

## Understanding the Relationship Between HR Roles and HR Effectiveness: A Conceptual Review

Rashed Mahmud Shakil<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohamed Ayyub Hassan<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad Imran Qureshi<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1,2</sup> School of Human Resource Development & Psychology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup> School of Human Resource Development & Psychology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup> Malaysian Institute of Industrial Technology, University of Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

\* Corresponding author: [rs.shakil1310@gmail.com](mailto:rs.shakil1310@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The concept of Human Resource Management (HRM) has undergone a big breakthrough resulting in a paradigm shift from the traditional approach of personnel management to the modern approach. The latter HRM approach focuses on how performing HR roles makes HR professionals effective and efficient. With the growing role of HR in sustained competitive advantage, the issue of HR effectiveness moves to the forefront of contemporary business. Hence, this paper aims to develop a conceptual framework on the relationship between Dave Ulrich's four HR roles and HR effectiveness. Here it is proposed that efficient performance of HR roles will have a positive relationship with HR effectiveness. HR professionals may perform their HR responsibilities more efficiently on the condition that they are provided adequate training and proper top management support. Even though this study is based on literature review, it contributes by enriching that part of the HR literature on the relationship between HR roles and HR effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Human Resource Management; HR professionals; HR roles; HR effectiveness; Competitive advantage.

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### Introduction

In terms of applying management two vital factors namely men and operating systems are existed in the organization because of the fact that men put operating systems into effect (Hanushek, 1997), thus it can rightly be claimed that Human Resources (HR) constitute the most significant asset in an enterprise (Fulmer & Ployhart, 2014; Mitchell, Obeidat, & Bray, 2013). When novel organizations are considered as one of the major innovations of present century, the effectiveness of organization is largely dependent on the efficient utilization of HR and the integration of their business strategies efficiently (Bagga & Srivastava, 2014; Brauns, 2013). Since the significance of Human Resource Management (HRM) is growing constantly in different parts of the world, HR professionals are encountering enormous pressure for ensuring HR effectiveness in the fast changing environment. It has also been widely acknowledged that HR play important role in sustaining competitive advantage and achieving organizational success (Kuipers & Giurge, 2017; Zhao, Sheehan, Cieri, & Cooper, 2019), but the contention exists to a great extent how HR roles enhance HR effectiveness in the organization. In this perspective, HR professionals act as driving force in ensuring the effectiveness of HR (Ulrich, 1998).

Over the past few decades, HRM was considered as administrative function as well as expense generator related to employee management of the firm (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Ramlall, 2003). Previous decades also witnessed paramount transformation in HRM recognizing the significant importance of manpower and managing them strategically with a view to achieving firm's success by applying coordinated HRM around the organizational needs (Azmi, 2011; Çalişkan, 2010). In a similar fashion, it was noticed by Yusliza (2011) that numerous practitioners and theorists are highlighting the nature of HRM as business-oriented, change-minded, and strategic-minded

together with focusing on people management. In this reasoning, a number of researchers has demonstrated how HRM is placing emphasis on gaining better performance from not merely people management but also business functions (Azmi, 2011; Buren, Greenwood, & Sheehan, 2011; Çalişkan, 2010; Inyang, 2010; Keegan & Francis, 2010). Taking such evident changes into account, up-to-date researchers are increasingly considering effective HRM as the addition of value to the organization by means of managing employee programs toward the success of business (Jahanian, Nawaz, Yamin, & Nawaz, 2012).

The need for HR professionals in assuming strategic role in the field of HRM has become a much-discussed issue during the recent years (Mitchell et al., 2013; Rees & Smith, 2017). A growing number of researchers contended that the strategic HRM concept evolved into the alignment of human resource strategies with corporate strategies (Bagga & Srivastava, 2014; Butler & Lee, 2003; Kuipers & Giurge, 2017). Being a key actor in the organization, HR is expected to play a dynamic and influential role in selecting its manpower well, investing them with the appropriate responsibilities, supporting their career growth, and respecting their needs and wants with a view to achieving the strategic business objectives of the organization. This essential role demands necessary competencies on the part of HR professionals for creating and sustaining an adaptive as well as flexible workforce (Geimer, Zolner, & Allen, 2017; Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, & Cardy, 2007; Laine, Stenvall, & Tuominen, 2017).

### The Ulrich Four-Roles Model of HR Management

The model pertaining to four-roles of HR management was first developed by Conner & Ulrich (1996) and later promoted by Ulrich (1997). There are two main dimensions in the conceptual framework of HR four-role model. While the first continuum reflects the focus from



operational aspects to strategic aspects, the second continuum represents conflicting demands between people aspects and process aspects. Based on the view of Ulrich (1997), organizational excellence can be delivered by HR by performing these four HR roles. In Figure 2 the four HR roles are depicted which can make a contribution to the organization by ensuring HR effectiveness.



Fig. 1. HR Multiple-Roles Model (Ulrich, 1997: 24)

Dave Ulrich mapped out four metaphor of HR namely strategic partner, change agent, employee champion, and administrative expert with specific roles. These roles incorporate their respective activities followed by a set of deliverables not only within the function but also within the business as portrayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Linking Ulrich's roles to deliverables

Metaphor	Role	Activity	Deliverable
Strategic Partner	Management of strategic resources	Aligning HR and business strategy	Executing strategy
Administrative Expert	Management of firm's infrastructure	Re-engineering process	Building an efficient infrastructure
Employee Champion	Management of employee contribution	Listening and responding to employees	Increasing employee commitment and capability
Change Agent	Management of transformation and change	Managing of transformation and change	Creating a renewed infrastructure

Source: Hunter, Saunders, and Constance (2016)

**a) Strategic Partner Role**

The strategic partner role of HR actively participates in the process of establishing business strategy, not just making response to the strategy that are introduced by senior managers (Long & Ismail, 2010; Ulrich, 1997). Additionally, strategic partner role is performed by HR professionals when they ask questions and design HR practices by aligning procedures efficiently and effectively with the business strategies (Geimer et al., 2017; Kuipers & Giurge, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2013). Against this backdrop, HR professionals are expected to be skilled in recognizing and executing HR practices with a view to ensuring HR effectiveness. Strategic HR is properly utilized when HR stakeholders like top management teams, HR professionals, and line managers put HR strategies into effect (Zhao et al., 2019). Because of this utilization, business strategies are transformed into organizational capabilities (Akaegbu & Usoro, 2017; Teece, 2018).

**b) Administrative Expert Role**

HR professionals as administrative expert are required to perform a set of functions such as designing and delivering HR processes training, staffing, rewarding, appraising performance, promoting, and supervising the smooth functioning of HR tasks accompanied by managing employees in the workplace (Brown, Kulik, Cregan, & Metz, 2017; Kuipers & Giurge, 2017; Ulrich, 1997). According to Huselid, Jackson, and Schuler (1997), the current level of technical HRM practices outweigh the strategic HRM practices in the organization because of its wide application. In order to maintain HR effectiveness, the organization are supposed to perform at least moderate level of

technical HR practices. The functional expert or administrative expert role of HR professionals as asserted by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) that the successful HR managers carry out staffing and training functions in an efficient and effective manner.

**c) Employee Champion Role:**

The performance of employee champion role deals with the management of contributing to the employees (Ramachandra, Mansor, & Mohamed, 2011; Ulrich, 1997). Being an effective employee champion, HR professionals make every effort constantly in comprehending the employee needs, meeting those needs, and providing proper incentives to enhance their commitment level, that in turn accelerate HR effectiveness. This view is supported by Long and Ismail (2010) who argued that the creation of value by performing relationship role is one of the six principles of HRM. The author went on to state that a candid advocate of employee interests should not lose sight of the business needs. As an effective employee champion, HR professionals' primary role is the creation of employee-friendly atmosphere for ensuring commitment to the organizational success. This issue is consistent with the HR professionals' role of dealing with employees' concerns, day-to-day problems, and needs (Conner & Ulrich, 1996; Kuipers & Giurge, 2017; Yusuf, Fidyawan, & Wekke, 2017). Involving as well as training employees and managers in how to maintain employee-centric behaviour tend to facilitate human capital recognition as a valuable resource for the company.

**d) Change Agent Role**

With the reference to Ulrich (1997), the management of transformation and change both falls within the domain of change agent role. Baran, Filipkowski, and Stockwell (2018) hold the view that HR roles vary from organization to organization in terms of driving changes and if the change process and priorities are not defined strongly by the HR community they will not be considered as an effective organizational player. More precisely, change agent role assist the organization to build its capacity for change by employees for ensuring HR effectiveness (Brown et al., 2017; Conner & Ulrich, 1996; Kuipers & Giurge, 2017). HR professionals deal with the organizational culture that help them to make crucial contribution in the organizational change management process. Additionally, Yusuf et al. (2017) maintained that the anticipation of change and knowledge regarding the implementation of change are the key responsibilities of effective HR professionals. With the passage of time organization grows, so does its needs, and by gaining fine-grained understanding pertaining to these organizational change, HR professionals can become both efficient and effective.

**HR Effectiveness**

Since the mid-1990s, a heavy research was found on the HRM system effectiveness in an effort to show its linkage with desired organizational outcomes (Huselid, 1995; Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). The concept effectiveness is meant as the attainment of objectives (Koontz & Weihrich, 2010; Rimi, 2015). When it is applied in the business context, HR effectiveness is referred as the performance level or success with respect to the achievement of desired goals of directing HR in that business. Several attempts have been made by past authors to address HR effectiveness that attempts to illustrate what functions HR professionals perform in the organization and how the relationship between HR practices and organizational outcomes are maintained (Mitchell et al., 2013; Sheikh, Hasnu, & Khan, 2016; Wright et al., 2001). Furthermore, the alignment of HR with the organizational strategy by applying the best potential of manpower is necessary for accelerating organizational performance (April Chang & Chun Huang, 2005; Bagga & Srivastava, 2014; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Collins & Clark, 2003; Kuipers & Giurge, 2017). Therefore, HR effectiveness is expected to assess the attainment of traditional administrative HR functions along with strategic goals of HR.

HR effectiveness, as defined by Huselid et al. (1997, p. 172), is the execution of high quality activities relating to technical and strategic



HR. This viewpoint is in agreement with the definition of HR effectiveness provided by Yusoff, Abdullah, and Ramayah (2009), arguing that technical and strategic HR are the major two aspects of HR effectiveness. Allied to this, technical HR effectiveness refers to the measurement of perception towards the accomplishment of traditional HR functions including training and development, recruitment and selection, compensation management, and performance appraisal (Huselid et al., 1997; Rees & Smith, 2017; Rimi, 2015). Conversely, strategic HR effectiveness defines how well HR activities improve the organizational employees by supporting their business needs such as developing communication, increasing involvement, fostering teamwork, improving talent, and enhancing quality for fulfilling future demand of the organization (Huselid et al., 1997; Rees & Smith, 2017; Rimi, 2015). Other than that, several researchers in the HRM literature are convinced that there are a number of performance measures for indicating HR effectiveness such as financial measures (Huselid, 1995; Mitchell et al., 2013), turnover and absence rates (Guthrie, 2001), commitment (Macky & Boxall, 2007), and employee satisfaction (Jamrog & Overholt, 2004).

### Relationship between HR Roles and HR Effectiveness

The consequences of HR roles and strategies on organizational effectiveness has become an emerging issue in the area of HRM, industrial and organizational psychology, and industrial relations (Boudreau, 1991; Jones & Wright, 1992). After the evolution of HR roles by Ulrich (1997) the matter of HR effectiveness came to the forefront. Despite the fact that the inevitable roles of HR for achieving the competitive advantage and organizational success are widely recognized (Baran et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2013), the HR roles for achieving HR effectiveness sparked the interest of numerous scholars. In the extant literature different researchers explained the relationship between HR roles and HR effectiveness in different ways. Numerous studies have attempted to claim the harmony between HR strategies and business strategies for ensuring the effectiveness in the organization (Bagga & Srivastava, 2014; Brauns, 2013; Kuipers & Giurge, 2017). HR effectiveness was explained by Tsui (1987) as an assessment of the extent to which HR systems are best fitted with the business intentions of the firm based on key criteria in the manner that business objectives are fulfilled by the firms. This notion is in favour with the perspective that the performance of HR roles ensure the best fit of HR practices, policies, and systems with the business objectives that are indispensable for the effectiveness of HR (Çalışkan, 2010; Rees & Smith, 2017; Ruel, Bondarouk, & Van der Velde, 2007). Hence, HR effectiveness is taken into account for making sure the people management success by means of consistent HR functions those are integrated strategically with business objectives.

Several attempts have been made by numerous authors (Azmi, 2011; Chen, Hsu, & Yip, 2011; Ferris et al., 2007; Ruel et al., 2007; D.-S. Wang & Shyu, 2008; Yusoff et al., 2009) to illustrate HR outcome effectiveness by reporting that ensuring HR effectiveness depends on what functions are performed by HR professionals to manage HR and how organizational performance, effectiveness, and competitive advantage are anticipated to link HR. Based on the multiple constituency theory developed by Tsui (1984, 1987, 1990), the conceptualization of HR effectiveness includes meeting different expectations of a variety of internal constituents by the performance of multiple roles that in turn lead to business success. Chang and Chi (2007) conducted a study by using HR performance indicators which have consistency with the roles of HR professionals for evaluating HR effectiveness. Their study results revealed that if HR professionals are provided thorough statements regarding performance expectations as behavioural guidance, their overall HR effectiveness are enhanced.

The number of studies finding the relationship between HR roles and HR effectiveness are lacking in the extant literature (Ruel et al., 2007; Yusoff et al., 2009). It is also mentioned in the extant literature that HR effectiveness can be measured by the contribution of HR professionals to organizational performance (see for example, Çalışkan, 2010; Schuler & Jackson, 2014; Wright et al., 2001). In line

with this, Kuipers and Giurge (2017) conducted a study in 336 full-time working students and came to the conclusion that strategic HR roles have positive and significant relationship with organizational performance, while no significant relationship was found between operational HR roles and performance. These findings can best be explained based on prior researchers suggestions that strategic roles of HR contribute and add value to expected level of performance (Bhatnagar & Sharma, 2005; Lawler & Mohrman, 2000, 2003). However, one study carried out by Lemmergaard (2009) reported his findings that operational HR roles are positively related to performance.

Another study on Jordanian private sector, Mitchell et al. (2013) conducted a self-administered survey where they found that the role of strategic HR is positively related to the financial performance of organization and the HR professionals make crucial contribution in adopting the ‘best practices’ in an organization. This findings was in consensus with Wang and Niu (2010), who carried out a survey on 112 Taiwanese companies and demonstrated the results that the overall performance of organization is explained by the role of change agent and employee champion, whereas greater efforts are required for administrative expert and strategic partner role. Additionally, in their survey, Bhatnagar and Sharma (2005) endeavoured to examine whether strategic roles of HR are positively related with the learning capability of organization which is the predictor to organizational performance. Ulrich’s four HR roles model was applied in their study and HR business partner role was the summation of four HR roles. Their study concluded that strategic HR roles have positive relationship with the learning capability of organization and HR business partner role is also positively related with the learning capability of organization.

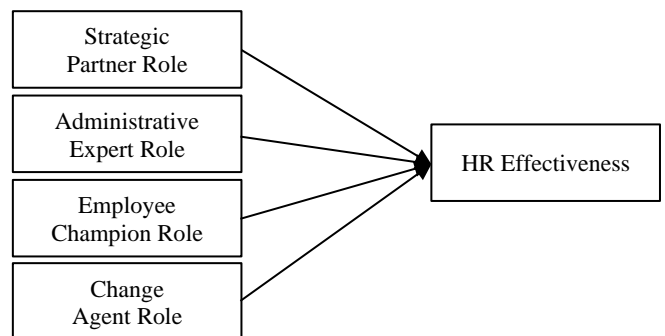


Fig. 2. Conceptual Framework

### Research Propositions and Conceptual Framework

The intention of the present study is to come up with a conceptual review based on the past literature pertaining to the relationship between HR roles developed by Ulrich (1997) and HR effectiveness. More broadly, this paper analyses how four HR roles (strategic partner, employee champion, administrative expert, and change agent) are related to HR effectiveness as displayed in the conceptual model (Fig. 2) developed by the authors. Based on the study of previous literature the following propositions are established:

Proposition 1: Strategic partner role of HR professionals is positively related to HR effectiveness.

Proposition 2: Employee champion role of HR professionals is positively related to HR effectiveness.

Proposition 3: Administrative expert role of HR professionals is positively related to HR effectiveness.

Proposition 4: Change agent role of HR professionals is positively related to HR effectiveness.

### Research Limitations and Recommendations

Being a conceptual paper, certain limitations need to be considered here. The authors provided all the literature support based on the previous study findings and did not provide any empirical evidence to



substantiate the literature used in this study that included the major limitation. Moreover, this study did not precisely explain the role of HR stakeholders due to the fact that this review was based on HR professionals' role in HR to enhance HR effectiveness. There is no denial of the fact that line managers are the crucial partner and stakeholder of HR (Mierlo, Bondarouk, & Sanders, 2018; Woodrow & Guest, 2014), and examining their role in HR will enrich the literature. Taking the stated limitations into account, it is recommended for future researchers to conduct study on the relationship between HR stakeholders' role in HR and HR effectiveness.

## Conclusion

HR effectiveness is taken into account for making sure the people management success by means of consistent HR functions those are integrated strategically with business objectives. Organizational excellence can be delivered by HR with performing four HR roles. Strategic partner role is performed by HR professionals when they ask questions and design HR practices by aligning procedures efficiently and effectively with the business strategies. The administrative expert role of HR professionals carry out staffing and training functions in an effective manner. The performance of employee champion role deals with the management of contributing to the employees. Finally, change agent role assist the organization to build its capacity for change for ensuring HR effectiveness.

The current paper examines the relationship between four HR roles performed by HR professionals and HR effectiveness. Four HR roles developed by Ulrich (1997) included strategic partner, employee champion, administrative expert, and change agent. Apparently, the thorough investigation of extant SHRM literature indicated that the performance of four HR roles accelerate the process of ensuring HR effectiveness. The successful performance of these HR roles help HR professionals become competent enough for getting invitation to the company's top management table (Long, Ismail, & Amin, 2013). Additionally, performing HR responsibilities duly, HR professionals not only enhance HR effectiveness but also help the organization achieve competitive advantage. In sum, the achievement of organizational goal depends to a great extent on efficient and effective HR professionals.

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