitude of COVID-19, is to continue working effortlessly for supporting the business to reach its goals to provide job security for its employees.

During times of crisis, managers are required to demonstrate good leadership skills in order to guide their employees towards achieving organisational goals. A study conducted by Chen and Sriphon (2021) emphasises the importance of trust and shared leadership in

situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, as they encourage effective team performance. The same study highlight that leaders should seek ways to address problems, such as reducing online working hours and gradually transitioning employees back to the office, while also involving team members in shared leadership to enhance their sense of value within organisations. According to Chen and Sriphon (2021, 16-17), trust plays a key role in all of these aspects. Trust has a positive impact on communal, organisational, and social exchange relationships. To foster employee engagement during the crisis, managers should encourage and trust their employees by decentralising decision-making and implementing shared leadership. This approach provides opportunities and empowerment to team members, leading to improved team performance and collaboration since team members needs to play a role in collectively leading team responsibilities (Chen & Sriphon, 2021)

Tensions and paradoxes due to COVID-19

The pandemic brought up a many tensions for HR, e.g., How do you provide extra care for the individuals, and at the same time attend to the organisation? This is just an example on the challenges HR are put up against in a unique way due to the pandemic. (Ulrich, April 2020, Min. 17-20).

There are many unanswered questions on how the long-lasting effects from the COVID-19 will affect people and business in organisations going forward, and how organisations and human resources must navigate these challenges (Hamouche 2020, 10). HR needs to navigate the people-profit paradox (Collings & al. 2021, 828), e.g., figure out how remote working affects organisational outcomes such as innovation, individual outcomes, productivity, and wellbeing. How can organisations balance the amount of remote work vs working from the office? Collings & al. (2021, 821, 825-826) believe that we need to understand more about how the COVID-19 pandemic influences the decisions made by organisations and HR. This includes both short-term and long-term goals, as well as the balancing act between prioritising people and maximising profits (people-profit paradox).

Crisis management and HR due to COVID-19

It was difficult to foresee and prepare for a pandemic of this magnitude, and the global impact it had, and never before has it been more important to have a strong HR function in place (Colling & al. 2020, 819). According to Johnsen & Murray (2020, chapter 1) a crisis provides a sudden and real sense of urgency, and organisations need to make decisions faster and implement social and organisational experiments to try to solve urgent problems. Human resources play a key role in policies regarding crisis management, where they

should prepare for what will happen before (planning), during (responding) and after (recovery) a crisis occurs (Vardarli 2016, 470). Crisis management may be defined as a how an organisation's act and behave, which prepare it to be ready to manage major catastrophic happenings in a safe and effective style (Lockwood 2005, 2).

During the previous decades, many researchers have underlined the importance of the strategic and active role human resources departments may play to overcome crisis. Before a crisis human resource departments (HRD) can assist employees' trainings and preparation regarding crisis and crisis management procedures. Human resources are one of the most essential functions in modern firms and have even more importance in the time of crisis (Nizamidou & Vouzas 2020, 1080-1081). During crisis times HR's first actions should be to take care of the employees, their safety, and their immediate needs, and it is important that HR opens up communication channels with their employees. When a crisis is ongoing, Smith and Ellesworth (1985) indicate that negative emotions like stress, anxiety, depression, fear, and stress will appear. HR need to be able to help their employees cope with these negative emotions to be able to have workability. HR must during, and mostly after a crisis also promote organisational learning to help employees overcome the crisis and recover from it. To summarise, HRD play a vital role with enhancing the efforts for the organisation to return to normality (Nizamidou & Vouzas 2020, 1081). Nizamidou & al. (2019, 559) conclude in their research paper, that HRD plays a big part in enhancing the efforts for the organisation to return to normality. The problem with the pandemic is that we do not seem to go back to what used to be normal, so organisations and HR need to redefine what will be the considered "new normal".

2.4 Summary theoretical framework

The theoretical framework show that the evolution of HR over time has move from a focus on worker conditions and managing grievances, to a strategic approach the aims to align HR activities with organisational goals. Major events and crisis' have been part of shaping the role of HR where it is today, leading to a development of the roles and strategic role HR has in organisations today. The evolution has come made organisations and HR professionals to align their activities to support both organisational objectives and individual needs.

In the chapter five different typologies have been discussed, on how the HR role has developed since the late 1970's. Ulrich's Champions Model stood out as the most recognised amongst these and has been widely adopted and used to align HR practises of each role to support both individual and organisational goals. HR's need for align its own objectives with organisational goals have been significantly highlighted, which also have led

HR to play a more strategic role in organisations. Over the few decades HR has aimed to impact organisations, take more ownership, and build confidence and credibility to the HR function. This could also be a consequence of a shifted focus from viewing employees as expenses, to recognising them as the most valuable assets in the organisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted HR practises, and HR departments are now adapting to what seems to become the “new normal”. The theoretical framework demonstrates that the HR role and responsibility change over time, driven by the need for strategic alignment and recognition of the employees’ value. It also provides insights on the importance of HR’s responses to a significant event like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theoretical framework provides context and support for the research question. It shows how HR has evolved over time, and the emerge of different new roles and functions within HR (e.g., HRBP, SHRM), and present various typologies that has been part of shaping the role. It also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted HR practises, with HR needing to adapt to various challenges. This research will apply the insights from the theoretical framework to analyse and discuss the changes that occurred in HR practises due to the pandemic. This will enable the research to provide a comprehensive understanding of how COVID-19 has affected the role of HR and discuss how HR practises have been affected and the difficulties encountered by the pandemic.

3 Methodology

This study aims to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the work and role of HR professionals. This chapter provides more information on the empirical research conducted in this study and why the chosen method was selected. The primary purpose of research interviews is to gather valid and reliable data to support and answer the research questions. Open-ended questions will be developed based on the theoretical framework to support this aim. This chapter will explain what qualitative research means, why it is appropriate for this study, and how it will be used (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019, 434).

3.1 Qualitative research

The label of “qualitative research” is an umbrella term for many approaches to conduct research. Qualitative research can be e.g., one-on-one interviews, focus group research, action research and ethnography. However, what all these different qualitative approaches have in common is that they do not use non-numerical data to the same extent that we see in quantitative research, and that the data is derived from images and words instead of numbers (Saunders & al. 2019, 179).

A qualitative research design may use a single collection technique, and a corresponding qualitative analytical procedure. When using a single collection method, it is referred to as a mono-method qualitative study. Qualitative research can also combine several qualitative data collection methods (multi-method qualitative study) or a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed method) (Saunders & al. 2019, 175-176, 179). The primary aim of qualitative research is to provide material for the empirical research of a phenomenon that the study is about (Flick 2017 ,7). With semi-structured interviews, the aim is to produce qualitative data with a set of predetermined open-ended questions (Saunders & al. 2019, 437). Ghauri & Gronhaug (2005, in Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 4) write that; “Qualitative research is particularly relevant when prior insights about a phenomenon under scrutiny are modest, implying that qualitative research tends to be exploratory and flexible because of ‘unstructured’ problems (due to modest insights)”.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively recent phenomenon, there are still modest amounts of prior insights from HR professionals on how the role and responsibilities of HR have changed due to this crisis. The definition of the use of qualitative research methods by Ghauri and Gronhaug, is very descriptive for why this also became the chosen methodology for this study.

3.1 Data collection and methods

The aim for this qualitative research is to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the HR role within organisations. The method of data collection that was used in this study was semi-structured one-on-one interviews with HR professionals. Qualitative interviews bring the author closer to the interview subjects and provide the researcher with more possibilities to explore questions and answers in depth (Saunders & al. 2019, 179) Additionally, this method can provide a more accurate understanding of the participants' viewpoints than other research methods and give the opportunity to study the emotions and interactions of those being interviewed.

A semi-structured approach provides the opportunity to have a set of predefined open questions and key questions related to themes, but also gives the opportunity to go deeper into the different questions and follow up based on the respondents' replies (Saunders & al. 2019, 436-437). The difference between structured and semi-structured interviews is that structured interviews strictly follow a predetermined set of identical questions that are asked exactly as they are written and in the same tone of voice to avoid any biases. An example of this is a person reading a predetermined set of questions to an interviewee, with no change in tone, and transcribing the answers. In simpler terms, structured vs. semi- or unstructured interviews can be defined as quantitative vs. qualitative research interviews (Saunders & al. 2019, 436-437).

The interviewees were asked various questions related to their organisation's response to the pandemic, their work before, during and after the pandemic, and the changes in HR's role and responsibilities. They were asked to reflect on the consequences of the pandemic for their organisation over the past three years. The questions were open question designed to gain insights into how the pandemic has affected HR's role in the organisations, how organisations have adapted to the challenges, and how the changes will last and impact HR's role in the future.

A total of nine interviews were conducted for this study. The length of the interviews varied between 44 minutes to 1 hour and 24 minutes, and all interviews were conducted on digital platforms, such as Microsoft Teams or Google Meet, except for one that was conducted over the phone. Most of the interviewees worked in a white-collar work environment. The interviewees represented C-level executives, HR business partners, and HR generalists, and is evenly distributed (see Table 3).

Table 3. Interviewees, industry, and organisational size

Code	Interviewee	Industry	Employees
Interviewee 1	Senior HR Advisor	IT and Consultancy	1-499
Interviewee 2	Head of People Operations	IT	1-499
Interviewee 3	HR Operations Team Lead	Construction / Consultancy	>1000
Interviewee 4	HR & Business assistant	Consumer goods	>1000
Interviewee 5	HR Director	IT and Consultancy	>1000
Interviewee 6	HR Manager	Energy / Chemical	500-999
Interviewee 7	HR Director	Energy	500-999
Interviewee 8	CHRO	Finance	1-499
Interviewee 9	Head of People and Culture	Energy	1-499

As Saunders & al. (2019, 456) explain, it is important to consider whether a study should be a snapshot of time or a series of snapshots to provide a better representation over time. In this study, all interviews were conducted between December 2022 and April 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects had already been present in organisations for over 2.5 years when the interviews began, and they continued for almost six months. Therefore, this study can be considered longitudinal, allowing for the study of change and development over time. However, one could also argue that there are elements of cross-sectional research, given that it focuses on a particular phenomenon and the interviews were conducted over a brief period of time (Saunders & al. 2019, 212).

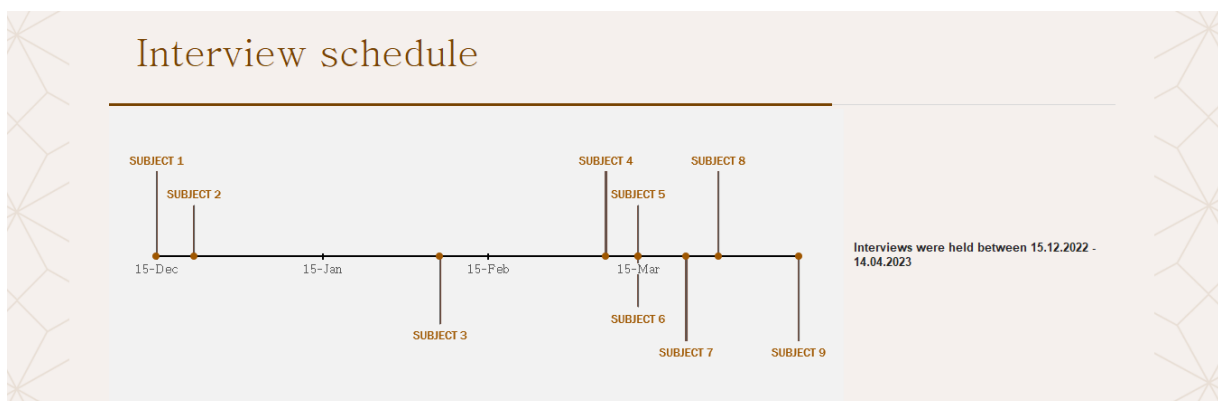


Figure 6. Interview schedule

3.2 Methods of data analysis

In the study, digital tools were used to automatically transcribe the interviews from the video conversations held primarily on Teams. This created many hours of recordings, and the interviews were transcribed verbatim with dialect (Gibbs 2007, 14-15), meaning that the original transcription contained many pause words and interrupted sentences. Therefore, the decision to also record all the interviews was taken, and the interviews were finally analysed verbatim, where everything that was said in the recordings and transcribed was written down as verbatim and "cleaned up". Tidying up the interviews (e.g., removing pauses and "pause-words") was necessary to make the respondents' meanings clearer and increase the readability of the findings.

In the interviewing process, a predefined list of open questions for the interviewees was asked based on the findings from the theoretical framework of the study. To identify patterns and themes from the interviews, a thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. The essential purpose of a thematic analysis is to search for themes and patterns that occur in the series of interviews (Saunders & al. 2019, 445, 651). Thematic analysis is described by Saunders & al. (2019, 818) as "a technique used to analyse qualitative data that involves the search for themes or patterns occurring across a data set." This method of analysis is well-suited for this study to identify patterns from the interviewees and help identify the key themes that are emerging from the interviews to gain a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

The data was coded and analysed to support the discussion and findings from the research. Coding is essential for this analysis to see if there are findings that can be linked to a theme and, in turn, linked to Dave Ulrich's typology and champions model and some of the four roles he defined. Code, or coding, is defined as a single word or short phrase used to label a unit of data (Saunders & al. 2019, 206).

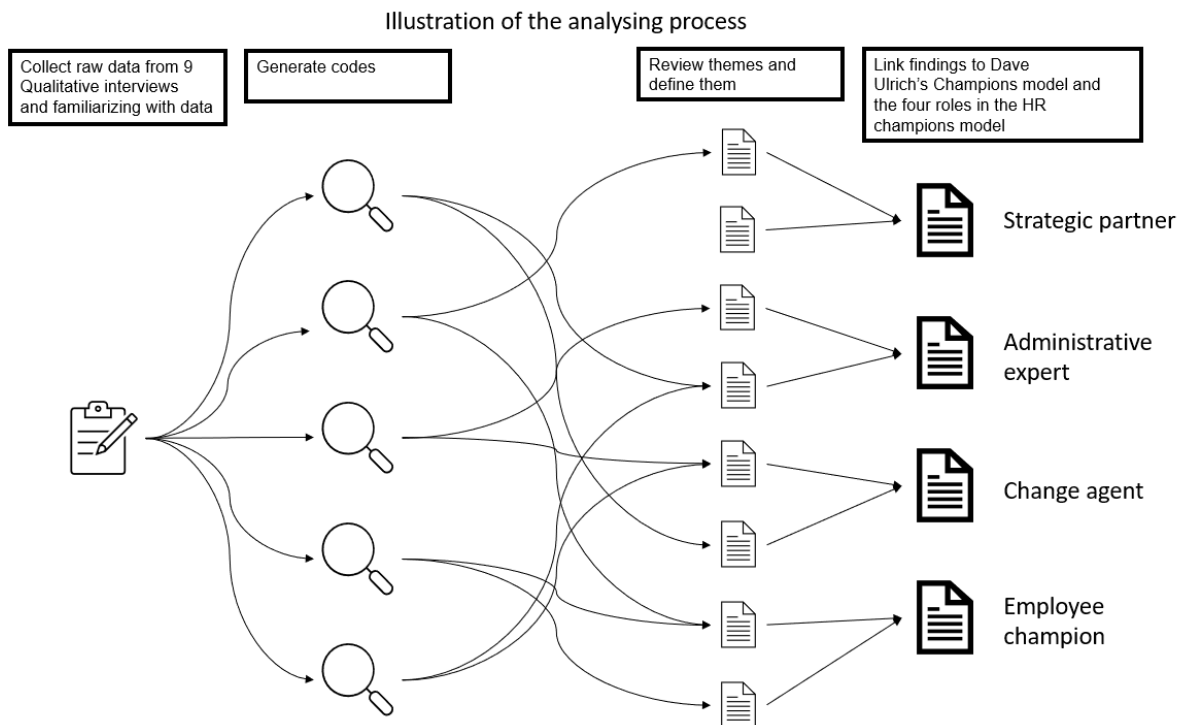


Figure 7. Collection and analysis process chart

3.3 Ethics

To ensure that the interview candidates feel comfortable and can speak openly, and that the interview will not cause unwanted consequences to the subjects (Kvaale 2007, 26) it is important to treat the interviews confidential unless otherwise agreed, but still then the researcher should closely investigate if there could be any harm to a larger group of people as well. The researcher should also be aware of his/her own integrity and be aware of ethical guidelines and theories (Kvaale 2007, 29), and give a clear informed consent to the subject, which means informing the research subjects about the overall purpose of the investigation and possible risks and benefits of the research project and inform the subjects that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

To protect the identity of those involved in the interviews, the interviews were conducted confidentially and presented anonymously. All interviewees were informed about the anonymity, and that the interviews were recorded for transcription purposes and validation (Kvaale 2007, 27). All interviewees participating in this study gave their consent to recording of the interview and were informed about the overall purpose of the study.

4 Research findings

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical study on how the pandemic has impacted the role of HR from the HR professionals viewing points. The sub-chapters that will explore the challenges HR faced during separate phases of the pandemic and present the main findings from the study. The first sub-chapter will focus on the initial phase of the pandemic and examines the HR challenges that arose during this period. The second sub-chapter discusses the adaptation phase of the pandemic and the challenges faced by HR in responding to the sudden shift towards a new way of working. The third sub-chapter looks at the recovery phase of the pandemic and the HR challenges that emerged during this period. The final sub-chapter provides a conclusion summarising the key findings of the thesis.

The main themes that emerged from the interviews will be linked to Ulrich's Champions model. In Figure 8, all the themes that came up in the interviews are listed together and linked to Dave Ulrich's HR Champions model. Not all of the data gathered from the empirical research is presented in this study. The research findings are validated with quotations from the interviews. A selection of quotations is presented in the findings chapter. To give more supplements to the validity of the findings, the reader can also find many additional quotations from the interviews in Appendix 1.

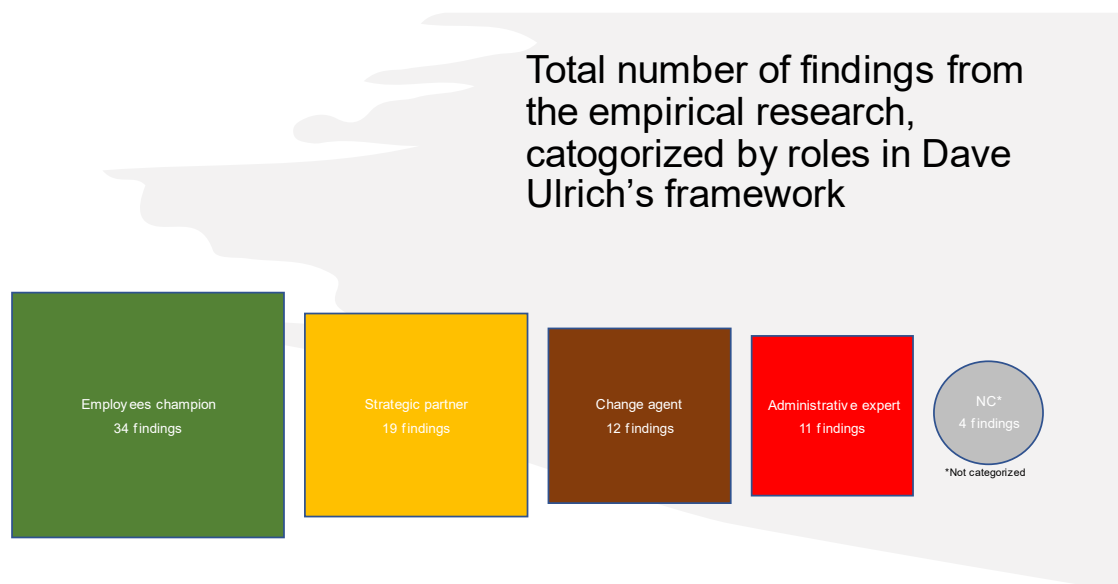


Figure 8. Number of findings categorised by the roles of Dave Ulrich's Champions Model

4.1 Initial phase of the pandemic and HR

Based on the interviews the first six months of the pandemic, which is named the “initial phase” in this research, HR professionals and organisations operated in crisis mode, where the main objective was to readjust the entire organisation to new working arrangements and implement new policies regarding infection control, participation, and working arrangement. The COVID-19 pandemic had unknown consequences that was threatening the health and safety of people and organisational survival. Therefore it quickly became a consensus throughout the organisations that rapid changes were needed and therefore swiftly implemented.

“There was complete chaos for the first 2 months. It was insane. It was usually 8 hours and a team meeting during the day and then the work only started when the working day was finished.” (Interviewee 8)

Navigating Uncharted Territory: HR's Response to the Initial Phase of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic provided organisations and HRP's with many tasks that required urgency and changes, and decisions had to be made and implemented quickly. One of the substantial changes in the initial phase of the pandemic, was the transition to home office for those employees who could work from home. Most organisations in this study had not yet experimented or implemented fully remote work in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the enforced lock-down brought many uncertainties according to the data. According to the interviewees, the transition to remote work went well for their employees, since most of them were already used to working on digital platforms, but for the human resources professionals this transition created a significant increase to their workload. HR professionals got involved in mapping out who could work from home, and which human resources they had to have at their premises and facilitate for this. For most respondents in this study, the selection was easy to overcome, since most only had white-collar workers that had the option of moving their work to home. The respondents that did not only have white-collar workers, got challenged with carefully mapping out which of their employees to keep at the workplace, and what safety measures to initiate.

However, the pandemic quickly proved that employees were able to maintain their productivity while working remotely from home, and the quite common fear of people not doing their jobs and slacking off if they had the opportunity to work from home was quickly dismissed. Shortly into the pandemic, employees adapted to the new way of working and the new level of autonomy, and in many cases, remote work increased productivity and had a positive effect on organisations. All the interviewees in this study, informed that they either

had normal or increased productivity levels throughout the pandemic, and that the business as such was not significantly affected during the pandemic.

“For us, a lockdown for office workers who are used to working on digital platforms did not impact on productivity overall.” (Interviewee 8)

Even though remote work also led to positive things, such as giving employees increased autonomy and flexibility, it became clear from the interviews that it brought many new challenges for HR to resolve. The data show that HR’s involvement with administrative tasks increased in the beginning of the pandemic. Regulations and lockdown forced organisations to take measures to reduce the risks of their employees becoming ill due to the pandemic. This involved HR to be engaged in new tasks e.g., creating policies on social distancing, remote work, health and safety protocols, new office protocols etc. This work usually fell on HR table to solve, which led them to seek expertise with occupational health care providers, governmental information channels etc. to obtain the information for the recommendations concerning health and safety. HR also needed to ensure that these policies was enforced, and that unwanted sickness did not occur to their employees.

“It was very important that people stayed healthy since they had production line, and HR had to maintain the level of knowledge about what companies had to deal with, so it was discussed every week, information was posted about what we were going to do, that we couldn’t be many in the dining room etc... Secondly, it was the case that protective equipment such as masks etc. was introduced and those who worked at the “factory” were not allowed to travel around much.” (Interviewee 7)

According to the data, the quick transition to remote work and isolation, was a challenging and chaotic period for HR, who had to ensure that in addition to the new tasks the pandemic brought, that also the “normal” HR processes and administrative tasks were executed satisfactory.

4.2 Adaptation phase of the pandemic and HR

In the adaption phase of the pandemic businesses and organisations was adapting to the new ways of working. This led to organisations introducing new digital tools and platforms to focus on new ways of leading, communicating and changes in strategies. Administrative tasks like the recruitment processes, onboarding and other tasks that were normally done face to face, now had to move over to digital platforms, and forced a rapid transition towards digitalisation. COVID-19 turned the life upside-down for many working with recruitment and onboarding. HR and talent acquisition managers had incorporated processes where normally the interviews and onboarding were conducted face-to-face with candidates. The forced transition to digital platforms questioned the HR practitioners if they can assess potential candidates and make the best assessment without seeing the prospects in person.

It required HR to adapt both technology and new methods and tools to be able to make correct and good assessments.

Another topic related to recruitment and retention that was interesting, was the mobility of employees and “accelerated globalisation”. This mainly affected organisations that had local affiliation in smaller locations. The data show that remote work is posing a threat to those organisation that has a strong local affiliation and local brand identity when it comes to hiring of personnel. These organisations now must compete domestically and even globally since there is no requirement of working from an office. Even though it also brings possibilities to find more potential candidates, it can also cause harm to the image of being a local employer. This causes short-term challenges with having to strengthen the employee value proposition, salary requests and softer benefits must be renewed to be competitive and to ensure that workers do not quit and change employer due to remote work. From a near monopoly situation and being an attractive workplace, the competition is now hardened, and they must now offer more to attract the same people to their organisation.

“Our biggest challenge has been mobility and movement of workforce related to recruitment. Because there is a much different attitude to the fact that people can work from other places in, and outside the country. So, mobility has changed dramatically, and we notice that for the better and worse. We have used to be quite protected up until now, but due to the pandemic we have had to make changes to increase salaries and come up with more softer benefits in the recruitment process.” (Interviewee 8)

Digitalisation is not anything new for Human Resources. The data shows that the digitalisation of HR related tasks in are postponed due to the lack of urgency and time. The COVID-19 pandemic forced Human Resources Departments to find innovative solutions to be able to conduct their tasks in a remote working environment. Without getting additional resources, the crisis enhanced the need for HR to find ways to work smarter to be able to solve these additional pandemic related tasks, additionally to their normal tasks that ensured that business is operating as seamlessly as possible. This implied that they had to take digital tools into use to be able to manage this workload. E.g., one of the companies interviewed in this study, who had over one thousand employees, did not have the capacity to manually follow up who came to the office when the restrictions where carefully lifted, and a certain percentage of the work force could return to the office and work. This forced the HR professionals think outside “the box” and use digital tools to solve the problem. It was implied in the one of the interviewees that the most important challenge regarding digital transformation in HR, is the mindset of HR to embrace technology and recognise its value as a support system to HR, and that the pandemic might have changed this perspective in that direction.

"I feel that HR in general have started thinking more and more about, the digital transformation and sort of, how they can we use technology for support. While maybe before it wasn't like that, HR were a bit more reluctant? To be able to transform, we need to have time. So, it was always put down on the priority list sort of, "I cannot do this because I have something else to do". While with the pandemic, I think we didn't have a choice. You sort of just had to transform." (Interviewee 5)

From the research, the data shows an increase of administrative tasks and other responsibilities. HR departments and professional needed to focus on finding smarter ways of working to be able to execute their tasks. One key point to this is to embrace technology and adopt technological tools, but another interesting point was the merging and division of HR related tasks within HR teams. Interviewee 2 gave an example where they started a project with defining the roles and responsibilities better, and created micro teams within the teams to ensure that people were not alone with the tasks and found out that micro teams with 2-4 people responsible for a set of tasks worked better and was more efficient than being alone with the tasks. This also makes smaller HR organisations less fragile towards absence and increases knowledge sharing within HRD.

Attrition, fatigue, and mental health issues

In the adaptation phase of the pandemic organisations noticed an increase on employee attrition and increased sick leaves. HR seems to have faced many challenges during the pandemic related to health and safety of their employees. Firstly, to keep people safe and reduce the risk of contamination, secondly, to manage the increase in people wellbeing (physically and mentally). As previously mentioned, HR needed to adapt policies and procedures to ensure a safe workplace, managing workloads to support colleagues and ensure mental wellbeing for their employees.

In the beginning of the pandemic the fears were mostly concerning respiratory diseases, but what started to emerge as the pandemic progressed was the need for psychological support. The pandemic did blur the lines between work and home life for many workers, which again influences the mental health of employees. Mental sick leaves increased, and fatigue and attrition amongst employees became visible. During the interviews, the interviewees spoke much about awareness regarding mental health and sick leaves related to mental illness' that many linked to a poor work-life balance. The data confirms that this is one of the key areas HR practitioners now are trying to solve, and that it has gotten increased focus the longer the pandemic lasted, and seems much linked to social isolation, remote work, and lack of personal relationships according to the interviewees. HR professionals are now having a high focus working on preventive processes that can limit the mental fatigue amongst their employees, but contradictory they are also used a "mental health

practitioners” in a much greater degree than before that takes away time from developing the processes. The work on how to ensure a healthy workforce in a remote working environment seems to be one of the key areas where HR practitioners now are considering how to solve, and why many are looking to limit fully flexible working policy and move to a hybrid working model.

The more employees adapt to the new way of working, isolated from their co-workers and customers, mostly meeting other people through screens and digital platforms, both the sense of belonging, engagement and resilience decreases amongst the employees decreases according to the data. The data show that this already has had negative impact in some of the organisations in this study regarding retention and sick leaves, and that the need for additional mental support, and other actions to support the employee’s resilience and engagement is going to be even more important going forward. This has also led to increased activity from HRP in providing mental support and taking more one-on-ones with employees on behalf of line-managers and is stealing time for HR to find more sustainable supportive systems.

HR professionals are usually given the responsibility to follow up with occupational health care services and have a close relationship with them to work on preventive actions. The COVID-19 pandemic has led HR professionals to expand their search for both physical health care providers and mental health care providers. HR professionals need to figure out how to support their employees while dealing with both physical and mental challenges for their employees to maintain workability. This involves building closer dialogue with occupational health care providers to work more proactively in strengthening the employee’s mental health to make them more resilient towards all the insecurities that occurred. HR will therefore also become advisors on how to cope and support with e.g., mental fatigue/health questions and to support leaders and employees with these questions. The challenge with mental illness has just enhanced the importance of HR encouraging more frequent contact between line-managers and employees, and to work strategically to find solutions the line-managers can use they see signals of employees struggling. The increase in mental health issues, was not the only concern for the HR professionals in this study the longer the pandemic went on. The research show that employees got more isolated, and most of the interviewees brought up challenges with engagement, cohesion, and sense of belonging as challenges that had to resolved. For those participating in this study, many highlighted that even though productivity has not been significantly affected, the contours of negative impact on the culture and cohesion appeared in the adaptation phase and has presented HR with a vast number of new challenges.

The data show clear indications that the extent on how remote work will affect organisational culture is still relatively unknown. The workplace is a place where people meet, create friendships and relationship that are important for people to build engagement and commitment towards the organisation. If you only meet a selected few people on a regular basis, there is a risk that employees also are not able to build the personal relationships with other colleagues outside their own teams. As a result of this, it can lead to a decline in social engagement and sharing of ideas and building personal relationships. During the interviews, several challenges were mentioned that HR needs to address regarding cohesion, social relations, engagement, and a sense of unity and belonging. Many interviewees highlighted that remote working has increased isolation among individuals. They referred to those who rarely interact or participate as "Batman's," comparing them to someone hiding in a cave and having limited impact on fostering a positive work environment and cohesion.

"We've got a lot more Batman's" (Interviewee 9)

Interviewee number 7 emphasised that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the fact that many employees do not longer realise, or acknowledge, how important it is to contribute a social actor within a team. Not only because they can share expertise and contribute with their skills, but also to be part of creating positive cohesion and contribute positively to the working community as a social actor. Many organisations experience a drop in their NPS or similar engagement surveys in the adaption phase of the pandemic and several of the respondents mentioned that they now must redefine their organisational culture, and to a bigger degree involve the employees when doing so in the context of the new way of working. This do require a collective effort where everyone from top management down to line managers and employees to engage in a common strategy.

"Although people may enjoy working from home, it's important to consider whether or not they are able to contribute as a social actor within a team. In this context, the team itself is the most important factor, not the individual, because they can contribute their skills and expertise best when they are an extension of the team's competence. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on team development and fostering a sense of unity within the team. While this may be challenging in a remote work environment, it's more important now than ever before."
(Interviewee 7)

Lower engagement, cohesion, and negative social effects due to remote work can for many organisations no longer be overlooked even though the organisation is still "productive". The unknown long-term effects on culture and engaged employees seems to be too big of a risk for many. According to the data, the longer the pandemic has gone on, it has become an increasingly worrying factor for many of the interviewees during the pandemic. It is affecting the culture of organisations, and most of the interviewees highlighted this as one of the other

areas that has increased a lot in focus during this phase of the pandemic, in addition to the focus on leadership and communication.

Engaged and motivated employees depend much on line-managers ability to pick up signals on how their employees are doing, so the organisation can find out if they have the means to execute their jobs, and that they feel motivated and engaged to contribute to satisfactory levels in the organisations. From the interviews training the leaders in leading from a distance and expand the leaders' toolboxes to do so, became a priority for HRP's during this phase of the pandemic. Several of the interviewees brought up the importance of developing effective communication skills and through this continue building and maintaining cohesive teams. Many of the interviewees brought up the challenges regarding leadership and communication. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of having attentive and caring leaders to be able to support the employee professionally, but also emotionally and make sure that they have the tools and information they need and that they feel good. Data gathered in this research show evidence that HR now need to facilitate and help leaders adopt a more softer leadership style, and that employees need more attention, care, and nursing than before the pandemic. For some employees, neglection in communication between employee and leader, can lead to many unwanted consequences such as decreased motivation, engagement and commitment, and lead to higher attrition and retention. Due to the pandemic, HRP must facilitate leadership trainings and help managers lead their teams from a distance.

The data also reveals that the pandemic has brought up trust issues between management and employees. In some organisations, management experience a trust issue when their employees are working from home, and question whether they are doing their job or not effectively when they have the freedom to work remotely. The trust between the employer and employees is critical for a successful work relationship, especially in a remote work setup, and can create tension that HR needs to engage in solving.

The challenge for HR is that a leader can only do "so much" and communicate in a certain way. HRP's must now ensure that the communication is working effortlessly, so that the employees can obtain the information and resources they need to execute their work, that everyone receives the information on where to find this and that employees are followed up by their managers in a satisfactory manner.

During the adaptation-phase of the pandemic the interviews revealed that HR were facing numerous challenges that was affecting their work and role. From the initial phase of the pandemic where HR and employees quite quickly managed to adopt to the new way of

working, it was quickly discovered that the pandemic brought on more challenges for HR than they were anticipating. The work HR did before the pandemic to increase NPS (Net Promoter Scores) and employee experience, quickly dropped due to external factors they were not in control of (the pandemic). Several of the interviews revealed that before the pandemic their organisation had a low retention rate amongst employees, but that it increased in this phase of the pandemic, and that the trend for this was lack of cohesion, community feeling, communication, and commitment. Onboarding processes like social gatherings were paused and moved remotely, which led to a much longer social integration of new employees in the organisation.

The new way of working caused by the pandemic, gave a decline in employees motivation, engagement, and cohesion. The longer the pandemic went on, the more isolated the employees became causing them to lose the informal meeting arena which resulted in less opportunities for building personal relationships outside their own teams. Additionally, it also blurred the work-life balance for many employees, which resulted in an increase in mental health related sick leaves. HR needed to find ways to support the line managers to find systems and providers that could help them address this, and get involved in a stronger dialogue with e.g., occupational healthcare providers and other external providers that could support managers and HR with this issue.

“There is a rise in the need for learning experts to teach employees how to adapt and prepare for the future.” (Interviewee 5)

What became apparent during the interviews was that most of the challenges could be linked to remote work and the organisational strategy on how to manage this new way of working. Remote work brought many positive effects, like autonomy and flexibility for the employees, but has challenged the culture of organisations, where many now must redefine their culture and values and make strategic decision on what direction the organisation will move forward. For the HR professionals interviewed in this study, the actions and focus on culture, leadership, communication and getting people back to the office became clear priorities in the next phase. An interesting comment from interviewee one, was that when things opened, they saw from their engagement scores that those people who came to the office, also were the most engaged. It can also be questioned whether if it is the most engaged employees who are working from the office, or if it is returning to the office that is the reason for the increased engagement.

“We are seeing from our engagement scores, that those people who come most of the office also are the most engaged.” (Interviewee 1)

4.3 Recovery phase from the pandemic and HR

In this chapter, the findings from most common discussed themes from interviews will be presented in the context of the recovery phase of the pandemic and how it affected HR. The most discussed themes were culture, remote work, leadership, and communication. During the duration of the recovery phase of the pandemic, culture, leadership, communication, and working models was the biggest topics in the interviews. The effect caused by the changes that has been applied during the COVID-19 pandemic did bring implications for organisations. These implications were not primarily related to productivity or business results for the organisations in this study, but rather human aspects such as a decline in many of the parameters that HR use when they did their organisational diagnosis (e.g., measuring employee engagement, culture, cohesion, teamwork, sense of belonging, workload, happiness, retention etc.).

Redefining culture: Navigating remote work challenges and opportunities.

Even though remote work brought many positive effects to the employees and the organisation, it also challenged the culture, which led to more challenges to keep employees motivated and engaged according to the interviewees. What used to be daily rituals such as talks around the coffee machine got replaced with Teams check-ins. The morning routines where you went to work, have been replaced with getting out of bed in sweatpants and opening the computer on the kitchen table. Many organisations are trying to move from a fully flexible work model to a hybrid model where employees are offered flexibility and autonomy, but at the same time encouraging employees to work from the office to increase teamwork, cohesion, and the sense of belonging. The goal is to come back to a working environment that fosters productivity, collaboration, and increased employee wellbeing. To do so, culture is key according to the interviewees. There was no consensus amongst the interviewees what culture was, but could be summed up as, how the organisation should operate from within and to live out the values of the organisation. To this aspect, sense of belonging, how we want to work, cohesion, the values had to be refined, and in some cases re-defined due to the pandemic. As the pandemic went on, realisations set in that we will not continue working like before, several of the interviewees saw the need of redefining the cultural “footprint” in their organisation.

One of the respondents said that while working from the office, their employees felt safe and sense of belonging and community, and they had a culture that appealed to their employees and was very “solid”. When the pandemic hit, this company was forced to work remotely as many others, and people could not participate to the events held at the office and it made a

realisation that they were more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic and had to take actions in revitalising their culture and employee value propositions. This was not unique for only this interviewee, many brought culture up as a challenge that has risen from the pandemic and has led many to start the process of re-defining or make changes to their culture strategy. The pandemic has led organisations and HRP's to increase their focus towards culture, and how it is going to be going forward, when the work force will continue to work in a remote working environment.

"I would say that one is the obvious thing that has changed for most people, and that is the hybrid home office arrangement. It is an expectation, even among new employees now. I think it is quite demanding for an employer to revoke that right, but at the same time we do not know the extent of it yet. What does that mean for culture? What will the impact be?"
(Interviewee 8)

In the initial part and adaptation phase of the pandemic, most of the focus was on business survival and making people stay safe and healthy. What seems to have affected the culture the most, according to the interviewees, is the move to remote work and the many ways it affected their pre-pandemic culture. It has e.g., become an expectation for employees to get this flexibility to work from their home or outside of the workplace, and this has increased the individualism vs. collectivism, which for many had a negative effect on building personal relationships. This situation has brought many challenges, but also provided an opportunity for organisations to focus more on culture and values, that in some organisations might have been overlooked, if not for the pandemic.

"I hope this will lead to that we get a greater focus on culture and integration, although of course we have very different working environments, we have some blue collar and white collar, so the needs are a little different as they have such different working conditions. So, finding the right mix so that everyone feels properly treated is perhaps the most important thing for me. And that we have measures that feel meaningful and that make sense."
(Interviewee 7)

Several of the interviewees highlighted the importance of the need of redefining and strengthen the culture at the workplace. They emphasised the importance of having a strong culture to foster collaboration, employee wellbeing, and to attract talent. To address these issues many has started to address these challenges and are intensifying culture surveys and focusing on creating a sense of community and shared purposes. In a new hybrid working environment the culture requires organisations to facilitate for more in-person meeting places, team building activities and such, and establish clear communication guidelines.

The work with values and culture has been on the agenda for a long time in organisations also before the pandemic, but during the COVID-19 pandemic one of the interviewees

mentioned that culture is the new “big thing” in HR, and that organisations are opening more positions as “people and culture” managers, rather than HR advisors and specialists. This was also supported in another interview where the organisation decided to outsource many of the administrative tasks, for the HR professional to get more time to work on strategic and cultural tasks, and the subject's title was changed to “Head of People and Culture” late into the pandemic.

“I have seen a change during the last year, and even more during the pandemic, that many organisations are posting “people and culture managers”, rather than HR advisors or HRM specialists, and that culture is the new big thing.” (Interviewee 6)

Transitioning to a hybrid work environment

While the transition to remote work went quite well for most organisations participating in this study, getting people to return from remote work to the office seem to be more challenging.

“The management team [where HR has representation] has decided that people are not allowed to work fully remote after the pandemic. We had to make a new policy on how much people need to come to the office. But this has not been easy. Top management has expressed that they would like the employees more in the office, while almost around 80% of the employees would like to have full flexibility.” (Interviewee 6)

Employees have started to voluntarily start working more from the office, but still there seems to be a gap in what the desirable levels of remote work is between management and employees in some organisations. There are no questions that the flexibility and autonomy for employees working remotely has given positive effects, and that it has increased job satisfaction for many, but what is the cost of this is the questions that came up in the interviews. Many of consequences for all the changes due to remote work are still unknown, and organisations and HRD are now trying to figure out the balance and best practises for their own organisation.

There were arguments both for and against implementing protocols for a hybrid working model amongst the interviewees. Some of the organisations were already convinced that the consequences of too much remote work will have negative impact on organisational culture and that it will lead to future consequences. The other respondents also acknowledge that too much remote work could have negative consequences on the culture. However, they did not have enough evidence to be sure if the consequences are great enough to move away from a fully flexible working environment.

I think it will be quite demanding us as an employer to revoke that right [remote work], but at the same time I do not quite know the extent of it yet. What does it mean, for example, for our culture? (Interviewee 8)

All the interviewees unanimously agreed that fully mandating employees to return to the office would not be a feasible solution, but rather a hybrid model solution. While most organisations are trying to find incentives for employees to voluntarily start working more from the office, some has also enforced new hybrid work protocols and guidelines.

Organisations and HR practitioners need to find the correct balance between remote work and working from the office. The pandemic changed the perception for many employees, who no longer expect that they must work from an office. The interviewee made the following statement as an exaggeration to illustrate how employees view the freedom, flexibility, and autonomy that they have been given. Although the statement is an exaggeration, it highlights the fact that employees who have the option to work remotely now consider it a “right” to be able to do so.

“How can they be so mean? That they force me back to the/an office 1-2 times per week?”
(Interviewee 5)

In the gathered data, it came up conflicting interests between management and employees when it comes to remote work. Some employee’s desire full flexibility, while at the same time the management want that the employees come more to the office than what has been the case without any formal guideline or policies. In one of the interviews, the interviewee brought a hypothesis that remote work potentially also could have delayed their R&D regarding development of new products. A paradox such as “does remote work harm the development of new products in R&D?” was one interviewees question because they had not produced any new products during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though if it was solely due to COVID-19 and/or remote work is too early to conclude with, but this paradox was used as motivation to transition towards a hybrid working model.

“We haven’t actually got any new products out [during the COVID-19 pandemic].”

The pandemic has changed employees' perception of the necessity to work from the office, and this might not be aligned with management’s strategy. While flexibility is now a motivating factor, organisations still need to find a hybrid model that balances flexibility and motivation for employees to stay, and not seek work elsewhere where the flexibility is higher, but at the same time contribute to their teams and organisation as social actors. There were different opinions on working policies amongst the interviewees, and to no surprise, there is no clear consensus on what a “correct” working policy is from the interviews, and there are many variables to consider. Some are still sticking to full flexibility, some let the leaders decide how much their team members were allowed to work remotely, and some have enforced hybrid solutions. HR must work continue to do organisational diagnosis and find out

what their employee's expectations are, and how to facilitate a working model that supports their expectations and try to incorporate this in the organisational culture and in the employee value proposition.

Employees are much more aware of their rights and what they expect from an employer now than before, and therefore it is important to have an HR that knows how to facilitate this more than before. (Interviewee 6)

The leadership role and communication in remote and hybrid work

With or without protocols and policies for remote or hybrid working models, the leadership role was one of the themes that the interviewee devoted much time for in the empirical research. Human resources do not seem to be able to get people back to the office singlehandedly, at least not without strict on-site working policies which can be harmful for retention and morale. HR needs to support line managers in this work, for them to be able to motivate people back to the office. E.g., HR and organisations are now trying to find the right incentives that would encourage people to start working more from the office and give line managers the tools they need to incentivise and help to foster the community feeling.

"Leaders need to motivate people to come back to the office, and HR needs to support and facilitate for their leaders to be able to do so. To find a solution for this has been difficult. We must consult, discuss, and advise leaders on how to do this." (Interviewee 5)

Now that many employees work from home, there is a need for leaders to change how they lead, but not all were able to transition to this leadership style. To be able to support and give leaders tools to manage their teams and team members remotely, became more important the longer the pandemic went on. The data confirms that HR are conducting several actions towards supporting line managers. They increased the activities on coaching and training to support their leaders, and e.g., hired external coaches that focused on virtual leadership, and facilitate and encourage peer support and sharing experiences within the organisation. One of the interviewees told that they look at the employee survey scores from the teams and productivity, and handpicked some of the leaders that were scoring high on both employee satisfaction and productivity during the pandemic. These managers were tasked with creating a video to share best practises with other leaders within the organisation.

We have had a focus to find out who has good practice in our company in keeping in touch with their employees and getting the tasks done. Those managers were assigned to make a small training material which we showed to all the other managers, so that they could share and learn about "best practice" on how to lead people from a distance. (Interviewee 8)

HR made new policies regarding employee satisfaction/performance reviews and increased the frequency on "check-ins" between the employees and the manager as part of their employee strategy. This to ensure that the line-managers also had frequent follow ups with

the employees. From having an annual employee performance review, organisations implemented bi-annual, monthly, and even weekly discussion as part of the manager strategy to ensure that there was a framework that ensured that the line managers followed up on their employees. Some organisations already had this kind of follow up even before the pandemic, but the pandemic seems to have increased the involvement in checking in on the employees in even more organisations.

The interviews brought up that training and development was key for leaders to develop new skills to lead teams virtually or on distance. According to many of the interviewees, the new way of working demands a more proactive involvement from line managers to ensure that people get the level of support they needed, and HR should think about ways to help and support the leaders to ensure this is happening. According to the interviewees, the leadership role will become more crucial in the post-pandemic era, where remote work may well become the norm, and need to find new ways on following up workers to a satisfactory level will be important.

Communication is key in this process. How can HR ensure that employees have all the information they need to perform their job? It will require more management training to understand employees' needs and adapt effectively to changes. When there is a weaker resilience among employees, it increases the importance of supporting and caring leaders. According to some of the interviewees, managers must adapt towards a more caring role and try to build a strong community feeling and sense of belonging between the team members. Managers need to be aware of this and adapt to this, and that more focus on symmetrical internal communication will be important. When the resilience among employees is weaker, the risk of conflict and receiving negative, yet constructive feedback might be harder to manage, especially when meeting over digital platforms, and that managers need to be aware of this.

“Communication has been put high on the agenda now, to ensure that we will be able to communicate and receive/give the communication we need to solve our job. It is a challenge when you are sitting in a home office. And when you are new, it is also the case that who should you turn to in order to solve your task or to obtain information, and it can be very difficult if you are not told this. And in many cases, you do not know who to ask for either.”
(Interviewee 7)

For organisations with a hierarchical non-symmetrical communication strategy (from top-down), are now looking on a new communication strategy where more involvement from the employees is needed. When you do not have full access to employees at the office, it is important to have clear communication channels, where employees can both give and receive information that is important for them to do their work in the best way possible. With

the lack of available colleagues to ask, and without proper communication channels, employees might find it difficult to be able to execute their tasks and feel even more isolated and disconnected to the organisation. HR need to provide training and support managers to help them adapt, communicate, and collaborate efficiently. Interviewee 7 also brought up a concern about the lack of informal communication channels, and that this can lead to disengagement, difficulties building relationships and fostering the sense of community additionally to lack of interaction on work related tasks.

Higher demand for HR professionals?

The pandemic seems to have highlighted the importance of HR in organisations during a crisis of this magnitude. Several of the interviewees that had extensive experience in the HR field, suggested that they noticed a significant increase in the demand for HR professionals during the pandemic. This could be an indication that the HR role, is getting a higher significance in organisation, and that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of the function.

“I talk to quite many start-ups. How I see it, is that even start-ups with around 20 employees are now recruiting HR people. While before it was a tendency that HR was hired later, when the companies were even bigger in size. I am not sure if this has to do with the pandemic, but it can be regarding that you can’t control the people when you can’t see them... but how I see it is that HR positions are just opening up much more now.” (Interviewee 6)

Although this hypothesis was not part of this study, it could be interesting for future research. This hypothesis was also supported by another interviewee, that also had a clear impression that businesses he knew that traditionally would not employ a HR professional to a strategic role, were posting job openings for strategic HR, and that also smaller organisation did this, and that they might got an “awakening call” and saw the need for such a roll in their organisation during the pandemic. If this is the case, it is possible to speculate that the role of HR has become more important due to the pandemic and has gained more influence in organisations. To study this hypothesis, a data analysis of HR job listings from the biggest job advertisement providers e.g., from 2019 compared to 2022, or 2017-2019 compared to 2020-2022 could give an indication to support these theories.

5 Discussion and analysis

This chapter will analyse the findings to address the research question. The analysis will explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the role of Human Resources and the changes that might have occurred using Dave Ulrich's typology. The key findings will be linked to each one of the Champions Model roles to determine, which of the roles have been affected, and to what degree. The key findings from the empirical research will be discussed and analysed in relation to the theoretical framework, aiming to identify any connections. The analysis will determine whether the empirical research result align with the findings from the theoretical framework.

The structure of this chapter follows a chronological approach, examining the roles in Dave Ulrich's champions model in relation to how they were affected by the pandemic. Firstly, the discussion will focus on the Administrative Expert role, as it is presumed that administrative tasks and policymaking were heavily impacted during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, the role of the Employee Champion will be explored, who had the responsibility of ensuring the well-being, productivity, and engagement of the employees. Then role of the Strategic Partner will be examined, considering the repercussions the pandemic had on organisational culture, leadership, and communication. Lastly, attention will be given to the role of the Change Agent, which became increasingly critical in the later stages of the pandemic, particularly in advocating for change and implementing new working policies, such as facilitating the return of employees to the office.

5.1 Administrative Expert

Key finding: The COVID-19 pandemic provided HR with an opportunity to embrace digital transformation and make process changes, showcasing their ability to quickly adapt and implement efficient digital practices for their administrative tasks.

According to Ulrich's typology (1998, 129) and role description, the Administrative Expert is the driving force responsible for ensuring efficient processes for managing and administering HR related tasks. This includes handling administrative and employment related issues. The respondents mentioned that the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic was a chaotic period. The data indicates that the pandemic did disrupt traditional HRM methods of administrative work, challenging the role of the Administrative Expert and required them to find new ways to execute their tasks efficiently.

HR professionals functioning as Administrative Experts seamlessly adapted to the change in working methods brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. They embraced new methods of recruitment, onboarding, administrative sick leaves, policy implementation, and found alternative means to support and equip employees. The data suggests that these adaptations gave a limited negative impact on their role as HR professionals, as they successfully established new routines for managing their tasks to a satisfactory level. The utilisation of digital tools became essential in this process, given the lack of other viable options. E.g., of these changes are remote recruitment, digital contract signing, and increased use of video meeting that replaced in-person interactions.

The pandemic has demonstrated that HR and administrative experts can make rapid changes and effectively digitalise the processes. For instance, since there were no opportunities for in-person meetings with new candidates, recruitment had to be shifted to digital platforms. There was an interesting quote from one of the interviewees related to the change in the recruitment process, *"How are we actually going to hire people with only seeing them remotely...?"*. This is an interesting philosophical aspect. The statement refers to a potential and hypothetical consequence to the change to an established routine. This can become a limiting factor towards making change to an already established processes. However, the new way of recruiting turned out to become a change that has been embraced, potentially saving time and resources for both candidates and recruiters. Another noteworthy example is the interview candidate who mentioned fully transitioning to digital signing processes, as meeting in person to sign documents like employment contracts was no longer feasible, and the back-and-forth exchange of papers proved time-consuming.

These changes exemplify what many companies have implemented due to the pandemic. Without the pandemic, these changes would likely not have been made, at least not as rapidly, due to the lack of urgency and already established and functioning practises.

A key finding is that most of the digital transformation and process changes occurred at the beginning of the pandemic. HR's role as an administrative expert can capitalise on the momentum of the initial digitisation process. The pandemic created urgency, but through that, also opportunities to digitise and streamline processes to a greater extent. HR has demonstrated that administrative experts have the ability to do so, displaying their adaptability and ability to enact changes quickly. This study only partially supports the finding by Minbaeva, & Navrbjerg (2023, 15), that concludes that there is little evidence that HR is driving the digital transformation process. According to the data from the empirical research, HR did drive the digitalisation process of certain administrative tasks in the initial phase of

the pandemic due to the lack of alternatives. However, there is no evidence that suggests the continuation of digitalisation of other administrative tasks in the later phases of the pandemic.

The pandemic served as a trigger for HR to embrace digital transformation and adopt new practices and tools. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed HR towards a path of digital transformation (Minbaeva, & Navrbjerg 2023, 23), and HR does have the opportunity and momentum to continue this digital transformation journey. In Al-Alawi, A. I., & al. study (2022, subchapter conclusion), they found that e-HRM would continue to develop post-COVID, and HRM in the organisations improved with digital transformation during the pandemic. The latter part can be confirmed partially in this research, but there is little evidence that show that HR has continued to have this focus.

HR are now in a unique position where they have the opportunity to embrace digital transformation and display their ability to adapt quickly, initiate and make processes more efficient. However, despite the momentum of digital transformation in the initial phase of the pandemic, it seems that HR has returned to their pre-pandemic pace, possibly due to the fear of unknown consequences, and reluctance to explore digitalisation opportunities influenced by already established working routines. The difficulty in driving digital transformation could also be due to the challenge of recognising the opportunities and the limited ability to initiate change when one's perspective is constrained by established and functioning routines. Overcoming routine blindness is crucial for organisations to uncover new possibilities and proactively drive the necessary changes. Another opportunity that has presented itself is to overcome argument against DT transformation of HR process from a management point of view. If there is a low willingness from the organisation to fund DT in HR, the pandemic has provided HR with good business cases for why organisation also should invest money in digitalising HR tools, and HR should take advantage of these.

This study confirms that the number of administrative tasks did increase dramatically, especially in initial phase, and that the pandemic effectively functioned as the initiator for change. The pandemic presented HR with obvious digitalisation needs and need for process changes in the administrative work. HR and the Administrative Expert role has been “forced” to take technology into use and make process changes to be able to execute tasks that are crucial for the organisation to move forward. This has led to that HR professionals now have an opportunity to take on greater responsibility for initiating change to display their ability to do so.

There was little evidence that can conclude that the role of the Administrative Expert has been significantly changed itself due to the pandemic, even though with the increased workload of administrative tasks. However, a key finding from the research, is that the pandemic presented HR with an opportunity to continue the digital transformation of administrative tasks. The pandemic displayed that HR do have the ability to quickly implement digital changes to well established working methods and achieve successful and sustainable change to the processes. It also proved that some changes can be enforced rapidly, to achieve more efficient processes without investing too much time.

Development suggestions for the Administrative Expert

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the importance of digital transformation in HR processes. HR should maintain its commitment to adopt digital tools and technology. They should now continue the momentum they have had in streamlining administrative tasks and enhance efficiency. Administrative Experts could now proactively initiate and take the lead in identifying and initiating digitalisation opportunities and continue driving implementation of digital solutions for HR processes.

The ability of HR to swiftly adapt and amend their administrative tasks and processes has been demonstrated effectively. The pandemic presented HR with a good opportunity to highlight their efficiency and effectiveness in implementing and suggesting changes and can now use it as a reason to continue digitalising their processes. By doing this, they also have an opportunity to increase their credibility and demonstrate the value the role of HR brings to the organisation. To overcome challenges like funding of digital transformation of HR processes, HR can now also display and build strong business cases about the positive outcomes and benefits from the HR initiatives implemented during the pandemic.

Lastly, in the suggestions for the Administrative Expert, is that it is important that HR professionals should address the resistance to change. The fear of unknown consequences and reluctance of challenges established working routines seems to hinder digital transformation opportunities. It is important to overcome resistance to change and foster a culture that embraces digital transformation in HR, and the pandemic has shown that it is possible.

It should be noted that some of the suggestions, are also very applicable with the Change Agent role, but the Administrative Expert should embrace and seek opportunities in makes their processes more effective with technology and overcome resistance and hesitation

towards adopting new ways of doing things and continue to challenge already established routines.

5.2 Employee Champion

Key findings: The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the importance of the role of Employee Champion role in ensuring employee wellbeing, psychological safety, fostering sense of belonging and social connections.

The majority of the data gathered in the empirical research can be linked to Ulrich's Employee Champion role. This was expected, given that the pandemic had an unprecedented impact on people's wellbeing and psychological safety. As described by Ulrich (1998, 129-130), the Employee Champion role aims to ensure that employees can fully contribute to the organisation by fostering feelings of safety, engagement, and commitment. In this role, it is crucial to provide employees with the necessary resources to meet the demands that are put on them, redesign working processes to support them, and maintain a high morale. These tasks, along with others related to the Employee Champion, were identified as challenging areas during the empirical research according to the HR professionals in this study.

The COVID-19 led to a lot of uncertainties for employees, and the data also provides valuable insight on how HR professionals now to a greater degree need to help employees reconcile work and family life than before the pandemic. There are now higher expectations from employees regarding the support they expect to receive from their employers. This has encouraged HR to place a greater emphasis on culture and explore new and improved ways of supporting their employees.

The pandemic has significantly amplified the HR department's responsibility to provide employees with necessary tools and equipment to make them capable of executing their tasks effectively from home. While HR has been accountable for ensuring the availability of resources also before the pandemic, the shift to remote work during the pandemic escalated the demand for equipment and digital tools for many. Even though for most, providing equipment seemed to be ad hoc in the beginning of the pandemic, e.g., not all employees had the required setup and equipment to facilitate work from home, and required HR to address this problem urgently.

The empirical research supports the theoretical findings by Alzueta & al. 2021; Bailey & al. 2023; Carnevale & Hatak 2020; and Conroy & al. 2021, that resilience of employees towards stress and work became weaker during the pandemic, and the importance of finding

solutions that support resilience and psychological safety became apparent. With all the external stress-factors, such as the pandemic, led to a higher degree of isolation and affected cohesion, feeling of unity and the working community negatively. The pandemic, along with other external factors such as financial stress and other global conflicts, also had a negative impact on the employees' resilience, posing a threat to their stress levels, well-being, and overall ability to cope. One of the actions made to deal with these issue, was the creation of a new position called HR Chief Happiness manager. This role was created in one of the satellite organisations, so the respondent could not explain the exact duties or responsibilities of this position, exempt from that it was a position that should work towards enhancing employee resilience and engagement.

In the adaptation phase of the pandemic, the need to prioritise and enhance psychological support for the employees' mental health became of significant importance. This was manifested by the increased sick leaves due to mental illnesses and attrition in the workforce emphasised. It created an urgent need of equipping employees with mental tools to increase their resilience and promoting a supporting environment. The need for additional help in supporting the employee's mental health.

The empirical evidence supports previous studies that offering mental support to their employees has become an area of importance for many organisations. COVID-19 have increased HR's involvement in mapping out employee's need for support and start a dialogue with their occupational health care providers to give additional support to both employees and managers. Several of the respondents introduced external digital mental health service providers to support employees with their mental health issues and did internal action such as mental health workshops. This to encourage their employees to be aware and take better care of their mental health.

Before the pandemic, HR has worked closely with occupational health care providers to support physical health related issues, but the pandemic brought an increased focus on psychological health issues. This has led HR to increase the focus on mapping out issues related to both mental- and physical health and provide tools to support employees with balancing their work-life balance, and to maintain psychological wellbeing. This also includes that HR should increase their interaction with line managers and inform and encourage more open dialogue regarding mental health in the work environment. One of the main findings from the study made by De-la-Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021, 12), is the key role managers play in following up and facilitate good remote working conditions so the employees can reconcile work and family life.

The data show evidence that maintaining a community feeling and sense of belonging was negatively impacted due to the pandemic. Organisations that felt they had a strong sense of community before the pandemic, but that this has been challenged due to the pandemic. While challenges related to recruitment, selection, and onboarding are challenging enough, the pandemic introduced a completely new aspect, employee integration in a remote work setting. The integration of employees who are not physically present in the same location poses an additional challenge for HR. The pandemic has disrupted the social environment and interactions between employees in organisations, and it does require more effort from both the employer and employees to build collegial relationships within the organisation.

The pandemic has led HR professionals to significantly intensify their focus on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of employees. This includes emphasising the importance of physical and psychological health to mitigate attrition and health related issues associated with isolation and lack of social interaction. The emphasis on employee welfare has become even more significant priority due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The data also suggest that fostering a supporting work environment nurtures social connections and has gain considerable importance.

This research highlights that HR has developed an increased awareness of mental health related issues, regarding social interactions, and a better understanding of the day-to-day challenges faced by employees as the pandemic has progressed. With the increased expectations from the employees and a greater need for support, it is evident that the role of the Employee Champion has assumed greater significance than ever before due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Development suggestion for the Employee Champion

As employee expectations for support rise, so too does the demand put on the Employee Champion. HR professionals must continue to promote cohesion and a sense of community among employees and teams in organisations going forward. This demands HR's ongoing efforts to identify best practices and facilitate social interactions among employees, particularly in the context of hybrid working arrangements.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of enhancing employee resilience, due to the increased stress and uncertainties amongst the employees, as there has been a significant increase in mental related sick leaves. It is important that HR continue to provide resources for stress management and foster a supportive network among employees to help build resilience. This to support those who have not adapted to this new way of working, and to

have mechanisms ready in the event of a new crisis, or if the post-pandemic stress levels increase amongst the employees.

HR must increase their activity in conducting organisational diagnostics to identify areas where employee support is needed. This can include enhancing knowledge in psychological support and/or increasing training programs. Since many of the challenges are new also to HR, it is important for HR to stay updated on the latest and best practises within the diagnosed problem areas.

HR also needs to find ways to integrate new employees and keep them engaged after the onboarding process. Without a proper integration plan, new hires might lose motivation and become less engaged, and consequently look for other options if this is not in place.

5.3 Strategic Partner

Key findings: The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for organisations to re-evaluate and redefine their culture in the context of the new ways of working. HR professionals play a crucial role in this process, where they have to focus on organisational culture, and fostering positive relationships between managers and employees.

One important role of the Strategic Partner is to debate for the best practises in culture change programs according to Ulrich (1998, 127-129). It has become evident that a strong organisational office culture, does not equal to having a strong digital organisational culture. This was manifested by several of the interviewees that perceived their culture to be strong before the pandemic, realising that it was not fitting well with the new ways of working.

The focus on strengthening the organisational culture and employee engagement is not a new concept for HR professionals and was already an important focus area before the pandemic. However, the good initiatives many HR professionals before the pandemic, got a significant setback. The pandemic led to a significant decline in their employee satisfaction surveys or NPS', and some experienced an increase in retention that could be related to lack of commitment and engagement. Based on this, several of the respondents said that they now need to re-define their culture.

HR serve as "guardians of organisational culture" and should be part of creating and maintaining a fitting culture for the organisation (Kim, Vaiman & Sanders 2022, 285-290). What has seemed to be challenging, was how to navigate and re-define organisational culture in a new working environment. HR need to actively engage in this process, and take actions that enhance cultural parameters, such as engagement, happiness, NPS etc. HR

practitioners and leaders have traditionally been able to rely on informal and in-person interactions to shape organisational culture (Bale 2021, 38) and receive feedback and provide feedback to employees regarding their alignment with the organisational culture. However, due to remote working policies and reduced interaction amongst employees, this option is now limited.

There are shared opinions regarding how the COVID-19 has affected the culture. Every organisation has their own culture and values, and for those organisations where individualism is stronger than collectivism, might not experience as big of an impact due to e.g., remote work. However, those of the respondents who had not seen clear proof of a negative impact on their organisational culture, were still uncertain about how things like remote working would affect the culture in the future.

From a leadership perspective, the pandemic increased the activities and the need for facilitating more frequent communication between HR and leaders. Closer interaction with managers, in cooperating with finding solutions on managing and following up the employees has increased of importance. The data shows suggests that softer leadership skills have become more important. One of the interviewees suggested that the powers and dynamics between the manager and the employees have change due to COVID-19, and that it is important that managers are aware of this. Another interviewee suggested that HR cannot alone increase the engagement amongst the employees, and that HR that they needed to have a closer cooperation and involvement with managers solving this issue.

These empirical findings are supported by other studies on leadership challenges during COVID-19. A study made by Chen & Sriphon (2021, 15-18), highlighted six key improvement areas that are important for managers to increase focus on due to COVID-19. These were communication, deliver messages more empathically and with optimism, use their credibility to build trust, sharing facts and information, and give consistent feedback. Lastly, according to Chen & Sriphon (2021, 17) managers play a crucial role by clarifying the goals and objectives of organisations, supporting the needs of everyone involved in the organisation, and creating a positive and supportive work environment for employees. These actions help to strengthen the organisation's ability to adapt and bounce back from challenging situations.

The findings from the empirical research shows that HR are aware of this issue, and have a high focus on leadership development, increased coaching and trainings for managers and created helpful guidelines for managers. Shared leadership can lead to positive effects on team collaboration and employee engagement, making it important in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen & Sriphon, 2021, 14-17).

However, not all managers and boardrooms are comfortable with the freedom and flexibility that the new way of working has provided, and this can cause a conflict with adapting e.g., shared leadership models. Trust issues do exist from the management towards the employees when working in a remote working environment. These issues can hinder managers willingness to implement shared leadership with their employees and be harmful for the overall working environment. HR professionals has been presented with a new challenge in finding ways of working and find ways to build trust between employees and management where this is necessary, to enhance leadership and organisational culture.

From a crisis management perspective, HR plays a significant role in overcoming crises. This is evident in the studies and literature conducted by Vardalier 2016, 463-471; Nizamidou & al. 2019, 541-560; and Collings & al. 2021, 819-830. These studies emphasise the significance of preparation in safeguarding the health of individuals and organisations. While the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic caught many organisations off guard, and data from this study indicate that organisations did not have pandemic as part of their contingency plan. The lessons learned have led HR departments to incorporate pandemic into the crisis management framework as part of their contingency plan for better preparation if a comparable situation should occur.

For the Strategic Partner, the pandemic seems affected the role moderately. It presented the role with some new challenges, such as trust issues and a higher focus on strategic leadership development, while culture and employee engagement experienced setbacks.

Development suggestion for the Strategic Partner:

Strategic Partners must take an initiative-taking role in helping the organisations re-define their culture. Strategic decisions on how the new hybrid culture should be, should not only be quickly decided, and HR need to increase monitoring, collect feedback from employees, and bring to the board rooms when setting the new course. P-E fit is key in this process. Setting the new course without having enough information might bring many unwanted consequences for organisations and increase retention rates and cause less engagement amongst the employees.

The Strategic Partner must also address leadership challenges in the organisation, and prioritise how to support leaders with communication, encourage shared leadership and address trust issues. Some leaders might struggle with leading on a distance, and HR should find ways to provide coaching, training and give guidance in these matters. Also, with lower resilience amongst the workers, it is important that managers also acknowledge that

they might have to adjust their communication, e.g., deliver messages more empathically (constructive and negative feedback) and optimistically (positive feedback) to create a positive work environment when people are not meeting in-person as frequently as before. This entails that HR should focus on improving leadership skills, and for that they also need to foster a closer relationship with line managers.

5.4 Change Agent

Key findings: The urgency to implement many numerous changes within a short period of time, without proper planning or analysis provided challenges for the Change Agent role, which should be an advocate for change. The challenge of establishing effective communication channels need to be one of the focus areas moving forwards. In addition, the move from remote work “back” to a hybrid working model, is a, or will like to be challenge the Change Agent who should be the advocate for change in organisations. One of the main challenges for HR is that they had to do implementation of changes "backward". They could not monitor and see the effect the changes had on the organisation before after a full-scale roll-out, and therefor changed needed to be reversed.

Organisations have implemented numerous changes to their operations during the pandemic. The research show that HR professionals have played a significant role in introducing and implementing many of these changes. Even when they are not initiated by HR, their responsibility is still to mitigate the impact of change in the organisations, as well as protecting employees from the negative consequences of these changes. Collings & al. (2021, 829) suggests that HR managers are uniquely positioned to navigate the paradox emerging from the pandemic, placing HR at the forefront of organisational responses to the crisis.

The standards of working culture changed from “always working at the office” (sector and industry dependant) to being fully remote during the pandemic. One of the major challenges that HR is facing in recovering from the post-pandemic in “How to implement a hybrid work model?” that does take into consideration the autonomy, flexibility and will not harm the motivation of the employees and find the optimal balance between these working models. One of the challenges that HR professionals are most likely to face in the recovery phase of the pandemic is how to implement a hybrid work model. This will involve limiting the freedom, flexibility, and autonomy that many employees have become accustomed to during remote work.

Only few interviewees stated that they would continue with a fully flexible working location, allowing employees complete freedom to choose where they work from. However, the majority of respondents are now either considering or preparing to adopt a hybrid working culture or have already done so. Two out of nine respondents had enforced hybrid working, making that the new policy in their organisation by the time of the interviews. While five respondents said that they are now preparing to enforce new working policies, the last two planned to stick to a fully remote option for their employees. All of the respondents expressed that efforts are made in also providing more incentives for employees, so that more of them would return voluntarily to the office. To incentivise the return to the work was something that all the interviewees brought up, regardless of their strategical decision on work location policies. Some examples of these incentives were facility upgrades, free meal benefits, more social activities at the office locations etc.

During the interviews, an interesting concern was raised about the need for better preparation before implementing a new work model, especially given that this would be the third working policy implemented in the previous 3,5 years (office, remote and hybrid). Many organisations have office employees who can work remotely, and employees who must be physically present at the workplace. Therefore, it was raised questions on organisations now can find a balance when deciding how much remote work they should allow. There were concerns if it could cause negative feelings like resentment and jealousy between employees who can work from home and those who cannot. Research shows that there was little support for this concern (Gajendran & Harrison 2007, 1532-1533). However, it can be questioned if the research made by Gajendran & Harrison is still valid today, considering the changes that have occurred in working life over the past 15 years since the study (globalisation, digitalisation, mobility of workers etc.), and the fact that there is a higher expectation for remote work and flexibility today compared to 15 years ago.

HR professionals and organisations did initially in the pandemic experience significant challenges due to the shift to fully remote work (e.g., lack of engagement, lower commitment, negative effects on culture). As a result, some are now starting to reconsider changes that limit certain employee privileges (e.g., fully remote work to a hybrid work policy) without building a convincing case for why these changes are necessary. This lack of employee involvement can potentially harm both the organisation and the employees' motivation and engagement. Therefore, it is important for HR professionals and organisations to communicate effectively with employees and involve them in decision-making processes to ensure a smooth transition to a hybrid work environment.

A study (Sun & al. 2021, 19-23) on how internal communication affects the change process in organisations, in the context of the pandemic, provided evidence for the importance of symmetrical communication during crises-induced organisational change. It identified that symmetrical internal communication was important to enhance the employees perceived organisational support and positive emotions during change. In the empirical findings, several of the HR professionals had communication as one of the main challenges and development areas that was in need for change due to the pandemic. When key stakeholders (i.e., management team) wishes for change are made, and with asymmetrical communication or one way directed “messaging downwards”, the risk of losing the employees support in the change process increases. This can lead to several unwanted consequences, such as less negative effect on the employee’s motivation and less chance of succeeding to make the changes sustainable.

According to the empirical findings the pandemic brought both challenges and opportunities for HR and their role within organisations. The sudden impact of the pandemic forced many organisations to make significant changes within a brief period of time, without the ability or time to thoughtfully plan, analyse, and measure the impact of these changes. Compared to a regular change process that can take long time to plan, develop, monitor, and implement, the pandemic required organisations to jump straight into adjusting and adapting. Thoroughly preparing for and analysing the impact of change, as well as monitoring and preparing for all the changes, was nearly impossible given the urgency of the situation.

From this research we can conclude that even though the role itself as a Change Agent has not changed, the pandemic has given the HR department and professionals more opportunities to take lead in change processes. Even if the conclusion is that HR as a Change Agent has not changed considerably during the pandemic, the pandemic has given HR professionals more opportunities to initiate, take charge and lead the change processes. HR should be the organisation’s “architect” and know the “blueprints” of the organisation to identify where change is most needed (Ulrich 1998, 128-129). Empirical findings can support Collings & al.’s (2021, 819, 829) paradox that HR has a unique position to strengthen and elevate the status of the HR function in the organisation if they take a more active role in implementing changes.

Development suggestions for Change Agent:

The COVID-19 pandemic presented HR with a unique position to take on more responsibility of the process as the Change Agent to initiate and lead the process to “full” implementation.

If HR does not actively initiate changes, but is only implementing and overseeing the implementation, their strategic position might be weakened within the organisation.

When deciding on a new working model, e.g., a move to a hybrid working policy from a fully remote, it will include limiting certain rights that the employees have got used to during the years of fully remote working policy. Change Agent needs to involve the employees in the decision-making process and communicate effectively to ensure a smooth transition to hybrid work if that is the chosen strategy. It is crucial for the Change Agent and the organisation to build a convincing case for necessary changes and addressing concerns to maintain motivation and engagement.

The Change Agent should be more aware of asymmetrical communication, and that employees in a changing environment can experience negative emotions if they are not heard in change processes. Due to the amount of change happening over the last 3 years, it is important that Change Agents addresses these challenges with communication and becomes advocates for symmetrical communication and ways to facilitate this. More involvement from the employees will support the success of change efforts.

5.5 Findings outside the scope

The rise of People and Culture Managers?

There is not enough evidence in this study to draw a definite conclusion, but it is worth considering whether the pandemic led to an increase in the number of "People and Culture Managers." While this job title is not new in the field of HR, it was brought up in the interviews that they have experienced a significant rise in such positions, and another interviewee even transitioned from an HR director role to a Director of People and Culture during the pandemic. This to free up time to work more strategically with people and culture related challenges. The strategic focus on how organisations should re-define their culture and how they want people to work together does seem to have got a higher focus due to the pandemic and become a priority for HR to continue exploring and find best practices going forward in this new way of working.

Increased need for HR professionals due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

There was also brought up a hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in HR positions. Several of the interviewees believed that the significance of people and culture within organisation has significantly increased because of the pandemic, and that it has become firmly established due to COVID-19. The data also suggests that the

pandemic has led to an increase in the need of HR professionals, and that especially companies with a small number of employees (SMB's) are recruiting HR professionals in an earlier stage than before. This can indicate that HR has got a more elevated role in organisation, and that the pandemic has strengthened HR's position in organisations.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find out how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the role of HR. The objective of this research is to provide HR professionals with development suggestions that will help them to navigate and reflect upon the many upcoming challenges that they will face in the post-pandemic environment. In this chapter I will conclude my research and do critical reflection on my process, findings, and own learning.

Amongst Dave Ulrich's four roles in his champions model, all the roles have been affected by the pandemic, but to a varying degree. This research has looked at the short-term effects of the pandemic impact, but also how the roles have been affected long-term going forward.

In the research findings it was discovered that the Administrative Expert was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant they primarily need to make changes to their administrative tasks and processes (e.g., digitalisation of recruitment and hiring). The findings also show the changes are still needed, also after the pandemic. According to this research, the best practises implemented during the pandemic for the Administrative Expert, was the digitalisation of the organisations crucial administrative task to be able to move forward. It is important to note, that for the Administrative Expert many of the challenges presented got rapidly solved. This shows to prove that the initial negative effects on this role caused by the pandemic with the uncertainty in recruitment- and hiring processes, led to positive changes long term. Rather than causing long-lasting negative impacts on this role, the pandemic has presented numerous opportunities for the Administrative Expert to identify and embrace digital transformation of administrative tasks, thus further accelerating the momentum in this area.

For the role of the Strategic Expert, the pandemic increased the activities existing areas of focus for the role, including culture, leadership, and communication, and challenged the people-profit paradox. While these challenges were not new to the Strategic Expert, the pandemic brought about a heightened sense of urgency and increased demands for effectively addressing them. What the pandemic did do, was that it increased the frequency for Strategic Expert on how to do organisational diagnosis. This is crucial when it comes to aligning organisational practices with current HR practises in a constantly changing work practices prompted by the pandemic. It also provides the HR with information about how they should progress focus on organisational culture, since there are still many uncertainties that the Strategic Expert must get involved in to set the new course regarding culture and working policies.

The role of the Change Agent was affected by the pandemic. Change Agents play a crucial role in advocating for change, involving the right stakeholders, and ensuring successful implementation of change processes. However, the urgency to implement numerous changes, without proper planning or analysis, presented significant challenges for the Change Agent role, which is expected to be an advocate for change. The lack of proper planning or analysis must be considered to be limited to the actual crisis and is not a long-term effect. Recommendations from this research is that the Change Agent should continue to advocate for symmetrical internal communication models and address challenges regarding implementation of new working policies.

The Employee Champion role faced numerous challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic in promoting employee wellbeing, addressing remote work challenges, and fostering social connections and community. This led the Employee Champion to implement many actions to increase the employee's wellbeing. Practises focusing on employee's health and wellbeing involved closer cooperation with external healthcare providers to ensure that employees have the tools they need to stay health an keep up workability. The unprecedented impact on employee's wellbeing highlighted the need to prioritise new areas of support, such as psychological assistance, fatigue management, and attrition prevention. The pandemic disrupted social connections and the sense of community, making it more challenging to integrate new employees into the organisation. This posed a threat to employee's ability to manage with work-related tasks, thus presenting a substantial risk to many organisations going forward. The initiative implemented seems to have also long-lasting effect for those organisations.

To answer the research questions, the study confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected traditional and established HR processes and development projects. It also confirms that the role of HR has been presented many opportunities that can help them manifest their importance in organisations. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of many areas that belong to HR and brought more attention to the critical need for increased focus on these. HR has stepped up and taken on greater responsibilities to support their employees in these areas. Most of the actions HR has implemented during the pandemic, seem have long-lasting effects.

The negative impacts include increased the workload for HR professionals, disrupted development projects, and created many uncertainties for HR. On the positive side, HR has increased the responsibility in their own domain, and have many new opportunities to both improve their processes and elevate their status within the organisation.

Regarding the objective, the research managed to highlight development suggestions for HR professionals to reflect on going forward. Based on this study, my recommendations to are:

- Embrace the digital transformation and leverage the momentum created by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Take the initiative to implement changes and improvements in administrative tasks.
- HR should enhance their own involvement in redefine the organisational culture.
- Focus on strengthening the managements leadership role within the organisation.
- Support, promote and use effective communication strategies.
- Address challenges in implementing new working models.
- Advocate for symmetrical communication and employee engagement during change processes.
- Conduct organisational needs assessments to identify areas for employee wellbeing support and development.
- Focus on strengthening unity, cohesion, promote social bonding and collaboration.
- Increase the activities to promote employee wellbeing and provide resources to enhance resilience in navigating challenges.

According to the additional findings, it can indicate the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a higher demand for HR practitioners to manage employment- and organisational culture related issues. It would not be the first time in history that a major event has caused an increase of HR practitioners. As described in the chapter 2.1, there was also a significant increase in welfare practitioners and personnel managers after the World Wars, with the need of battling employment related issue. It is not yet conclusive, and this need further studies to confirm, but a hypothesis can be that the pandemic has led to a significant increase in the need of HR professionals. If this hypothesis would be confirmed, it can also lead to further conclusions that it helps organisations see the increased importance of having a strong HR function, and that the function has gained an elevated status.

The research method that was selected for this study was quite successful. The semi-structure interview form brought me close to the interviewees and I felt that there was trust and a good open dialogue throughout all of the interviews. However, during the first interviews it became evident that the original research question had to be changed. Initially this study aimed to investigate how the pandemic has affected the role and compare this to before and after the pandemic. There was just too little information about the focus areas before the pandemic, which made it difficult to make a comparison to new focus areas enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This did not impact the study too much, since the

objective was to figure out the impact caused by the pandemic and find development suggestions for the way going forward for HR professionals.

To look through the critical lens, this study does have some weaknesses that should have been addressed. Since most of the interviewees worked in white-collar organisation, their employees were used to working on digital platforms already before the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees did not work in industries that were hit worse by the pandemic such as tourism, aviation, and production. Therefore, the study did not examine whether certain responses would differ if it had included more blue-collar organisations. Additionally, there is reason to believe that the responses and findings may have been different if the study had included organisations that were more severely impacted by the pandemic.

Another potential weakness was that Dave Ulrich's Champion's model (1997) does not necessarily fit all organisations. It became clear in some of the interviews with the smaller organisations, where there was only a single HR practitioner employed, or for HR professionals who had not heard about his typology or practised it, that it took time to explain about why I chose to apply this typology to this study. Based on this feedback, it can also be concluded that Ulrich Champions model, does not necessarily fit all organisations.

The 5.5.2023 the COVID-19 pandemic was no longer defined as a global health emergency according to the World Health Organisation. Only in Europe the World Health Organisation (WHO) has confirmed 2 237 380 deaths, and almost 300 000 000 cases of confirmed COVID-19 cases (WHO, 2023). For organisations however, the work on adapting and adjusting seems to be far from over. This study confirms that COVID-19 have disrupted certain areas and change the landscape for HR professionals, but the long-term implications of the pandemic cannot yet be concluded.

Own learnings

To reflect on my own learning, I have gained a better understanding on how HR contributes and have realised the crucial important of having a strong HR function in organisations. The interviews became inspirational experiences, where I met highly dedicated and emphatic HR professionals that openly share about their days, challenges, and hard work.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Quotations from the interviews organised by roles

Theme	Illustrative example	HR role
Recruitment, onboarding and integration	<i>"I have noticed that with recruitments, for example, it's much harder to get a, like, good overall picture about potential employees via video connection. Rather than seeing how they communicate when you meet them in person and with body language, for example."</i>	Administrative Expert
Policymaking	<i>"When COVID started, we [HR] had to come up with policies for when to come to the office, how to do different things like washing hands, and how to attend meetings when only a few people were in the office."</i>	
Equipment	<i>"Many of our employees didn't have anything else at home but their laptop and a kitchen table, for example. So, [we were] thinking about different kind of practices to tackle that, so that everyone has proper chairs and desks at home as well, and additional screens and stuff like that."</i> <i>"It was all about getting people into home offices and getting equipment in place for them. It also had to happen quite quickly and didn't have much of a plan for it."</i>	
Increased communication activities	<i>"It was very important that people stayed healthy since they had production line, and we [HR] had to maintain the level of knowledge about what the company had to deal with, so it was discussed every week, and information was posted."</i>	
Mental health support	<i>"So how do we ensure the mental health of our employees in the remote setup?"</i>	
Adapting new technology	<i>"...if we look at it from a general perspective you know, technology has accelerated during the pandemic in general. And I think for, HR, it may be the same. That you can utilise sort of the technology to become the partner that HR should be."</i> <i>"I needed to automate more [of the HR tasks] and find the system that supported that... otherwise I've be working 24/7, and that is not sustainable for HR either."</i>	
Digitalisation	<i>"So, we had these extra pandemic-related tasks that we had to figure out how to work smarter on. For example, we had to map out who was coming to the office because only 20% of the workforce could come in [to the office]. One of the ways we did this was by creating a form to collect responses instead of approaching people one by one."</i> <i>"If you think of technology and HR, I think many HR's, we as well, had on the agenda to do more, like data-driven decisions, have more technology, the support of the processes that supported the businesses. But that was sort of when you had time, if it makes sense while with the pandemic you just had to do it because something like crash you know society shut down, and you just had to figure it out quickly."</i>	

Table 4 Quotations related to the Administrative Expert

Theme	Illustrative example	HR role
Trust issues	<p><i>"Employment and employee relationship is built up on trust. A question that has been brought up is the trust between the employer and employees. For some managers there has been an issue to trust that the employees are doing their job if they get the freedom to work from home."</i></p>	Employee Champion
Sense of belonging	<p><i>"When the sense of belonging decreases together with the community feeling, then that affects the engagement of the employees, and people have felt more disengaged during the remote work."</i></p> <p><i>"We are working on increasing the sense of belonging. With remote events and improving remote way of working"</i></p>	
Collectiveness	<p><i>"The pandemic has made people more isolated, and feel lonelier, and the feeling of collectiveness that you get in an office has disappeared to a certain degree and made people lonelier, and this has also increased that HR has gotten more to do to talk with these one-on-one."</i></p>	
Resilience and capability	<p><i>"The resilience seems to be weaker, and the workers might feel that they only get more to do, without the employer supporting it, and have higher expectation from the employer on the support they need".</i></p> <p><i>"I have been used more as a psychologist than before. The pandemic, war, and energy crisis, all of these has increased the psychological safety at work. It might not only be due to the pandemic, but the sum of all these might do so the employee feel less and less safe and the sum of all these also affect the capability of work and increase unhappiness."</i></p>	
Increase in sick leaves related to mental illnesses.	<p><i>It was a quite big change for people to learn for example the boundaries of work and home life, and we saw a huge increase in mental health related sick leaves during the pandemic.</i></p>	
Resilience and capability	<p><i>"We as the employer is responsible for the employee's wellbeing, so we were contemplating the risk of COVID and getting an infection, but also about the mental health side. So how do we ensure the mental health of our employees in the remote setup?"</i></p> <p><i>"And we had to facilitate support for the mental health of your employees as well."</i></p>	
Attrition	<p><i>"I have been used more as a psychologist than before. The pandemic, war, and energy crisis have all increased the need for psychological safety at work. It may not only be due to the pandemic, but the cumulative effect of all these factors may make employees feel less and less safe, affecting their capability to work and their level of happiness. The resilience of employees seems weaker, which may make them feel that they are getting more work without sufficient support from the employer, and they have higher expectations from the employer regarding the support they need."</i></p> <p><i>"I felt I had to support people on mental health as well, because, you know. They were sitting a lot alone, so you had to talk more to people. That was not part of my role before. So, I had to spend a lot of time on that so that meant that I had to figure out what do I do with my other tasks."</i></p> <p><i>"If you lose the connection with your own company, then there is a higher risk of attrition. So, during the pandemic, the attrition was of course very low because people were sort of scared and feeling uncertain. But when it kind of got easier a little bit, or people got used to that crisis in a way, then then it was kind of a ketchup bottle that,</i></p>	(Strategic Expert & Employee Champion)

Isolation and loneliness	<i>"OK they have unfilled the sense of belonging that much", and it's easy to leave."</i>
Work life balance	<i>"The pandemic has made people more isolated and lonelier."</i>
Effects on culture	<i>"We had some case where people are not able to separate home life and work life. People e.g., were not able to separate home and work life."</i>
Less socialising / Weakened relationships	<i>"Why you come to the office if there are no one you want to meet?" "From a purely professional point of view, it was not difficult for me to get into the job. However, building relationships took a bit longer, especially since people were working from home during the pandemic. It took me almost a year to meet with all the employees in the organisation."</i>

Table 5 Quotation related to the Employee Champion

Theme	Illustrative example	HR role
Community feeling	<i>"We should get this feeling of that it is us, together, that is working towards a common goal, and that is difficult when everyone only meets and work virtually. Thigh them up with some of the softer values and culture."</i>	Strategic Partner
Retention	<i>"We had good retention before the pandemic. During my time in this company [5,5 years], before the pandemic, five people resigned. But now, only during the last six months [interview Jan 2023], there has been five people leaving during the last six months."</i>	
Softer leadership skills	<i>"The powers/dynamics has changed, and it is important that also managers are aware of this. I believe that the leaders need to be more nursing, empathic and had to become gentler in their communication."</i>	
Leadership development	<i>"The leadership role will probably become even more important in the future, since we most likely will not return to the office full time, so this will also be added to management training, and capturing the employees' wishes, changes and such becomes even more important for the future, and it is certainly different from manager to manager how they handle this."</i>	
Connected workforce	<i>"There is a new strategy where communication has been put on the agenda to ensure that we can communicate and receive/give the information we need to perform our job. It's challenging when working from home, especially when you're new and unsure who to turn to for help or information."</i>	
Contingency planning	<i>"We have a contingency plan, and we now have a new unwanted event that must be risk-managed, and it is called Pandemic."</i>	
Effects on culture	<i>"We need to work more with the culture and how we can work closer together." "We had a strong office culture and we felt "untouchable" before the pandemic, but the pandemic led to a realisation that it was not the case." "The matter of value and culture has been put higher up on the agenda after the pandemic."</i>	

Incentivise voluntary return to office	<p>"We actively work more on the culture to thigh employees to the organisation with other means rather than just monetary incentives and tasks. We should get this feeling of that it is us together that are working towards a common goal, and that is difficult when everyone only meets and work virtually. Thigh them [the employees] up with some of the softer values and culture."</p>
New working policies	<p>"We now have culture surveys to find out where we stand right now, what we need to be aware of and where we need to go."</p> <p>"To get people to work, we must not force them, but entice them, right? Run a hot lunch, then everyone will show up. It's not just students who like free food, e.g., just offer grilled sausages, it attracts people."</p> <p>"We need to ensure that our facilities undergo a facelift to make coming to the office even more appealing. Together with the employees, we are working to identify other benefits that could encourage employees to come in, such as providing better food, improving the gym, and offering better coffee. But we realise that this may not be enough for everyone, so we are developing new policies to incentivise people to return to the office."</p> <p>"We had to implement a policy requiring a hybrid work model, meaning employees cannot work from home all the time."</p> <p>"There was a survey done, where around 50% [of the employees] said that if they were forced fully back to office, they would quit their job."</p>
Remote work impact	<p>"...I'm not really too worried about productivity [regarding fully remote working] and that, but at the same time you lose the "coffee machine talk", and the informal meeting arena, because digital meetings are often very structured. So, you don't get the same dynamics in a conversation on Teams as you do in the hallways, and it's clear when you're in an environment, and perhaps not only with your own colleagues from your team, but also with others, then it will be easy for you to start talking about things... We still today do not know the extent of how the remote work will affect our culture".</p> <p>"If we allow too much home office, then it will still be a challenge to feel included. I think that the people who can't do it, because it is also about the person's ability to be independent and adjust, right? And if you don't have that, and feel like you're a bit lost or lonely, and maybe don't have an observant leader, then you might want to stay at home with a feeling of being alone, and then you probably don't want to be in the company if it doesn't get better."</p>

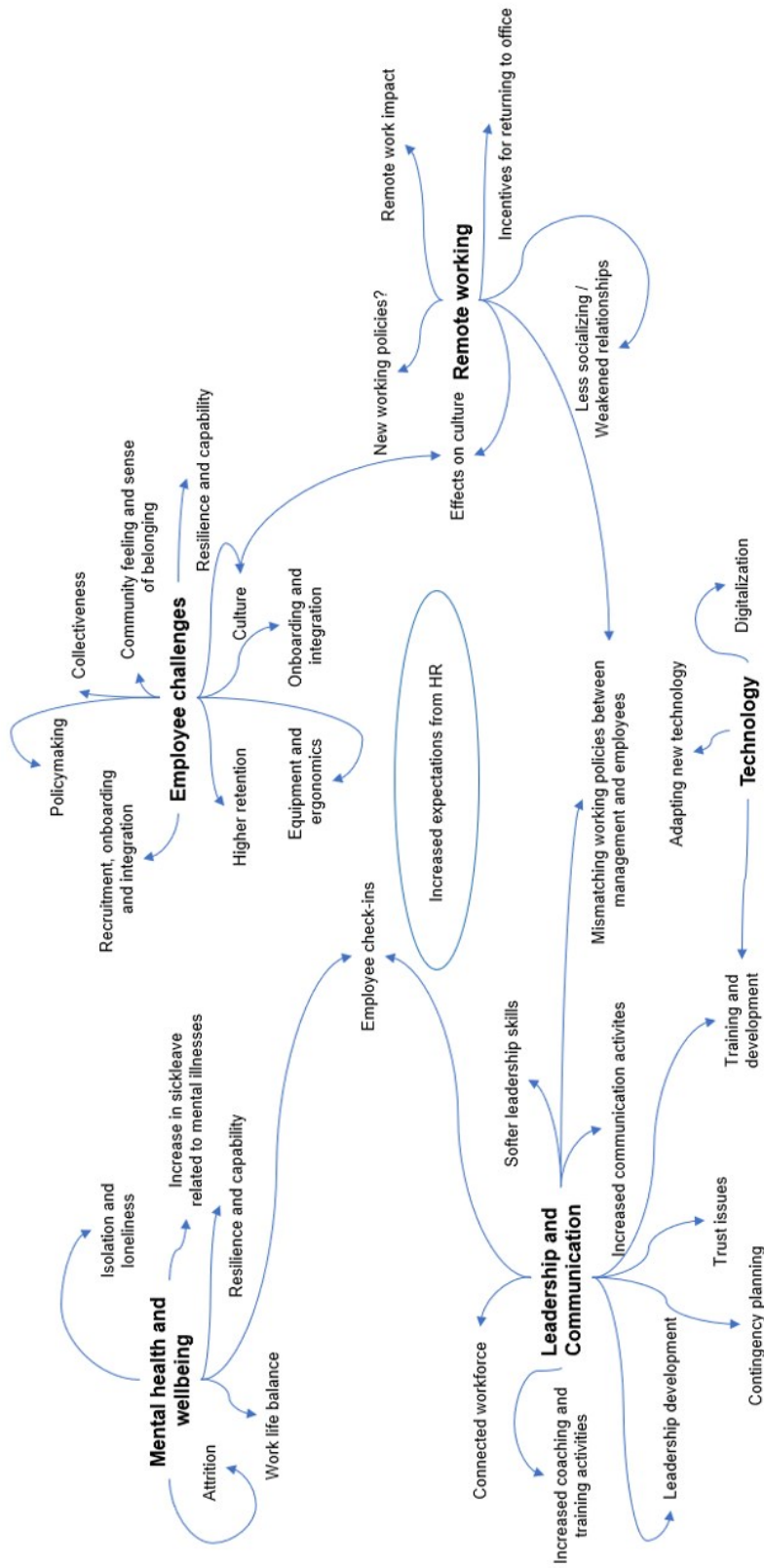
Table 6 Quotations related to the Strategic Partner

Theme	Illustrative example	HR role
Recruitment, onboarding and integration	<p>"We were very used to having face-to-face interviews. So, at first, there was a bit of shock that now we were going to have all the interviews remotely, and it was kind of weird. "How are we going to actually hire people only seeing them remotely? But we got over it."</p>	Change Agent
Increased coaching and training activities	<p>"We have increased the focus on virtual leadership, and we hired coaching and trainings from outside to support mid-level managers on how to lead virtually. How to support the team members from a distance."</p> <p>"What do the managers do? Now that they have all their employees in home offices or in an office far away. How should they ensure that they are followed up? It is now more difficult to follow up employees and</p>	

	<i>make them committed and engaged, since there is much more autonomy and remote work.”</i>
Employee check-ins	<i>“We have thought much more about embracing more of the performance culture thinking, so we have now introduced half-yearly employee reviews with monthly check-ins, and all the way down to weekly check-ins. And we think that’s important when people don’t meet [work remotely].”</i>
Mismatching working policies between management and employees	<i>“Top management has expressed that they would like the employees more in the office, while almost around 80% of the work force would like to have full flexibility. Most people would like to come 1-2 times to the office.”</i>
Digitalisation	<i>“I feel in general that we have started thinking more about that [digital transformation] and how we can use technology for support? While maybe before it wasn’t like that. We were [HR] were a bit more reluctant? To be able to transform, you have to have time. So, it was always put down on the priority list sort of, I cannot do this project because I have something else to do. While with the pandemic, we didn’t have a choice. We sort of just had to transform.”</i>
Effects on culture	<i>“We would like to get the employees back to the office. HR and the management team has now made a new rule that we should go back to a hybrid model, with some different variations within the teams. We had to make a new policy, on how much people need to come to the office. But this has not been easy.”</i> <i>“If you have a good culture, then maybe people would like to come more to the office, and when people come the office, it will be a better culture, so that goes both ways.”</i>
Engagement / Change the mindset in the organisation	<i>“The engagement issue is not kind of solely an HR problem, but more like leadership problem and, so we have had to involve managers, supervisors, leadership to be part of solving these things as well.”</i>

Table 7 Quotations related to the Change Agent

Appendix 2. Main impacts areas on HR during the pandemic



Appendix 3. Interview questions.

Interview questions

Inform about anonymity and consent to record.

Initial questions:

1. Name
2. Organisation
3. Industry?
4. Number of employees
5. How long have you been working in HR?

Qualitative research

The aim is to figure out how, or if, the pandemic has affected HR's role within the organisation.

Can you tell how the COVID-19 pandemic had an impacted your organisation?

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact your organisation in 2020?
2. What was the most important focus areas from an HR perspective before the pandemic were?
3. How would you describe your work today if you compared it to before the pandemic?
4. How has your organisation been affected by the pandemic?
5. How has the role of HR been affected by the pandemic?
6. What has been the biggest challenges to overcome due to the pandemic?
7. Can you talk more about the actions your organisation has done to mitigate (resolve/reduce impact) the challenges that was brought by the pandemic?
8. How was the HR organisation involved in reducing/resolving the challenges?
9. In what degree did your HR organisation have the necessary resources/tools/capacity to handle these challenges?
10. What happened when the pandemic came?
11. Would you say that HR responsibilities has changed due to the pandemic?
12. How do you think that the changes that you have implemented due to the pandemic will last? And why?
13. What are the biggest challenges for your HR organisation going forward?