Becoming an HR Strategic Partner: tales of transition

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Abstract

This paper aims to bridge the gap between previous examinations of HR strategic partnership from a role perspective (Truss et al. 2002; Caldwell 2003) and an emerging interest in the social construction of identity (Alvesson et al. 2008). I consider 'strategic partner' as a local, flexible social construction framed by the broader occupational context. Based on a year-long ethnographic study, I examine the experiences of HR practitioners 'becoming' strategic partners, considering the themes of becoming strategic, becoming a partner and remaining a generalist. Practitioners depict becoming strategic as a 'release' from previous constraints, with becoming a partner positioned as filling a gap created by clients' deficiencies in people management. Meanwhile, tensions develop as strategic partners attempt to retain a say in transactional issues. I reflect on the resulting practical issues while also considering the role of HR practitioners in "the dynamic and socially complex nature of HRM" (Francis 2003: 323).

Introduction

This paper aims to bridge the gap between previous examinations of strategic partnership from a role perspective (Truss et al. 2002; Caldwell 2003) and emerging interest in the social construction of identity within the broader organisational studies literature (Collinson 2003; Alvesson et al. 2008). Based on a year-long ethnographic study, I consider the experiences of HR practitioners becoming strategic partners and examine how participants construct notions of, and relationships between, 'strategic' and 'partner' aspects of their identity.

Over the past forty years many commentators have suggested categorising HR roles according to the nature of their work and their relationships with other managers within the organisation. However, it is Ulrich and colleagues' classifications (1997; Ulrich and Beatty 2001; Ulrich and Brockbank 2005) that attract the most academic and practitioner interest (Reilly et al. 2007; Wright 2008) with the proposed role of 'strategic partner' (Ulrich 1997) often the centre of attention; be it criticism or endorsement (Caldwell 2003; Rynes 2004; Francis and Keegan 2006).

This paper is not an evaluation of the strategic partner role or Ulrich's model more broadly. Rather, I follow the transition of these ideas across the oft-postulated academic-practitioner divide (Rynes et al. 2001) and examine the experience of HR practitioners becoming strategic partners. I consider 'strategic partner' as a local and flexible social construction which, while framed by the broader academic and occupational context, is also situated in the day-to-day work, experiences and relationships of these HR practitioners. This focus offers an alternative lens to previous empirical studies which have generally sought to understand broader challenges facing strategic partners, often looking across accounts and contexts to identify the different factors that inhibit or enhance role performance.

Employing ideas emerging from the social construction of identity, my focus is the emergent (Watson 2003) and subjective (Ibarra 1999; Roberts 2005) process of identity construction. This provides an opportunity to attend to fragmentation (rather than coherence) and becoming (rather than being) (Simpson and Carroll 2008). Adopting this approach offers the potential to generate both academic and practical insight into the work of HR practitioners whilst also contributing to our broader understanding of HRM, as the participants are in the unusual position of being both the agents and the recipients of HR policies and practices. To position my empirical project I first review the emergence of the HR strategic partner role, before exploring the potential offered by a shift to an identity perspective to consider their experiences.

The emergence of the HR Strategic Partner

HR work covers a broad spectrum of activities and is manifest in a variety of organisational arrangements. However, the means by which HR practitioners can effect a variety of roles and, working with line managers, enhance (organisational and individual) performance through effective management of the employment relationship is of primary interest to both academics and practitioners (Truss et al. 2002).

Whilst there have been many different HR role classifications (Legge 1978; Tyson and Fell 1986; Adams 1991; Storey 1992) the work of Ulrich and colleagues (1997; Ulrich and Beatty 2001; Ulrich and Brockbank 2005) is seen to have had the most influence on practitioners within the U.K. Under Ulrich's original role model, the strategic partner has the broad remit to "partner with senior and line managers in strategy execution" (1997: 30) although more recently his writing (e.g. Ulrich and Brockbank 2005) reflects concern with simplistic distinctions between 'strategic' as opposed to 'transactional' HR activities. Recent developments see the strategic partner represented as a "player" whose aim is to add value through acting as a "coach, architect, builder, facilitator, leader and conscience" (Ulrich and Beatty 2001: 294).

Despite the evolution of Ulrich's ideas, commentators (Rynes 2004; Francis and Keegan 2006) have become increasingly concerned about the adoption of the rhetoric of strategic partnership by HR practitioners. Reilly et al's (2007) review suggests that, particularly in large organisations, implementation is accompanied by an emphasis on separating "thinking from doing" (40) in an oversimplification of Ulrich's position, despite the complexity of boundaries between strategic and transactional work. This research also suggests that the implementation of Ulrich's ideas often results in a "three legged stool model" (Reilly et al. 2007: ix) comprising shared services (including process-orientated activity such as payroll and recruitment), centres of HR 'technical' expertise (often including employee relations and management development) and strategic partner roles. Within this context, the strategic partner role appears to be something of a moving target, rather loosely defined and precariously positioned with respect to changing relationships both internal and external to the HR function (Watson 2001; Guest and King 2004; Hope-Hailey et al. 2005). This suggests the need for research which examines how individuals construct notions of, and relationships between, 'strategic' and 'partner' aspects of their identity.

Empirical investigations of the work of HR practitioners are relatively few and far between (Watson 2004; Farndale and Brewster 2005). To date, the main focus has been a comparison of accounts (usually collected via interview or questionnaire) with role descriptions to either confirm or contest role transformation. This finds that HR practitioners identify with a variety of roles and claim to operate differently in relation to a range of HR issues (Proctor and Currie 1999; Caldwell 2001).

Employing a longitudinal perspective to view changing roles, Truss et al (2002) suggest roles are locally negotiated between HR practitioners and other stakeholders, but are also framed by the broader organisational context. Comparing across organisational contexts and over time this provides a useful overview of the range of influences on HR practitioners. However, given the level of analysis addressed, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of HR practitioners' experiences of such transitions.

My ethnographic research provides the opportunity to foreground HR practitioners' experiences of becoming strategic partners. This is in contrast to existing studies' objective assessment of the strategic partner role and their concern with the subjectivity of HR practitioners' own perspectives since "there may be a bias in their opinions" (Truss et al. 2002: 42). An alternative view would be to consider that 'strategic partner' is a flexible, fluid, social construction which, while framed by the broader academic and occupational context, is also situated in day-to-day work, experiences and encounters. My empirical analysis therefore focuses on how individual HR practitioners work through, negotiate and manage the tensions of becoming strategic partners.

In this respect a key aim of this paper is to bridge a gap between previous examinations of ‘strategic partnership’ from a role perspective and an emerging concern with the social construction of identity within the broader organisational studies literature (Alvesson et al. 2008). I suggest that this perspective offers the potential to generate both academic and practical insights into the work of HR practitioners.

From HR roles to HR identities

Academically, the concept of role and role theory has been somewhat sidelined (Simpson and Carroll 2008) by an increasing interest in identity at a number of different levels of analysis (du Gay 1996). Identity has developed from a purely psychological concept, marked particularly by concern with developmental stages and problems that might prevent individual’s self-awareness (Erikson 1968), through an interest in the interaction between self and social (Tajfel 1978) to the recent consideration of the “socially constructed, multiple and shifting character of identities” (Collinson 2003: 535).

It is this latter conception that provides the theoretical framing for my empirical investigation as I examine how individuals engage with and enact (Weick 1995) their strategic partner identity and consider how this is embedded in both the local organisational and broader occupational context (Thomas and Davies 2002; Tracy and Trethewey 2005; Watson 2008). The notion of ‘identity work’ (Alvesson and

Willmott 2002) highlights the active aspect of engagement with this process in which "people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (626). Since it is suggested that this process is emphasised when "routinised reproduction of a self-identity in a stable setting is discontinued" (Alvesson et al. 2008: 15) it offers a useful framing for analysing the experiences of those HR practitioners who are becoming strategic partners.

Of further interest is that identity has become a particular focus in studies of professions (Dent and Whitehead 2001). The notion of 'profession' has long featured in accounts of the struggles of HR practitioners (Watson 2001; Guest and King 2004) and been central to the role of the CIPD (the UK professional body) in respect to the institutional positioning of HR within the UK (Bell et al. 2001; Gilmore and Williams 2007).

Within the professional studies literature there has been a move towards examining how legitimacy and credibility are constructed, and even performed, by individuals (Ibarra 1999; Fournier 2001; Roberts 2005). That is to say 'being' a professional is considered as a process rather than an occupational label or role (Watson 2003). Studies have investigated how individuals construct a professional identity and draw on a broader framing of professionalism including qualification (Anderson-Gough et al. 2002) and, in contrast, how the notion of professionalism may also act as a disciplinary mechanism (Fournier 1999; Hodgson 2002; Aldridge and Evetts 2003). The findings reflect the complexity of identity work when considered as embedded in a broader network of power relations (Kosmola and Herrback 2006).

These issues have received some attention in investigations of the institutional framing of HR. For example, Bell et al (2001; 2002) examined how the HRM philosophy is embedded within the UK Government's "Investor's in People" (IiP) initiative, suggesting this legitimises both the adoption of HRM and the specialist status of the HR practitioner. However, as already highlighted there is little empirical work which examines how HR practitioners construct their identity as strategic partners within this broader institutional framework.

My aim is therefore to extend our understanding of the way in which those working in HR operate and, in particular, how individuals become 'strategic partners' through examining their accounts of, and performances in, this 'role'. This approach reflects that, as much of the critical literature suggests, a key feature of HRM is that it provides the means by which an organisation's employees are constructed or 'known' (Townley 1995; Schneider 1999) and this may apply as much to HR practitioners themselves as other members of the organisation. The key research question guiding my investigation is therefore: how do HR practitioners work through, negotiate and manage the tensions of becoming strategic partners?

Methodology

The findings reported here emerged from a year-long ethnographic study. This involved participating in "people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 1). However, doing (and indeed writing) ethnography is not a straightforward endeavour and has become increasingly “self-conscious” (Wolfinger 2002: 85).

The notion of “factualist” (Geertz 1988: 4) ethnography is no longer taken for granted (Brewer 2004). The advent of deconstructive (Linstead 1993), critical (Madison 2004) and reflexive ethnography (Burawoy 2003) challenge that an ethnographer can, by virtue of their position as a (superior) outsider, produce a neutral, objective account situating individuals and events within a systematic explanation of behaviour and belief (Van Maanen 2006). My positioning is sympathetic to this increasing emphasis on reflexivity; reflecting the belief that the “witnessing” (Van Maanen 2006: 18) role of the researcher is a myth. Indeed, this invites us as researchers to consider our own positioning; in particular that constructing ‘the participant’ is an outcome of our own identity work as ‘academic researchers’.

My ethnography involved shadowing participants, collecting documents, attending team meetings, sessions of the strategic partner training course and some meetings with business clients. It also involved deliberate (though often fortuitous) attempts to discuss practitioners’ experiences of becoming strategic partners; both informally and via more targeted data collection efforts. For example as part of my overall research project, I undertook a mapping of HR activity across the department using a tracer study approach (Hornby and Symon 1994) to follow specific projects and HR processes, interviewing strategic partners (and others) about their involvement in these particular activities. My preliminary fieldwork started in July 2004, the main period of fieldwork from September 2004 to June 2005, followed by withdrawal during July 2005. During the main period of fieldwork, I spent an average of three days per week on site; equating to an approximate total of 70 days.

Throughout the research project I kept field notes which included general observations and reflections on informal conversations. I also logged 98 data collection ‘events’, varying in length from a half to several hours, which were either recorded (70 events) or the subject of detailed note taking at the time. Using my field notes and research questions as a guide, I transcribed two-thirds of the 70 recordings which were then analysed alongside field, event notes and other documentary data.

Analysis within an ethnographic frame is not a discrete set of activities but a state of mind that demands increasing time and energy as research progresses. It is also an iterative process and NVivo (computer-aided qualitative data analysis software) was employed as a means of organising data and maintaining links between events, documents, field notes and recordings. NVivo was also used to aid thematic analysis (King 1998) and as a means of mapping evolving relationships between themes. Several iterations of thematic analysis proceeded alongside more detailed consideration of individual participants’ evolving narratives about their transition to strategic partner. In practical terms, this approach required a balance of looking across the data corpus to identify themes whilst also maintaining a focus on individual participant’s journeys through and between them (Symon et al. 2000). A key aspect of analysis was a reflexive approach to the analytic process itself, particularly focusing on the way in which understandings emerged, were clarified and became constructed in the process of writing this paper.

Research Context

My research took place in the HR department of the London operation of an American investment bank, which was regarded as a 'bulge bracket' bank, a term used to indicate membership of the top tier of investment banks (Burch and Foerster 2004). The bank's complex matrix structure reflects product, market and geographical divisions, further complicated by a number of recent mergers and acquisitions. The organisation of HR mirrors this broader organisational structure, although geography rather than product area is the primary basis for the division of work. London is the regional base for HR serving all non-US operations.

During 2004 the 200-strong HR department was reorganised around key roles and processes reflecting the three legged stool model previously described, which one participant commented "brought us to the Ulrich kind of place" (see figure 1). This change was presented as necessary to integrate HR operations after recent mergers and further justified as a means of improving efficiency, effectiveness and client service. The majority of the change project was carried out in-house, although consultants facilitated a customer service review, designed the strategic partner competency model and developed training courses.

FIGURE 1 (HR Roles after reorganisation) ABOUT HERE.

The strategic partner was presented as a re-positioning of the previous HR generalist role. HR generalists had been the first point of contact for employees whilst also liaising with business managers regarding the implementation of HR policies and processes. With the reorganisation the lines of communication were revised and employees were asked to contact an HR call centre with general enquiries. Roles with respect to HR policies and processes also shifted. While the generalist's focus had been implementation, the strategic partners were expected to take a broader perspective on shaping HR strategy, as reflected in the key objectives listed in their job description:

> *shape business strategy; develop HR strategy in line with business strategy; align HR interventions/processes with HR strategy.*

The group was organised into eight business facing teams, each headed by a senior strategic partner supported by three or four junior strategic partners (depending on the size of the business area). The majority were physically located within main London offices, although a few junior strategic partners were based in regional offices alongside their respective business functions.

All generalists were given the opportunity to transfer to strategic partner roles, although a handful moved to new roles elsewhere in the organisation. For those 'becoming' strategic partners, a training programme was a key aspect of their transition. There was a considerable investment in this (externally developed) training programme, based on a new competency framework for the strategic partner role which emphasised three key areas: organisational effectiveness, personal impact and business insight. The new competencies identified included trusted advisor, leading change, critical thinking, financial acumen and strategy formulation.

The training programme comprised five modules totalling ten days per person over a five month period. Many sessions involved 'real' business leaders who, usually in conjunction with their respective strategic partner, explained key business issues and HR solutions. Other sessions involved group work which encouraged the strategic partners to work through business issues and develop HR strategies in a team environment. However, in common with the broader framework of HRM and notions of business strategy more broadly; descriptions and discussion about the work of the strategic partner employed rather ambiguous and often vague ideas about what 'doing' this kind of work might involve.

In the sections that follow I focus on how these HR practitioners worked through, negotiated and managed the tensions of becoming strategic partners, through a consideration of the three main themes emerging from my analysis:

- Becoming strategic
- Becoming a partner
- Remaining a generalist

Becoming strategic

Talking to the strategic partners I found that they were, on the whole, extremely enthusiastic about becoming strategic. A key feature of their accounts was presenting this as a 'release' from the confines of the generalist role:

> *We love it! We love it! ....we really do see the benefit of getting out of execution so that we can actually focus on the stuff that really does add more value; stuff like succession planning and everything else…the generalist role has always been a jack of all trades, master of none…you can't be all things to all men, this really makes more sense to give the client the experience that they*

really ought to have, rather than what they've had before which is a generalist struggling to do it all.

This enthusiastic endorsement emphasises a clear break with 'execution' while becoming strategic is related to a 'focus' on adding 'value', while being rather vague about the activities ('stuff') that this might involve. In this construction, strategic work is not positioned as new but as previously suppressed within the 'struggle' of doing it all. Removing execution work frees the HR practitioner to 'become' strategic, as captured below:

> *so you are much more of an orchestrator than before and you really can have more time in theory to have strategic dialogue whereas before you were expected to have a strategic dialogue and do the rest of it as well.*

This was summed up by another strategic partner, drawing again on the notion of freedom from previous generalist work enabling a strategic focus, captured here in the notion of 'thinking time':

> *you've got to be able to divest from the day to day grind because no-one is actually having any thinking time here….get away from the e-mail, get away from the voice mail and actually start thinking and we weren't thinking, we were just doing all the time.*

A common theme in becoming strategic is then a sense that these individuals had been held back by the previous organisation of HR roles. In contrast there is little acknowledgement, despite the investment in the strategic partner training, that becoming strategic is associated with an acquisition of new skills or the deployment of new tools and techniques.

However, as the strategic partners were enthusiastically depicting their strategic freedom, they were, in part, achieving this construction by effectively downgrading the previous generalist work (‘execution’, ‘doing’, ‘grind’); work which is now being carried out by others within the HR department. As one of the HR practitioners in a functional team commented:

> *You take away the transactional element and, all of a sudden, they are supposed to be strategic ...they think: “the rest of HR will take care of all this stuff for me and I can just go and talk to business leaders and be strategic”.*

Here the phrase “be strategic” is used in an ironic sense; this may be not ‘real’ work at all but just ‘talk’. Using the same sense of compare and contrast deployed by the strategic partners, this challenges the idea that they are now delivering value. Rather the ‘real’ work is going on elsewhere in the HR department.

During my field work, I observed that the junior strategic partners also seemed to struggle somewhat with the relationship between becoming strategic and adding value:

> *I find it sometimes, even for me, I find it sometimes difficult to say what am I really bringing to these guys. Yeah, I’m sitting in their management team. Yeah, I’m talking to them but am I really adding value…yes, they listen to me when I present the HR agenda…..they say “yes” but how much is a polite yes and how much is a thought that “yes this is really what we need to do to make our business work better”.*

This individual works through the dilemma of strategic work; that it is difficult to determine what value is being added, and echoes the concerns others in HR raised about the strategic partners role being ‘just talk’. At the same time, she manages to create the impression of already operating at a strategic level since she mentions many of the tasks identified as being involved in this type of work. Indeed the emphasis is placed on the business leaders perhaps not responding in the appropriate manner, a point to which I return later.

In these early stages of the transition, tensions began to emerge between the strategic partners and other groups within the HR department in relation to HR process execution. Members of HR functional teams complained that they no longer had access to the business and that the nature of their work had changed. For example, the training and development team became increasingly frustrated, as one commented:

> *it’s things like producing files for performance management, which is just printing,, waste of time, you know, and it’s not even worthy of admin people doing it because it’s a waste of paper. But things like that have been seen as: “I’ll get T&D to do it”. And that really riles me because it’s like, well, what are we seen as? Just support for the strategic partners because they can’t be bothered to do something?*

In contrast, the strategic partner justified the decision to restrict access to the business:

> *So, you know, {name} and {name} are both fantastic people but I couldn’t take either of them to a meeting with {the business leader}; they are never going to be able to influence his thinking around this stuff.*

Here becoming strategic is a more complex construction that ‘just talk’; it is about influencing. The members of the training and development team (despite considerable technical expertise in this area) are damned with faint praise (as ‘fantastic people’) but becoming strategic is put beyond their reach. A particular relationship is established here between becoming strategic and being a certain type of person.

Becoming a partner

The central theme underpinning becoming a partner relates to the HR practitioners’ knowledge of their business clients as an essential basis for partnership:

> *I think the way you change their {the business clients’} behaviours in the longer term is by getting to be a trusted advisor, and the way to become a trusted advisor is to know your individual, to know your client and to know how to hook the individual, right?*

This positioning provides a legitimating framework for strategic partners’ discussion of their clients; it is both required and justified and therefore cannot be construed as gossip, namedropping or, related to the early discussion of becoming strategic, just talk. Indeed, since telling stories about clients (particularly the big money earners or ‘rainmakers’) was common within HR more broadly, it was perhaps particularly important to distinguish this type of ‘legitimate’ discussion.

At the same time, the strategic partners also engaged in what might be seen as more HR-focused discussions about their personalities and capabilities:

> *you typically have a collection of people with very high IQs and very low EQs, they’re virtually emotionally autistic…. You get people who are generally very bright, very motivated by money, very conscious of status, prima donnaish tendencies, egos the size of planets and yet we expect them to be business leaders and good managers.*

As this extract illustrates, in talking about the business leaders, strategic partners often used the language of personality assessment. This both acts to legitimise this account (again, distinguishing it from gossip) and demonstrates knowledge of ‘personality’ (both generally and specifically) which reinforces the position of the strategic partner as expert. One of the key themes to emerge is the notion that the business leaders’ personalities are flawed in respect to being good people managers. This construction emerges as a key justification of becoming a partner, as it enables the strategic partners to establish their position as filling a gap and providing a balancing influence on the business leader’s management team.

Knowing the clients and positioning them as difficult also allows for a construction of the strategic partners’ own work as difficult:

> *you know, it’s just these guys are just so egotistical and they’re so opinionated and they think that they know everything. So they don’t come and ask you, they come and tell you. And then when you try and give them different advice it becomes a very difficult situation to manage, if not exhausting.*

Becoming a partner is therefore depicted as problematic, but the problems are placed at the door of the business clients themselves. This appeared to be well established amongst the group, such that the mere mention of a particular business leader’s name was all that was required by way of explanation for late arrival at a meeting or difficulty in meeting a deadline.

Remaining a generalist

So far I have examined how the strategic partners positioned becoming strategic as a release from their previous generalist work which is now being carried out by other teams within the HR department. However, I found 'old' generalist activities began to re-emerge as a topic of discussion. In theory it should be extremely problematic for a strategic partner to also remain a generalist; however they adopted a variety of different justifications that enabled them to weave aspects of the 'old' into their 'new' role.

Within a broader discussion of their role during a team meeting discussion, one strategic partner commented:

> *I also think that as a strategic partner, whether you're answering that question or not, you'd quite like to know. I'd quite like to know, for my own knowledge… just so that you had that level of comfort,…cos even if you don't deal with the issue, you, you, you still need to understand the background.*

I suggest that this comment reflects a general uneasiness about the transition from generalist work implicit in becoming strategic and becoming partners. As this participant reflects, many found it hard to step away from the day-to-day HR activities with which they had been involved for many years.

Justifications included that the strategic partners continued involvement was necessary until new ways of working were fully established and that they had valuable experience. Both these explanations suggest in some way that the rest of the HR department is not yet able to deliver the required level of performance:

I'm not spending enough time on the strategic stuff as much as I would like; there's still some things that are falling through the cracks… sometimes it's quicker for me to deal with issues right away.

This argument suggests that the strategic partners are concerned with how work is being handled elsewhere in the HR department, an issue which once again picks up on the tension created during the reorganisation.

However, many strategic partners drew on more positive rationales for their on-going involvement with these activities. A particularly popular justification focused on a continued involvement in generalist type work as an essential stepping stone to a more strategic role. This is in interesting contrast to the earlier discussion of becoming strategic as a release from this work. Rather, old ways of working are reintegrated within the new strategic partner identity, and involvement in transactional processes is positioned as an essential pre-requisite to being able to operate strategically at some point in the future:

if you don't know the little things, they'll {the business leaders} never trust you with the bigger things....... you survive by doing the little things and doing them right; and then building up that trust and that relationship with them.

This is not unrelated to the problems of becoming a partner reviewed in the previous section.

The importance of remaining involved in pursuit of the ultimate aim of client service is also evident in the following account:

I'm probably keeping a tighter eye on what's going on so that I am prepared to feedback to the business…, I don't want to be on the back foot; and {I} don't want them to be on the back foot. And yes, there {are} probably still some things that I'm doing that I really strictly I shouldn't be doing.

This individual combines a positioning of ongoing involvement in generalist work with the strategic partner's focus on relationships of business leaders. Here "providing feedback to the business" is emphasised so that the notion of client relationships remains centre stage, illustrating the weaving together of old and new notions of HR work.

I mentioned earlier that becoming strategic created tensions within the HR department. Attempts to hold onto or reclaim aspects of generalist work by the strategic partners did not lesson the tension but were seen by many as a way for the strategic partners to both 'have their cake and eat it'. The undercurrent of concerns culminated in a meeting of HR functional team managers to highlight issues and actions required to address these. They prepared a presentation for the senior HR management team highlighting issues of low morale, concern about lack of partnering within HR and feeling undervalued. The functional team managers then also prepared their own strategic HR plan. This was a practical but also symbolic move, as the 'transactional' groups demonstrated they could also lay claim to being strategic. Furthermore, other groups in the department, including those working in the HR call centre, were also drawing on aspects of the previous constructions of generalist work, particularly a claim to have a feel for the mood of the organisation and to be a valuable source of such knowledge within the HR department, a notion that was widely rejected by strategic partners themselves. There was particular tension when individual strategic partners were seen to be addressing transactional issues, bypassing new procedures, and when the justification was a lack of experience, knowledge or ability within the relevant team. In this case the teams had in effect been given the transactional role and then been positioned as unable to fulfil it.

In analysing how HR practitioners work through, negotiate and manage the tensions of becoming a strategic partner I examined three themes which captured their identity work in respect to becoming strategic, becoming a partner and remaining a generalist. Becoming strategic is equated with a release from the previous struggle of the HR generalist role; their strategic potential had been constrained by the previous organisation and is now set free. I examined the tensions that results from attempts to separate strategic from other forms of HR activity and how this is played out in the conflict over notions of talk, work and value. Key to the notion of becoming a partner is an assessment of the business client. Legitimised through the language of HR, the business clients are often depicted as flawed geniuses, creating a need for the strategic partner role while also being held responsible for the difficult nature of this partnership. Lastly, while remaining a generalist should present a challenge for these HR practitioners, aspects are woven into their constructions of strategic partner identity, justified by claims to be the only group with experience necessary to resolve HR issues and by positioning resolution of these issues as an essential pre-requisite to successful partnerships. Tensions emerge here as strategic partners are seen to ‘both have their cake and eat it’ in respect to notions of being free to be strategic but retaining a say in transactional issues.

Discussion

A key aim of this paper was to offer an alternative to existing examinations of strategic partnership by shifting the focus from a role perspective to the social construction of identity. Of particular pertinence here, is the attention drawn not only to the emerging constructions but to the identity work performed by HR practitioners in their conversations and interactions as they go about their every day work. Becoming a strategic partner in this context is an active working through of these issues, a ‘performance’, rather than associated with the execution of certain tasks within a new job specification. We can see that tensions emerge as HR practitioners attempt to become strategic partners, and that these are emphasised as they weave ‘old’ generalist activities into this new positioning.

This identity focus adds a new layer of understanding to the previous emphasis on role enactment. Specifically it engages with the subjective experience of HR practitioners rather than seeking an objective assessment or categorisation of their work. I suggest that these performances are important in constructing (sometimes shared but also disputed) meanings of strategic partnership in this organisational context. This focus allows us not only to identify tensions but to work through how these emerge, are negotiated and, at times, managed. The attention to process is an important addition to the sometimes static portrayal of the strategic partner from a role perspective.

Furthermore, while the critical literature has long suggested that HRM be regarded as framing the management of the employment relationship within organisations (Townley 1993; Keenoy 1999), it has largely overlooked how HR practitioners may engage with this process in an attempt to secure legitimacy and in doing so shape the way in which HRM itself is enacted. My analysis provides insight into the ways in which these HR practitioners engage with (enact and recreate) the broader themes of HRM and highlights their participation in "the dynamic and socially complex nature of HRM" (Francis 2003: 323). It also offers an alternative perspective on arguments surrounding the nature of the HR profession, which here is not considered as a label or occupational category but rather as a process integral to this identity work.

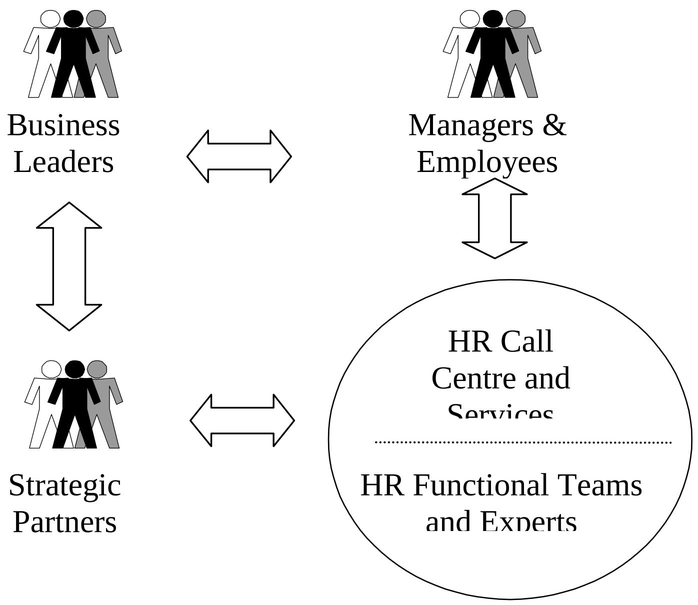
From this perspective it is important to consider the broader impact of identity work on the local organisational context. We see in these data various tensions that emerge between different groups of HR practitioners as different constructions of becoming strategic and becoming a partner are worked through. The impact of these tensions is felt across the HR department, and indeed beyond with the clients, as they ripple through the way work is performed in respect to key HR practices and policies.

A further aim of this research was to generate practical insights for those organisations embarking on similar re-organisations. Firstly, the research highlights the need for a focus on how different groups of HR practitioners interpret changes to organisations and roles. Secondly, it points to the need to pay attention to how these groups (both within and without the HR department) will work together moving forward – above and beyond an attention to HR policies and procedures. Thirdly, it suggests more attention to the ongoing experience of change, and perhaps that the HR department is at risk of not practising what it preaches in the broader context of organisational change.

The strategic partner role is much discussed in both the academic and practitioner literature. However the change in focus from HR role to HR identity offered in this paper highlights the ongoing, flexible and fragmented experience of becoming a strategic partner. While I felt that foregrounding the HR practitioners' own identity work was essential, at the same time, I recognise that other (organisational and institutional) influences evident in previous role based studies have not featured in this account. A useful extension of this research would therefore be to broaden participation to business clients and other HR practitioners, ideally by continuing the ethnographic research approach adopted here to examine day-to-day interactions and work experiences.

Figure 1 for insertion in text as indicated:

Figure 1: HR roles and relationships after reorganisation



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