

**Does the HR business partner model add value
to the HR function and does it assist in preparing
organisations for the Fourth Industrial Revolution?**

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MA in Human Resource Management

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Abstract

Does the HR BP model add value to the HR function and does it assist in preparing organisations for 4IR? – Cecilia Rochford

The WEF recommended that the HR function 'reinvent' itself to assist organisations to prepare for the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) using the description of a HR business partner (BP) model that has existed for twenty years. This shows a gap between the theory and practice of the HR BP model. This research will seek to understand if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and explore if the HR BP model can assist organisations to prepare for 4IR.

Through qualitative research conducted using semi structured interviews the author also explores the benefits and challenges of the HR BP model, if the value of the BP model is defined by the six competency domains of Ulrich, Brockbank, Ulrich, and Kryscynski (2015) and the challenges of 4IR on the organisation.

The author concluded that the HR BP model can add value to the HR function and assist with the preparations for 4IR, but this is determined by the effectiveness of 7 dynamic factors defined as: (1) organisation culture; (2) a shared service centre; (3) a HR information system; (4) HR competencies; (5) organisation strategy; (6) the speed of change; and (7) understanding the impact of 4IR.

Declaration

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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Signature of research student:

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "C. Rochford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'C'.

Date: 29 August 2018

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List of Abbreviations

4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
BP	Business Partner
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
SSC	Shared Services Centre
US	United States
WEF	World Economic Forum

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context

The fourth industrial revolution is “...a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before” (Schwab, 2016, p. 1). The difference between this industrial revolution and other industrial revolutions throughout history, is that the speed of technological innovation is disrupting traditional business models and subsequently the organisation of the global workforce (Bessen, 2016; Chui, Manyika and Miremadi, 2016; Schwab, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2016;).

The fourth industrial revolution (4IR), is recognised as a technological industrial revolution that enables automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet-of-things to be inextricably linked so that each technology is further enhanced by the other. This technological advancement has been referred to as a “...marriage of physical and digital technologies...that is not only interconnected, but also capable of more holistic, informed decision making” (Deloitte, 2018, p. 2). In essence, this ‘marriage’ of technologies will either enhance the ability of humans to make decisions and be more productive, or it will completely remove humans from the process (PwC, 2017) and examples of this advanced technology are already found in manufacturing, healthcare, professional services and other service industries around the globe (CIPD, 2017b). The expected impact of 4IR is that significant levels of job displacement will result in global unrest and instability if businesses, governments and educators do not prepare for the change (Schwab, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2016; Morrar, Arman and Mousa, 2017).

However, not all scholars believe the impact of 4IR is different from other industrial revolutions in human history. In fact, some scholars believe that the advent of 4IR is just another evolution of this historical phenomenon; organisations will adapt their workforce to meet the demands of a technologically advancing global economy as they have done before (Bessen,

2016; Lund and Manyika, 2017). In an article published by McKinsey & Company, Lund and Manyika (2017) found that total employment continued to grow even though one-third of China's workforce moved from agriculture to other sectors between 1990 and 2015. This continued growth of total employment during large shifts in employment has also occurred in the US, where even though manufacturing has moved from 26% of total employment in the 1960s to below 10% in the 2000s, total employment continues to strengthen (Lund and Manyika, 2017). Whether 4IR is a phenomenon that is an evolution or a radical change, scholars are agreed that the disruption to the global workforce must be managed.

It is unsurprising then, that in the WEF's Global Challenge Insight Report, "The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution", the first recommendation for "immediate focus" was that the human resource (HR) function must be "reinvented" in order to assist organisations with the impact of this global change (World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 29). The WEF report identifies four requirements of the HR function: (1) be more strategic; (2) use analytical tools to identify trends and skill gaps; (3) provide insight to the business; and (4) be innovative in talent management to maximise opportunities in transformation trends (World Economic Forum, 2016). These four competencies are expected to assist organisations to prepare for the change. However, these recommended proficiencies outlined in the WEF report are the characteristics of the HR business partner model; a model that has been operating in large organisations for almost twenty years (CIPD, 2015).

1.2 Objectives

The WEF recommending that the HR function 'reinvent' itself to assist organisations to prepare for 4IR, using a model that has existed for twenty years, shows a disconnect between the theory and practice of the HR business partner (BP) model. This research will seek to understand if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and explore if the HR BP model can assist organisations to prepare for 4IR.

1.3 Rationale

The disruption of 4IR is generally discussed in literature as a global phenomenon. Research completed by the WEF suggests that the impact to the global workforce is specific to region, industry and occupation; however, it is in modern economies that the greatest impact is expected (World Economic Forum, 2016). Ireland has one of the fastest growing open market modern economies in the world (IDA Ireland, 2015; Ibec, 2017), yet country specific analysis related to 4IR is not included in the WEF report.

Furthermore, as an open market economy Ireland is dependent on inward foreign direct investment (FDI) in the form of large multinationals (Gunnigle, Lavelle and McDonnell, 2007). Large organisations, defined as 500 or more employees, are more likely to utilise the business partner model for support functions such as finance or human resources (Gunnigle, et al., 2007). In Ireland, almost 50% of companies surveyed by the CIPD utilise the business partner model (CIPD, 2017a). The first comprehensive survey of multinationals (MNCs) was completed by the University of Limerick in 2007, but its focus was to understand the policies and practices of HR in these large organisations and did not specifically look at the value of the HR BP model (Gunnigle, et al., 2007). Longitudinal studies performed by Ulrich and his contemporaries on the competencies required for HR professionals and the HR function are global studies, but similar to the WEF report on the impact of 4IR, the data does not provide country specific data for Ireland (Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, Sandholtz, and Younger, 2008; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2009).

Therefore, the rationale for this research project is to add to the body of knowledge by understanding the link between the impact of technological change and the value of the HR BP in the context of the Irish market. Although an in-depth review of the Irish workforce is out of scope for this research, the framework of this research may provide a foundation for future study.

This research is important for the field of human resource management (HRM) because it will enable HR professionals to reflect on potential gaps in the

implementation of the HR BP model and understand how as a HR function it can facilitate change in the impending global transformation.

1.4 Dissertation overview

There is extensive debate about the impact of 4IR from many different perspectives - social, economic, political and environmental to name a few. What is agreed is that 4IR will create complex global change. Kurt Lewin's theory that the complexities of change are constant and must be managed (Swanson and Creed, 2014) will set the conceptual framework for the dissertation.

Chapter two will provide a review of the current literature outlining the existing research on 4IR, HRM and the HR BP model.

Chapter three will clearly outline the research aims and objectives and the research methodology, design and analysis to answer the aims and objectives. This chapter also includes the ethical considerations and limitations of the research.

Chapter four presents the research findings and discussion. Themes identified during the analysis are considered and deliberated with reference to current literature.

Finally, in chapter five the conclusions and recommendations for organisations are presented, along with suggestions for further research in the area.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review focuses on some of the key discussions about the challenges of 4IR, human resource management (HRM), the HR function and the HR BP model with a view to understanding the role that HR can play in assisting organisations to prepare and adapt for the change.

2.2. What is the impact of 4IR on the global workforce?

Research completed by McKinsey & Company suggests that with the technology already developed and in use today, up to sixty percent of jobs in America could automate at least thirty percent of their day-to-day tasks (Chui, et al., 2016). In more recent research, McKinsey Global Institute estimate that depending on the speed of technological adoption up to 375 million people globally will need to change jobs by 2030 (Manyika and Spence, 2018). The World Economic Forum (WEF) estimate the global impact of current trends will be a net loss of five million jobs, with many of these jobs lost in white-collar professional and administrative office jobs (World Economic Forum, 2016). What the research by these organisations emphasises is that employment shifts unlike any experienced in history are anticipated with 4IR. However, not all scholars agree with this perspective.

2.2.1 A historical perspective on industrial revolutions

The first industrial revolution changed the global landscape in the nineteenth century, particularly in the UK and the US. The organisation of the labour force was transformed as farm workers transitioned to factory workers. The first industrial revolution is defined by the use of the steam engine, which mechanised production (Schwab, 2016). As the age of the machine grew, new innovations to improve existing technology were developed and new theories to enhance worker productivity were established.

Bessen (2016) would agree 4IR is a new industrial revolution, but he looks to the technological changes that impacted the textile industry in the first industrial revolution for historical perspective. During this time, “automation drove the

price of cloth down, increasing the highly elastic demand, resulting in net job growth despite the labor saving technology” (Bessen, 2016, p. 5). In other words, as more automated looming technology was introduced, there was increased demand for workers in the textile industry. This increased demand for workers was due to the efficiency and production capabilities of the textile workers using new technology, and although the types of job roles may have changed, growth overall continued to increase (Bessen, 2012).

Lund and Manyika (2017) would describe this phenomenon as an ‘employment shift’. An employment shift can be described as the loss of some occupations, but growth in new and different occupations; the number of new jobs surpass the numbers of lost jobs so overall the employment growth numbers increase (Lund and Manyika, 2017). Employment shifts are not without significant impact; “throughout history, the process of creative destruction following technological inventions has created enormous wealth, but also undesired disruptions” (Frey and Osborne, 2013, p. 5). Manyika and Spence (2018) echo Bessen’s argument that productivity increased during the first industrial revolution; however, they argue that the transition through the period resulted in stagnation of real wages for workers. This meant that although there was growth, only through “substantial policy reforms” did the impact on the workforce ease (Manyika and Spence, 2018).

Frey and Osborne (2013) analysed the impact of the introduction of computers in the third industrial revolution from the 1960s to 1990s. During this period, automation due to computer technology was being introduced in manufacturing, with the result that employment shifted from blue-collar manufacturing jobs to lower paid service jobs (Frey and Osborne, 2013). Unlike the focus on overall job growth by Bessen (2016) and to some extent Lund and Manyika (2017), Frey and Osborne (2013) sought to understand the impact on the workforce through the *type* of jobs, not the total *number* of jobs. The essence of their research is that jobs continued to grow during the third industrial revolution, but a gap between low-skilled and high-skilled employment showed the “...hollowing-out of middle-income routine jobs” (Frey and Osborne, 2013, p. 12). In essence, there was job growth during this period

but a divide in the type of work and subsequently wages for workers. There were jobs available in the employment shift, but it was lower paid work. The significance of the employment shift in the third industrial revolution is that the growth was in quantity of jobs, not in quality of work or wages.

Bessen (2016) also discusses the impact of the third industrial revolution on the workforce in the United States. Unlike Frey and Osborne (2013) who look at the impact in manufacturing, Bessen (2016) uses the introduction of computers in the field of desktop publishing as an example. Bessen (2016) explains that some jobs, such as typesetters and compositors, disappeared completely. However, he outlines how there was growth in the job field overall due to the increasing numbers of graphic designers who were now using computers for desktop publishing (Bessen, 2016). For Bessen (2016), history has shown that organisations and industries adapt to the change that technology introduces into the workforce. Fundamentally, he believes that while some jobs may disappear new ones are created and the evidence through each industrial revolution is that this can increase job growth. Frey and Osborne (2013) may acknowledge that job growth is evident, but the concern would be with the types of jobs that fuel the growth. According to Frey and Osborne (2013) there is evidence of a shift to high-skilled workers now working in fields that were traditionally occupied by low-skilled workers. This is due to the complexity of computerisation and workers needing a higher level of skill and cognitive ability, while computers complete more of the automated tasks that would previously have been completed by lower skilled workers.

What is evident in the research of prior industrial revolutions is that while there is job loss, there is also job growth. However, the employment shifts have complex impacts – whether that is wage stagnation or a ‘hollowing-out’ of middle income workers. If these are the employment shifts in prior industrial revolutions, what is different in 4IR?

2.2.2 The difference is a fusion of capability and the speed of change

Whether it is called a ‘marriage’ or ‘fusion’ of technologies it is agreed by scholars that the technology of 4IR is removing the boundaries between the physical and cognitive abilities of humanity and the digital world (Frey and

Osborne, 2013; Schwab, 2016; PwC, 2017; Deloitte, 2018). Until 4IR, "...cognitive tasks...have largely remained a human domain" (Frey and Osborne, 2013, p. 19). The speed of change as this industrial revolution evolves is impacting traditional business models and is expected to continue to disrupt as technology is used in innovative ways to create new products and services for global consumers (World Economic Forum, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2017). Large incumbent organisations are seeing market share loss to more dynamic businesses and are having to adapt to these new ways of doing business (World Economic Forum, 2017).

However, one must consider that time and again the overall debate on the impact of 4IR returns to employments shifts - while some jobs are lost, others are created. Further evidence of this is a recent global study completed by Accenture; Daugherty and Wilson (2018) found that new jobs that did not exist before were evident in organisations that are testing or already using AI. However, these new jobs require technical capability and are not a direct replacement for jobs lost in professional or office roles. There appears to be a growing consensus that the impact of 4IR is an employment shift that will see the disappearance of several job families, while others will be created (Bessen, 2016; Chui, et al., 2016; Lund and Manyika, 2017); however, the concern about the 'hollowing out of the middle' cannot be overlooked (Frey and Osborne, 2013).

The impact for organisations is 'nuanced' (Chui, et al., 2016). Like prior industrial revolutions, automation will remove repetitive tasks, but the impact will not be the removal of job occupations in their entirety (Chui, et al., 2016; Lund and Manyika, 2017). The key transformation for organisations is the removal of repetitive tasks in almost all job roles that will have the largest impact on the workforce (Chui, et al., 2016). Frey and Osborne (2013) describe this nuance as computerisation moving into the realm of 'non-routine' tasks. Although the emphasis in literature is different, the essence of the argument is the same – with rapid changes in technology, organisations are forced to reconsider how they divide and allocate tasks and activities; organisations must

adapt their workforce (Bessen, 2016; Chui, et al., 2016). The question is – who is responsible for organising and adapting the workforce?

2.3 What is the role of human resource management?

The concept of human resource management (HRM) developed from the behavioural management approach in the US in the 1960s (Hitt, Black and Porter, 2012). By the 1980s, the term “human resource management” was generally accepted as “...the activities of management in organising and employing people” (Boxall and Purcell, 2011, p. 1). By the 1990s, the approach developed into a strategic alignment between an organisation’s business strategy and the HRM policies and processes that were used to manage the workforce (CIPD, 2017c). The key in the strategic link between an organisation and the HR function is that the HR policies, practices and processes will reflect the competitive strategy and management style of the organisation (Schuler and Jackson, 1987) or the industrial sector (Harney and Monks, 2014). For example, the HR policies, practices and processes of an organisation focussed on a low-cost strategy will be different from an organisation that is a unionised public sector organisation. Furthermore, in a larger more complex organisation the approach to the workforce may be altered for different groups of employees, such as executives and managers or employees considered to be valuable for achieving strategic competitiveness (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). The key concept is that each of these organisations will have a management approach to their workforce that will be reflected in the activities that manage all aspects of the employee lifecycle – such as recruitment and selection, onboarding, performance management, reward and benefits, talent development and retention. Generally, these activities are facilitated by the human resource function.

The WEF (2016) state that as a priority HR needs to reinvent itself as a strategic partner to meet the immediate needs of organisations in managing the impact of 4IR. Ulrich and Brockbank (2009) would say the HR business partner model, where HR as an enabler of the business aligns strategic objectives to that of the business, has existed informally for more than a hundred years. Others would state that a more formal HR business partner model has existed for

almost twenty years (CIPD, 2015). This disconnect between the WEF report and HR professional bodies is evidence of the gap between theory and practice of the HR business partner model.

2.4 What is the HR business partner model?

CIPD define the term 'HR operating model' as not just the HR organisational structure, "...but the roles within that structure, the capabilities required to deliver those roles, the processes within the structure, and the enablers such as technology, governance and measurement" (CIPD, 2015). One of the most common HR operating models for large organisations is known as 'the Ulrich model', which splits HR into three areas of specialisation – shared services that perform day-to-day transactional activities, business partner roles to provide strategic HR support and centres of expertise that provide specialised skills for the business (Boroughs, 2015). At the core of this model is the requirement that the HR function, and by default the HR professionals within the function, must deliver value to the business (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Ulrich and Brockbank define 'value' for the HR function where "...HR practices, departments and professionals produce positive outcomes for key stakeholders – employees, line managers, customers and investors" (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005, p. 2). The HR BP model sits firmly in the concept that HR is a strategic partner to the business. To understand the model, one must have a brief understanding of the evolution of HR.

2.4.1 Evolution of HR from personnel to strategic partner

The evolution of HR from personnel to strategic partner echoes the change in how organisations managed and organised their workforce. The requirement to manage and organise a workforce dates to the first industrial revolution; factories needed to ensure employees were efficient and productive in completing assigned tasks (Khan and Mushtaq, 2015). In the early years, the key purpose of the personnel department was completion of administrative duties focused on compliance with policies and procedures (Khan and Mushtaq, 2015). It is not until the 1980s that the focus to improve workforce efficiency and productivity shifted to emphasise improvements in the work environment itself (Khan and Mushtaq, 2015). By the 1990s, the HR function

was expected to be competent as a strategic partner in ensuring the workforce, now considered human capital, was driving the organisation's competitive advantage (Khan and Mushtaq, 2015).

In Ireland, the start of the personnel function began in the late 1960s and continued into the 1970s and 1980s (Harney and Monks, 2014). The primary focus of the personnel function was related to industrial relations (Harney and Monks, 2014). Industrial relations differ from the concept of HRM because the focus is on "...control of employees and compliance of policies and procedures..." (Khan and Mushtaq, 2015, p. 195). The concept of HRM and HR as a strategic partner begins to appear with the setup of US MNCs that were no longer required to recognise unions in their Irish greenfield sites (Gunnigle, MacCurtain and Morley, 2001). By the 1990s, with an improved economic environment in Ireland, the HR function increasingly began to focus on its strategic influence on Irish businesses (Harney and Monks, 2014).

A strategic approach in the HR function acknowledges "...that managers exercise strategic choice when making decisions in key areas of HR such as rewards, employee relations, training and performance management, culminating in an overall philosophy towards employees" (Harney and Monks, 2014). The link between HR strategy and the business in large organisations is generally with the implementation of the HR BP model.

2.5 What is the value of the HR BP model to the HR function?

As organisations increase in size and complexity, they are more likely to have a HR function that includes more specialist HR roles (Gunnigle, Heraty and Morley, 2017). In Ireland, almost 50% of large organisations utilise the HR BP model (CIPD, 2017a). As previously described, the implementation of the HR BP model consists of the HR function diverging into three strands – operational or transactional delivery, HR business partners who support the business, and specialist functions in centres of expertise. Ulrich and Brockbank (2009) define business partners within the HR BP model as HR professionals that can be in one of four categories (depending on the size of the organisation): corporate HR, embedded HR in organisational functional areas, HR specialists in centres of expertise, or HR delivery in service centres. In other words, HR BPs can

work in a head office, out in the field, or in a shared service centre. There are benefits and challenges with the implementation of the HR BP model.

2.5.1 Key benefits and challenges of the HR BP model

In a globalised world where large organisations must account for organisational value, the business partner model is not limited to the HR function (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2009). The benefit that is most associated with the HR BP model is that lower value transactional activities can be split from higher value 'strategic' activities and either outsourced completely or moved to a shared service centre. Whether outsourced or in a shared service centre, the transactional activities are usually moved offshore to a developing economy and the clear benefit of the HR BP model is to drive efficiencies in cost.

Research suggests that while organisations who have implemented this model have found the day-to-day transactional activities of HR to have improved in efficiency, the key challenge is that the role of the HR business partner is found to be lacking in its strategic objectives (Boroughs, 2015; Gandhi and Pobereskin, 2018). There are a variety of reasons for this outlined in literature. Some scholars argue some HR BPs do not have the required capabilities (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2009; Holley, 2015). Others believe there is a lack of buy-in from line managers who still turn to HR BPs to complete transactional activities (McCracken, O'Kane, Brown and McCrory, 2016), or HR BPs who get stuck in transactional work because they do not have clarity on their role as a HR BP (Laine, Stenvall and Tuominen, 2017). At its core, these arguments support the scholars that argue the culture of the organisation and maturity level of the implementation of the HR BP model impact the ability of HR BPs to be strategic (Lawler III and Boudreau, 2009; Sheehan, De Cieri, Greenwood and Van Buren III, 2014; McCracken, et al., 2016; Laine, et al., 2017). In other words, the challenges of the HR BP model are not linked to a single factor; they can reside in the capabilities of the person who is in the role of HR BP and the organisation itself.

2.5.2 What are the key competencies of the HR business partner?

Competencies and capabilities are used interchangeably in literature (Ulrich, et al., 2008). However, Ulrich, et al. (2008) have very clear definitions for each term. Capabilities are defined as "...the collective abilities of an organization" (Ulrich, et al., 2008, p. 22). Ulrich, et al. (2008) link capabilities to the culture of an organisation. In other words, capabilities are linked to group behaviours. Competencies are defined as "...the knowledge, skills, and behaviors demonstrated by individuals in the course of getting their work done. Competencies may be technical in nature...or more socially oriented" (Ulrich, et al., 2008, p. 22). The strength of the HR function comes from skills, knowledge and behaviours of the HR professionals within the team. The stronger the competencies of the HR function, the more likely that the HR BP model is adding value to the organisation (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005).

Based on global research completed over thirty years, Ulrich, Brockbank, Ulrich and Kruscynski (2015) determine that there are six key competency categories for the HR professional that assist with the performance of their organisation. These competency categories are (1) a core knowledge and understanding of business, the external and internal market factors, and how to develop and implement business strategy; (2) an ability to develop human resource tools, practices and processes for the employee lifecycle; (3) understand and utilise HR information systems, analytics and architecture to assist executive decision-making; (4) be a change agent; (5) create and sustain the organisation and its culture; and (6) absolute personal integrity (Ulrich, et al., 2015).

Three of the key competencies outlined by Ulrich, et al. (2015) are supported by a recent CIPD report on the impact of the fourth industrial revolution on work; however, the CIPD more clearly defines HR BP competencies as (1) change management; (2) business knowledge; and (3) addressing the skills gap and managing in-house talent (CIPD, 2017b). As already noted, these competency categories easily align to the four recommendations found in the WEF report on the 'reinvention' of the HR function; (1) be more strategic; (2) use analytical tools to identify trends and skill gaps; (3) provide insight to the business; and

(4) be innovative in talent management to maximise opportunities in transformation trends (World Economic Forum, 2016).

The ability of HR professionals to be capable in the key competencies, regardless of which definition is used, enable the HR BP model to effectively support the HR function to add value to organisations.

2.6 Conclusion

The fourth industrial revolution is here. The rate of advances in technology is moving faster than ever before because in automation, artificial intelligence, the internet of things, and robotics the technology is coalescing to enhance technical capabilities. Schwab (2016) and Morrar, et al. (2017) believe that without advanced planning global unrest is certain due to the depth of the impact of lost jobs across the globe.

From the research review, it is clear that the understanding of the impacts of 4IR is rooted in the global experience of previous industrial revolutions. Bessen (2016), Chui, et al. (2016) and Lund and Manyika (2017) agree there will be an impact on the global workforce, but as shown throughout history the impact is an employment shift; jobs will be lost, but other jobs will be created. Frey and Osborne (2013) would agree that there will be an employment shift. However, their concern is that the job growth will continue to hollow out the middle-class because new jobs will be in either higher skilled occupations or poor quality lower skilled jobs (Frey and Osborne, 2013). It is evident from history and early indications of job growth in 4IR that there will be an impact on jobs and organisations must begin to prepare.

There is an urgency in the report by the WEF (2016) of the requirement for HR to reinvent itself as a strategic partner in order to support organisations with preparations for 4IR. Ulrich and Brockbank (2009) would say that organisations that have implemented the HR BP model for its HR function are already capable of providing this support. This is evidence of the gap between the theory of the HR BP model and the practice of the model in organisations.

This research project aims to close the gap between the theory and practice of the HR BP model and understand if the model provides value to the HR function. The research also aims to understand if the HR BP model will assist organisations to prepare for 4IR. The purpose of the research project is to add to the body of knowledge on 4IR and the HR BP model, in particular within an Irish context.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of the research is to add 'reliable knowledge' to an existing body of work; however, "...the creation of reliable knowledge lies in the methods and rigour of the inquiry..." (Horn, 2009, p. 108). In other words, the researcher must ensure they can fully justify the chosen methods to answer the research objectives or hypothesis.

This chapter outlines the research philosophy and conceptual approach, the research strategy and choice, and the research instrument used for data collection and data analysis. This chapter also outlines ethical considerations and the value and limitations of the research.

3.2 Research aims and objectives

This research seeks to understand if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and explore if the HR BP model can assist organisations to prepare for 4IR. The focus of the research is to explore the role of HR in assisting organisations to adapt to the complex and dynamic change of 4IR.

The overall aim of the research is to answer the question: *Does the HR BP model add value to the HR function and does it assist organisations to prepare for 4IR?*

To answer the question, the research was divided into the following objectives and sub objectives:

Objective 1: How has the HR function changed with the implementation of the HR BP model?

Sub objectives:

- (i) What are the benefits of implementing the HR BP model?
- (ii) What are the challenges of implementing the HR BP model?

Objective 2: What is the value of the HR BP model to the HR function?

Sub objectives:

- (i) Is the value of the HR BP model defined by the six key competency domains defined by Ulrich, et al. (2015)?
 - Have business knowledge
 - Use human resource tools, practices and processes
 - Use HR information systems, analytics and architecture
 - Manage and enable change
 - Support organisation and culture
 - Personal credibility

Objective 3: What are the challenges of 4IR and how can HR support the change?

Sub objectives:

- (i) What are the impacts of introducing new technology?
- (ii) What is the role of HR when new technology is introduced?
- (iii) What is the key challenge posed by 4IR for organisations?

In answering these questions, the research will provide an understanding of the value of the HR BP model and if it will assist organisations to adapt in 4IR.

3.3 Research ontology, conceptual approach and philosophy

The aim of this research is to understand if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and if it assists organisations to prepare for 4IR. In simple terms, the research sets out to understand if a common model for the HR function used in large organisations will support these businesses through disruptive change.

The researcher has a subjectivist ontology. This means that the researcher's beliefs about the 'nature of reality' are grounded in the assumptions that "...different opinions and narratives...can help to account for different social realities of different social actors" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016, p. 130). In other words, the researcher believes that organisations are a social construct that are influenced by several different environmental realities. These environmental realities, such as the impact of 4IR, the management style of an organisation, or the type of HR model selected to support an organisation are dynamic factors that are both internal and external to the organisation.

Furthermore, these dynamic factors are impacted by the individual or group interpretation of these factors and this too is critical in the understanding of the social construct.

3.3.1 Research philosophies

According to Saunders, et al. (2016) there are five types of research philosophy: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism. Positivism is a philosophy that is focused on scientific data that will "...produce law-like generalisations" (Saunders, et al., 2016, p. 135). Considering the research is exploratory and the researcher is grounded in a subjectivist ontology, a positivist approach was not an appropriate selection. Critical realism sits somewhere between positivism and interpretivism (Fisher, Buglear, Lowry, Mutch and Tansley, 2010). It is a philosophical approach that studies the social structure or the cause of the phenomena (Saunders, et al., 2016). While this might suit a research project focused only on the value of the HR BP model, the exploratory nature of 4IR again did not fit the research. Postmodernism focuses on the power of language; more specifically deconstructing and analysing concepts (Saunders, et al., 2016). For example, in this research the focus might be the power relationship between different types of HR BPs – embedded HR BPs versus operationally focused HR BPs. The key to the research would be shedding light on these power relationships to understand what might be marginalised (Saunders, et al., 2016). A pragmatist approach is described simply as bridging the gap between "facts and values" (Saunders, et al., 2016, p. 143). While there may be a pragmatist approach in the recommendations provided in the summary of the research project, this did not fit with the fluid and dynamic nature of the research. Therefore, the researcher chose to utilise an interpretivist approach because it can "...create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts" (Saunders, et al., 2016, p. 140). There are many factors to be considered in the context of 4IR, how organisations will adapt and how HR functions will support the change. The interpretivist philosophy considers the dynamic and changing factors that impact a social construct and is the selected choice for the research project.

3.3.2 An interpretivist approach and force field analysis

Kurt Lewin's view of field theory "...emphasizes the importance of the fact that any event is resultant of a multitude of factors" (Lewin, 1943, p. 293). Lewin's concept of field theory is best understood through what came to be known as force field analysis in the 1990s (Burnes and Cooke, 2013). Lewin's theory is interpretivist (Swanson and Creed, 2014) and it will provide the conceptual approach for the research philosophy. The interpretivist creates their own reality based on individual experiences and the interpretation of those experiences (Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin and Zikmund, 2015). Force field analysis is based on the perception of the individual or a group at a point in time where a single factor could be interpreted as an enabling force, whereas at another point in time that same factor is interpreted as a constraining force (Lewin, 1943; Burnes, 2004; Swanson and Creed, 2014).

The fourth industrial revolution represents disruptive and complex change. How an organisation responds to that change or how an HR function supports and prepares for that change is influenced by a 'multitude of factors'. Utilising an interpretivist philosophy such as Lewin's force field analysis fits the research because "...the necessity of a fair representation of this multitude of interdependent factors is a step towards field theory" (Lewin, 1943, p. 293).

3.4 Research approach, choice and strategy

The research applies an inductive research approach which is aligned to the researcher's ontology and philosophy. An inductive method is described as "...the logical process of establishing a general proposition on the basis of observation of particular facts" (Quinlan, et al., 2015, p. 79). At its core, an inductive approach provides the researcher with the ability to understand the data and develop reasoning through a conceptual approach (Saunders, et al., 2016). The conceptual approach of Lewin's force field analysis will enable the researcher to visually present that reasoning.

Deductive methods are more restrictive and would not fit with the researcher's interpretivist philosophy. Deductive methods generally have three characteristics - they are structured, they can be quantitatively assessed, and due to the sample selection they can allow for generalisations (Saunders, et al.,

2016). Quantitative methods can be used for interpretivist research (Saunders, et al., 2016); however, the exploratory nature of this research lends itself towards an inductive qualitative approach.

The purpose of qualitative research is to understand patterns or themes and utilise a framework to present the theory of the research (Creswell, 2007). There are many studies on the value proposition of the HR function and the business partner model that use both quantitative and qualitative methodologies; however, Ulrich, et al. (2008) is considered to be the seminal work in this area. However, the researcher is seeking to understand the value of the HR BP model and its ability to support organisation through the changes of 4IR. A qualitative approach fits with the exploratory nature of the research questions. Furthermore, in the research completed by the WEF in relation to 4IR, the methodology consisted of an online survey of Chief Human Resources and Chief Strategy Officers, targeting 2,450 leading global organisations (World Economic Forum, 2016). This researcher does not have the access or resources to endeavour to complete a similar approach. The researcher considered a smaller subset of the survey for the Irish market, but on further analysis recognised that access and resources were genuine constraints to the method.

On determining that a qualitative approach was the most suitable methodology for the research, the researcher considered appropriate strategic options. Thematic analysis is a method that is firmly based in grounded theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Grounded theory provides a systematic approach to qualitative data collection and analysis; however, it can be complex and time consuming (Saunders, et al., 2016). Thematic analysis provides for a flexible tool for the research novice to identify, analyse and report on themes found in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six key phases to enable the researcher to credibly analyse the data:

1. Familiarise yourself with the data by transcribing data, reading and rereading the data to generate an initial list of codes.
2. Generate initial codes using a systematic process across the full data set; classify your data to the initial codes, coding "...for as many potential themes/patterns as possible" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 89).

3. As you classify the data, search for themes and begin to organise your data.
4. Review the themes and related codes to develop a thematic 'map'.
5. Define and name your themes with clear definitions of each theme and the relevance of the data.
6. Produce the report using a "...selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back...the analysis to the research question and literature..." (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

Utilising a method that will provide the researcher with dependable and transferable data is important for the interpretivist researcher (Saunders, et al., 2016). In quantitative methods reliable and valid research is more easily established. However, the use of the thematic analysis method is a structured approach that will assist the researcher to provide credible outcomes from the cross-sectional survey chosen as the qualitative method to answer the research aims and objectives.

3.5 Research instrument: data collection

The research instrument utilised for data collection is semi-structured interviews of HR professionals from a large Irish organisation. The interview questions were grounded in the literature review and based on the research questions and objectives. Semi-structured interviews provide a consistency across the interviews and enables the researcher to identify themes during the data analysis. However, they also enable the researcher to probe for additional information from the participant when required (Saunders, et al., 2016). The interviewer chose not to employ entirely open interviews because the challenge with this method of data collection is to ensure the data collected stays relevant to the research.

3.5.1 Sample selection

The sampling method selected is purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method. This means that the interview participants are selected by the researcher because they meet criteria set by the researcher.

In selecting this sampling method, the researcher considered two different approaches to obtain data. The first option to examine was to interview HR professionals from a variety of large organisations. The researcher could develop a list of large organisations in Ireland, contact each HR department to determine the model utilised in the HR function, and request interviews from HR managers where the HR BP model was in use. Depending on the final sample size, this method of data collection may have enabled the researcher to make broad generalisations about the HR BP model across several sectors in Ireland. However, the researcher determined access and resource constraints would impede the data collection process and disregarded this method of data collection.

The second option considered, and subsequently chosen by the researcher, was to interview a cross-section of HR professionals from one large Irish organisation operating the HR BP model for its HR function. Although the researcher acknowledged this reduces the ability of the researcher to make generalisations in the analysis, the researcher recognised that key longitudinal studies performed by Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, Sandholtz and Younger (2008) would support the findings. Once permission for access to the organisation was granted by the HR Director, the researcher did briefly consider a case study approach since the data would be collected from one organisation. However, a case study approach is an in-depth inquiry and can benefit most by a mixed-method approach of quantitative and qualitative data collection (Saunders, et al., 2016). Similar to the decision not to utilise a cross-section of HR professionals from a variety of large organisations, the researcher chose not to apply a case study approach due to concerns with access and resource constraints.

The criteria for the sample selection of HR professionals at the chosen organisation was as follows:

- A minimum of 10 years of experience as a HR professional
- At least 1 head of each HR functional area (based on BP model role definitions) must be interviewed (e.g., Service Delivery, Business Partner and Centre of Excellence)

- Where the head of the HR functional area did not participate, the subordinate manager was interviewed

The only exception made in the selection process was the interview for the HR Director. The HR Director at this organisation had operational roles prior to appointment as HR Director in 2004. Although the HR Director did not meet the minimum number of years of experience as a HR professional, the Director sits on the Executive Board and therefore could provide valuable insight into the HR function at the organisation.

Once the sample criteria were decided, the researcher organised interviews for data collection.

3.5.2 Interview process

Based on the criteria established by the researcher, the total population to be interviewed at the organisation was 12 HR professionals. The researcher contacted each of the 12 identified participants via email (see Appendix 1). The email briefly outlined the research project and made a request for interview. The researcher also attached a synopsis of the research project and the initial interview questions. This was to ensure the participants had an opportunity to consider whether they wanted to participate in the research. It was also to ensure they understood the format and initial questions that would be asked during the interview. The researcher was clear that the initial questions were a guideline for the interview and that additional questions may be asked depending on the conversation.

Of the 12 HR professionals contacted for interview, 1 was the HR Director and 4 of the HR professionals were heads of function within the structure of the HR BP model. Of the 4 heads of function, 3 agreed to participate in the research project. Per the criteria set by the researcher, the subordinate manager of the missing function was contacted and agreed to participate in the research project. In total, 13 HR professionals were contacted and 9 agreed to participate (see Table 1), providing the researcher with a response rate of 69%.

Prior to each interview, the participant was provided with a consent form (see Appendix 2). The consent form explained the purpose of the research, informed the participant of their right to withdraw consent at any time during or after the interview, and informed the participant that the interview would be recorded. The consent form also included information about participant confidentiality and data security. All consent forms were signed and provided to the researcher in advance of each interview.

Outlined below in Table 1 is the anonymised list of participants, their role as defined by the HR business partner model, the date and duration of the interview, the years of experience in both HR and the organisation, and their gender. The purpose of providing the role of the participant in the BP model definitions was twofold; (1) to add another layer of anonymity for the participants from this organisation, and (2) to provide a link between the perception of the participant and their role within the BP model. Although gender was not relevant for this research project, this data was collected for future study.

Table 1: List of interview participants (anonymised)

Date	Name	HR role (in BP model definitions)	Duration (mins.)	Years in HR	Years in Org.	Gender
25 Jul 18	Manager A	HR Manager, Centre of Expertise	34	13	13	F
25 Jul 18	Manager B	HR Manager, Centre of Expertise	46	10	1	F
26 Jul 18	Manager C	HR Manager, Service Delivery	28	14	26	F
27 Jul 18	Manager D	HR Manager, Service Delivery	33	15	19	F
30 Jul 18	Manager E	HR Manager, Business Partner	25	22	28	F
1 Aug 18	Manager F	HR Manager, Centre of Expertise	21	10	1	F
2 Aug 18	Manager G	HR Director	19	4	17	F
3 Aug 18	Manager H	HR Manager, Centre of Expertise	52	23	<1	F
3 Aug 18	Manager I	Head of HR, Business Partner	39	18	20	F

As evidenced in Table 1, the interviews were scheduled between 25 July 2018 and 3 August 2018 and the average duration of each interview was 30-40 minutes. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in meeting rooms at the organisation. One exception was the interview with the HR Director, which was completed via conference call due to scheduling constraints. All interviews were recorded using the 'Smart Recorder' app downloaded from the Apple App Store to the researcher's iPhone. The researcher purchased the functionality to export the recordings in order to safely store the interviews on the researcher's personal laptop. The 'Smart Recorder' app was simple to use; the recording was clear, which allowed the researcher to accurately transcribe all interviews. To enhance the researcher's familiarity with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the researcher chose to transcribe the interviews instead of outsourcing this task. The researcher transcribed the interviews over the period of 25 July 2018 to 5 August 2018.

The researcher chose not to complete a pilot interview due to the small sample size. To ensure all interviews could be used for data analysis, the researcher opted to test the recording device by logging a non-related conversation on the iPhone for 60 minutes. This ensured that the iPhone and recording app were operating effectively and there was enough memory on the iPhone to record an interview of up to 60 minutes. The researcher requested that a non-participant HR professional review the questions to ensure they were clear, concise and objective open-ended questions. No changes were required to the interview questions.

The research aims and objectives are to explore if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and if the HR BP model assists organisations to prepare for 4IR. In developing the questions for the interview, the researcher considered including key terms that are associated with the HR BP model – such as 'credible activists', 'strategic architects', 'culture & change agents', 'talent manager and organisational designers' and 'operational executors' (Ulrich, et al., 2008). However, the researcher did not want to limit the responses of the participants. Instead the researcher chose broad questions that would enable the participants to outline the value of the BP model and the HR function without

interviewer bias. For the questions related to the impact of introducing new technology, the researcher provided examples that related to the organisation. However, most of the participants provided additional examples outside the knowledge of the interviewer, which confirmed to the researcher that interviewer bias did not impact this question. All other questions related to the impact of 4IR and the role of HR were broad open questions in order to ensure the interviewee was not impacted by interviewer bias.

3.6 Research instrument: data analysis

Data analysis started informally as the data was being transcribed by the researcher. This means the interviewer was reviewing the data to determine if the framework of questions was providing answers to the stated objectives. The researcher determined that no change in the framework was required. The researcher noted that by the third interview, very clear high level themes were being identified in the data. However, formal coding and data analysis started once the last interviews were completed on 3 August 2018.

As outlined in section 3.4, the researcher chose to follow a thematic approach. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that once a preliminary list of topics is complete, the key task in Phase 2 is to code for as many themes or patterns as possible. Similarly to the decision of the researcher to personally transcribe the data, the researcher chose to manually code the data rather than use computer-assisted tools. The researcher marked up the transcriptions using the 'Comments' feature in Word. Once this process was complete the researcher copied the data into a table format in Excel in order to review and sort the data by code. This resulted in the initial identification of 167 codes.

In Phase 3, the researcher "...re-focusses the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 89). To complete this phase, the researcher developed a two-pronged approach. This was to help the researcher organise the high number of codes into manageable subsets of the data to identify themes for the report. The first step in this two-pronged approach was to review the data extracts now sorted by code and assign a theme related to the themes of the research paper. For example, codes such

as 'Fear of job loss', 'IR/ER issues', 'Speed of change' were assigned to the theme of 4IR. This process continued for all 167 codes, with the result that 16 codes were identified. The second step in the two-pronged approach was to develop a thematic map to assist the researcher to "...start thinking about the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 89). The researcher found this an effective method to identify themes. In Phase 4, the themes were reviewed and refined as the researcher studied the thematic maps. The researcher identified 7 dynamic factors that impact the value of the HR BP model on the HR function and its ability to prepare for 4IR. Per Phase 5, the researcher defined and named the themes as follows:

- 1) Organisation culture
- 2) The shared services centre (SSC)
- 3) A HR information system (HRIS)
- 4) HR competencies
- 5) Organisation strategy
- 6) The speed of change
- 7) Understanding 4IR impact

Phase 6, which was to complete the final analysis and report the findings, is detailed in the findings and discussion chapter that will follow this chapter on methodology.

3.7 Limitations of the research methodology

The limitation of this research approach is that a small selection of HR professionals from one organisation participated in the data collection process. Although the researcher believes there will be interesting outcomes from the project, the researcher will not be able to generalise findings across industries and sectors of Irish organisations.

Another limitation is that only HR professionals participated in this research project. In longitudinal research completed by Ulrich, et al (2008), HR professionals and non-HR professionals are included in order to test the perception of the value of the HR function. The researcher had considered this

more expansive approach as it would have enriched the data analysis; however, the researcher was not certain if access to the organisation would be revoked because the research would be a more in-depth and extensive review of the HR function.

The researcher acknowledges the risk of interviewer and interview bias. To minimise any impact on the interviewees, the researcher maintained an even tone when asking questions and limited note taking so that participants were comfortable sharing. Interviewees were provided with questions in advance in order to ensure they were comfortable with participation in the research project. While the researcher acknowledges there are key limitations in the chosen method of research design, data collection and analysis, the researcher believes there is still valuable knowledge to add to the literature.

3.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations related to access and consent are key to successful research projects (Saunders, et al., 2016). To ensure the research incorporated ethical considerations, the researcher utilised five ethical principles as a guideline for research collection. These five principles listed below in Table 2 are based on the ten ethical principles outlined by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016). The processes that were completed to adhere to each ethical principle are also outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Ethical principles and processes for research project

Ethical principle	Process to meet ethical principle
Respect and integrity	- The researcher was respectful of all participants and maintained objectivity and accuracy throughout the research project.
Voluntary participation and right to withdraw	- 13 HR professionals were approached to participate in the research project. - A formal email request was sent (see Appendix 1) with an attached synopsis and

	<p>sample of interview question (see Appendix 3).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Only one follow up per participant was allowed. - 9 participants volunteered to be interviewed and each person was informed of their right to withdraw their participation in writing (see Appendix 2). - Also, at the start of each interview participants were verbally informed of their right to withdraw consent.
<p>Informed consent of participant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An interview request was sent to 13 HR professionals via email (see Appendix 1). - Each email included an attached synopsis and sample of interview questions (see Appendix 3). - Each participant received a consent form (see Appendix 2) in advance of each interview. - No interview commenced without a signed consent form from the participant.
<p>Confidentiality of data and participant anonymity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Each participant was assured data collected during the interview process would be kept confidential. - Only the researcher has access to the recordings and all transcripts are anonymised. - To ensure anonymity, each participant was given a code (e.g., Manager A, Manager B) and their job title was modified to reflect their job role in the BP model.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- All data will be deleted once the research project is concluded.
Compliance with data management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Each participant was informed of the purpose of the data collection, that it is stored in a secured location, and that it will be deleted once the research project is concluded.

Chapter 4: Findings and discussion

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to explore if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and if the HR BP model assists organisations to prepare for 4IR.

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews of 9 HR professionals from one large Irish organisation that has already implemented the HR BP model in its HR function.

4.1.1 Context of the organisation's implementation of the HR BP model

The organisation involved in the research started the implementation of the HR BP model for its HR function in 2007 (Manager I). As a result of a review of its cost base, the organisation transitioned administration and transactional tasks to a shared services centre (SSC) in India (Manager I). HR was one of several functions that transitioned activities to the SSC. The SSC supports the HR function with administrative or transactional tasks in process areas such as recruitment and selection, payroll, reward and benefits, talent management, and employee relations (Manager A, B, C, D, E, F and I).

In 2014, with the appointment of the current HR Director, the HR structure was redesigned so that it reflected the 'three-legged' approach of the HR BP model – transactional service delivery (performed by the SSC), HR BPs to support functional areas of the business and HR Specialists to support the business (centres of expertise).

Prior to this HR restructure, the HR function was split between HR Generalists and HR Specialists who supported Head Office and HR Generalists (called 'Personnel Managers') who were embedded in the Field Offices (Manager E and G). The reporting line for HR was split – those in Head Office reported up to the HR Director and those in the Field Offices reported up to the Heads of the Functional Business Area (Manager E, G and I). With the structure change in 2014, all streams of HR report up to the HR Director. The HR Director sits on the Executive Board of the Irish organisation and reports to the Chief Executive Officer.

The context of the implementation of the HR BP model for the organisation is important because it sets the context for the outcomes of the research.

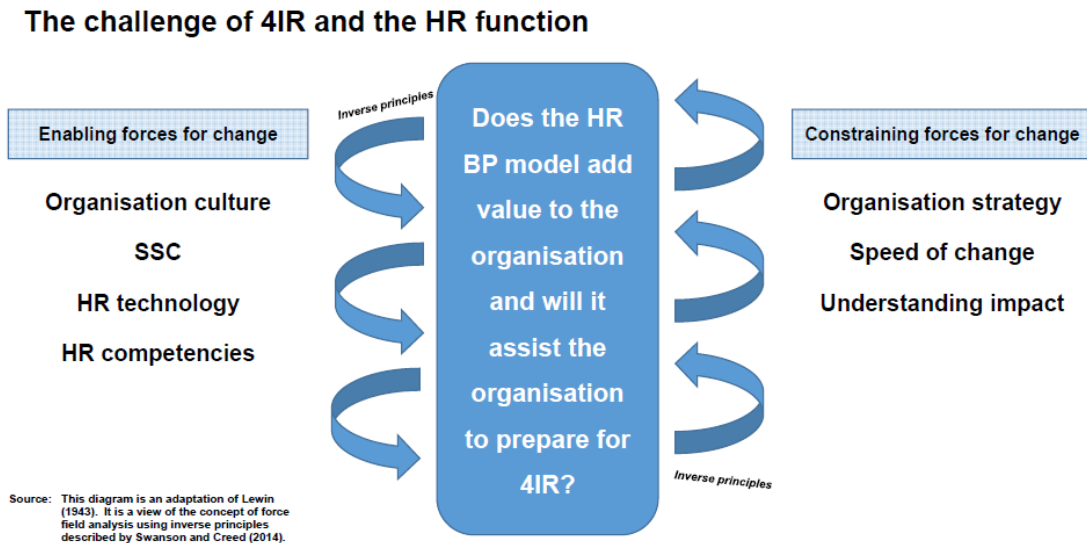
The thematic analysis of the full dataset completed by the researcher identified 7 dynamic factors that impact the value of the HR BP model on the HR function and its ability to prepare for 4IR. Lewin's concept of force field analysis provides a visual tool to describe the conceptual framework of the dynamic factors of enabling forces for change and constraining forces for change as evidenced in the research. The dynamic factors identified are:

- 1) Organisation culture
- 2) The shared services centre (SSC)
- 3) A HR information system (HRIS)
- 4) HR competencies
- 5) Organisation strategy
- 6) The speed of change
- 7) Understanding 4IR impact

What is clear from the analysis of the full dataset is that there are dynamic factors that impact the effectiveness of the HR BP model and the value it can bring to the HR function and subsequently the organisation.

Figure 1 below shows the challenge of 4IR and the HR function. The question to be resolved is if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and if the HR BP model assists the organisation to prepare for 4IR - this is represented in the box in the middle of the diagram. The circling arrows around the question represent the inverse principles described by Swanson and Creed (2014). Swanson and Creed (2014) explain that inverse principles represent the concept that the factors are dynamic, so each factor can be either an enabler or a constraint depending on the point in time. The diagram is attempting to show the fluidity described in Lewin's original concept of field theory (Lewin, 1943). In other words, the enabling and constraining forces are not static. The effectiveness of each factor directly relates to the value of the HR BP model.

Figure 1: The challenge of 4IR and the HR function



To understand if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function, the researcher developed the objective of determining how the HR function had changed at the organisation with the implementation of the HR BP model. The researcher wanted to understand the benefits and challenges of implementing the HR BP model with a view to being able to understand the value of the HR BP model for the HR function and subsequently the organisation.

To understand if the HR BP model assists organisations to prepare for 4IR, the researcher set the objective of understanding the challenges of 4IR for the organisation and how HR might support that change. Participants were asked about the impacts of introducing new technology at the organisation, the role of HR, and the key challenges posed by 4IR.

The analysis of the data showed that there are enablers and constraints that impact the effectiveness of the HR BP model. Each of these factors are interlinked and they impact HR's ability to add value to the organisation and assist the organisation to prepare for 4IR.

Outlined below are the findings and a discussion of the results with reference to the literature.

4.2 Organisation culture

Organisation culture has long been described as ‘the way we get things done around here’ and it has an impact on the HR function (McCracken, et al., 2016). With the implementation of the HR BP model there can be tensions between line managers and HR BPs because the roles and responsibilities have shifted from one to the other (McCracken, et al., 2016). The HR BP plays more of an advisor or consultant role and the line manager performs the day-to-day people management tasks that would have once been performed by a HR Generalist. The research results at this organisation showed evidence of a tension between the previous HR structure and the HR BP model, which echoes the research by McCracken, et al. (2016). While the HR function attempts to support line managers to manage their own people, 5 of 9 interviewees mentioned that they recognise they are being tasked with administration activities that are now supposed to be within the remit of line managers:

“...I think we are still too involved in the day to day operations and helping people make difficult choices. And I think the more we can lean away from that and lean towards the future, the better. We can still be seen as the ‘no’ brigade and we’re still seen as the people who implement processes and policies...I think there is too much reliance on us” (Manager G).

Manager B was more explicit in explaining the frustration with the current culture of HR BPs continuing to perform transactional tasks:

“I am a bit cynical probably. I think they are grateful that we’re here to deal with the shit that they don’t want to deal with and I think we do that. We answer questions and we get involved and we step in for line managers and managers when we shouldn’t. We do this mammy role, which I think is really wrong. I think they are grateful for that – but they don’t see us a function that contributes to the bottom line or anything like that. I just don’t think they see that whatsoever, which is disappointing...there are people out there who are really trying to do a good job and really want to do a good job in HR.”

However, there is evidence that the organisation culture is changing. Manager C talked about how the HR BPs are getting better at supporting line managers rather than doing the people management for them:

“We have gotten a lot better at it, and to be fair from the top down, we really have done that as well. So it’s empowering them and giving them the tools and enabling them to be the people manager. It’s very easy for people to say, well that’s what HR told me to say. That has been the culture previously. And now, I just won’t have them conversations. I’ll help them have the conversations, but I won’t do it for them. So it is always reverting them back to their line manager, but supporting the line manager in doing that ‘cause people need to manage their teams - good or bad. And helping them have them hard conversations. You know we are much better about having them difficult conversations and nobody wants to do it, but as a business we’ve gotten better at it. We’re not fully there, but better.”

The results from the research reinforce the concept that “...an organisation’s culture influences the role HR plays and ultimately how effective HR professionals and LMPs can be in transitioning to and enacting the HRBP arrangement” (McCracken, et al., 2016, p. 60). In other words, organisation culture is a key enabler of the HR BP model and it is one element that must be operating effectively to ensure the HR BP model is providing value to the organisation.

4.3 The shared service centre (SSC)

The purpose of a shared service centre (SSC) in any BP model is to remove low-value transactional tasks to enable BPs to focus on more strategic complex tasks. This concept is no different in the HR BP model.

The research suggests that a functional SSC is a key enabler in determining the value of the HR BP model for the HR function. The research showed that 6 out of 9 managers interviewed did not feel that the current SSC is meeting the needs of the HR function (Managers A, B, C, D, E and I) and this is having

a detrimental impact on the ability of the HR function to add value to the organisation (Managers A, B, C and D).

The number one challenge identified by the managers who highlight issues with the SSC is that there is significant duplication of work (Manager A, B, C, and I). Managers in the Irish organisation spend substantial amounts of time either checking work completed by the SSC or following up on the status of work, *“I would say between Colleague Name and I, we would waste 2-3 hours a week just doing those things, making those phone calls and sending those emails”* (Manager B). In some cases, managers choose not to use the SSC because they do not expect the SSC will be able to meet deadlines for critical time bound pieces of work;

“...the big thing that I have observed, and I try not to do it, but because the pace here is insane. I mean, if I really used the service centre properly I wouldn't get things done. And I would have a lot of angry people saying - where is that? Why is that not done? Why have you not got that yet? So you know, a lot of the time I short cut them and just do it myself because it's quicker. I know that is counterproductive but...they overpromise and under deliver all the time” (Manager B).

When the interviewer asked if Manager C had more freedom to perform other tasks as a follow up question in relation to the benefits of the SSC performing the administration work, Manager C paused before responding *“no, because we end up doing a lot of it ourselves, especially if it's not right.”*

Manager I explained that although turnover in the SSC is highlighted as an issue (Manager A and B), the root cause of the problem is related to expectations of progression in the SSC. Manager I stated;

“...there is very much a different culture – our shared services sits in India, the culture there would be very much that if you are not seen to move role in 18 months, that's not seen as a good thing. So they would expect that their progression is like 18 months and then I should be moving on. So they would have a policy there that would be that you can't move for the first 12 months, but then

from 12 months on you need to be thinking about your next move.”

However, the issue of turnover is still relevant to the impact of the effectiveness of the SSC on the HR function. With a turnover of staff in each of the support areas of HR averaging 18 months, the impact on the HR team in Ireland means inconsistent work being completed by the SSC (Manager C and D), evidence of knowledge gaps (Manager A), and although the Irish team is not responsible for upskilling the SSC team, managers in Ireland spending time upskilling the team (Manager A).

The impact of the SSC not effectively supporting the HR function is that the benefit of the removal of tasks from the HR BPs or HR Specialists is not realised. The research showed that the HR managers were well aware of the benefits of the HR BP model in that they could articulate that when it is working well there is time for HR BPs and HR Specialists to be more strategic, *“It freed up that strategic time to be able to look more holistically at...our total reward and benefits...”* (Manager A).

Manager B, who had previously worked at an Irish Bank that operated the HR BP model stated,

“So, if I think about my experience in the Irish Bank where I thought the model worked well - and even then we had lots of problems. We did have lots of problems, but when it works well, you have an HR function that is seen as a strategic part of the business.”

The other key impact of an ineffective SSC is that the HR team who is client facing loses credibility with the functional area of the business they support. Credibility is critical to the role of the HR BP (Ulrich, et al., 2015; McCracken, et al., 2016). The business users of the HR function see only that the team cannot meet its deadlines, it does not matter where the responsibility for the task sits within the function itself. Manager B stated the impact most succinctly by expressing, *“When it doesn’t work well, you have what I have just described there. Where it’s busy fools, running around, everyone over doing everyone else’s work and it just – I think we lose credibility for that reason. “*

A functional SSC that is meeting the demands of the HR function and ultimately the business itself, is a key enabler of the HR BP model. Another key enabler is a HR information system (HRIS).

4.4 HR information system (HRIS)

A HRIS is an information system that enables the HR function to utilise a software package to manage HR processes from a central system. HR processes can include employee pay and benefits, tracking holidays or working time, and usually there is some system capability to perform HR analytics. Examples of HR analytics are reports generated by the system to provide gender split by management teams, or the number of retirees expected in a given year. A HRIS also provides a basis for organisations to enable more self-service functions for employees. For example, an employee can log into a HR portal and request holidays or parental leave. The system would automatically send the request to a line manager for approval. An approved request would be tracked by the system with little or no requirement for HR intervention if it is a standard request.

The organisation utilised for the research does not have “...an integrated HR system” (Manager D). The HR function uses the payroll system to provide any HR data analysis or reporting when required (Manager D). Managers recognise that without a HRIS, a simple request for information is a time consuming manual process that means there is less time to be of value to the organisation:

“A lot of the stuff that we do is manual, even down to the payroll. So how we keep payroll, takes so much time. If you are looking for any sort of information, so a lot of what – someone might say, can we have a list of all the office email addresses? We don’t actually hold that stuff. We need to go and do that manually, we don’t actually have a system, a point where we hold a lot of the information - it’s just there, and we can just pull it when we need it. So I think it would be to remove the manual activities that we do, which would free us up to do the stuff that really matters to people. So in the background, it’s something so small like paying people, which seems like something that would just happen, but

actually there is a lot of manual work we have to do in the background to get that right. And there is a lot of follow up conversations, and all that takes time” (Manager D).

In analysing the data, 8 out of 9 interviewees made some comment in relation to the lack of technology for the HR function (Manger A, B, C, D, F, G, H and I). This supports the research finding that a HRIS is considered to be an enabler of the HR BP model. Manager F used a previous company as evidence of the ability of HR to drive decision making when supported by a HRIS;

“Well I suppose the last role I was in...they would have used SAP right across the business in every function...and as a result it enabled people to get the insights they need to drive decisions, to drive the work they should be focusing on, drive the conversations that they needed to be having. You know so, you can’t underestimate it really.”

Manager I identified the connection between the HR BP model and the ability of a HRIS to provide a structure of processes and information as a foundation for the model:

“So, yeah. I think that the business partner model is enabled by having a proper structure of technology, processes and everything in the background. And where it isn’t working to its full - is where we don’t have those things in place. So, would I say our business partnering model is the best that it can be, no. We don’t have people who have access to the right information that they need to do their jobs at the moment, because we don’t have a system to be able to do that. So, I think you will only have an optimum business partnering model when you have everything else. All the foundations in the background to set it up. And I don’t think we’re there yet...I think we have very definitely got things to do to get there.” (Manager I)

Similar to the SSC, a HRIS is a tool to enable the HR BP model to add value to the HR function. This tool also enables HR competencies.

4.5 HR competencies

As mentioned in section 3.2 of the methodology, Objective 2 for the researcher was to understand the value of the HR BP model for the HR function. The sub objective was to explore if the value of the HR BP model was defined by the six competency domains outlined by Ulrich, et al. (2015), which are; (1) have business knowledge; (2) use human resource tools, practices and processes; (3) use HR information systems, analytics and architecture; (4) manage and enable change; (5) support organisation and culture; and, (5) personal credibility. Ulrich and Brockbank (2009) link the ability of HR professionals to effectively perform in these competency areas with the value of the HR function in an organisation. If an HR function is utilising the structure of the HR BP model, then inherently the value of the HR function is linked to the competencies of the HR professionals working within the HR BP model.

The researcher used four varying questions in the interviews to determine the perceived value of the HR BP model. The researcher asked each participant to describe what the business most values about the HR function, to describe the key skills and capabilities required of the HR professional at the organisation, and to describe what is valued most about their role by the HR function and the organisation. The purpose of the variety of questions was to determine if there were similar patterns or themes in the responses. The researcher chose not to ask participants the value of their role or of the HR function using the Ulrich, et al. (2015) definitions to avoid interviewee bias. The researcher wanted to capture the thoughts and beliefs of each of the participants without any preconceptions. The researcher noted that in 7 of 9 interviews, the participants struggled to articulate what the business would value most about the HR function.

To enable a coherent comparison of the research findings to the literature, the results are outlined based on the competency areas defined by Ulrich, et al. (2015).

4.5.1 Business knowledge

Ulrich, et al. (2015) define this competency area as the ability of the HR professional to understand the business from end to end in each of the

functional areas, such as finance, marketing, sales and distribution. The HR professional should also understand market impacts on the business "...and be able to apply this knowledge to the formulation and implementation of business strategy" (Ulrich, et al., 2015, p. 59).

The research indicated that understanding the business for the HR team is an important value at the organisation (Manager C). Of the 9 members of the HR senior leadership team, 6 held operational roles in the organisation at various times of their career. The research also indicated that at one time, HR experience was also valued for operations managers. Manager C explained that operations managers used to rotate into HR before they could be promoted to a senior leadership role in the field offices, "*So, that was – that did happen that they needed to have both sides [operations and HR] before they could become a Field Senior Manager.*" Although rotation is not a consistent practice anymore, Manager C stated that operational experience "...does stand to you."

However, the researcher found evidence that while business knowledge is valued by the HR professionals within the team, time constraints prevented attendance at some of the functional strategy meetings (Manager C); or in some other cases functional leaders did not include invitations for the relevant HR professional (Manager C and E). This shows an inconsistency in the perceived value of HR BPs attending strategy meetings.

4.5.2 Human resource tools, practices and processes

This competency domain could be described as the technical skills required for a HR Generalist role. "Competence in this domain entails the ability to design and utilize the basic HR tools such as recruitment, succession planning, job rotation, outplacement, performance management, reward mechanisms..." (Ulrich, et al., 2015, p. 59).

To enable a broader skillset within the HR team, interviewees who had been with the organisation for a number of years had also worked in other areas of the HR function, whether a field office (Manager C, D, E and I) or other HR specialist area (Manager A and I). Manager I reflected that with a business that must adapt to market changes, it is important that the HR function is open to changing priorities;

“...because things change so much, sometimes priorities change and actually being able to pick up and having different skill sets to do different things is really valuable. People being open to change and moving and doing different things has been one of the key successes for us as an HR function...So, the opportunity to broaden skillset across all areas of HR would be a key...success for me... And we are so much better and more rounded as a team from doing things like that, is my view.”

This is evidence that the HR leadership team recognise the importance of strong technical skills in the HR function.

4.5.3 HR information systems, analytics and architecture

Ulrich, et al. (2015) outline three levels of this domain: use a system to track and manage employees, provide predictive HR analytics, and finally utilise market data that would support senior management decision making.

As already outlined in section 4.4, this organisation does not have a HRIS. Although there are plans for investment in this area, it may be another two years before the system is fully implemented (Manager C, D, G and I). The interviewees described the lack of technology as a key constraint in their ability to add value to the organisation;

“I suppose, again due to the more infrastructural technological challenges that we have, and maybe resource and skill challenges that we have within the team, there’s probably a lot of opportunity for the HR function to be adding more value to the business. So, unfortunately a lot of those issues are...a lot of those challenges...are out of our control... but, overall because of those issues and challenges that we have, we’re probably not operating at the level that we should be as an enabling function” (Manager F).

If the HR function cannot meet the needs of the organisation with efficient and effective service delivery, then HR loses credibility (Bustamante and Gandhi, 2018). What a HRIS provides is “...consistent process execution” (Bustamante and Gandhi, 2018, p. 2)

4.5.4 Manage and enable change

HR professionals must have the capability to enable, manage and sustain change by “...providing institutional stability while concurrently facilitating institutional innovation, flexibility and adaptability” (Ulrich, et al., 2015, p. 60).

The terms or statements used by participants to describe managing and enabling change included “bringing people on a journey”, “being open to change”, and ensuring that communications about business change “landed” with colleagues (Managers A, C and I). One manager provided an example of the implementation of a system for finance and structural changes resulting in redundancies, which showed the importance of the HR team and how they support the business to manage and enable change:

“Like even a simple thing, when we introduced Oracle here in the finance team. It streamlined so much work people got nervous about their jobs. You have to bring people on the journey. The SSC is another example. When we moved [functional transactions] to India, the people who were being displaced had to upskill the people who were taking their jobs in India. So, if HR didn’t do the coaching and training with the managers to make sure that their teams did that right, that whole piece could have fallen over” (Manager A).

The ability to manage change is a key skill for HR professionals. The evidence showed that less than half of the respondents identified this as a key skill for their role at the organisation.

4.5.5 Support organisation and culture

For Ulrich, et al. (2015) this competency domain reflects the role of HR in developing a high performance workforce. It is the role of HR to ensure the culture of the organisation reflects the needs of the external market (Ulrich, et al., 2015).

The researcher found that the ability of HR professionals to support organisational culture is more than a competency, it is a key enabler of the perceived value of the HR BP model (see section 4.2). Although, Ulrich, et al.

(2015) believes the culture should reflect external market requirements, Manager F described how this negatively impacted the HR function:

“I think broadly I suppose you know when I look at the business here, because it is so focused on short term outlook and heavily focused on results and getting results...culture is constantly compromised as a result. So, I - if you look at management styles, leadership behaviours...they are key...and should be weighted just as important to help shape the culture. But when it doesn't, it impacts what the HR function are trying to achieve ultimately, because...you are rowing upstream.”

Manager F described the impact of the requirement for market results that created a management style focused on the short term rather than longer term. This impacts the HR function because changes like a culture shift cannot be measured in the short term.

4.5.6 Personal credibility

Personal credibility is required if a HR professional is to be effective in their role: “personal credibility is built on a foundation of having strong relationships with key leaders, of communicating clearly..., of having absolute integrity, and of having rigorous discipline in achieving agreed upon objectives” (Ulrich, et al., 2015, p. 60).

The results from the research showed that the HR professionals built relationships and trust with their functional partners (Manager C, D, E and I), but limitations in delivery, whether due to the SSC or human error, could impact their perceived effectiveness in the role. Manager C stated:

“And unfortunately, it can happen. ‘Cause I now go through structure charts to fill out a spreadsheet, to send to India, for them to do our payroll. And if I don't put something on that right, and then they don't pick it up, something can go wrong. Or, if I don't take a note – or trackers, I have trackers for everything - it can pick up something wrong. And it's awful having to have that conversation.”

According to Laine, et al. (2017), strategic influence and business partnering are based on HR competencies. However, the researcher would argue that HR competencies are not the only enabler of a successful HR BP model and its ability to add value to the HR function.

4.6 Organisation strategy for 4IR

One of the enablers identified in data analysis is an organisational strategy that would enable the organisation to respond (Manager G). However, the development of an organisational strategy to respond to 4IR is identified as one of the biggest challenges:

“I think our biggest challenge is getting ahead of it, being clear on what are our future skills, where does the business want to go – and doing it from a business perspective and working backwards as opposed to the other way around. Where do we want to be in 5 years’ time? How automated do we want to be? What are our customer insights telling us and then what does our workforce look like? I think we are very much in the short term 1, 2 years and I think we need to get more into the ... in 10 years’ time what will the world look like? It mightn’t be a lot different, but it’s about being clear on where we think based on all the insights and articles on AI and experience, where we think we’re going to be. And I think we’re too much on the day to day still.” (Manager G)

As part of the organisation strategy, interviewees identified a requirement for balance in whatever that strategy might be (Managers C, D, F and H).

Manager D stated:

“...our customers are so different. It’s finding the balance between new technologies for customers who want it. And actually, that personal touch is what some customers still want. So, I think the biggest challenge would be finding the right balance in terms of what our customers really want...like, the Amazon shop where you just go in and don’t talk to anyone. And I suppose the world is changing and a lot more people are moving that way. People aren’t engaging as much, but actually that there will also

be a lot of...our customers, who want that personal touch, who want to talk to someone. I would hate to think we would live in a world where people just don't talk to each other. Em, so I suppose for me it's about finding the balance."

However, it is the speed of change and understanding the impact that were also identified as key factors.

4.7 The speed of change

In each of the interviews, participants responded that the challenge was to understand the impact on customers, the impact on the organisation and that the response to the change would be determined by the speed of the change of 4IR.

The speed of the change determines the response from the organisation; as Manager E stated, *"if we move very fast, I think it's the confidence and security of jobs, but if it's a slow transition then I think it'll just eventually be in and then before you know it the new world is here."*

The speed of the change in the market would also signal a response from the organisation; *"there is no way around it...if our competitors are doing it and it will run cheaper then we'll do it, and we'll make it run cheaper no matter how inhuman it is because we ultimately have to make the money"* (Manager H).

4.8 Understanding the impact of 4IR

Understanding the impact of 4IR was considered by the participants in relation to the customer and to the organisation.

All of the participants in the research identified that understanding the impact of new technology on customers would impact the organisational response. (Managers A, B, C, D, E, F, G and I).

From the HR perspective, the interviewees recognised HR would need to respond to the change based on business requirements and how this related to the workforce (Managers E and I). Two of the key roles of HR in the change were identified as building the capability of the existing workforce (Managers B) and understanding the impact on jobs (Managers A, B, C, E and I).

The impact on jobs was considered from the expectation that there could be IR/ER issues (Managers A, B, E and I) and in any job redesign the question of quality of jobs or quantity of jobs may arise (Managers A and I).

4.9 Conclusion

By developing an understanding of the benefits and challenges of the HR function, the researcher was able to ascertain whether the HR BP model adds value to the HR function. The answer to the question is not a straight forward 'yes' or 'no'. The answer to the question for an organisation is determined by dynamic factors. This means that depending on that point in time, the HR BP model may be operating at its optimum and adding significant value to an organisation. Conversely, if any of the enablers are in fact operating as constraints for the HR BP model, then it is unlikely the HR BP model is providing substantial value to the HR function or the organisation.

This concept is further complicated when attempting to determine if the HR BP model assists organisations to prepare for 4IR. The answer is equally imprecise. The HR BP model can enable an organisation to prepare for 4IR, but there are several dynamic factors that impact the ability of the model to be effective. Add to that the uncertainty about how quickly the technological revolution will arrive in Ireland, how quickly the market adopts new technologies, how customers respond to new technological innovations and the strategies organisations develop to respond to each of these dynamic factors, and again the answer to the initial question is vague.

What is certain is that 4IR is here. While there may be challenges with the implementation of the HR BP model, when implemented to its full capacity it can add value to the HR function and the HR function is then strategically aligned with the business to assist with the preparations for 4IR.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

In its report, the WEF (2016) signals an urgency for HR to 'reinvent' itself as a strategic partner in order to support organisations with preparations for 4IR. Ulrich and Brockbank (2009) would say that the HR BP model implemented in the HR function enables HR to provide that support. This is evidence of the gap between the theory and the practice of the of the HR BP model in organisations and this research project set out to close that gap.

To explore if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and if the HR BP model will assist organisations to prepare for 4IR, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 9 HR professionals from a large Irish organisation that has implemented the HR BP model.

The results of the research were the identification of 7 dynamic factors defined as: (1) organisation culture; (2) a shared service centre; (3) a HR information system; (4) HR competencies; (5) organisation strategy; (6) the speed of change; and (7) understanding the impact of 4IR that can be an enabling or constraining force for change, depending on the point in time of the analysis. Lewin's force field analysis provides a conceptual framework to present the findings.

The evidence shows that the more embedded the principles of the HR BP model, the more value it provides to the HR function. The more the HR function is strategically aligned to the business, the more value it can provide in assisting organisations to prepare for 4IR.

5.1.1 Future research

There are a number of options for future research in relation to this topic.

The research showed that there were 7 dynamic factors; however, only one organisation participated in this research project. To further develop the theory, the same qualitative methodology could be used but in a greater population of large organisations who have implemented the HR BP model. The group of large organisations could be from the same industry or sector, or could be from

a cross-section of industries in Ireland, or could have varying levels of maturity in relation to the implementation of the model. Any of these research projects would enhance the body of knowledge in this area.

Another gap identified in this research is that all of the HR professionals that participated in the study were female. A study that contained an equal number of male and female HR professionals would add another level of complexity to the analysis and would add to the body of knowledge.

This research project did not compare other HR operating models with the HR BP model to understand if other operating models could just as effectively support organisations to adapt to 4IR. This would add to the body of knowledge by providing an assessment of the effectiveness of the HR BP model to add value to the HR function in relation to other HR models.

Finally, this research project used semi-structured interviews of HR professionals. Another important view would be from non-HR professionals in the same organisation, echoing the research methods utilised by Ulrich, et al in the longitudinal studies. This additional perspective would provide a depth of data to explore the value of the HR BP model to the organisation and its ability to support the organisation through 4IR.

5.2 Recommendations

The HR BP model adds value to the HR function and can assist an organisation with the preparations for 4IR. However, as evidenced in the research, this is determined by the effectiveness of key dynamic factors.

Outlined below are recommendations based on the research:

1. Perform a review of the HR BP model to understand current strengths and opportunities for improvements. Areas to cover in the review include:
 - a) A review of HR competencies with the objective of understanding the current skillset and identifying gaps in the team. Develop a roadmap for upskilling the team or filling gaps with external hires. This competency review will provide baseline data for any 4IR workforce planning. Depending on the size of the HR team, the review timeline is 3-6 months.

- b) A review of the processes and procedures that are performed by the shared services centre (SSC). This is to determine if agreed standard operating procedures and service level agreements require updating. Develop an action plan to close any gaps and ensure this is tracked until gaps are closed. Depending on the number of functional areas covered by the SSC, the timeline is 6-12 months.
2. Workforce planning reviews should be conducted to enable an organisation to run scenarios of external and internal environmental factors to understand the impact on the workforce. The data input can include market factors such as an aging workforce, Brexit or the introduction of new technology.
- a) If the skillset to implement workforce planning is not currently within the HR team, consider upskilling or hiring an external consultant to assist.
 - b) Develop a high level plan as input into an organisation strategy for 4IR. Timeline for this process is 3-6 months depending on the size of the organisation. Thereafter, this process should be completed as part of an annual plan with scenarios updated.

Chapter 6: References

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Personal Learning Statement

I have two key insights as I reflect on what I have learned from the process of this research project:

First, I now recognise and admit that I procrastinate through reading. I absolutely loved the topic of my research paper - it meant I read a lot! However, on reflection I did a lot of highlighting on paper and using post it notes in books. It felt like I was working on the research because I was reading so much, but I was not taking notes that would allow me to write my literature review easily. This meant that it was a challenge to get started initially, because my critical analysis was in my head and not in notes that I should have been taking as I went along.

Second, I really enjoyed the process of using a qualitative research approach – from start to finish. I enjoyed the semi-structured interviews and found that with the interview questions rooted firmly in the literature review, the data collected provided an insightful understanding of the HR BP model and the value of HR for organisations. I found the thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) easy to use and it provided a structure that helped to develop clear themes in the analysis. The key learning is that although everyone warns you using a qualitative approach is time consuming, I fell into the trap like many students of poor time management in this area. Personally transcribing the interviews and analysis of the data using a thematic approach took much longer than I expected. This had a knock on effect on my time, which has meant a few late nights and very early mornings before heading off to work over the last few weeks.

Overall, this has been an amazing experience. Although I wish I had listened to all the advice and started the actual writing part of the research paper earlier, I have thoroughly enjoyed working on this project. Working fulltime and completing my MA has been challenging, but the sense of achievement now that it is finished is wonderful!

Appendix 2: Email to participants

Dear [Name],

As you may be aware, I am completing a Masters dissertation in Human Resource Management. My area of research is to explore how the Human Resource (HR) function will assist organisations with changes related to the fourth industrial revolution (i.e., automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet-of-things). My particular area of study is how the HR business partner model will support organisations with that change.

As an HR professional at [Name of Organisation], I would be really grateful if you would consider allowing me to interview you for my research. Interviews should last no longer than 40-60 minutes and all information will be treated as completely confidential. All participants will be anonymised, and all data will be deleted once my dissertation is complete.

I have attached a short outline of my research project. If you would like to participate, please let me know and I will organise a time and date for our interview.

Kind regards,

Cecilia

Appendix 3: Participant consent form

The purpose of this research is to explore how the HR business partner model will support organisations with changes related to the fourth industrial revolution (i.e., automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet-of-things).

One to one interviews will be conducted with HR personnel from a range of roles within the HR business partner model (e.g., HR generalist, HR business partner, HR director). The information will be recorded and uploaded to a secure computer only accessible by the researcher and all recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the project.

Participants will remain anonymous and any information received will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

I.....voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview. The interview material will be deleted and will not be included in the research project.

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. This means that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. Anonymity will be provided by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview that may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation.

I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on a secure computer only accessible by the researcher until the project has been completed.

I understand that under data protection legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage.

Signature of research participant:

_____ Date _____

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

Signature of researcher:

_____ Date _____

Appendix 4: Attached participant synopsis and interview questions

Research synopsis

The Human Resource Business Partner (HR BP) Model – Does the HR BP model add value to the HR function and does it assist in preparing organisations for the fourth industrial revolution (i.e., automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet-of-things).

Overview

The technology of the fourth industrial revolution - automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet-of-things - will fundamentally change the global landscape because it is disrupting traditional business models and consequently the organisation of the global workforce.

In the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Challenge Insight Report, “The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution”, the first recommendation is that the HR function must “reinvent” itself in order to assist organisations with the impact of the global change.

However, the four key areas of focus identified for the HR function: (1) be more strategic; (2) use analytical tools to identify trends and skill gaps; (3) provide insight to the business; and (4) be innovative in talent management to maximise opportunities in transformation trends, echo the purpose of the HR BP model as outlined by David Ulrich – a model almost half of Irish organisations are using for the HR function according to the CIPD.

Aims and Objectives

The research project will explore the impact of the fourth industrial revolution on the workforce in Ireland. In particular, the objective of the research is to understand if the HR BP model adds value to the HR function and does it assist in preparing organisations for the fourth industrial revolution (i.e., automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet-of-things).

Interview questions

The interview questions below will provide you with a guideline of the interview format. However, as we progress through the interview additional questions may be asked.

As outlined in the consent form, all information provided for this study will be treated with the utmost confidence. Please be assured that your identity will remain anonymous by changing your name and disguising any details of the interview that may reveal your identity or the identity of anyone you speak about.

Thank you for your participation in my research project.

The interviewee:

1. Please tell me your name and your role at *organisation*.
2. How many years have you worked in HR?
3. How many years have you worked at *organisation*?

The HR function at *organisation*:

1. How has the HR function at *organisation* changed over the years (e.g., from 'personnel' to 'people')?
2. What are the key benefits of this change?
3. What are the key challenges of this change?
4. What does the business most value about the HR function at *organisation*?
5. What would the business like to see improved in the HR function?

Impact of technology at *organisation*:

1. How has the introduction of technology impacted the workforce at *organisation*?
2. How has the HR function supported the business through the change?
3. With the introduction of more advanced technologies, such as automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet-of-things, what do you see as the greatest challenge at *organisation*?

4. How will the HR function support the change?

Your role and the HR function:

1. What are the key skills and capabilities required for success in your role at *organisation*?
2. What does the HR function most value about your role at *organisation*?
3. What does the business most value about your role at *organisation*?