

Strategic implications of HR role management in a dynamic environment

Strategic
implications
of HR role
management

353

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to consider the impact of human resource (HR) role overload and HR role conflict on the HR function's involvement in strategic decision making and to examine whether conditions of environmental dynamism moderate the impact of HR role conflict and HR role overload in that relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors collected data from two sources, senior HR and top management team (TMT) executives. A total of 180 HR executives and 109 TMT members completed the survey. In all, 102 organisations were included in the sample with matched HR executive and TMT responses.

Findings – Results did not support hypothesised negative relationships between HR role management and involvement in strategic decision making but did establish the moderating effect of environmental dynamism, such that these associations were more negative at higher levels of dynamism.

Research limitations/implications – The cross-sectional nature of the study precludes making inferences about causality and would need to be replicated with a longitudinal design before stronger inferences could be drawn with regard to the relationships between the variables. A strength of the study however is the use of two sources of data to address the issue of common method variance.

Practical implications – The research has implications for the potential value that HR provides in dynamic environments and the risk that HR role conflict and overload pose to the contribution that HR can make during these periods.

Originality/value – The research shifts the focus away from the definition of HR roles to considering how these roles are enacted and kept in balance.

Keywords Quantitative, Environmental dynamism, HR role, HR role conflict, HR role overload

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The factors that determine the strategic input of the human resource (HR) professional continue to be a point of discussion in the academic literature (Aldrich *et al.*, 2015). Indeed Lawler (2011, p. 171), reflecting on the strategic progress of the HR professional for the 50th Anniversary edition of *Human Resource Management*, stated that “my research and experience tells me that for the last 20 years or so, HR has not progressed significantly in terms of its strategic role in corporations”. To further understand the factors that may detract from a strategic HR role, the argument developed in this paper is that the variety, and sometimes competing expectations of the roles played by the HR professional within their social system (Lemmergaard, 2009; Welch and Welch, 2012), potentially generate problems for HR professionals that undermine strategic decision-making inclusion. Theoretically the argument is made that where the HR professional experiences role overload or conflict, the HR function's



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power of meaning, as proposed by Hardy (1996) and more recently considered by Sheehan *et al.* (2014), will be diminished and HR professionals will be less likely to be involved in strategic decision making. The first aim of the current research therefore is to analyse the impact of HR role management on HR professional inclusion in strategic decision-making processes.

A further aim of the research is to consider the impact of environmental dynamism on HR involvement in decision making. It has been argued that dynamic conditions are becoming the norm as unpredictable environments reduce the likelihood of long term sustainable competitive advantage (Jiao *et al.*, 2013). Economic volatility creates challenges, but also opportunities for HR managers and employers wishing to differentiate themselves as an “employer of choice” by investing in human resource management (HRM) strategies such as extensive training and development, or employee incentive and bonus schemes (Zatzick and Iverson, 2006). There is evidence that in crisis situations, the HR function has assumed an important role in decisions related to the strategic challenges that face MNEs to reduce costs and enhance productivity (Gunnigle *et al.*, 2013). Although the HR function has the potential to make a substantial contribution during periods of environmental dynamism, we make the argument that if at the time HR professionals are experiencing HR role overload and HR role conflict, the HR function’s power of meaning is low (Hardy, 1996; Sheehan *et al.*, 2014), and the opportunity to contribute to decision making will be reduced. The second aim of this research therefore is to examine how conditions of environmental dynamism moderate the impact of HR role conflict and HR role overload on HR’s inclusion in these strategic decision-making processes.

The research contributes to the ongoing discussion about progressing HR’s strategic role as highlighted by Aldrich *et al.* (2015) and Lawler (2011). The research reviews this issue in the context of environmental dynamism and therefore has added value in view of the argument that dynamic conditions are becoming the norm (Jiao *et al.*, 2013). In order to realise the potentially positive contribution that HR can make during periods of dynamism, as argued by Dubois and Dubois (2012), Nijssen and Paauwe (2012) and Zagelmeyer and Gollan (2012), it is necessary to first understand how HR professionals can be assured of a place in key strategic conversations during these periods. Structurally the discussion first introduces the importance of the power of meaning for the HR function and an analysis of how role overload and role conflict detract from that power. The hypotheses of a direct effect of HR role management on HR strategic decision-making involvement are then developed. The discussion then considers the interaction effect of HR role management and environmental dynamism on the involvement of HR professionals in the strategic decision-making process.

HR power of meaning and HR role management

Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) argue for the importance of a unified commitment from the top management group to HR initiatives. The authors explain that when decisions are taken about the introduction and implementation of new HR practices, the support of the chief executive and other senior executives is critical. Such support however is not assured and Pritchard (2010), in her discussion of the transition to a strategic HR partner role, argues that for the HR professional to be able to operate effectively within strategic processes and make an impact, the HR professional must be influential. This requires the HR professional to socially construct an identity and a “performance” that are important in developing a shared understanding of the meaning of what the HR strategic partnership involves.

Sheehan *et al.* (2014), in their analysis of the sources of power of the HR function, reinforce the importance of developing a shared understanding of the meaning of HRM with the top management group. Drawing from Hardy's (1996) dimensions of power, Sheehan *et al.* (2014) explain that the power of meaning refers to the capacity to legitimise interests through the management of meaning, using symbols, rituals and language to make initiatives appear legitimate, desirable, rational and inevitable. Importantly they add that the proposed value of HRM involvement within formal and informal decision-making processes, or process power, is often contingent on the power of meaning that is assigned to HR professionals by other managers or generated by the HR professional themselves. Sheehan *et al.* (2014) note the importance of how well HR professionals communicate effective role management. Referring to Ulrich's (1997, 2009) work on the multiple HR roles, the authors explain that when the HR professional struggles to balance the demands of the various roles they lose credibility and influence. It is the importance of this HR role management that is the focus of the current research. The following section provides an overview of the roles of the HR professional and the associated role management problems of role overload and role conflict.

HR professional roles have gone through significant change resulting in multiple role dimensions (Truss *et al.*, 2002). Ulrich (1997), a key architect in the re-design of HR roles transformed HR professionals into a new category of manager, the "HR business partner", that requires HR professionals to become "strategic partners", "administrative experts", "employee champions" and "change agents". These four roles shifted the focus away from the traditional personnel support role to one focused on HR as a delivery function that primarily served the business (Caldwell, 2008). In Ulrich's much cited research into the role of the HR professional (see Ulrich, 1997, 2009; Ulrich *et al.*, 2009; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) he has re-visited his categorisation and made variations to the terms used. In his 2009 writing the employee champion role has been re-defined to incorporate employee advocacy along with human capital developer. The administrative expert role is now termed the functional expert and continues to refer to administrative efficiency but makes a stronger link between the delivery of HR practices for the development of individual ability and organisational capability. The strategic partner role now incorporates the change agent responsibility. The last role, HR leader, is seen as one that integrates the other four roles and describes an HR leader as one who is credible both within their own function and to those outside. The revision incorporates some refinement of the HR roles but the key areas continue to emphasise employee advocacy and human capital development, functional expertise and strategic partnership. On the one hand, this refinement may be evidence of an increased understanding of the HR role but other writers such as Lemmergaard (2009) see the changes as evidence of the underlying difficulty in capturing the variety in the HR position. Lemmergaard (2009) notes that "[...] Ulrich and Brockbank's changing thinking might suggest that maybe there is no single definitive model" (p. 188).

Lemmergaard (2009) has argued that Ulrich's model is both simplistic and problematic, particularly with regard to the gap between the conceptualisation of the roles and the pragmatic difficulties for an HR manager attempting to enact all of the roles. Caldwell (2008) has similarly noted that as HR business partnering has grown in popularity, questions have emerged about how each HR role is actually defined and what specific competencies they require. Caldwell (2003), in his examination of the various HR roles taken on by personnel and HR managers in the UK, for example, determined that 39 per cent of respondents were unable to identify a main role. Caldwell observed that the failure to identify a main role reflects the multifaceted and complex

nature of HR work and also posited that HR professionals may as a result be experiencing some degree of role conflict. Commenting on the combination of Ulrich's roles, Caldwell (2003) argues that the prescriptive vision for the HR function is an "overreach" that fails to capture the complexity of meeting the demands of each of the roles.

Elsewhere there is concern that the strategic presence of HR professionals is underdeveloped and they remain caught up with operational tasks (Lawler, 2011; Ulrich, 2011). The emergence of a business partner role for HR, for example has required building credibility and working more closely with line managers to enact HR at the business level. The result has been that HR professionals are often consumed with the hurdle of doing the HR work itself as HR professionals have taken on more of an administrative burden (Lawler, 2011; Ulrich, 2011). Consequently Cohen (2011) reflects that along with identifying HR issues, HR professionals face the challenge of how to practice HR effectively. Similarly Welch and Welch (2012) have extended the discussion beyond definitions of what the HR roles are to a consideration of how the various HR roles are enacted or carried out. Drawing from role theory Welch and Welch (2012, p. 599) explain that "roles are conceptualised as behavioural expectations others have regarding an individual in a certain context". These expectations may be generated by official job descriptions but formal role expectations may also be impacted by the norms, beliefs and priorities generated within the social system (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Welch and Welch, 2012). For the HR professional therefore even though they have roles assigned through a formal job description, the variety, and sometimes competing expectations of actors in their social system potentially generate problems for HR role management. Beer (1997) has also questioned the capacity of an HR professional to be able to successfully address complex HR role requirements and discusses whether it is best to actually just focus on the strategic role and shed traditional administrative, compliance and service roles. The comment is made that HR executives who have integrated the roles find that there is simply not enough time to complete all responsibilities; effectively the HR professional becomes overloaded. Over a decade later, Lemmergaard (2009) echoes the concern that HR executives may not be able fulfil roles simultaneously.

Role overload has been defined by Kahn *et al.* (1964) as a perception that role demands are overwhelming relative to available resources. When role demands create the perception that available resources, or time as argued by Beer (1997), are inadequate to deal with them, the result is distraction and stress. Brown *et al.* (2005), for example showed that role overload counteracted the positive effects of self-efficacy, or confidence in one's ability, and the resultant pursuit of goals. In other words, individuals who normally have belief in their own ability and are able to visualise conceivable future achievements in goal setting are likely to constrain their vision of what is attainable when they experience role overload. This effect of constrained goal attainment is evident in Beer's description of the impact of HR role overload. Beer (1997) explains that the limitations of time mean that the HR professional is unable to meet all HR role requirements so they change their view of the goals that can be achieved. The urgent and immediate nature of the administrative, compliance and service-oriented activities effectively drive out the capacity to attend to more ambiguous and long term strategic priorities, a point that has been reinforced by Aldrich *et al.* (2015) for current day HR professionals.

Alternatively those HR professionals who have been able to transition to a strategic role find that their inclination to attend to the traditional administrative tasks diminishes and these tasks are left unattended. Either way an important HR role is neglected as a

result of the HR professional's need to stretch their attention, effort and resources to cover overwhelming demands. For the purposes of the current research we build on Kahn *et al.*'s (1964) definition of role overload to define HR role overload as the perception that HR role demands involved in attending to the traditional administrative, or functional expert role, as well as emergent strategic roles are overwhelming relative to available resources.

As well as this discussion of role overload and the time management demands involved in attending to competing traditional administrative and emergent strategic roles, the issue of HR role conflict has attracted discussion in the management of competing employer and employee expectations. Legge (1989), Kamoche (1994) and Paauwe (2009) have argued that shifting to a strategic HR role and a focus on the HR economic contribution has been accompanied by a negative impact on the traditional HR responsibility for the stewardship of the social contract at work. Kochan (2004, 2007) and Van Buren *et al.* (2011) have argued that the HR professional's strategic focus has led to a crisis of trust and a loss of legitimacy with both employees and society. Kochan (2004) cites the examples of longer working hours, stagnant wages and increasing job insecurity to conclude that diverging HRM priorities and increasing pressures of the workforce have created a widening gulf between the needs of organisations and their employees and ultimately a breakdown in employee trust in the HR function. Kochan's research highlights ongoing practical difficulties for the HR professional who is reconciling the HR roles of employee advocacy and strategic partner and suggests that there are qualitative impacts for employees in how they are dealt with by HR professionals.

The reported tensions for the HR professional who is trying to balance employee and management expectations are consistent with the experience of role conflict. Drawing from classical organisational theory and role theory, Rizzo *et al.* (1970) argue, using the principle of single accountability, that ideally a person should be accountable for the successful execution of tasks to one and only one source or superior. As later incorporated by Welch and Welch (2012), Rizzo *et al.* (1970) then use role theory to explain that when the behaviours expected of an individual are inconsistent they will experience stress, become dissatisfied and perform less effectively than if the expectations imposed on them did not conflict. They define role conflict in terms of the dimensions of congruency-incongruency or compatibility-incompatibility in the requirements of the role, where congruency or compatibility is judged relative to a set of standards or conditions that impinge upon role performance (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970).

Applying this discussion to HR role management, the alignment of employee advocacy and strategic roles potentially involves a conflict, or incompatibility and a lack of congruency, of expectations (Welch and Welch, 2012). This is distinct from role overload as discussed above which refers to the satisfaction of administrative and strategic role demands relative to available resources. For the purposes of the current research therefore we define HR role conflict as congruency-incongruency or compatibility-incompatibility in the requirements of the HR role, where congruency or compatibility is judged relative to a set of expectations.

Having established that HR role overload and conflict are potentially implicit in HR role requirements the following section considers the implications of these HR role demands for HR professionals seeking involvement in strategic decision-making processes.

The impact of HR role overload and conflict

Kochan (2007) and Van Buren *et al.* (2011) highlight the potentially negative outcomes for employees of conflicting HR roles but there are also ramifications for the strategic focus that HR professionals can successfully pursue. Along with the concerns raised by

these authors that the HR role change has shifted HR from its proper responsibilities towards employees, there is concurrent debate about whether strategic HR responsibilities to the organisation are being understood and enacted effectively. Lawler (2011), for example has reflected that despite ongoing changes the HR function has not progressed significantly in terms of its strategic role in corporations. Wright *et al.* (2001) in a comparative review of the perspectives of both top level line and HR executives established that top level line executives lacked confidence in HR's successful delivery of a strategic role and ability to provide a value adding contribution.

A key indicator of organisational confidence in a strategic role for HR is representation in senior decision-making arenas. Caldwell (2011) argues, for example that HR representation on the Board of Directors indicates the profession's "symbolic capital", or professional esteem, recognition, status and respect. There is evidence that HR professionals have attained increasing recognition with membership on Boards of Directors (see Kramar, 2012) but, as Buyens and De Vos (2001) and Kelly and Gennard (2001, 2007) suggest, strategic formulation does not always occur through formal mechanisms, it is access to both formal and informal decision making that provides a linkage for HR professionals to the strategic planning process. Caldwell (2011) acknowledges Kelly and Gennard's (2007) arguments and agrees that although Boardroom representation does provide gravitas, failure to have a presence on the Board of Directors may not detract from the influence that HR representatives can have in strategic discussions as there is substantial value via involvement in decision-making processes further down the organisation within other executive groupings. Kelly and Gennard (2007) argue strongly for the importance of both formal and informal discussions that take place within the executive group. The importance of informal channels of influence has been supported elsewhere by writers who suggest that most new strategic ideas do not emerge in formal meetings. Buyens and De Vos (2001) explain that although formal strategic decision-making arenas are important, informal ad hoc strategic discussions referred to as "strategic adaptation", are the most likely forum for strategy formulation. In informal discussions people are able to take the time to think through options, debate possibilities and formulate ideas. Buyens and De Vos (2001) also stress the importance of HR's involvement across the full range of decision-making stages, including early involvement in strategy formulation. The earlier that the HR representative is involved in the decision-making process, the greater will be their impact. Early and full involvement in these decision-making processes therefore is necessary in order to be considered actively involved in strategic decision-making processes.

HR access to these important formal and informal decision-making processes is however not assured (Lawler, 2011; Wright *et al.*, 2001). Sheehan *et al.* (2014) explain that HR involvement within formal and informal decision-making processes is often contingent on the power of meaning, either assigned to HR professionals by other managers or generated by the HR professional themselves. HR professionals who are able to access the power of meaning are able to make HR initiatives appear legitimate, desirable, rational and inevitable. Similarly Pritchard (2010) has argued that for HR to become a strategic partner, success is not contingent on the execution of certain tasks within a new job specification but rather on the social construction, or performance of a strategic HR identity. In view of these arguments about the importance of constructed meaning, when HR professionals are struggling to balance their roles, there is a risk that they will not be able to construct clear meaning of their strategic partnership. If their performance is unclear they risk losing power over meaning and the likelihood that HR will be included in senior management decisions (Sheehan *et al.*, 2014).

When an HR professional is time poor due to role overload pressures or is conflicted and experiences tensions between conflicting expectations these conditions may reduce confidence in the HR professional's strategic capacity and impact the likelihood that HR professionals are included in formal and informal decision-making discussions. Our first set of hypotheses are framed to capture the impact of HR role management issues, as reflected in HR role overload and role conflict, on the HR function's actual involvement in the full range of stages in strategic decision making:

- H1. Greater HR role overload will be associated with lower HR involvement in strategic decision making.
- H2. Greater HR role conflict will be associated with lower HR involvement in strategic decision making.

Environmental dynamism as a moderator

The concepts of environmental dynamism (at the firm level) and perceived environmental uncertainty (at the individual level) have been extensively discussed over decades in organisation theory and the management literature (e.g. Jansen *et al.*, 2009; Milliken, 1987; Thompson, 1967). Environmental dynamism refers to both the rate of change and the unpredictability of change in the external environment of a firm (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). The dynamism in a given environment may be due to factors such as technological change, interruptions in the supply chain or fluctuations in demand for a product or service (Jansen *et al.*, 2006). Dubois and Dubois (2012) argue that HR can make an enormous contribution when an organisation is considering issues associated with sustainability. Elsewhere Paauwe (2009) has argued for HR as an enabler for an array of strategic options specifically in the development of a flexible workforce responsive to a range of strategic challenges. Environmental dynamism may well present the HR function with an opportunity to take a role in the design of strategies to cope with a dynamic environment (see Boyle and McDonnell, 2013; Townsend and Wilkinson, 2013) but the HR professional has to be able to meet the challenge and generate confidence in their ability to provide necessary advice. The previous review of HR role overload and role conflict indicates that such role management issues may detract from the HR professional's capacity to generate the necessary confidence during a period of environmental dynamism. As noted previously, role overload counteracts the positive effects of self-efficacy and confidence in one's ability (Brown *et al.*, 2005) therefore an HR professional who is overloaded may be constrained by their own belief that they can make a strategic contribution. Role conflict also has negative ramifications for the HR professional's personal impact. As Rizzo *et al.* (1970) have explained, role conflict is associated with conflicting expectations and results in reduced personal performance. There is evidence therefore that role management has personal implications. For the purposes of the current discussion however, elevated levels of personal self-doubt and reduced personal performance associated with role overload and conflict, may detract from the HR professional's capacity to create an effective impression and therefore access the power of meaning necessary to be part of heightened strategic decision making during a period of increased environmental dynamism. Alternatively when the HR professional is able to manage these role management issues, there will be greater confidence in HR's capacity to make the type of substantial contribution during periods of environmental dynamism that is

described by Dubois and Dubois (2012) and Paauwe (2009). The final hypotheses therefore become:

- H3. Environmental dynamism will moderate the relationship between HR role overload and HR involvement in strategic decision making, such that the relationship between role overload and HR involvement in strategic decision making will be increasingly negative at higher levels of dynamism.
- H4. Environmental dynamism will moderate the relationship between HR role conflict and HR involvement in strategic decision making, such that the relationship between role conflict and HR involvement in strategic decision making will be increasingly negative at higher levels of dynamism.

The full set of relationships to be tested in the study is depicted in Figure 1.

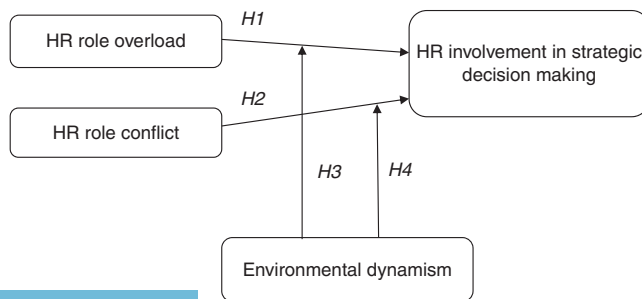
Method

Sample and procedure

Australia is an appropriate research context for the research at hand, exhibiting the environmental dynamism, change and unpredictability referred to by Jansen *et al.* (2009). Deloitte *et al.* (2014) report, for example, that due to Australia’s location and geographic spread, local companies regularly deal with unforeseen events and complex supply chains, caused by a combination of natural disasters and congestion in the cities and ports. Australia has also been impacted by its geographic proximity to high-growth Asian economies that have created major opportunities for Australian companies. The connections with these economies however also present complex legal, economic and cultural challenges. In terms of economic growth, Australia’s productivity has slowed with the Reserve Bank of Australia and the Australian Treasury reporting changing economic conditions over the last decade and a decline in Australia’s productivity performance despite a commodity boom (Green *et al.*, 2012). The Australian business environment therefore presents companies with variable, changing business conditions.

The sample for the research comprised senior HR and top management executives in medium to large employers in Australia. Respondents provide an experienced overview of the HR function and of the connections between HR and involvement in decision making. The research used a mail survey conducted in 2012 and piloted with ten HR experts including executive HR practitioners associated with the Australian professional body for executive HR practitioners, the Australian Senior Human Resource Roundtable, as well as senior academics and HR consultants. The feedback

Figure 1.
Model of the proposed impact of environmental dynamism in the relationship between HR role overload and conflict and HR involvement in strategic decision making



from the pilot-testing ensured that the survey items were clear, focused and had face validity (De Vellis, 2003; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012).

We collected data from two sources (senior HR and top management executives) to minimise the risk of common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). The finalised survey was mailed to a random sample of 2000 senior HR executives who were identified through a national mailing list provider. The mailing list included HR executives in Australian organisations across the major Australian and New Zealand Standard Industry Classification categories. The HR executives were provided with a second separate questionnaire designed for a top management team (TMT) member and were asked to forward this on to a member of the TMT who participates in the major decision-making processes within their organisation. Prospective respondents were assured that their responses were confidential, and were informed of the voluntary nature of participation. Both sets of questionnaires were coded to ensure that the responses of HR executives and the TMT could be matched. A follow-up e-mail was sent two weeks after the initial mail out to encourage participation, as were telephone follow-ups a month later. Similar processes of recruitment have been used in other TMT research, such as a recent study by Li *et al.* (2013), who interviewed CEOs and asked the CEO to identify managers to be invited to participate in a survey.

A total of 180 questionnaires were received from HR executives, yielding a response rate of 9 per cent. This response rate is relatively consistent with those obtained in previous studies with senior executives and can be attributed to the difficulties associated with obtaining responses from top managerial level respondents (Cycyota and Harrison, 2006). For example, Hambrick *et al.* (1993) noted that a response rate of 10-12 per cent was typical for surveys of top executives. Of these 180 responses, 102 could be matched with a member of the TMT. In total, 64 per cent of HR executives were female, whereas TMT executives were largely male (71 per cent). The mean age of the HR respondents was 47.03 years (SD = 9.75) and 47.16 years (SD = 8.08) for TMT respondents. HR executives had been working for an average of 7.35 years (SD = 6.98) in their current organisations and 9.08 years (SD = 8.39) for TMT executives. The mean position tenure was 4.52 years (SD = 3.79) for HR executives and 5.10 years (SD = 5.61) for TMT members.

The matched sample covered a wide range of industries, including manufacturing, health and community services and education. The majority (76 per cent) were private sector organisations. The organisations covered a wide range in terms of number of employees, with 38 per cent having 500 or more employees, 23 per cent 200-499 employees and 39 per cent employing fewer than 200 employees.

Measures

HR involvement in strategic decision making. Using the scale developed by Purcell (1995), respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale (1 = not at all involved to 5 = highly involved), the HR function's involvement in each of the four stages of a strategic business decision. The four stages are, drawing up proposals; evaluating financial consequences; taking the final decision; and implementation. To minimise concerns over common method variance, TMT executives provided the ratings for this variable. The scores on the four items were averaged to form a composite measure (possible range of scores is 1-5), with higher scores indicating greater HR involvement in strategic decision-making processes ($\alpha = 0.84$).

HR role overload was measured by adapting the scale used by Brown *et al.* (2005) to reflect the specific issue of completing both the functional expert and strategic partner roles described by Ulrich (2009). We measured HR role overload with four items and

asked how often (on a scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = always) the HR executive experienced each of the following, “the amount of HR functional expert work I do interferes with how well the strategic partnering work gets done”; “I do not have enough help and resources to do both HR functional expert and strategic partner work well”; “I do not have enough time to get both the HR functional expert and strategic partner work done well”; and “I have to try to satisfy too many different people”. Collectively, these items are consistent with the conceptual definition of role overload as specified by Kahn *et al.* (1964) and with previous research (House, 1980). The scores on the four items were averaged to form a composite measure (possible range of scores is 1-5), with higher scores indicating greater HR role overload ($\alpha = 0.91$).

HR role conflict was measured adapting the scale used by Yitzhak and Tiegs (1995) to reflect the issue of meeting the competing expectations of employees and employers. Yitzhak and Tiegs’ scale included three items relating specifically to meeting the conflicting expectations of different groups of people. These items were re-worded to reflect the aspect of role conflict that is being measured in the current study, the HR role conflict experienced when meeting the different expectations of management and employees. The items asked how often (1 = never to 5 = always) the HR executive experiences the following, “I receive incompatible requests from management and employees”, “I do things that are apt to be accepted by either employees or by management but not by both” and “I work with management and employees who operate quite differently”. A further two items were included that similarly reflected the conflict of meeting different expectations, “I work with management and employees who have quite different expectations of the HR role” and “To satisfy management I have to upset employees”. The scores on the five items were averaged to form a composite measure (possible range of scores is 1-5), with higher scores indicating greater HR role conflict ($\alpha = 0.70$).

Environmental dynamism was measured using a five-item scale developed and validated by Jansen *et al.* (2009). HR executives were asked to respond to each of the following five items on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), “Changes in our local market are intense”, “Our clients regularly ask for new products and services”, “In our local market, changes are taking place continuously”, “In a year, nothing has changed in our market” and “In our market, the volumes of products and services to be delivered change quickly and often”. The scores on the five items were averaged to form a composite measure (possible range of scores is 1-5), with higher scores indicating greater rate of change and the instability of the external environment ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Control variables. We controlled for three variables that potentially may confound the results. First, organisational size affects the strategic role assigned to HRM. Small to medium-sized organisations in Australia are less likely than larger organisations to have formal HRM practices and a strategically active HR department (Kotey and Sheridan, 2001; Michelson and Kramar, 2003; Nankervis *et al.*, 2002). Accordingly, we controlled for organisational size, measured as the total number of employees in the organisation in Australia on a seven-point ordinal scale from (1) 50 or less to (7) 10,000 or more. Second, organisational sector affects the strategic role of HR, as private sector organisations more often include the function in a strategic business partner role (Teo, 2002). A dummy variable was included to indicate if the organisation was private sector (coded 1) or other sector (coded 0). Third, we controlled for gender of the HR manager (coded 1 = female, 0 = male). Writers such as Broadbridge and Simpson (2011) and Ross-Smith and Huppatz (2010) call for ongoing research into the explanatory power of gender in understanding the enactment of senior managerial

roles. Reichel *et al.* (2010) in particular note the impact of gender in the HR profession and Simpson and Lenoir (2003) have argued that women in HR perform the role differently. It was considered relevant therefore that gender may influence the experience of role overload/conflict and degree of involvement in decision making.

Method of analysis

The hypotheses were tested using OLS regression with HR involvement in strategic involvement as the dependent variable. Multiple regression is the method of choice for analysing general linear models with moderator (interaction) effects (Cohen *et al.*, 2003). As recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), to reduce problems associated with multicollinearity and to generate correct standardised regression weights in moderated regression, all variables, were z-standardised prior to analysis. Evaluation of regression assumptions showed that normality, linearity, absence of multicollinearity and homoscedasticity were satisfactory.

Results

Table I presents the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of the study variables. It is of interest to note that female HR managers were more likely than males to report significantly higher role conflict ($r = 0.27, p < 0.05$). Factor analysis was conducted to examine the potential influence of common method bias and to establish the construct validity of the four key measures (HR involvement in strategic decision making, environmental dynamism, HR role overload and HR role conflict). We used exploratory (principal components analysis) factor analysis with Promax (oblique) rotation as the role overload and role conflict measures were adapted and have not been subject to previous construct validation in the HRM context. Inspection of the scree plot supported a four-factor solution. In this four-factor solution (explaining 64 per cent of the variance), all items loaded onto their intended constructs with a mean factor loading of 0.76, providing support for construct validity.

Results of the regression analyses are shown in Table II.

We first examine the hypothesised effects of HR role overload and HR role conflict on HR involvement in strategic decision making. As shown in Table II (Model 1), controlling for organisational size, sector and gender of HR manager, HR role overload was not a statistically significant predictor of HR strategic involvement. Hence, *H1* was not supported. Similarly, the relationship between HR role conflict and HR involvement in strategic decision-making processes was not significantly different from zero (see Model 2). Hence, *H2* was not supported. It is also interesting to note that

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. HR involvement in strategic decision making	3.58	0.89						
2. HR role conflict	2.84	0.54	-0.09					
3. HR role overload	3.30	0.95	0.01	0.53*				
4. Environmental dynamism	3.72	0.74	0.17	-0.05	-0.06			
5. Private sector	0.76	0.43	-0.09	-0.06	0.02	0.06		
6. Organisational size ^a	3.32	1.42	0.15	-0.01	-0.01	0.02	-0.22*	
7. Gender of HR manager ^b	0.64	0.48	-0.16	0.27*	0.19	-0.07	0.06	-0.08

Notes: ^aCoded on a scale from (1) 50 or less to (7) 10,000 or more employees; ^bCoded 1 = female, 0 = male. * $p < 0.05$

Table I. Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of study variables

environmental dynamism did not have a statistically significant direct relationship with HR involvement in strategic decision making.

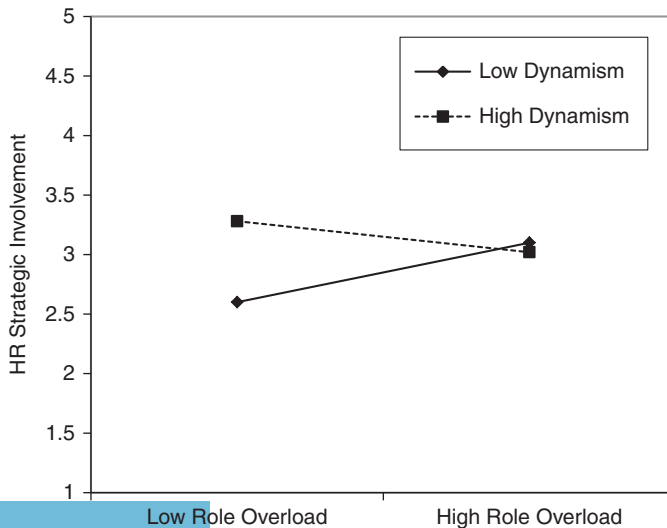
The absence of any main effects ignores the possibility that there are specific conditions under which the HR role variables may influence strategic involvement. We hypothesised environmental dynamism to be one such contextual influence or boundary condition. Specifically, *H3* proposed that environmental dynamism will moderate the relationship between HR role overload and HR involvement in strategic decision making, such that the relationship between HR role overload and HR involvement in strategic decision making will be more negative at higher levels of environmental dynamism. As shown in Table II (Model 3), the interaction between environmental dynamism and HR role overload was statistically significant. To aid in interpretation of this interaction effect, we plotted the interaction using the conventional values of one SD below the mean and one SD above the mean (Aiken and West, 1991). As shown in Figure 2, the relationship between HR role overload and HR involvement in

Table II.
Results of regression analyses predicting HR involvement in strategic decision making

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Organisational size	0.14	0.14	0.16	0.14
Private sector	-0.09	-0.09	-0.06	-0.07
Gender of HR manager	-0.19**	-0.16	-0.15	-0.13
HR role overload	0.07		0.06	
HR role conflict		-0.06		-0.07
Environmental dynamism	0.16	0.16	0.15	0.16
HR role overload×Environmental dynamism			-0.19*	
HR role conflict×Environmental dynamism				-0.18**
R ²	0.09	0.09	0.12	0.11

Notes: Standardised regression coefficients reported. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.10$

Figure 2.
Interaction between HR role overload and environmental dynamism in predicting HR involvement in strategic decision making



strategic decision making was negative when environmental dynamism was high (one SD above the mean). Hence, *H3* was supported. Interestingly, the relationship between HR role overload and HR involvement in strategic decision making was slightly positive when environmental dynamism was low (one SD below the mean).

H4 proposed that environmental dynamism will moderate the relationship between HR role conflict and HR involvement in strategic decision making, such that the relationship between HR role conflict and HR involvement in strategic decision making will be more negative at higher levels of environmental dynamism. The interaction between environmental dynamism and HR role conflict was statistically significant at the 90 per cent level (see Table II, Model 4). Given the well-known difficulties in detecting interaction effects, even in relatively large samples (Aguinis, 1995), we proceeded to interpret this interaction.

As shown in Figure 3, consistent with *H4* and similar to the effect observed for HR role overload, the relationship between HR role conflict and HR involvement in strategic decision making was also negative when environmental dynamism was high (one SD above the mean) and again positive when low (one SD below the mean).

Discussion

The aims of the current study were to first consider the direct impact of HR role overload and HR role conflict on the HR function's involvement in strategic decision making and second to examine whether conditions of environmental dynamism moderate the impact of HR role conflict and HR role overload in the relationship. Results did not support the expected negative relationships between HR role overload and role conflict with HR involvement in strategic decision making. Once the moderating effect of environmental dynamism was taken into account however, as expected, the associations between HR role management and the HR function's involvement in strategic decision making was negative at higher levels of dynamism. Of interest was the positive relationship between HR role overload and conflict with HR involvement in strategic decision making when

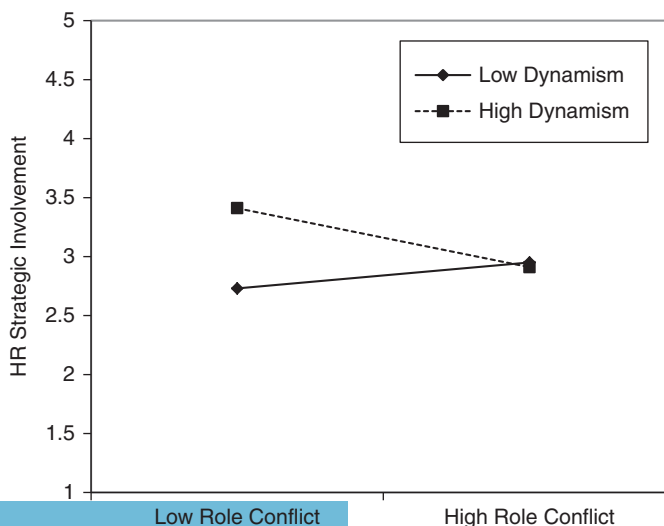


Figure 3. Interaction between HR role conflict and environmental dynamism in predicting HR involvement in strategic decision making

environmental dynamism is low. Our expectation was that the relationship would be negative but less so than reported for higher levels of environmental dynamism. It would seem therefore that when environmental uncertainty is low, HR role overload and role conflict are positively associated with HR involvement in strategic decision making. The positive association may reflect the ongoing difficulties experienced by the HR manager in balancing the strategic decision-making role with other HR roles. Once the environment becomes less stable, levels of HR role overload and tension become less tolerable however and HR's involvement in decision-making arenas diminishes. The following discussion highlights the value of the results with respect to current theoretical discussions, the implications for HR professionals operating in dynamic environments and the practical implications for HR role management.

The research contributes to the discussions about sources of HR power, specifically the importance of power of meaning for HR professionals (Hardy, 1996; Sheehan *et al.*, 2014). This source of power allows agents to make initiatives appear legitimate, desirable, rational and inevitable. Sheehan *et al.* (2014) have argued that it is an important source of power for HR professionals whose role is one that is often performed without authority as many HR duties are now conducted by other managers and there is a resultant substitutability of the HR professional's capabilities as all managers are now expected to be HRM conversant. HR professionals therefore have to rely on power of meaning and the creation of a unified perception of the value that they can add. Sheehan *et al.* (2014) in particular note the importance of how well HR professionals communicated their organisational role and the extent to which they avoided role tensions. The current study provides some evidence that effective HR role management does indeed have ramifications for HR professionals, specifically with respect to the opportunity to be part of strategically important decision discussions during dynamic periods.

The results have several implications for the impact that HR role management can make during periods of environmental dynamism. As noted previously, a number of writers have argued that HR can make an important contribution when an organisation is considering issues associated with sustainability in a dynamic environment (Dubois and Dubois, 2012; Paauwe, 2009). Nijssen and Paauwe (2012), for example examine the benefits of HRM practices that form the basis of organisational agility capabilities and Lengnick-Hall *et al.* (2011) emphasise HR's role in developing "organisational resilience" or the ability to "bounce back" from difficult challenges and survive environmental dynamism. As well as reviews of the value of specific HR practices that assist with dynamic environments, Zagelmeyer and Gollan (2012) argue that compared to other business functions, HR has much to offer in the management of individuals and groups when people are facing situations of uncertainty and change. First, the HR function plays an important role in organisational change and re-structuring, downsizing, working time reductions, lay-offs, industrial relations negotiations and related changes in reward systems and working conditions. The second trend identified is that the HR function is under increasing scrutiny and pressure to demonstrate delivery of value to organisations. There is recognition therefore of the value that the HR function can add during periods of environmental dynamism but there is also an associated extended examination of what HR provides. The current research indicates that such scrutiny will mean that HR professionals who are struggling with role overload or role conflict will not be included in key decision-making arenas at these times and therefore a valuable opportunity to impact on HRM policy and practice enactment is lost.

The research also has practical implications for HR practitioners. As noted earlier, Welch and Welch (2012) have urged that the discussion of HR roles should not only consider HR

role definition but issues associated with HR enactment and the negative impact for the HR function in simultaneously attending to divergent expectations. Our study has shown that when HR is unable to manage role overload and role conflict, the risk is that there will be an absence of an HR perspective at this decision-making level and the implication is, as Guest and King (2004) argue, that such non-involvement of HR in strategic planning creates a vicious cycle, where resultant people management problems create further challenges for the HR function that lead to reactive HRM responses and in turn reinforce the perception that the HR function is ineffective and provides further justification for HR professionals to be excluded from the strategic decision-making process. The current research reinforces this concern by identifying the ramifications for overloaded or conflicted HR professionals who may have the potential to contribute in dynamic situations but are absent from strategic decision making when the opportunity presents.

Practical approaches to HR role overload are to increase the level of HR tasks that are outsourced so that HR professionals are free to concentrate on strategic tasks (Lepak and Snell, 1998; Stroh and Treehuboff, 2003). There is also the option of investigating HR information technologies in the delivery of HR services (Gardner *et al.*, 2003). These suggestions do however require available resourcing as well as careful monitoring of the alternative sourcing to maintain the quality delivery of HR services (Dell, 2004; Delmotte and Sels, 2008). Outsourcing in particular does involve the risk of diluting the HR message if the outside provider does not communicate in a manner consistent with the HR message delivered by the HR professionals operating from within the organisation. This is especially relevant in view of the argued priority that should be given to the maintenance of HR's power of meaning. The risk may be ameliorated when time is taken to develop a strong relationship with any outsourced provider (Dell, 2004) but the relationship with the provider is one that does require careful management.

With respect to HR role conflict, HR functions may enlist the help of other resources to support distressed employees: line managers, unions or employee assistance programmes (Brown *et al.*, 2009). HR departments operating in larger organisations will also have the option of allowing members of the HR team to specialise in various roles. Such an initiative would be underpinned by a unified HR view that employee-centred assistance concurrently generates organisational benefits (Brown *et al.*, 2009).

The present study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes making inferences about causality. The findings of this study would need to be replicated with a longitudinal design before stronger inferences could be drawn in relation to the relationships between the variables. A strength of the study is the use of two sources of data to address the issue of potential common method variance but as the HR manager was the contact point for the choice of the second TMT member, it is possible that this second executive may be biased in favour of the HR function. It was made clear to both the HR manager and the TMT member that their responses were to be mailed directly to the researchers and information was de-identified once the responses were matched. We realise that this does not reduce the possibility of the HR manager choosing a favourable respondent but it may assist in enhancing honesty in responses. The personal contact from the HR manager was also used as a strategy to enhance the likelihood that the other TMT member would return the survey. It is worth noting that similar processes of recruitment have been used in other TMT research, such as a recent study by Li *et al.* (2013), who interviewed CEOs and asked the CEO to identify managers to be invited to participate in a survey. Finally, generalisability is somewhat limited by the relatively small sample and possibility of non-response bias. Future research may seek to replicate these findings with a larger sample.

In terms of future research, while our approach of investigating environmental dynamism as a moderator is consistent with leading contributions on this topic (Jansen *et al.*, 2009; Sirmon *et al.*, 2007; Yang and Li, 2011), it might be interesting to consider the possibility of environmental dynamism as an antecedent directly influencing HR role variables. For example, under conditions of high environmental dynamism, demand for HR to participate in strategic decision-making processes may be high, which in turn could lead to HR executives experiencing more role overload and conflict. Another possible area for future research would be to investigate the impact of organisational size on HR role management. It is possible that HR professionals working in larger organisations may be able to avoid role conflict as there is more opportunity to specialise in particular HR roles. HR professionals who are working in smaller companies however may experience greater role conflict and overload as they are working across a broader range of HR tasks.

Conclusion

The current research has added to the discussion on the operation of HR professionals within strategic decision-making arenas in periods of environmental dynamism. Our research responds to the argument that environmental dynamism is becoming the norm (Jiao *et al.*, 2013). Organisations face the challenge of meeting the demands of turbulent and dynamic environments and HR professionals have the potential to provide leadership and strategic value in decisions that steer organisations at these times (Dubois and Dubois, 2012; Paauwe, 2009). The study contributes to the strategic HRM literature by providing a response to calls to further understand the factors that determine HR's strategic contribution (Aldrich *et al.*, 2015; Lawler, 2011). The research also provides insights into the factors that may detract from HR strategic contribution during periods of environmental dynamism despite the proposal that the HR function can add value during these periods (Dubois and Dubois, 2012; Nijssen and Paauwe, 2012; Zagelmeyer and Gollan, 2012). Our research has shown that even though there has been evolution in the HR role that now accommodates a strategic focus, when the HR professional is unable to manage additional strategic role requirements alongside traditional administrative expectations, or when that professional is experiencing role conflict in balancing strategic management and employee expectations, the opportunity to make an effective contribution during dynamic periods is diminished. There has been a substantial commentary on the range of roles that the HR professional should now be developing (Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997, 2009; Ulrich *et al.*, 2009; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Perhaps, as Caldwell (2003) and Welch and Welch (2012) argue, the research should now turn to considering how these roles are enacted and act in a state of balance such that the HR professional can maintain the credibility required to be a strategic decision maker in times of change.

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