

CHAPTER 2

MANAGEMENT IN FIRMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

HR Professionalism: Perceptions of US HR Practitioners

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Abstract

The work of HR practitioners provides interesting dynamics for study. As a relative newcomer to the world of work, HR has evolved over the past 50 years and is, to a certain extent, still defining its role and legitimizing its value to stakeholders. The objective of this study is to provide an occupational portrait of HR as it is viewed today by its practitioners in the United States. The survey explores a number of institutional constants or defining elements and critical contingencies inspired by the professionalism ideal-type developed by Eliot Freidson. The study, conducted under the auspices of SHRM (the Society for Human Resource Management), establishes a benchmark for future research of the HR profession. The findings indicate that while HR has made great strides in becoming a profession, HR practitioners do not yet perceive themselves as full fledged professionals. Implications for HR and recommendations for professionalization are suggested.

Key words: Human resources, professions, professionalization.

The Development of HR

The work of HR (Human Resource) practitioners provides interesting dynamics for study. As a relative newcomer to the world of work, HR has evolved over the past 50 years and is, to a certain extent, still defining its role and legitimizing its value to stakeholders. HR, like any other form of occupational work, must be seen in context of time and place.

Twentieth century HR was influenced by three major shifts: from personnel to strategic HR, from domestic to global and from administrative to e-HRM (Claus, 2001). The first major shift was from personnel administration to strategic HR. Driving forces for this shift were TQM and reengineering identifying the concept of multiple HR customers and the possibility of conflicting requirements among these customers. This paradigm shift focused on the need for continuous improvement of HR, process redesign as a result of HR information systems, and the use of metrics and scorecards to show HR's contributions to the bottom line. A second paradigm shift was characterized by the move from domestic to global HR. Fueled by the interconnectedness of world economies, the complexity of international assignments, and the multicultural diversity of the workforce, HR practitioners could no longer ignore the impact of globalization. In response to the internationalization of companies, international and global HR issues were encroaching on domestic HR and business decision-making. The third paradigm shift was from traditional economy to new economy HR. The driving force behind this shift was the widespread use of e-HRM applications for employee recruiting, selection, and learning. The Internet both changed the nature of the work being done by HR practitioners and the perception of the usefulness of HR task managers by a new generation of knowledge workers. Today, the early 21st century HR environment is characterized by a very different context as compared to the 1990s. A corporate crisis of confidence, as a result of accounting scandals, a predictable demographic outlook impacting labor supplies, and a vastly different global and political climate impacting employee safety needs and work-life balance issues are providing turbulent times for HR practice.

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The objective of this research was to provide an occupational portrait of HR as it is viewed today by its practitioners worldwide. The survey explored a number of questions related to the professionalization of HR inspired by the professionalism ideal-type developed by Eliot Freidson (2001). The research was conducted in 23 countries but the results presented here are based on the US sample of HR respondents.

HR as a Profession

While there has been a great deal of debate on the context of the development of HR (Brewster, 1994; Caudron, Fisher Gale, Greengard & Hall, 2002; Claus, 2003), its strategic role (Ulrich, 1998; Stewart, 1996; Stroh & Calgiuri, 1998), HR competencies to operate in domestic or international markets (Ulrich et al., 1995; Brockbank, W. 2003) and current activities (Wright, McMahan, Snell, & Gerhart, 1998) there is a lack of occupational research about HR, whether in the US or abroad. There is, however, an extensive body of theoretical and applied research on occupations and professions within the sociology of work (Abbott, 1988, 1991; Bledstein 1976; Elliott, 1972; Evetts, 1999; Freidson, 1970, 1986, 1999, 2001; Goode, 1969; Larson, 1977; Macdonald, 1995). Sociologists have focused most of their attention on the core professions (law, medicine, nursing, clergy, academics) while HR resource practitioners have mostly been ignored. One can only speculate about the reasons for this apparent neglect. Does HR simply not meet the essential characteristics to be designated as professional work? Does the fact that HR is practiced within a bureaucratic or organizational context (rather than a liberal profession) without external customers, make it merely an occupation?

First, we will sketch the vertical and horizontal differentiation of HR in the U.S. Second, we will highlight the characteristics that are commonly used to separate a profession from other occupations and put HR to the test. Third, we will focus on the professionalism ideal-type developed by Eliot Freidson (2001) as it was used as the conceptual framework for this study.

Vertical and Horizontal Differentiation of HR work

HR is differentiated horizontally (different job titles) as well as vertically (hierarchical level of jobs). The U.S. Dictionary of Occupational Titles (1991) lists 30 different HR job titles (and alternate titles) under category 166: Personnel Administration Occupations Professional, a subcategory of Occupations in Administrative Specializations (category 16), that is embedded in the general heading Technical and Managerial Occupations (heading 0/1). The U.S. Dictionary of Occupational Titles is inadequate to show the breadth and depth of different HR job titles and rankings. A Mercer/SHRM salary survey (2001) provides a more useful delineation of differentiation within HR work. It lists 103 HR job titles and several levels as well as average salaries and salary ranges for each title and level.

HR practitioners are not a monolithic group. They may range from an administrative assistant, who assumes HR responsibility for a small company, to a senior HR Vice President for a multinational company. In addition, HR practitioners can have a very specialized functional scope of responsibilities (e.g., compensation, benefits, labor relations, international assignment management, or training) or may be responsible for all HR functions at a generalist level.

Characteristics of a Profession

The SHRM Learning System (2003) identified five characteristics that separate a profession from other occupations. They are: (1) a *national organization* or some other type of recognized voice that can speak for its members and foster development of the field; (2) a *code of ethics* that identifies standards of behavior related to fairness, justice, truthfulness and social responsibility; (3) the practice of applied *research* to develop the field; (4) a defined *body of knowledge*; and (5) a *credentialing organization* that sets professional standards in the field (p. 3-5).

The claim can be made that HR fits these five characteristics, at least to some extent, and may be defined as a "profession." In the United States, SHRM is considered the "voice of the profession" and, with 175,000 members, it is the largest HR organization in the world. In addition, a number of other organizations represent specific professional HR interests: compensation and benefits are represented by World at Work (former American Compensation Association), human resource in-

formation systems by IHRIM (International Association of Human Resource Information Management), training and development by ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) and public sector HR by IPMA (International Personnel Management Association). Although there are several codes of ethics directly pertaining to HR in the United States (each US HR association has one), these codes generally advocate five common principles related to integrity, legality, proficiency, loyalty and confidentiality (Wiley, 2000). Applied research is conducted at universities in the field of HR and disseminated primarily through academic journals. There is also a fair amount of HR research conducted by consulting companies and professional organizations. Rynes, Colbert and Brown (2002) identified that there are, however, large discrepancies between academic research findings and the beliefs of HR practitioners regarding the main HR content areas. According to the authors, this HR research-practice gap is not just a knowledge gap, but also an implementation or "knowing-doing gap." With regard to the body of knowledge, the HR practice domains, which are codified in the United States by HRCI (Human Resource Certification Institute), relate to: general management practices, staffing, training and development, compensation and benefits, employee and labor relations, and health, safety and security. Finally, with regard to credentialing, while only the United Kingdom and the United States have as yet introduced some form of HR certification, there are HR industry associations in the majority of developed countries. Using the traditional characteristics of a profession to identify status of a practitioner, one could conclude that people working in HR in the United States have a legitimate claim that their work is professional in nature.

Professionalism Ideal-Type

While the above characteristics of a profession may be useful in making a broad brush distinction between an occupation and a profession, they are not very useful in distinguishing between occupational and professional work. Professional autonomy and control over their work are crucial distinctions to enable HR professionals to play a strategic HR role. Using the medical profession as an example, Freidson (1977) asserted that professional autonomy, or the ability to make discretionary judgments based on a body of theoretical knowledge, and using specific rules, is what distinguishes occupational work from professional work. Freidson (1986) further elaborated on the concept of professional power and how it is used to institutionalize formal knowledge. In his more recent work, Freidson (2001) prefers to speak about professionalism rather than professions. He defined it as "the institutional circumstances in which the members of occupations rather than consumers or managers control work" (p.12). Further, professionalism "exists when an organized occupation gains the power to determine who is qualified to perform a defined set of tasks, to prevent all others from performing that work, and to control the criteria by which to evaluate performance" (p.12). Freidson (2001) developed a professionalism ideal-type distinguishing among institutional constants or defining elements, and a number of variables that are critical contingencies for establishing and supporting professionalism. The contingencies vary with the concrete context of time, place, and industry or economic sector, and interact with one another. Freidson's professionalism ideal-type is summarized in Table 1.

Freidson's professionalism ideal-type is a much more stringent test for distinguishing various types of work the five characteristics of a profession. It is less concerned with whether certain occupations are professions than with the ability of the members of an occupation to control their work in the labor market. Freidson derived this model theoretically based on several decades studying the core professions (medicine, law, divinity, and academic professors). He did, however, not operationalize his ideal-type for the empirical testing of professionalism. Applying Freidson's ideal-type to HR (or any occupation) requires an in-depth analysis using various methodologies and taking into account timeframes and contexts. Such an in-depth analysis is beyond the scope of this study. This research took the professionalism ideal-type concept and applied it to HR. The questions asked in this survey of HR practitioners (i.e., self-perception) were centered on the institutional constraints or defining elements of Freidson's ideal-type. It also operationalized the professionalism concept by developing a number of scales to measure professionalism. The critical contingencies of work that vary by time and place were controlled in the current design, as the data presented focused on the United States at one particular point in time (i.e., the year 2003).

Professionalism Ideal Type of Eliot Freidson

Institutional Constants or Defining Elements	Critical Contingencies Varying in Time and Place
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A body of knowledge and skills that is officially recognized as one based on abstract concepts and theories and requiring the exercise of considerable discretion. 2. An occupationally controlled division of labor. 3. An occupationally controlled labor market requiring training credentials for entry and career mobility. 4. An occupationally controlled training program which produces those credentials, schooling that is associated with "higher learning", segregated from the ordinary labor market, and provides opportunity for the development of new knowledge. 5. An ideology serving some transcendent value and asserting greater devotion to doing good work than to economic rewards. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The organization and policy positions of state agencies. 2. The organization of occupations themselves. 3. The varying institutional circumstances required for the successful practice of different bodies of knowledge and skills.

Source: Freidson (2001), Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism: The Third Logic*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 180.

Methodology

One of the research objectives of this study was to determine the professionalization status of HR using the elements provided in Freidson's professionalism ideal-type and ascertain the perception HR practitioners have about their work. The survey was conducted during the spring of 2003 under the auspices of SHRM. An e-mail questionnaire was sent to a computer generated random sample of 2,500 US members of SHRM. SHRM had 175,000 members. The survey obtained completed responses of 615 US HR practitioners. Considering that there were 328 undelivered emails, the response rate was 28 %.

The demographics of the response sample mirror the SHRM broader membership. The primary professional activity of HR practitioners is as HR generalist (45.3 %), followed by HR functions at the executive level (16.2 %), administrative (6.6 %), benefits (5.3 %) and employee relations (5.3 %). All other types of primary activities are represented by less than 5.5 % of the respondents. More than two-thirds of the HR practitioners (68.4 %) have managerial titles (manager and above). One-quarter of the HR practitioners report to the CEO, and another 15.3 % report to the COO or CFO. About half of the HR practitioners (51.3 %) have been in HR for less than 10 years and half (48.7 %) for more than 10 years. More than half of the HR practitioners (53.7 %) work for companies that have less than 1000 employees, while 17.7 % work for companies with more than 20,000 people. HR practitioners are concentrated in the following industries: (1) health (12.6 %); (2) services (12.0 %); (3) manufacturing (11.2 %), and the remaining in a variety of other industries. One third (32.3 %) of the HR practitioners works for a multinational organization and one quarter (24.6 %) for the public sector.

The perceptions of HR practitioners about their work were derived from a quantitative analysis of defining constants and critical contingencies of Freidson's professionalism ideal-type. For the purpose of this study, the notion of 'professional' work was operationalized by using six dimensions of professionalism. Professionalism is based on a body of knowledge and skills (BOK) that is officially recognized (REC: recognition) as one based on abstract concepts and theories and requiring the exercise of considerable discretion (AUT: autonomy). The professional group enjoys an occupationally controlled labor market requiring training credentials for entry and career mobility. Professionalism also has occupationally controlled training programs which produce those credentials, and schooling that is associated with "higher learning", segregated from the ordinary labor market, and providing opportunity for the development of new knowledge (CRED: credentialing). Finally professionalism is based on an ideology serving some transcendent value and asserting greater devotion to doing good work than to economic rewards (IDEO: ideology of service). Critical contingencies that professionalism must address are the organization and policy positions of outsiders that put external control on the profession (CON: external control).

A series of survey questions, with similar format, addressed Freidson's professionalism ideal-type. Using a Likert scale with identical response options of a standard 5-point agree/disagree intensity scale, the respondents were given a statement and asked whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree or were neutral. This format lent itself to index construction by combining and grouping several statements intended to measure a given dimension of professionalism. The assumption was that the total score, based on responses to the many items, would reflect the dimension under consideration and provide a reasonable good measure of that variable. As there were five response options, a score of 0 to 4 was used taking the direction of the item into account. For example, a score of '4' was given to 'strongly agree' on positive items and 'strongly disagree' of negative items, and a score of '0' was given to 'neutral'. Each respondent was then assigned an overall score for a particular dimension of Freidson's ideal type representing the sum of the scores received for the several responses to the grouped individual items.

Putting each question into a factor/scale can be justified from either factor loading (correlation) or a-priori knowledge. Initially the scales were constructed based on a-priori knowledge, but subsequent factor analysis of the items was done on the worldwide sample of 4,352 respondents. Cronbach alpha coefficients, a measure of reliability, were computed for each scale and coefficients of .7 were considered good, .8 very good and below .6 unacceptable. As a result of the factor analysis four scales were considered reliable (BOK, REC, CRE and CON) and two scales (AUT, IDEO) were eliminated.

Table 2

Cronbach Alpha Coefficients of HR Professionalism Scales

Scale	Cronbach Alpha coefficient
REC (Recognition)	.8271
CRED (Credentialing)	.7948
CON (External control)	.6986
BOK (Body of knowledge)	.6712
IDEO (Ideology)	.4822
AUT (Autonomy)	.2489

Findings

First, the measures of professionalism are reported as a whole. Subsequently, each professionalism dimension is reviewed in detail.

Overall, HR Practitioners in the United States consider that they have a specific body of knowledge and skills that adds value to an organization. They do not perceive that credentials are necessary to work in HR, yet essential to advance one's career. They believe that they themselves lack professional recognition from their constituents (employees, line manager, executive as well as society as a whole). But most of all, they are subject to a lot of external control as a result of government agencies, laws and regulations in the exercise of their work. For the first three scales a high score (from 0 to 4) indicates a high level of professionalism while for the last dimensions a low score indicates a higher level of professionalism.

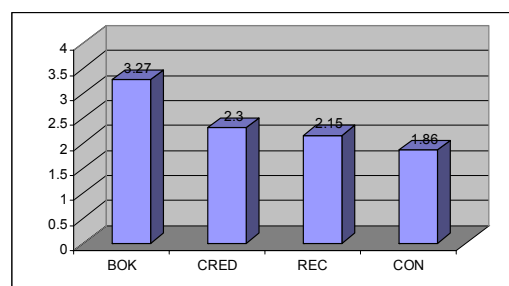


Fig. 1. HR Professionalism Measures (USA)

HR as a Body of Knowledge (BOK)

This dimension measures whether HR has an officially recognized body of knowledge and is considered a business discipline. The BOK scale is made up of the following three statements:

- HR represents a body of knowledge and skills
- To work in HR, one must have business knowledge and/or business experience
- To advance one’s career in HR one must have business knowledge and/or business experience.

Almost all HR practitioners (99.2 %) agree or strongly agree that HR represents a body of knowledge and skills. The majority of HR professionals (88.7 %) agrees or strongly agrees that to work in HR, one must have business knowledge and/or business experience. A much larger percentage of HR professionals (96.7 %) agrees or strongly agrees that business knowledge and/or business experience are necessary to advance one’s career in HR. The professionalism score for BOK is very high for the USA (3.27 on a scale of 4).

Table 3

HR’s Body of Knowledge

Statement (Percentages)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
HR represents a body of knowledge and skills.	67.3	31.9	.8	0	0	611
To work in HR, one must have business knowledge and/or business experience.	35.6	53.1	7.0	4.1	.2	612
To advance one’s career in HR one must have business knowledge and/or business experience.	53.0	43.7	2.6	.7	0	611

When compared to 22 other countries and the worldwide average, the BOK professionalism score is very high for the US. Only one country, Colombia rates higher than the USA. All countries rate at least 2.5 on a scale of 0 to 4.

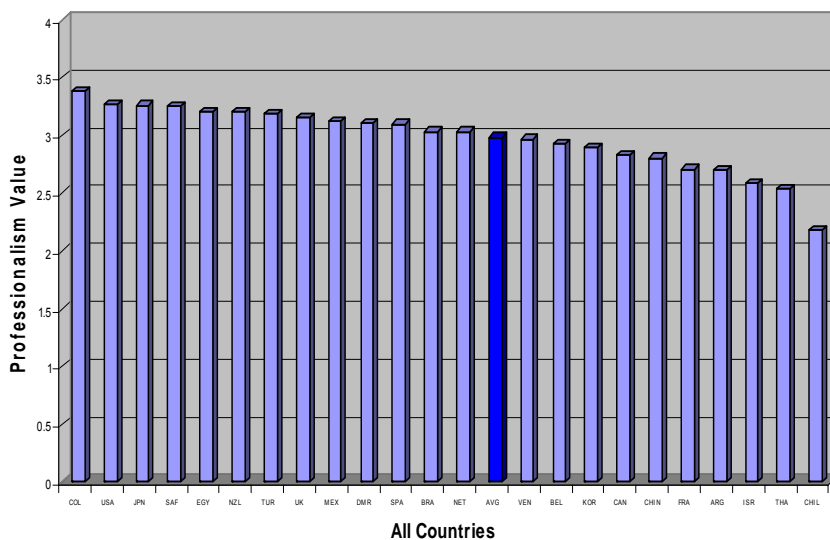


Fig. 2. BOK Professionalism Score for 23 countries

Recognition of HR as a Profession (REC)

This dimension measures whether HR is recognized as a body of knowledge and skills that adds value to the organization and is being regarded as a business partner. The REC scale is made up of the following six statements:

- HR's body of knowledge and skills is recognized as a profession by society in general.
- Employees recognize that HR practitioners have specific knowledge and skills that add to the value of the organization.
- Line managers recognize that HR practitioners have specific knowledge and skills that add to the value of the organization.
- Non-HR business executives recognize that HR practitioners have specific knowledge and skills that add to the value of the organization.
- Overall, HR professionals are held in high esteem in organizations today.
- HR professionals feel they are being regarded as a business partner by the leaders of the senior management group.

When it comes to recognition as a profession, only three quarters of HR practitioners (76.2 %) agree or strongly agree that HR's body of knowledge and skills is recognized as a profession by society in general. HR practitioners agree or strongly agree that line managers (68.4 %), employees (66.0 %) and non-business executives (60.5 %) recognize that HR practitioners have specific knowledge and skills that add value to the organization. Less than half of the HR practitioners (46.4) feel that are being regarded as a business partner by the leaders of the senior management group.

Table 4

Recognition of HR as a Profession

Statement (Percentages)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
HR's body of knowledge and skills is recognized as a profession by society in general.	17.6	58.6	14.1	9.7	0	608
Employees recognize that HR practitioners have specific knowledge and skills that add to the value of the organization.	9.5	56.5	23.4	10.1	.5	612
Line managers recognize that HR practitioners have specific knowledge and skills that add to the value of the organization.	8.3	60.1	21.7	9.6	.2	612
Non-HR business executives recognize that HR practitioners have specific knowledge and skills that add to the value of the organization.	7.3	53.2	26.8	12.4	.3	613
Overall, HR professionals are held in high esteem in organizations today.	2.5	36.6	38.2	21.4	1.3	612
HR professionals feel they are being regarded as a business partner by the leaders of the senior management group.	3.8	42.6	30.8	20.7	2.1	608

Although above the worldwide average, the REC professionalism score is relatively low (2.15) for the USA.

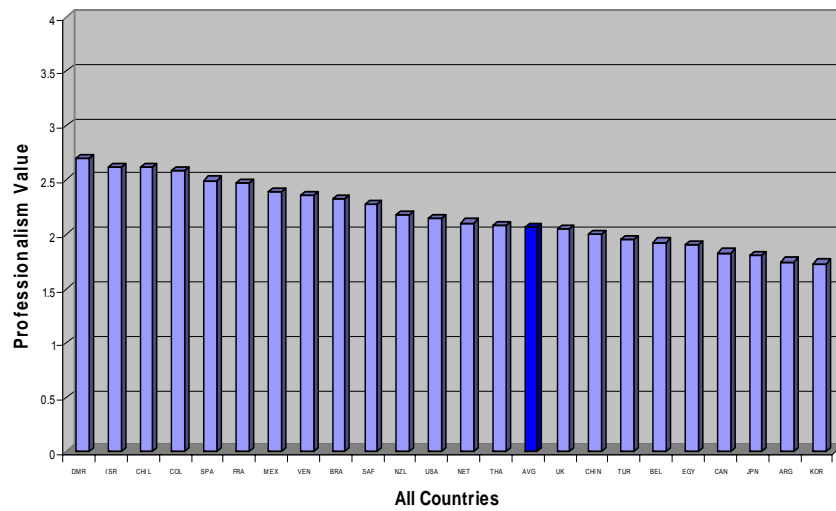


Fig. 3. REC Professionalism Score for 23 countries

HR Professional Discretion and Autonomy (AUT)

This dimension measures the autonomy and discretion of HR practitioners in doing their work and who determines their advancement. The AUT scale is made up of the following five statements:

- HR practitioners have considerable autonomy and discretion in doing their work.
- Career advancement of HR practitioners in their organizations is largely determined by HR executives.
- Non-HR senior executives largely determine career advancement of HR practitioners in their organizations*¹.
- In the organizations for which I have worked, management has mainly controlled my work as an HR practitioner*.
- Employees have mainly influenced and controlled my work as HR practitioners*.

Table 5

HR Professional Discretion and Autonomy

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
HR practitioners have considerable autonomy and discretion in doing their work.	9.0	53.9	20.4	15.8	1.0	609
Career advancement of HR practitioners in their organizations is largely determined by HR executives.	10.0	43.2	23.0	22.5	1.3	613
Non-HR senior executives largely determine career advancement of HR practitioners in their organizations.	9.3	40.5	26.1	23.2	.8	612
In the organizations for which I have worked, management has mainly controlled my work as an HR practitioner.	7.4	45.3	16.5	28.2	2.6	611
Employees have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner.	2.5	39.0	28.2	28.9	1.5	610

¹ The items marked with an asterisk (*) were reversed scored.

The majority of HR practitioners (62.9 %) agrees or strongly agrees that they have considerable autonomy and discretion in doing their work. The majority of HR practitioners agrees or strongly agrees that their career advancement in their organizations is largely determined by both HR executives (53.2 %) and non-HR executives (49.8%). The majority of HR practitioners (52.7 %) agrees or strongly agrees that in the organizations for which they work, management has mainly controlled their work as HR practitioners. A plurality of HR practitioners (41.5 %) agrees or strongly agrees that employees have mainly influenced and controlled their work as HR practitioners. The AUT professionalism scale did not meet the necessary reliability requirements.

Occupationally Controlled Credentialing and Certification (CRE)

This dimension measures the need for credentials, certification and a university degree to work and advance one's career. The CRE scale is made up of the following six statements:

- To work in HR, one must have some type of recognized credentials.
- To work in HR, one should have professional certification from a certifying body or agency within one's country.
- To advance one's career in HR one must have some type of recognized credentials.
- To advance one's career in HR, one should have professional certification from a certifying body or agency within one's country.
- To work in HR, one must have a university degree of some type.
- To advance one's career in HR one must have a university degree of some type.

The majority of HR practitioners (53.6%) agrees or strongly agrees that to work in HR one must have some type of recognized credentials, but four out of five (80.8%) believe that credentials are necessary for career advancement. Four out of 10 (39.0%) HR practitioners agree or strongly agree that to work in HR one should have professional certification from a certifying body or agency within one's country, but 63.6% agree or strongly agree that certification is necessary for career advancement.

Table 6

Credentialing

Credentialing	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
To work in HR, one must have some type of recognized credentials.	11.8	41.8	23.5	20.9	2.0	612
To work in HR, one should have professional certification from a certifying body or agency within one's country.	6.7	22.3	35.1	33.0	2.9	615
To advance one's career in HR one must have some type of recognized credentials.	27.6	53.2	11.7	6.5	1.0	615
To advance one's career in HR, one should have professional certification related to HR from a certifying body or agency within one's country.	19.1	44.5	22.0	11.9	2.4	613

Four out of 10 HR practitioners (40.7 %) have a professional certification in HR.

Table 7

Certification

Do you have a professional certification in HR (i.e., an official endorsement by an authorized body or agency to practice your profession)?	Frequencies	Percentages
Yes	250	40.7
No	358	58.2
TOTAL	608	100.0

The CRE professionalism score for the USA is low (2.3) and comparatively below the world average.

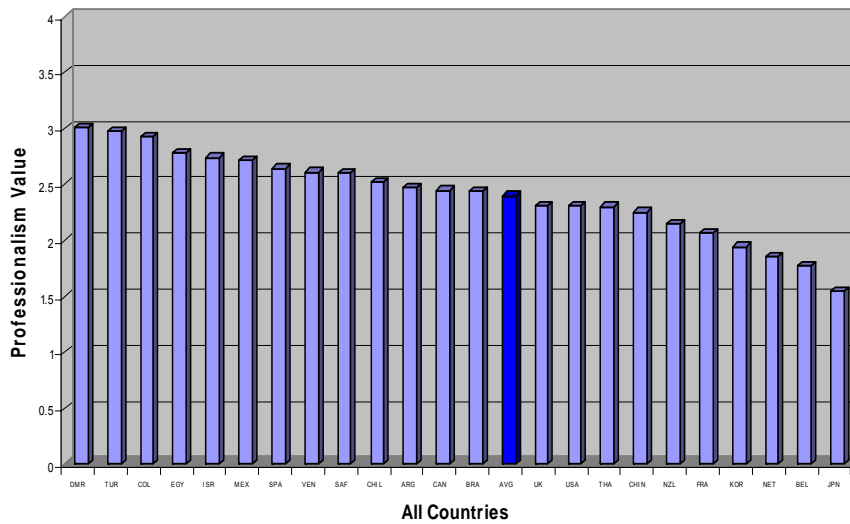


Fig. 4. CRE Professionalism Score for 23 countries

Occupationally Controlled Education and Training

Less than half (46.7 %) of the HR practitioners agree or strongly agree that to work in HR one must have some type of university degree, but almost three-quarters agree or strongly agree that to advance one's career in HR one must have a university degree of some type. More than three quarters (77.7 %) of HR practitioners have 4 or more years of schooling after high school. More than three-quarters (78.0 %) of the HR practitioners have a university degree. The most common university degrees for HR practitioners are in business administration (27.1 %), human resources (19.5 %), and psychology (8.5 %).

Table 8

Need for University Degree for Work and Mobility

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
To work in HR, one must have a university degree of some type.	15.8	30.9	24.3	26.2	2.8	614
To advance one's career in HR one must have a university degree of some type.	32.1	41.3	15.0	10.3	1.3	613

Ideology (IDEO)

This dimension measures an ideology of service (i.e., devotion to doing good rather than to their remuneration). The IDEO scale is made up of the following three statements:

- HR practitioners place a higher value on doing good work than on their own compensation.
- HR practitioners are concerned with the well being of employees in their organizations.
- HR practitioners tend to be interested in the financial results of their organizations*¹.

The majority of HR respondents (61.7 %) agree or strongly agree that HR practitioners place a higher value on doing good work than on their own compensation. Almost all respondents (95.3 %) agree or strongly agree that HR practitioners are concerned with the well being of employees in their organizations. More than three-quarters of the respondents (78.0 %) agree or strongly agree that HR practitioners tend to be interested in the financial results of their organizations.

Table 9

Ideology of Service

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
HR practitioners place a higher value on doing good work than on their own compensation.	11.7	50.0	25.4	12.2	.7	614
HR practitioners are concerned with the well being of employees in their organizations.	41.8	53.5	3.6	.8	.3	615
HR practitioners tend to be interested in the financial results of their organizations.	19.4	58.6	14.7	6.7	.7	613

There is no difference in professional ideology of service between HR practitioners who work in the public or private sector and those who work for multinational or domestic companies. The IDEO professionalism scale did meet the necessary reliability requirement.

External Professional Control (CON)

This dimension measures external control by government agencies, laws, labor groups and professional associations. The CON scale is made up of the following six statements:

- Government and administrative agencies have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner*.
- Laws and regulations have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner*.
- Labor unions have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner*.
- Professional HR organizations have a great deal of control and influence over my work as an HR practitioner.
- Work councils have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner*.
- HR professional organizations impact the development of laws and regulations affecting HR.

External control that has primarily influenced the work of HR practitioners is felt through laws and regulations (mean of 3.8) as well as government and administrative agencies (mean of 3.24). However, the majority of HR practitioners (63.8 %) agree or strongly agree that HR professional organizations impact the development of laws and regulations affecting HR. HR practitioners agree or strongly agree that labor unions (mean of 2.41), professional HR organizations (2.67) and work councils (2.31) have influenced and controlled their work less than laws and government agencies.

¹ The items marked with an asterisk (*) were reversed scored.

Table 10

External Professional Control

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
Government and administrative agencies have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner.	5.9	40.7	26.4	25.4	1.6	610
Laws and regulations have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner.	12.0	64.6	15.5	7.4	.5	607
Labor unions have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner.	1.7	14.2	29.0	33.9	21.2	604
Professional HR organizations have a great deal of control and influence over my work as an HR practitioner.	1.8	18.6	31.5	41.1	7.1	609
Work councils have mainly influenced and controlled my work as an HR practitioner.	0	5.3	34.3	46.6	13.8	607
HR professional organizations impact the development of laws and regulations affecting HR.	8.2	55.6	27.5	7.9	.8	608

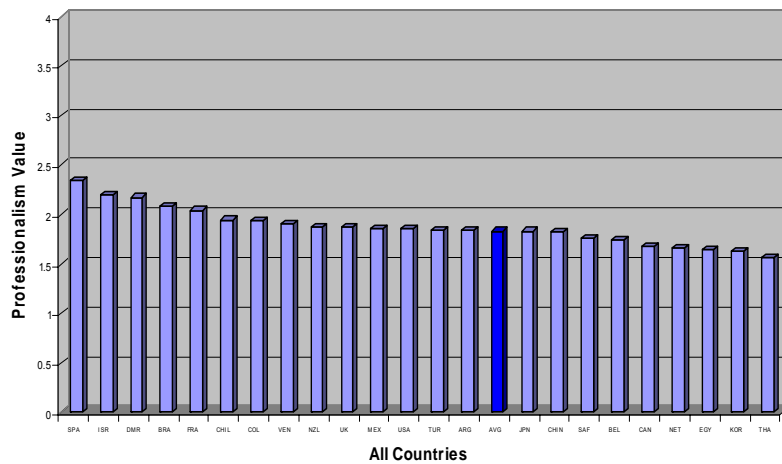


Fig. 4. CON Professionalism Score for 23 countries

The CON professionalism score is higher for the US than the world average. However, unlike the other scales, this scale should be lower for HR to be considered a profession meaning that external control by various stakeholder is limited.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The degree of HR professionalism, as perceived by its practitioners, is mixed. HR practitioners, in general, believe that there is a distinct body of HR knowledge. They also believe that to work and advance in HR one must have business knowledge and/or business experience. In addition, they have a strong ideology of service. They are simultaneously concerned with the well-being of employees and interested in the financial results of their organization. A body of knowl-

edge and ideology of service are strong indicators of professionalism and they seem to be present and internalized among US HR practitioners.

On the other hand, HR practitioners seem to suffer from low professional self-esteem. Three indicators are especially low and troublesome: the perception of HR practitioners regarding recognition of their work, the need for formally establishing their credibility, and internal control of their work. First, HR practitioners do not feel that they are held in high esteem in their organizations today or that they are being regarded as business partners by the leaders of the senior management group. Second, a large proportion of HR practitioners consider credentialing and university education to work in HR of relatively little value. While HR practitioners agree that credentialing and university education are needed to advance in the profession, they place low value on these for entering and working as HR practitioners. These findings are somewhat surprising in the light of the fact that three quarters of US HR practitioners have a university degree and that 4 out of 10 have voluntary HR certification. Hence, perception of the need to control entrance into the profession in terms of credentialing (certification and university education) is extremely low while professions generally aspire to establish barriers to entry in terms of credentials. The fact that HR has a low barrier to entrance may very well be related to the perception of low recognition from society and business partners of the work done by HR practitioners. Third, while US HR practitioners claim to have some professional autonomy over their work, they perceive their work to be mainly internally controlled by their organizations. External control on HR practices is mainly a result of laws and regulations and control by government and administrative agencies. HR practitioners credit their HR professional organizations with impacting the development of laws and regulations affecting their work, while labor unions are perceived to have minimal control over their work.

For HR to gain full professional status, its practitioners must increase their own professional self-esteem and be recognized as a profession by others. Credibility and recognition of HR as a profession are usually gained through an occupationally controlled training program of higher learning, credentialing through certification, and an ongoing opportunities for the development of new knowledge. While many US HR practitioners, in fact, already have these credentials (e.g., university degrees in business administration, human resources and psychology, and PHR and SPHR certifications) and believe that they are necessary for advancement, they seem to attach little importance to them for working in HR. Unless HR places more importance on competencies and credentialing for entering the profession (i.e., hire people with formal training rather than on-the-job induction, attach greater importance to competency development and certification) it will polarize the view that others have about their work and affect HR's recognition as a profession. HR does not control the entry mechanism into its work and allows people without formal credentials to do the work. This creates a low barrier to entry into the profession. By allowing people to enter but only those with credentials to advance, it also creates a hybrid external view of HR work (occupational versus professional and administrative versus strategic). Whether the self-perceptions of HR practitioners, with regard to low professional recognition of HR, are based on reality, or not, is somewhat inconsequential. If HR practitioners do not perceive that they have a seat at the table, they are very unlikely to legitimately occupy or demand one. US HR practitioners give a lot of credit to their professional organization to influence laws affecting their work. The professional organization, however, can only do that with the support and active participation of its membership in lobbying at state and federal levels. This allows them to limit external control on their professional work. While the self-perception as professionals of US HR practitioners is mixed, it must be put into context and compared with HR practitioners in other countries. Preliminary analyses of the data from the other 22 countries obtained through this study suggest that although there is a lot of room left for the professionalization of the HR, in United States HR has achieved a relatively high degree of professionalism as compared to other countries in terms of body of knowledge and recognition. While other countries may learn for US HR, this study indicates that there are many areas of professionalization that US HR practitioners could use as best practices from other countries.

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