UNIVERSITY OF
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How do HR Business Partners work strategically?

- A case study of HR transformation and strategic HR work in Göteborgs Stad

Master Thesis in Strategic HRM and Labour relations

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Abstract

Over the last decades, the focus on strategic work within HRM theorists and practices has been increasing. Largely because of the global trend to transform HR organizations in larger companies where also divisional HR practitioners, in the role as HR business partners (HR BP), are supposed to work "more strategically". Though, previous research implies that the strategic transition of HR practitioners work is unclear, and that it is often an uncritical adoption of the strategy concept within HRM theory and practice. Through a case study of the municipality of Gothenburg this paper explore problematize how HR Business Partners work strategically. The methods for data collection were in-depth interviews with different HR practitioners, line managers and trade union representatives, observations of meetings and document reviews. The different ideas of strategic HR work within Göteborgs Stad are discussed in relation to Ulrich's (1997) four-role typology and the prevalent ideas of strategic HR work within the HRM scholarship. The result is then analysed in relation to three general theoretical strategy approaches.

The findings show diverse ideas of HR BP's strategic work where they imply to be strategic in what Ulrich's model suggests to be operational. However, the adoption of the strategy concept by Ulrich and within the SHRM discourse, seem to be mainly based on classical strategy arguments, emphasizing organizational diagnosis and formal strategy planning and implying a division between strategic and operational work. By adopting a Strategy-as-Practice perspective together with a Processual strategy approach, other aspects of HR BPs work could be regarded as strategic. Hence, this paper suggests a more multi-paradigmatic view of strategy and strategic HR work in HRM scholarship and practice, at least in the context of HR BPs.

Keywords: Strategic HR work, HR transformation, HR Business Partner, SHRM

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1. Introduction

Strategy is suggested to be a powerful buzzword, which is used in terms of for example, *strategic* leadership, *strategic* change and *strategic* Human Resource Management (Clegg et al., 2011). It is also argued that it is often an uncritical adoption of the language and motivation of strategy within HRM scholarship and practice (Van Buren et al., 2011). This paper discusses and problematizes the phenomena of strategy in HR work, which lately has received an increased emphasis within HRM theory practice. The discussion is influenced by the HR transformation concept and Ulrich's (1997) advocated role typology, which have had major impact globally on HR functions and HR practitioners in larger companies over the last decade. Hence, the aim for HR practitioners is to take the role as strategic partners to the management and add more value to the organization by focusing at strategic work. However, what strategic HR work actually implies, and how HR practitioners in reality act strategically, are seen as rather unclear and an under-explored area of research (e.g. Boglind et al., 2013, Björkman et al., 2014).

In Ulrich's highly influential literature "Human Resource Champion" (1997) it is argued that the roles of HR must be redefined in order to meet the future competitive challenges organizations are facing, challenges such as: globalization, new technological innovations, increasing competition of best talent and the ability to change. Ulrich emphasize a value adding focus, a shift of HR professional's mentality from "what I do" to "what I deliver", and advocated four distinct roles that HR staff, in the position as business partner (BP), must assume in order to make the transition: strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion, and change agent (see figure 1). This four-role model became seminal aspects of the HR transformation concept, also referred to as "shared service model" (SSM), that has become a leading global trend of a "best practice" model for HR functions in larger companies (Boglind et al., 2013, Thilander, 2013). Later, Ulrich et al. (2009) also talks about redesigning HR to work as a *strategic partner*, moving the focus from internal reactive operational issues to actively engage in the execution of business strategies, by translating HR priorities and designing HR practices that align with business strategy. The authors make the distinction between *transactional* (standardized, administrative) and *transformational* (strategic) HR work, and argue that if these different kind of work is not separated, neither are performed well.

Moreover, the SSM model is a way to streamline the HR function with help of new IT systems

and joint HR processes. The more transactional administrative HR services to line managers and employees are primarily provided in self-service-based IT systems supported by a centralized service centre with call support. The divisional operational HR practitioners, are then suggested to take the role as Business Partners to the divisional management, focusing more time at value adding and "strategic" work, rather than be stuck to administrative and reactive tasks (Ulrich et al. 2009, Thilander, 2013). Thus, the HR transformation and SSM concept is a serious attempt to build a bridge between management and personnel work by rationalizing and standardizing the routine based "transactional work". The aim is accordingly to create time and space for more "strategic" HR work that incorporate the personnel issues with the business, which comprises the management and the organizational issues (Boglind et al. 2013).

A decade after the introduction of the value-adding perspective of HRM with a strategic emphasis, Ulrich et al. (2009) state that the majority of HR professionals now have access to be at "the table". The strategic integration of the HR function is today also considered as critical in (Strategic) HRM literature (e.g. Salaman et al. 2005, Shuler & Jackson 2007, Boxall & Purcell 2011, Van Buren 2011, Casio & Bordreau, 2012). However, a glimpse at the historical background of HR shows that the strategic focus in HR was emphasized long before Ulrich's (2009) concept of HR transformation and the SSM. Especially during the 80th the term "strategic personnel work" becomes emphasized, implying that the personnel practitioners need competence development and to take a more active part in the business' strategic activities. The motto "from dead-end to strategic thinking" becomes significant for the shift from personnel administration to HRM (Damm, 2003). Furthermore, Ohlson & Targama (1986) connect the management focus of HR with "offensive" HR work and refers to engagement in strategic issues, the business' adjustments and change. Also Dyer & Holder (1987) recommends the role for the personnel managers as that of a strategic partner to management. Accordingly, such rhetoric is very much in line with the arguments advocated by Ulrich et al. (e.g. 1997, 2005, 2009). Though, it seems it was not until late into the 2000th that the "strategic role" has been seriously acknowledged among HR practitioners. Thus, after the HR transformation concept, facilitated by management consultants, has become a global trend among large organizations (Boglind et al., 2013).

The idea of reforming the HR function in line with "Ulrich's" HR-transformation concept, also decentralizes the advocated "strategic role" of HR to the local HR practitioners who are working

down the line organization as operational support to line managers, now in the role as Business Partners (Ulrich et al 2009, Boglind et al 2013, Thilander 2013). Thus, the traditional divisional personnel role, as operational support to line managers in e.g. recruitment, rehabilitation, wage setting, transition, competence development, training, labour law, trade union bargaining etc. (Boglind et al. 2013:43), is in the role as business partner supposed to work "more strategically". Thus, since more HR practitioners than only those operating at the corporate centre are regarded to act more strategically, but leading literature on SHRM focus on strategic HR on macro organizational level (e.g. Salaman et al. 2005, Shuler & Jackson 2007, Boxall & Purcell 2011, Casio & Bordreau, 2012), I argue that more research should explore HR practitioners' strategic role on micro level, with a main focus on the practices of HR BPs, especially in larger organizations that have adapted the transformation concept.

Regarding the global trend among organizations adapting the HR transformation concept, the concept was initially acknowledged among large private sector organizations, but later on also many public organizations have started to "transform" their HR functions in line with the model, where the strongest motivator is to become more strategic (Boglind et al., 2013). Similar is also the case of the municipality of Gothenburg, Göteborgs Stad, which through the last decade has performed major reformations of the HR organization in line with the HR transformation concept. The increased strategic emphasis within the HR function and in the roles of divisional HR practitioners makes this large public organization a relevant case to study.

2. Objectives and research questions

Regarding the increased emphasis on strategic HR work within HRM scholarship and practice and the unclear idea of how HR practitioners in reality act strategically, the aim of this study is through a case study of Göteborgs Stad, explore and describe how HR practitioners are working strategically. Also, the purpose is to bring deeper understanding in how a reformation in line with the HR transformation concept has affected the strategic HR role. The focus is primarily to gain an understanding of the strategic work of HR practitioners operating at micro level as "business partners", rather than the HR practitioners on corporate level. Hence, I want to explore the ideas of what characterizes strategic HR work for HR BPs in the organization, and discuss these ideas in relation to prevailing adoptions of strategy and strategic work within SHRM scholarship, such

as Ulrich's (1997) influential role typology. Lastly, in order to put different perspectives on the empirical result and problematize the dominant ideas of strategic HR work in SHRM, different theoretical strategy approaches are adopted as framework for analysis: *Classical* strategy approach, *Processual* strategy approach and *Strategy-as-Practice*.

Hence, the research questions that will guide this paper are:
- What characterizes strategic work for HR Business Partners?
- How has an HR reformation in line with the HR transformation concept affected the strategic role of local HR practitioners in Göteborgs Stad?
- How is the strategy concept applied between theorists and HR practitioners?

In order to bring deeper understandings in how HR BPs are working, the methodologies used for data collection are; interviews with HR practitioners and line managers at different levels, as well as with trade union representatives. Also, observations of various meetings and document reviews are conducted. In order to limit this study, the primary purpose is to bring a deeper understanding of this specific case and problematize strategic HR work in general, rather than exploring differences between strategic HR in public sector versus private sector. Still, some reflections in regard to the context of public sector will be considered in the following section.

3. Previous research

In this section I will overview previous research discussing the topic of HR transformation and the strategic role of HR practitioners. First a review of general research on the topic is discussed, followed by research specifically focusing on HR transformation and strategic HR in public sector.

3.2 General research on HR transformation and HR's strategic role

Research by Lawler III & Bordeau (2009), based on surveys among HR professionals, show that HR professional's presence at the strategic level have remained largely unchanged between 1998 and 2007. The result suggests that HR is not making the kind of progress that numerous consultants and academics often suggest it should make. Regarding the strategic shift in HRM theory and practice the last decade, Van Buren et al. (2011) overviewed the significance of this

trend. The results show that HR professionals acknowledge a primary strategic emphasis in their role and the importance of strategic integration of HRM policies. Though, the authors also state that is often an uncritical adoption of the language and motivation of strategy within HRM scholarship and practice. Moreover, in Pritchard's (2010) research on HR practitioners new role as strategic partners, the result shows tensions in releasing their old generalist role to be free to become strategic, that HR practitioners need to be involved in transactional activities to be able to operate strategically, to know the "little things" in order to gain trust and a relationship with the business leaders. Further, Reilly's (2012) research showed that HR has found it difficult to effectively make a strategic contribution to the organizations it supports, because it has not defined what form a strategic input should take. The result points at a problem of lack of capability within the HR function together with an absence of management support, which makes HR struggle to become accepted as business partner.

Regarding Ulrich's (1997) four-role model, results by Welch & Welch (2012) studying the role of HR Managers in the context of international projects, show limited division between the strategic and operational roles, where HR Managers were strategic in the performance of what Ulrich's role model would classify as operational. Such results also support earlier research by Caldwell (2003) highlighting emergent role conflicts among HR Managers adopting Ulrich's (1997) prescriptive role typology. Moreover, research by Roche & Teague (2012) put the light on the struggles of the HR BP role in the context of recession. The hypothesis, that the recession provides an opportunity for the HR function to recast itself in accordance to the business partner model, and be more strategically involved in a long-term perspective, does not agree with the results of this study. Rather the HR-managers perceived a much greater influence regarding short-term and reactive measures, thus the authors conclude the metaphor – they are business partners but still "working the pumps" (ibid). In an extensive study by Boglind et al. (2013) on the adaption of the HR transformation concept in three private and four public organizations, HR's internal motivator; changing from operational focus to strategic focus, was strongest emphasized within the public organizations that do not have as strong economic justification with the transformation as private sector organizations (ibid, p.76). Though, it was not evident that the HR work had become more strategic, especially not on local level where the division of roles between HR practitioner and line managers were unclear (ibid, p.145). Also, the results point at the high

ambition to be more strategic among HR practitioners didn't match their competence, and few considered themselves to know what strategy is (ibid, p.145, 150). Moreover, the authors imply that the "value adding" concept could be considered as somewhat diffuse and overrated and it was not really used or concretized in the studied organizations.

3.3 HR transformation and strategic HR in public sector

Regarding research on HR transformation and strategic HR work specifically within the public sector, it is, except the research mentioned by Boglind et al (2013), limited literature on the effects of HR-transformation. Though, in a study by Truss (2008), based on case studies of six British public organizations, the question of whether the role of the HR function has become more strategic under the reform agenda was explored. The author argue of clear evidences that the HR function is becoming increasingly strategic, but the new strategic role is not replacing the traditional HR role, it is rather being transformed to a variety of hybrid HR roles, adding to the diversity, challenge and complexity of HR in the public sector. The result implies that the full potential of the HR function to be strategic is still held back by cumbersome and time-consuming procedures. As for future research, Truss also request studies to investigate the impact of transformation in large civil service HR departments, which is the focus of my study.

Furthermore, in a study, based on surveys from 146 senior line managers and HR executives within Australian public sector agencies, Teo & Rodwell (2007) examines the level of operational and strategic involvement by HR departments. The findings highlight the inherent tension of the dual roles of HR professionals as functional and administrative experts, as well as being strategic partners to line managers. Furthermore the results show that the overall level of strategic involvement by the HR department is only moderate, which the authors have different hypotheses to. For instance because HR managers may not be comfortable with the change in strategic focus, rather reliant to their traditional arena of personnel management where their professionalism is established. Another possible explanation is, according to the authors, that HR managers may not have the support and commitment from senior management in moving from operational to strategic HRM. A concluding challenge for HR practitioners, in this study, is that HR needs to build its strategic value from its core operational activities. Similar results are shown in research by Harris (2007) based on three case studies of public sector organizations. The change of the HR role towards pursuing a strategic and business partnership, at the cost of a decreased operational

knowledge, tended to lead to undercut HR's ability to understand the employees' perspective. Hence, the HR function's ability to effectively exercise strategic influence was weakened, according to the study.

To conclude this research review, the suggested strategic transition among HR practitioners the last decade could be highly questioned, irrespective of private or public sector. Foremost, it seems to be problematic for HR practitioners to find a balance in reducing or even leaving the administrative and operational tasks, and focus the time at the suggested strategic partner role and long-term change issues.

4. Theoretical Framework

So what does *strategy* and *strategic work* mean? This section will first consider some definitions and concepts that base the discourse of strategy and strategic work within (Strategic) HRM scholarship. I will then discuss three different general theoretical approaches on strategy and strategic work that will figure as theoretical framework for analysis. Thus, in order to put different perspectives on strategic HR work, as well as to grasp what theoretical adoption on strategy that is prevalent within SHRM.

4.1 Idea of strategy within SHRM

To clear out a coherent definition of strategy and strategic work within academic literature on SHRM could be regarded as a difficult task. As Salaman et al. (2005:3) conclude the complex scholarship of SHRM: "It is virtually impossible to define SHRM. There is no such thing as SHRM because SHRM is not a unitary phenomenon but a collection of phenomena. It consists of very diverse phenomena: prescriptions, models, theories and critiques". However, as a red line within SHRM literature, the theoretical basis and rhetorical discourse are very much based on the resource based view of the firm, considering the human capital, as the firm's most important asset, and key source to competitive advantage (e.g. Casio & Bordreau, 2012, Boxall & Purcell, 2011, Shuler & Jackson 2007, Salaman et al., 2005). Cascio & Boudreau (2012:1) adopt a broad definition of HR strategy as; the processes, decisions, and choices the organization makes regarding its human resources and how they are organized. Regarding the work connected to HR strategy, they discuss conducting internal and environmental analysis and the use of recognized

management models as e.g. "SWOT" and Porter's "five-forces model". Storey (2007:65) discuss that HRM might be defined as strategic if decisions regarding pay, job design, recruitment, selection etc. not is taken on an ad hoc basis, but with adequate consistency that also supports the business' strategy. Furthermore, Boxall & Purcell (2011) also emphasize a "strategic choice" approach on strategy arguing that strategy is best distinguished in behaviour, not only in formal planning documents. They prefer to define a firm's strategy in a broad sense as the set of "strategic choices" that is revealed in the characteristic ways it behaves. The authors argue that the most critical challenges for firms is to survive and to remain viable in their chosen market, this requires "table stakes": a set of goals, resources and capable people that are appropriate to the concerned industry, and critical decisions (choices) about these "table stakes" are seen as strategic (Boxall & Purcell, 2011:41,43). Such strategic choice in terms of HRM regards e.g. the debate about "best fit" versus "best practice" of how to align HR strategy with business strategy. For instance, the SSM concept could be seen as a most topical example of an HR "best practice" model, though the "best fit" school argue that a successful HR strategy must be adapted to its specific context (ibid, p.63)

Regarding ideas of strategy within broader research on HRM, one could find more definitions specifically about strategic work. Lawler III and Mohrman (2003) argue that "strategic" goes hand in hand with planning, design and development of business needs. Brockbank (1999:339) advocate five criteria that distinguish strategic HR activities from the day-to-day routine based operational activities, work that is; long term value adding, organizational comprehensive, planned (well documented, not on ad hoc basis), integrating multifaceted areas, high value adding (critical for business success). Moreover, it is also relevant to mention the definition of strategic HR work in Ulrich's (1997) four-role model, since it has had such a strong influence on the increasing strategic focus in HRM. The strategic work that is connected to the strategic partner role in the upper left corner of the model (see figure 1) is regarded as; aligning HR strategies and practices with business strategy, primarily by identifying HR priorities through organizational diagnosis, such as determine its strengths and weaknesses (ibid, p.25, 27). Later on Ulrich et al. (2009) include the "change agent" role in to the strategic partner role, and suggest that HR BPs should focus time at the upper strategic dimension (transformational work) of the model, rather than the lower operational dimension (transactional work).

Figure 1. *Modified version of Ulrich's (1997:24) four-role model of HR work. Including Ulrich's suggested work descriptions (ibid p. 25).*

To conclude this brief review of influential (S)HRM literature, the general rhetoric regarding strategic work, as I interpret, primarily emphasizes the conduction of long-term plans, organizational diagnosis and macro organizational strategic decisions (choices). As a more multifaceted strategy definition, Boglind et al. (2013:151) imply to consider three different aspects to understand strategy: 1. Strategic plans, aiming to achieve goals. 2. Strategic positions, as having influence on other parts of the organization or employees. 3. Strategic acting, aiming at picking up emerging strategic opportunities in the day-to-day working situations. Thus, such arguments seem to be based on several theoretical approaches on strategy and strategic work.

4.2 General theories of strategy

4.2.1 Classical approach to strategy

The classical rationalistic approach to strategy was established in the 1960s, mainly through literature by Chandler (1962), Sloan (1963) and Ansoff (1965). This approach to strategy is largely inspired by the military hierarchical and commanding tradition together with academic economics (Ansoff, 1965:105), viewing strategy in businesses as a matter of long-term *plans* (Chandler, 1962) and *policies* (Sloan, 1963), with the ultimate goal to achieve profit maximization. Chandler (1962:13) defines strategy as: "the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for those goals". Ansoff (1965) also emphasize planning cycles as a powerful activity because they set strategic direction. Moreover, Chandler distinguish between *strategic*

and *tactical* decisions, where strategic decisions refer to those concerned with the long-term health of the firm, whereas the tactical decisions rather deal with the day-to-day activities required for efficient and flexible operations (ibid, p.11). Chandler emphasizes a distinction between the formulation of planned policies and procedures and their implementation, similarly to Sloan (1963:183) who stresses separating the strategy, named as "policy", from the daily business decisions in the operations. Chandler (1962:11) argue that the departmental offices might make some long-term decisions, but since their executives work within a leading framework set by the general office, their primary activities tend to be tactical or operational. It is the general office that makes the strategic decisions and plans concerning the policies and procedures of the firm, since they have the final mandate in terms of the firm's resources, money and personnel. Also, Chandler's research suggest that it is when the top executives remove their routine based operational duties, and focus time and commitment on analysis and long-term planning, that the firm reach strategic success (ibid, p.309). Hence, the classical strategy approach clearly connects strategy work to hierarchical positions, such as executives positioned at the top management level of the firm.

4.2.2 Processual approach to strategy

The processual approach to strategy is more sceptical to the classical approach on strategy with its rational analysis models and planning focus striving for market profit-maximation and rational streams of action, they rather view strategy as much more ad hoc and *emergent* (Clegg et al. 2011:25-26). Early theorists within this approach stress the bounded human cognition and interpretative biases when people analyse organizational data and conduct strategic plans (Cyert & March, 1963). Weick (1995:54) rather does the metaphor of plans as a map to confidence managers and to make sense of the complex and chaotic reality of the organization. The author furthermore argue that the organization might freeze if it sits waiting for the right map (plans), but if it gets going it will eventually discover strategic opportunities and course. Moreover, in the influential work by Mintzberg & Waters (1985) they make a distinction between planned "deliberate" strategies and emergent "unrealized" strategies. The latter is referring to the patterns of action and behavior that could appear without preconception of formal plans. When a strategy is realized exactly as intended, thus in line with the formal plans, policies and collective action, it could be considered as perfectly deliberate. That means e.g. that no external forces like market, technological, political etc. could have implicated on the strategy. Hence, we are unlikely to find

any perfectly deliberate strategies in organizations. A perfectly emergent strategy must, according to the authors, be order-consistency in action over time and without intentions about it. Since action in the absolute absence of intention is difficult to visualize, also the pure emergent strategy could be expected to be as rare as a perfectly deliberate strategy. However, the authors argue some patterns of the actual realized strategy may come rather close to a perfectly emergent strategy (ibid). Their point is that strategies might become emergent in retrospective, thus perceived after the events. Mintzberg (1990) also discuss that the actual strategy implementation could be as important as the planning and formulation, meaning that implementation also is part of the strategy formulation process, since the shortcomings and insights that emerge during the implementation, especially within turbulent environments, might form the ground for tomorrow's strategy. Regarding the idea of strategic work Mintzberg (1987) also play down the rational action as planning and systematic analysis of markets, competitors, company strength and weaknesses etc. Rather he images the strategic work with the metaphor of "crafting" and emphasizes business involvement to craft the mastery of details.

> Craftsmen have to train themselves to see, to pick up things other people miss. The same holds true for managers of strategy. It is those with a kind of peripheral vision who are best able to detect and take advantage of events as they unfold. [Mintzberg, 1987:74]

Mintzberg also strongly emphasize the craftsman's knowledge as fundamental in the crafting of strategy, aiming at the personal business knowledge and intimate understanding of the operations, rather than the intellectual knowledge and the analysis of reports, abstract facts and figures, etc. Such facts are approachable for anyone, but personal knowledge, also referred to as "wisdom", is not (ibid, p.74).

4.2.3 Strategy-as-Practice
A rapidly expanding strategy approach the last decade is *strategy-as-practice* (SAP) initiated by Whittington (1996). In line with the process oriented perspective on strategy, SAP theory has evolved as a reply to the economic views of rational strategic planning and decision making, emphasizing the importance to consider the complex day-to-day processes of decision making and decision makers (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Hence, strategy is explained by SAP as something that organizations "do", as a socially accomplished practice, rather than something organizations "have", like formal plans and policies, which is embedded in routines and

procedures, discursive resources and material technologies (e.g. Jarzabkowski 2004, Whittington 2006, 2007). Therefore SAP also emphasize sociological theories and methods in the study of the complex reality of strategy, in contrast to objective economic theories with often simplistic models (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008). Moreover, Johnson et al. (2003) use the verb *strategizing* referring to how practitioners shape strategic activities and its outcomes, which they argue is something that happens in the periphery not only in the center of the firm. Thus the authors emphasize a micro perspective on strategy and strategizing, to study the detailed processes and practices that constitute the day-to-day activities of organizational life, which also relate to strategic outcomes (ibid). The authors consider an activity (strategizing) as strategic if it is consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival and competitive advantage of the firm (Johnson et al., 2003), even where these consequences are not part of an intended and formally articulated strategy. Hence, such arguments are closely related to the emergent strategy concept within the processual approach. Also Jarzabkowski (2007) advocate that such strategic activity could be consequential for tendency and survival at multiple layers, depending on the applied level of analysis, from groups and organizations to industries etc. Accordingly SAP theory favors the study of strategy and strategic activities on macro (industries, societies), meso (organizational), as well as micro (divisional) level.

Moreover, Hendry et al. (2010) build further on the concept of strategizing in the studied context of management boards. They make a distinction between *procedural strategizing* and *interactive strategizing,* which they argue, affect strategic decision-making in different ways. Procedural strategizing refers to formal administrative activities as e.g. strategic plans, planning cycles, budgets, forecasts, trend analyses, quarterly reviews, etc. This more formalized type of strategizing has, according to the authors, also a strong focus on diagnostic controls in order to monitor and amend the strategic outcomes, such as performance indicators, sanctions and rewards (ibid, p.36). Thus, such strategic practices are, as I see it, very much related to strategic activities emphasized in the classical strategy approach. Interactive strategizing on the other hand refers to direct face-to-face interaction, formal and informal communication, persuasions, negotiations etc., between senior managers and other actors that continuously creates shared frameworks of meaning about strategy, and influence the development and execution of strategy within the organization. They also argue that the interactive strategizing primarily serves to

introduce and legitimate new strategies, or reinterpret current strategies that have become consolidated in old administrative activities with a doubtful contribution to the organization's strategic goals (ibid). Regarding the practitioners of strategy, Carter et al. (2008) claim that positioning oneself as strategist is a matter of mastering a certain language, tools and bearing. Hence, the authors state that a practice approach might help us to understand what constitutes a strategist as a subject, not in beforehand assume top management to be strategists (ibid).

However, to put a critical perspective on the SAP approach, Carter et al. (ibid) argue that it is a rather unclear and contradictory definition of practice adopted within influential SAP work, which tend to make practice to a concept that could explain almost everything. They furthermore view the relationship between process and practice within SAP as ambiguous, arguing that the synonyms often are used interchangeably. The authors also imply that the SAP perspective on strategy is clearly linked to Mintzberg's work on emerging strategy, and questioning the silence of Mintzberg's work within SAP literature since they share the same "bottom-up" approach to strategy. Similarly, Clegg et al. (2011:26-27) discuss the close relationship between the process approach and SAP, where the latter are argued to be spawned on ideas such as Mintzberg and Weick, who share the same skepticism about the classical approach to strategy and share equal interest in what happens when strategist are engaged in the process of strategy. Also Langely (2007) views SAP as a category of process.

The fact that SAP theory was initiated, as well as has been evolved, during the same period of time as "Ulrich's" HR transformation concept and the increased strategy focus among HR organizations and practitioners, should make HR practices an interesting area to study from an SAP perspective. Yet, very few studies consider the strategic role of HR in SAP research. In Vaara and Whittington's (2012) review of the development of SAP research so far, no empirical focus in relation to SHRM is discussed in any of the studies mentioned. 2014 though, Björkman et al. (2014) advocate a "practice turn" within HRM research in line with SAP research and state that insufficient research has focused at HR practice at micro level, such as the relationship between HR representatives at the centre and those in divisional level. As also mentioned in the introduction, they stress that the question; how HR professionals in reality act strategically, are under-explored areas of research.

4.3 Summary of the theoretical framework

In the light of this theoretical discussion, I argue that the approach to strategy within SHRM scholarship is not coherent, however most in line with the rhetoric of the classical strategy approach, primarily focusing at achieving competitive advantage for the firm. The overall view of strategic HR work is mainly connected to organizational and environmental analysis and to the development of HR strategy plans.

As framework for analysis, the empirical characteristics of HR practitioners' strategic work within Göteborgs Stad will first be analysed in relation to Ulrich's (1997) influential four-role model (see figure 1). This is in order to clear out how much in line they work strategically with what is suggested in the role as "strategic partner" and the prevalent idea of strategic work within SHRM scholarship. In order to put different perspectives on how HR practitioners in Göteborgs Stad are working strategically, the empirical results are then analysed in relation to the discussed general theoretical approaches on strategy. The focus is to explore how arguments and concepts of strategic work by SAP (strategizing) and the Processual school (emergent strategies) could provide different understandings of strategic HR work, as a challenging complement to the classical strategy approach, which I regard as dominant within the SHRM discourse. Hence, in regard to the stated close relationship between strategy practice and process (Langely, 2007, Carter's et al., 2008, Clegg et al., 2011), I will in this sense discuss these challenging strategy perspectives in parallel with one another. Thus, approach strategy practice as what emerge within the strategy process. SAP will also serve as a methodological inspiration for the empirical data collection, since it favours the study of strategic work on micro organizational level (Björkman et al., 2014).

5. Methodology

In this section, I will present the methodology and the approach chosen to answer the study's research question. It will include; the research design, a case introduction, data collection and empirical analysis, as well as reflect ethical considerations.

5.1 Research design

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of how HR BPs work strategically, in the

context of a public organization that has conducted a reformation in line with the HR transformation concept. I want and bring deeper understanding in how HR practitioners perceive and interpret their involvement in strategic activities. Thus, I have adopted a qualitative and interpretative research approach, since the emphasis of qualitative research is on the interpretation and understanding of a phenomenon in a social reality (Bryman, 2001). Viewing the case study as social research equivalent to the spotlight (Hakim, 2000:59), a case study design has been adopted, since it favours the opportunity to explore and describe how HR BPs work strategically in a natural setting of a public organization. According to Yin (2003:13) *"A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life content, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident"*. Since the boundaries between the contemporary phenomenon of "strategic work", in the context of HR practitioner's real-life content, is argued to be unclear, this motivates the choice of a case study design as a research strategy.

5.1.1 The Case

The case for this study is as discussed the municipality of Gothenburg. Göteborgs Stad is one of Sweden's largest employer with around 49,000 employees working throughout the different City District Administrations (CDA) (70%), Departments (fackförvaltningar) (15%), or municipal owned companies (15%). There are more than 200 employed HR practitioners operating throughout the different HR departments. The majority of these are named as HR Specialists, a smaller amount of HR practitioners are also HR administrators, and almost every local organization has an HR Manager. Furthermore there is also a central HR function, the "HR strategic department" (HR-SD), that during the empirical data collection were manned by around 40 different HR professionals, including the HR Director. The case is interesting for this study since the organization has performed major re-organizations during the last decade in line with the HR transformation concept, where the roles of local HR Managers and HR Specialists have changed towards becoming "strategic" business partners. A further description of the case will be presented in the result section.

5.2 Empirical data collection

What is stated to be a great benefit of a case study design is the possibility to use multiple sources of evidence, *data triangulation* (Yin, 2003). This strategy gave me the opportunity to approach

the phenomenon of HR strategic work in different ways and thereby seek a convergence of evidence (ibid). The primary source of data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, secondary source of data through observations, and as a complementary third source of data different organizational documents were reviewed. The data collection started in the central HR-SD that also helped me to get access to the local HR departments. Since about 70% of both employees and HR practitioners work within CDAs, I chose to collect my data focusing at three different CDAs and one Department. Because of the need to limit my study, I was recommended to disregard the HR functions in the municipal owned companies, since they often are smaller and organized rather differently. The empirical collection was conducted between January and April during the spring of 2014.

5.2.1 Primary source of data

In-depth interviews were considered as an important source of data, both in order to gain understanding in HR practitioners' interpretation of strategic work, as well as understand the adaption and impact of the HR transformation in the organization. Since the main focus was to investigate the strategic work of HR practitioners working as "business partner" to managers in the line organization, local HR Managers and HR Specialists were the primary group of interest. However, interviews were also conducted with HR professionals at central level at the HR-SD, including the HR Director. In order to also gain a line manager perspective and a trade union perspective on the changed role of HR, three interviews with different local level managers were carried out, as well as one focus group interview with two trade union chairmen. Regarding the selection of participants (see figure 2), I initially carried out a pilot interview with two representatives at the HR-SD who gave me access to study the organization and helped me to identify appropriate local HR departments to contact, as well as relevant participants at the HR-SD and trade union contacts. Furthermore, after establishing contact with different HR Mangers I got help to identify relevant HR Specialists, voluntary managers as well as appropriate meetings for observation.

Central level	
HR-SD: HR Director, 3 HR Professionals	**Trade unions:** 2 chairmen

Local level			
CDA 1: HR Manager, 2 HR Specialists, CDA Director	**CDA 2:** HR Manager, 3 HR Specialists	**CDA 3:** 2 HR Specialists	**Department:** HR Manager, 1 HR Specialist, 1 Area Manager, 1 Unit manager.

Figure 2. Map of interviews

The interviews were semi-structured using guides with open thematic questions, which allowed me as researcher to create space for discussion and focus more on the narratives. This interview technique was also beneficial in the sense that I could move more freely in the order of questions and allowed me to manage a good balance between the ways the respondents could give descriptive answers, but also let me guide the conversation (Bryman, 2001). Moreover, this approach facilitated the possibility to ask supplementary investigating questions, such as "can you give a practical example", if the interviewee were mentioning strategy or strategic work. Since the roles of the respondents were multiple, modified versions of four different interview guides were used for HR interviewees, Managers, and for the trade union representatives (see Appendix I-IV). The initial information the participants received regarding the purpose with my study was mainly that I wanted to investigate how HR works today after the major performed changes (transformation) within Göteborgs Stad. The main themes for all HR practitioners were: *Brief background experience, role and responsibilities, view of the change towards the BP-role, influence in management team, strategic work / operational work, long-term work, most value adding work, future challenges*. Complementing question specifically about defining and exemplifying the "strategic role" or "strategic work" etc. were rather asked later on, since my aim was initially to here their story about how they perceive their role and what they do in practice. Accordingly, to also be able to do own interpretations about events that could be perceived as "strategic" in the analysis, without being too influenced of the interviewees' idea of strategic work. The questions to the managers were rather focusing at their view of HR's role and deliverance, if and how the role has changed, HR's engagement in business issues and long term work, as well as future challenges. Additionally, a focus group interview was conducted with the

two trade union representatives, in which the themes were: their relation to HR, view of HR's mission, the change within HR, HR's strategic role, the effects of the HR change for line managers and employees. The focus group, which was the last interview, was an attempt to generate a richer collection of viewpoints of the issues in focus through a discussion involving more than one participant (Kvale, 2009). Though, in a retrospective, the collected information from the focus group would most likely have been similar as the outcome from ordinary single interviews. 19 face-to-face interviews were conducted with all together 20 participants, since one included two participants, and all interviews were recorded and performed at the local office of respectively participant. The average duration was just over an hour, the shortest 45 and the longest 90 minutes. Every participant except three HR Specialists and one HR Manager had been working within Göteborgs Stad longer than the implementation of the HR BP role. Three of these had been working in their current role for at least two years, where two had senior previous HR experience. One interviewee, also with previous experience from an HR BP role, was chosen in order to also gain a perspective from a newly recruited HR Specialist.

5.2.2 Secondary source of data

Moreover, observations was seen as a vital complement to provide interesting data, both as comparison to the interviews as well as to enrich my understanding of what HR practitioners actually do that could be perceived as strategic practice. Since I am mainly interested in understanding the strategic activities of local HR BPs, the focus has been to study different meetings with HR Specialists and/or HR Managers. In the initial contact with local HR Managers and HR Specialists, I asked for the possibility to observe different meetings, as a complement to the interviews, including HR participants, like management team meetings, HR work meetings, process group meetings etc. in order to gain deeper understanding in how they work. I didn't explicitly mention my interest in strategic work since I wanted to capture the "natural" behaviour in the meeting activities.

My role as an observer in the majority of the different meetings (see figure 3) was in line with what Gold (1958) describes as "observer-as-participant". Initially I presented myself very briefly as an HR thesis student who conducted a case study of HR within Göteborgs Stad. After that I had no activity in the interaction, rather trying to be a "fly on the wall" as a passive observer just taking discrete notes. At one meeting (6) though, with only three participants except me, I was

rather a "participant-as-observer" (ibid) who were more active in the discussion and asked questions regarding details about the project and the on going planning process. The starting observation event was an annual HR conference during a day, in which I could take a more passive role as observer. In every meeting I took careful field notes of; the roles of the different participants, continuous time updates, the issues discussed and power pointed, etc. Once in a while I also wrote down analytic reflections connected to my research question. In the management team meetings I put specific focus on the contribution and behaviour of the HR participants. Shortly after each meeting, as latest a few hours after, I summarized the observations and the analytic reflections.

Kind of meeting (chronological order by date)	Central, CDA or Department	Number of Participants	Participant roles	Duration (approx hours)
1. HR Conference (including 4 seminars)	Central	Approx 200	HR Director (Moderator), HR Managers, HR Specialists, et al.	8 h
2. Process Group meeting – Salary administrative process	Central	Approx 30.	Process leader (moderator), HR Specialists (majority), Administrators, Central HR service representatives	3 h
3. Sector management team meeting	CDA(1)	13	Sector Manager (moderator) , Area Managers, Unit Managers, Controller, HR Specialist, Administrator	3,5 h
4. Management team meeting (support functions)	CDA(1)	6	HR Manager, CFO, Development Manager, Staffing Unit Manager, Controller	2 h
5. HR weekly team meeting	CDA(1)	Approx 15	HR Manager (moderator), HR Specialists, Staffing Unit Manager, OSH Strategist	2 h
6. HR project status meeting	Department	3	HR Manager, HR Specialists	1,5 h
7. Process Group meeting – Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)	Central	Approx 15	Process leader (moderator), HR Specialists	3 h
8. HR weekly team meeting	CDA(2)	7	HR Specialists	2 h
9. Steering group meeting for staffing project	CDA(2)	8	Project leader (moderator), Sector Managers, Area Managers, CFO, HR Manager, HR Specialist	2 h
10. Sector management team meeting	Department	8	Head of operations (moderator), Unit Managers, Controller, HR Specialist	3,5h

Figure 3. *Map of observations*

5.2.3 Third source of data

As an additional empirical source, different organizational documents and information have been reviewed. The purpose with this data source was primarily for the description of Göteborgs Stad as a case and details regarding the transformation process. The majority of this collected material has been web based and open for public on Göteborgs Stad's intranet such as: documents regarding HR's joint processes, policies, guidelines, relevant ratios, local service level agreements etc. Also additional documents as power point presentations considering the change process within the HR function have been shared from the HR-SD.

5.3 Data analysis and theoretical framework

The purpose with the study was not to confirm or reject a hypothesis based on theory, as in deductive research strategies (Bryman 2001). Still I have approached the data collection as well as data analysis with the eyes of the different perspectives on strategy and strategic work discussed in my theoretical framework, hence the research strategy should rather be referred to as *abductive* (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). All the interviews were transcribed word by word and the analysis of data started in parallel with the on going empirical collection, in line with an iterative research approach (Bryman, 2001). During the multiple readings of the interview transcripts and observation notes, I have applied a thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially I coded interesting episodes in the data connected to either the participants' perceptions of strategic work, or aspects that could be perceived as strategic activities in regard to my theoretical framework. I then searched for patterns in the codes (e.g. "long-term work", "proactive work", "coaching approach") that I grouped into different categories. Eventually I could relate the categories with each other and organize them in to four core themes that I named; "strategic partner work", "process leader work", "change and long-term work" and "strategically operational work", which were representing common ideas of strategic HR work. In the analysis of the material from the observations I could on the one hand identify aspects that validated the categories from the interview transcripts, such as e.g. "giving input to management decisions" or "planning HR projects". Also, with help of the analytic reflection notes the categories could be expanded with additional aspects that could be interpreted as strategic HR work, such as "different activities connected to change processes". In order to give transparency and strengthen the trustworthiness of the empirical analysis a rich adoption of quotations are used in the empirical presentation.

As framework for analysis, the characteristics of HR practitioners' strategic work in the empirical presentation are discussed in two different sections. First, in order to give a picture of the ideas of strategic work within Göteborgs Stad in connection to prevalent ideas of strategic HR work within SHRM, the empirical result is applied to and discussed in relation to Ulrich's (1997) influential four-role model. The latter part is rather a theoretical analysis where the empirical result is discussed in relation to the different theoretical approaches to strategy and strategic work presented in the theoretical framework.

5.4 Ethical considerations

In terms of confidentiality, Göteborgs Stad agreed to be transparent as case. During the interview the participants were initially informed about the purpose of the study and they got the chance to sort out possible questions. All interviewees gave their consent to record the interviews, as well as agreed with the purpose that the recording was only to facilitate the forthcoming analysis and that no one other than the researcher would have access to the material. They were also informed that the interview was confidential and that possible use of quotations would be anonymous. All quotations used in the final report have also been sent back to respectively respondent and approved. The local CDAs and the Department is also confidential in the report in order to not be able to identify the interviewees.

6. Empirical presentation

The presentation of the empirical material is organized in three main sections. The initial part is an overview of the HR transformation process in Göteborgs Stad, mainly based on reviewed documents and the interviews with the participants from the HR-SD. The second part is a short description of the different HR roles and responsibilities will be presented to give a picture of *what are they doing* after the transformation. Since the purpose of this study is to explore the strategic work of HR BPs, the focus will be at the HR Specialists and HR Managers. But in order to understand the whole context in which local HR practitioners work strategically, the role of the central HR-SD is also briefly considered. In the third section the *ideas* of HR practitioners' strategic work will be presented, together with reflections from the observations.

6.1 The HR transformation process

Göteborg Stad initiated the first aspects of an HR reformation, in line with the HR transformation concept, in 2004 in conjunction with a recreation of the internal personnel system. An important motivator was to organize joint guidelines and working processes for all HR departments in Göteborgs Stad, which at the time were working independently and rather differently, and develop such HR processes together with supporting IT systems. Starting with the process of recruitment 2006, the organization has now 12 different joint "HR owned" processes, concerning for example: Occupational safety and health (OSH), talent management, rehabilitation, wage administration, wage setting, transition, staffing, internships, etc. These "strategic HR processes" provide step by step recommendations of how to plan and implement the strategies in to local practice, including leading policy documents, analysis tools, and guidelines. The processes are not only tools and support for all HR practitioners throughout the organization, but ultimately also for the line managers who are responsible for implementing the processes in to their respectively business, supported by their local HR function. Today there's also a great amount of new IT-systems supporting the different processes, which the line managers are supposed to handle themselves, rather than delegating the work to their local HR function.

In parallel with this centralization of HR processes in Göteborgs Stad, the HR function also acknowledged a shift around 2007 from the traditional "Personnel Specialist" to "HR Specialist", which not only refer to a shift by title, but rather to a transformation of the role of HR practitioners throughout the organization. The idea was to change the working approach of HR practitioners, reduce the administrative work and work more "strategically", becoming strategic partners to the local management in respectively CDA, Department or municipal owned company. Such partner role is held both by the different HR Mangers, who are partners on the department director level, as well as by the HR Specialists who are partnering the line managers on sector, area and unit level (first line level). A purpose of implementing the strategic partner role was, according to HR-SD participants, to connect the HR issues as a natural part of the business issues and the financial issues, and become a support to the strategic development of the business in every level of the organization.

Firstly, we can't discuss HR issues as a separate phenomenon, it's a business issue. This business consists of personnel, so I can't understand why we still end up in the discussion [...] when you really should sit down and discuss - we have a business to be developed and to deliver something to a customer or user. Then that must be the common objective, to which we can contribute in different ways. That is to be a strategic partner. [HR Director]

As a part of the new HR role, the majority of HR practitioners have performed training in a "coaching approach", which is based on the argument that they henceforth should support line managers by coaching and advising rather than actually perform the work for them. Moreover, during the annual HR conference (meeting 1) within Göteborgs Stad in 2014, a picture were presented (see figure 3) illustrating the transformation towards the HR concept of tomorrow, emphasizing a focus on strategic, value adding and proactive work. Also, an adapted version of Ulrich's (1997) four-role model has been used during the years of reformation to guide the role and responsibilities of local HR practitioners.
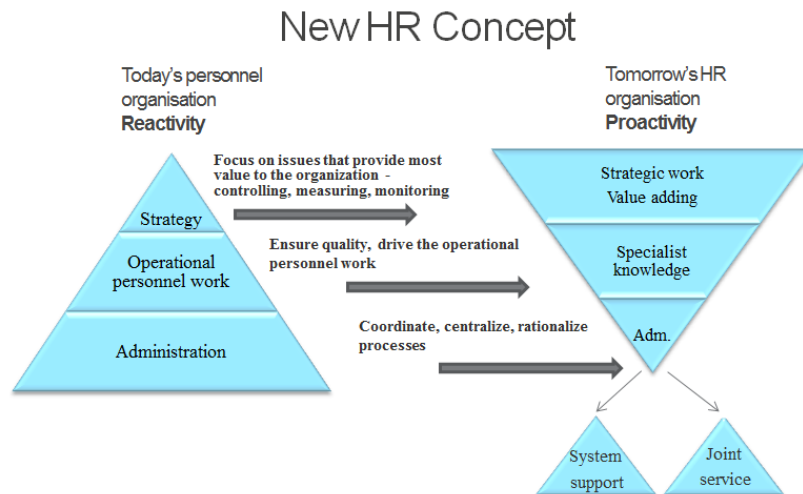
Figure 4. Translated version from an HR conference power point illustration 2014.

However, a fully adopted Shared Service Model is not yet performed in the organization in terms of a complete "service centre" (Ulrich et al. 2009), which so far mainly includes the wage function. A centralized HR service function is though under development and will be implemented before the summer 2014. Specifically which HR related issues that will be held by the service centre, and the configuration of the service that will be provided, is during the time of writing not yet decided. The increased administrative responsibility for line managers has been handled differently throughout the organization. A common solution has been to employ new

administrators, either as a direct generally administrative support to the line managers, or either as an HR administrative call support located at the local HR department. To what extent different HR Specialists have reduced the direct administrative support towards line managers and focus at the "strategic work" is described as rather shifting between individuals and between different local HR departments.

6.2 What are they doing?

6.2.1 Central HR Strategic Department (HR-SD)

The HR-SD belongs to City Planning Office and has the central employer function in Göteborgs Stad. One group is for instance responsible for analysing and monitoring organizational employment ratios, which is information that partly constitutes municipal government decisions. What is emphasized, as a main mission for the HR-SD, is to coordinate the joint strategic HR processes and policies for Göteborgs Stad, and each process has a process manager operating at central level. At the HR-SD the top "decision-making-forum" within HR, which is headed by the HR Director, also takes place, where all final decisions about investments or reorganizations of the HR owned processes are made. Even though the HR-SD are the "extended arm" of the municipal executive committee they do not have the mandate to take decisions for the local departments and CDAs, which have their own goals and budget set by local political committees, only to provide recommendation and mediate prioritized goals. Furthermore, the HR-SD could also be compared to what Ulrich (2009) refer to as "centre of expertise", since it is manned by senior experts within certain HR areas like e.g. labour law and negotiation, who gives support in more complicated cases that the local HR departments can not solve. Also they negotiate the central collective bargaining, which becomes the frames for the bargaining at local levels. A newer area of responsibility in the HR-SD is also HR practitioners that works specifically with city-wide employer branding. It is considered as one of the most important long-term strategic issues for Göteborgs Stad, to become a more attractive employer in order to compete for talented labour in the future. The talent management process is currently also considered to be a top priority within the whole organization. And such directions come not only from the central HR-SD, but also from political decisions. The HR-SD has then created the joint processes as a leading framework and a "best practice" of how every local HR department should work in their organization, both operational as well as strategic. Since the local organizations are steered by

own political committees and all strategic decisions regarding the businesses are made locally, the HR-SD can not force the Departments to follow the action plans in practice, only provide recommendations and guidelines.

6.2.2 The HR Manager role

The role of local HR Managers is, according to the interviewed HR Managers, described as multifaceted with many areas of responsibility. The primary responsibility is to monitor and coordinate the overall development of the HR area within the specific CDA or Department. Since they primarily delegate the responsibility for driving the different HR processes to the HR Specialists, they rather coordinate the implementation and decision-making of the processes as a partner to the CDA/Department Director and local top management team. This means having a permanent place at different top management meetings discussing overall business issues, which also includes participation in committee meetings with political representatives who takes strategic decisions regarding the annual budget and prioritized aims for the business.

> The HR manager is a bubble on my body, you could say. I receive the political commissions, but then all the members of the management committee assist me in my mission, where the HR manager is an important part. [CDA Director]

The HR managers also have continuous meetings with the central HR-SD together with other HR Managers, who jointly engage in the overall development of the HR function in Göteborg Stad. Another assignment is to be the HR support to the local Department Director, which could include "operational" work tasks similar to the HR-specialist, but on the highest department level, e.g. supporting in the recruitment of a new manager. Furthermore, since they are the manager of all the HR employees at their local HR department they have also the responsibility for all the personnel related issues like health, safety, finance and everything included in an ordinary manger assignment. Thus, the majority of the working week does, according to one HR Manager, consist of different meetings with different steering teams, project teams, union representatives and coordination with the other support functions including the CFO and Development Manager. In CDA1 they have put extra effort in the cooperation of the support functions; economy, development and HR. This is strongly supported by the CDA Director who emphasizes the benefit of a close collaboration between the support functions in order to drive the business issues more efficiently together with the management board.

6.2.3 The HR Specialist role

The role for the majority of the HR Specialist within Göteborg Stad is described as twofold; 1) a generalist assignment as line manager support, and 2) a specialist assignment as "process leader". Primarily, the main responsibility is the "traditional" assignment; to support and advice the line managers in all HR related issues, also referred to as "consulting", "coaching", "quality controlling", etc. Hence, they are in practice also generalists, even though they are by title referred to as specialists. To be a generalist in this sense is mainly referred to as having basic knowledge in all joint HR processes and the related IT-tools within Göteborgs Stad, in order to be able to advice and support in all HR related issues to the specific line managers connected to them. This sort of daily support is often what the respondents describe as the operational work.

> Well, a lot is of course about counselling in rehabilitation, labour legislation and that type of questions. And even purely administrative support in all these systems that the managers are supposed to handle. [HR Specialist 2, CDA 1]

In addition to this traditional HR role all HR Specialists are today supposed to have a place as strategic HR partner at the management board in their specific sector or area of managers. Also the majority of the HR Specialists have managed to get a more or less permanent place at some or all of the weekly and/or monthly management meetings. Still, a minority have not yet got access, or participates only on occasional basis. The "specialist" assignment is accordingly partly referring to the specific sector in which they operate, e.g. since they gain in-depth knowledge in that particular business and its employees and managers.

The secondary assignment of the majority of the HR Specialists is to be a local "process leader" for certain HR areas connected to one or several of the joint strategic HR processes. The local HR Managers initially held this assignment, but since the HR Specialists eventually became experts who worked with the processes on a daily basis, the assignment was redirected to them. Hence, in parallel with their traditional role, the responsibility is to lead the process development locally, but also to represent his/her HR department in centralized "process groups" together with other HR Specialists from other parts of Göteborgs Stad. The purpose is to continuously improve and coordinate the joint HR processes and the supporting IT-tools connected to them, partly by bringing local issues and ideas of improvement to the process group meetings, but also to communicate the issues discussed back to their local HR team and drive the implementation of

the processes locally. Through these forums every HR Specialist has the possibility to bring ideas of improvement that, through a joint decision and often after a final approve from the HR Director, could lead to an improvement in the joint system, or process policies/routines that comes for the whole organization.

The perceived distribution of work time between these two main responsibilities seems to vary between different HR Specialists and HR departments. The time spent on activities connected to the process leader role are described as depending on for instance; what kind of processes and how many HR processes you are responsible for, how self-propelled your area of managers are, but also in the HR Specialist's personal engagement in the processes. Some estimate an equally distributed working time seen over a longer period of time, where some periods are more focused on "traditional" support for managers and other periods are almost completely dedicated to work connected to the HR processes. A minority of the HR Specialists though, e.g. newly recruited, are only working with the assignment 1. There are also some rare examples of HR Specialists that doesn't work towards a specific sector or area of managers, who only works as specialists within a specific HR area such as Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) or recruitment. Such examples of non-standard specialized HR roles are present in CDA1, which is the largest local HR department in Göteborgs Stad.

6.3 The idea of strategic HR work

The general opinion concerning the local HR practitioners is that they are in various ways "more strategic" today, both as an HR function but also in their individual work. Though the motivations and strategic emphasis are rather diverse among the respondents. This subsection will be presented in four themes that represent different "ideas of strategic work" that were most commonly shown in the empirical data: *strategic partner work, process leader work, change and long-term work, strategically operational work.* The themes are more or less inter-connected but present different perspectives on "strategic work".

6.3.1 Strategic partner work
The idea of strategic work, or rather "being strategic" is, in terms of all respondents, most commonly discussed around the role as strategic partner, or "having a place at the management table". The HR Director exemplifies the work of a strategic partner in a broad sense as "raising issues that a manager may not always be able to, do think about, or somehow do not see the

consequences of". Other examples of strategic work that is mentioned at HR-SD level concerning this role can be to: Identify and produce data to be able to do correct judgments of the business' needs of development and change. Conduct future analysis and add on facts from the finance function, since about 70% of the cost is personnel, e.g. identifying future staffing alternatives instead of using expensive temporary agency workers. Similarly, a senior HR Specialist also emphasizes personnel planning in connection to the strategic partner work.

> "We're involved regard to planning, to all forecasts. It can result that we can see in front of us that it will be a great need for reorganization and redundancy, or large recruitment requirements or whatever it is. There's HR contributing as a natural partner of course, which we were not before when we were Personnel Specialists. In such cases recruitment specialists were consulted when we were about to recruit, it was not this sort of strategic thinking – where are we going? and where do we want to go? etc." [HR Specialist 2, CDA 3].

The HR Manager at CDA2 also emphasize the BP aspect of the transformation: "Since HR Specialists joined the management meetings more regularly in all sectors I find that we're more involved in more issues, not only related to HR then, but the whole business in a different way". Several informants discuss the importance of "selling" your knowledge and competence as an HR BP and show results in management meetings to become a trusted strategic partner, especially among many senior line managers who expect the traditional service from HR. From the HR Specialists' perspective the most common described practice in such meetings is to "give input to the business issues discussed from an HR perspective". The most frequent input, which also became evident during the observation (meeting 3, 9, 10), is connected to labour legislation and policies as well as aspects to consider trade union dialogue. Usually they often have their own item on the meeting agenda presenting and discussing e.g. issues connected to specific HR processes or IT-tools, or inform about present and future HR projects and development initiatives. Moreover, an important practice specifically for HR Managers as BPs, is described as "lining in" HR issues in the local top management board, which could be connected to political aims or something that has been identified as an area of development. One HR Manager also refers to "planting" and "selling" ideas to management board, by presenting facts and cost-win arguments.

Moreover, an emphasized aspect that is seen as facilitated by the "new" role as partner to the

local management board is the ability to act *proactively*, which also often is discussed in relation to "being strategic". Acting proactively is mainly referred to as; taking action before problems happen, instead of just "putting out fires". The proactive actions could, according to one HR Manager, be done by gaining knowledge in the actual business, what is going on, what is problematic, future challenges, etc. that could affect employees and also cause problems connected to labour law and cause extra costs to the business if its handled incorrectly. Such proactive HR input, early in the discussions of strategic decisions at the management table, some HR Specialists also refer to as the most value adding HR work to the business, or; being "HR with a big H" rather than being the traditional reactive personnel worker. Two HR Specialists also emphasize the importance of not just having a place but "taking" a place at the management table.

> "And it's not just that you sit with the management team, but to actually sit and sketch of how we should think about our organization, how to staff, if we need to create new services and what they need to do, that type of work. That I would say is most strategic." [HR Specialist 2, CDA2].

Such active involvement in the business discussion was exemplified in meeting 10, where the HR Specialist seemed to have established a prominent partner role in the management team, asking questions and giving input in the majority of issues at the meeting agenda.

6.3.2 Process leader work

Some HR Specialists primarily relate the strategic aspects of their work to the process leader role rather than the business partner role. They describe the strategic aspect of the process related work as more *organizational comprehensive* and with a future focus.

> There we are talking about more overall approaches that we will have on the various issues, and what happens ahead, what's going on, what new research findings are available and new methodologies or so. So it's strategic, absolutely it is. [HR Specialist, CDA 1]

Further, one HR Specialist describes the change of the HR role as:

> Since I came here the work has changed to a great extent. Back then I sat with more, as I see it, operational duties as e.g. wellness issues, labour costs to put in payroll software, and such things. Now I work more with processes, as talent management, wage setting and such aspects. So it's been more towards strategic tasks than it was initially.

Though, such perception seems to correlate with what kind of HR processes you manage, depending on whether the questions discussed in different processes are more or less connected to system administrative development issues, also referred to as "hard" or "soft" HR processes. Especially the HR Specialists who were process leaders within the less IT-tool related (soft) processes, e.g. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and Talent Management, also seemed more positive about the possibility to affect the processes development and accordingly contribute to the central HR plans and policies. They were also more positive about the possibility to affect the implementation of the process locally, viewing the process as recommendations of best practice that provides supporting tools in the making of local HR plans, rather than strict guidelines of how to work. This also became clearer during the observations of these meetings (2 and 7). E.g. in the team for the payroll process (hard process) the discussion was rather connected to IT-tools and short-term improvements before the next month. This group were also including several HR administrators. The process group for OSH process (soft process) on the other hand, was not as bound to an IT-system, rather they discussed improvements of policies and had a longer time perspective. They were also a smaller group who were divided in sub teams focusing at specific long-term development areas. The development aspects in this meeting were also on a macro organizational level, which accordingly will affect the work strategy plan regarding OSH for every line manager and HR practitioner within Göteborgs Stad. One HR Specialist though was rather critical about the creative aspect of the use of joint processes in general.

> Working in processes becomes very rectangular. If you only stick to the process, then I think you miss the creativity and the knowledge that we possess. If you turn off and stick to the process, then there is no renewal at all. And one of our core values in Göteborgs Stad it is "we think new." And how should you think "new" if you have to turn of and conduct yourself to a particular process? [HR Specialist, CDA3].

Furthermore, some HR participants emphasize *coordination* as an important and strategic HR practice, which is seen as facilitated by the HR transformation and the new joint HR Processes. This refers to coordinating the service deliverance of the HR function, both on a central level and within the local HR departments, in order to achieve uniformity and secure service quality through standardized processes. Accordingly, this is practiced on all levels in the organization, but on the most strategic level by the HR practitioners at the HR-SD. As a respondent at HR-SD

puts it: "the strategic in my daily work it is to coordinate". They are responsible for the planning, development and coordination of the joint strategic HR processes and the supporting IT systems, which are seen as the ultimate HR coordination tools as such since they lead and support all the work connected to personnel for the whole organization. Moreover, on local level strategic coordination planning is primarily managed by the HR-Managers, but also practiced by HR Specialists through e.g. HR team meetings where both daily and future issues are discussed. Such meetings were, especially within CDA2, referred to as coordinating interactions where joint decisions are taken about how to act in a unanimous way to ensure the future service quality, which also was exemplified in an observed HR team meeting (8). Many local HR departments have also jointly created different kinds of service level agreements (SLA) as a guiding document of the expected HR service.

6.3.3 Change and long-term work

A common aspect discussed among HR participants in every level, in connection to becoming more strategic is "acting with a long-term future perspective" and having the possibility to engage in more long-term change work. In terms of long-term planning, a one-year perspective is mentioned as the most normal long-term perspective for HR Specialists in the business involvement in their management teams, since the political budget decisions are set annually. The HR Managers though, mention involvement in decision-making at local top management level regarding plans with even two to three year perspectives, and at the HR-SD two to four year planning horizons is mentioned as common. Regarding HR Managers, a practice with long-term effect that were exemplified is to write propositions that will be the basis for political targets connected to personnel issues, which is integrated in the annual budget plan and steering document for the local area of business. For instance motivate a focus and financial stake at OSH development. Moreover, several different local change projects were exemplified with a long-term development focus, which often are driven by HR Specialist but monitored and supported by the HR Manager. One HR Manager describes:

> We have a development work in terms of health-promoting leadership and teamwork, where we have surveyed and interviewed half of the district managers. We have identified a number of areas for improvement where managers have been involved to prioritize. And now we have a package of measures that we will work with the next two years. It is also a part of working more strategically with health issues, not just to look at sick leave ratios, but working more with long-term prevention and

health promotion. Speaking of going from operational to strategic, it's also such a thing we didn't do before. [HR Manager, CDA1]

Also during the observations some examples of different local development projects with long-term improvement focus were evident. For instance in one local meeting (5) three different project teams presented their status of current projects within their CDA: communication strategy development for support functions, team development strategy to prevent stress, and a project to streamline and simplify all processes related to IT-systems for managers. The work was still more or less during the planning phase but with the ultimate purpose to support the line managers in various ways, in order for them to focus at the business. Another example from an observed meeting (7) is a session of development of the local "talent management" plan, which could be exemplified in these reflective and summarizing field notes:

> The process has initially been to review the organizational leading documents, plans and recommendations in the joint talent management process of how work to annually. The next present step is to translate these recommendations of "best practice" to an action plan and work material, that best fit the local environment and organization, which is discussed during this meeting. The HR Manager will later on present the final action plan, together with compiled material that will be used as tools for line managers, in the steering committee of this local department, where a joint decision of the implementation plan will be taken. The HR specialists will then be the main drivers of implementation by educating and coach line managers how to work with the material annually and evaluate the competences of their employees.

A specific activity that some interviewees at all HR levels connect to strategic work, which also is linked to change initiatives, is *environment scanning* in order to identify organizational development areas. Such scanning activities are mentioned as e.g. identifying societal trends and changes that could affect the business in terms of needed competences, or the attraction of public jobs on the labour market. Some also stress the major effects that political decisions might have on the business that might come with a new governmental election. The environmental scanning is mentioned as a practice primarily connected to the HR Managers or HR practitioners at the HR-SD, but also mentioned by two HR Specialists. Moreover, on local level some refer to internal scanning within the specific sector or department; partly through issues discussed in the management team meetings, but also through different kind of customer surveys or in-depth interviews etc. Analysing sick leave ratios are also exemplified as such "strategic" practice.

6.3.4 Strategically operational work and the "coaching approach"

Some respondents emphasize the importance of working strategically in their operational work as the most strategic way of adding a long-term value to the business. One example mentioned is:

> I am struggling with the "LAS list" (part time workers to become employed regulated by Swedish labour law) for instance. But I see it as an extremely strategic task, we need to bring order to this, we have to get a system, then bit by bit going in the right direction. And we do it, I see improvement from last year to this year, which is noticeable when I sit and work on it, and that means something has worked.

One respondent at HR-SD also emphasize supporting in the recruitment process as a very operational strategic HR practice in order for the business to face the future need of competence in a better way, e.g. by challenging managers to think in other ways when identifying requirement profiles, as well as ensuring the quality of the recruitment process. Such arguments some also connected to the earlier mentioned "coaching approach", that if a systematic coaching of line managers are conducted successfully, it will help them to be better managers of their business and employees, who ultimately will provide better service and add value to the citizens. The HR Specialist in the Department comment; "the most strategic in my role it is to work extremely consciously strategic with the managers in my business area", and stress the strategic coaching as: "Very much bringing in personnel issues in the everyday issues for managers, not only something that gets side-tracked that they do at work meetings, or appraisal or assessment interviews, and then there'll be no more". In terms of the HR Specialists, this "strategically operational" approach is also what is most emphasized by the respondents at the HR-SD, and that they have a proximity to the prevailing conditions in their local businesses.

> "For me it is extremely strategic that they are working with the managers, and works to train managers and ensure they are working properly, and do not put too much work on things that are not needed, but focuses on what is really necessary". [HR Process Manager, HR-SD].

Though, the opinions of the strategic value and the activities connected to the coaching approach differ. The majority of the local respondents have perceived a complexity in finding a good balance in to what extent they should support line managers by actually performing the operational work for them, or only coach and train them to self take responsibility for the operational work. A respondent at the HR-SD also describe this complexity: "I think this is what is difficult, how this boarder is floating. Because it depends on how mature the boss is as well as

how mature the organization and employees are. What and how can they handle things themselves, and with what do they need HRs support". Also, all HR departments in this study has more or less chosen to take a step back and start doing much of the traditional operational tasks again, after they received complains from line managers and perceived a decreased trust as a function. The trade union representatives are the most critical interviewees to HR's coaching approach, as well as to what they refer to as the increased planning activities, stating that the work environment and stress levels for many line managers and employees have increased a lot the last years, partly because line managers do not get the same operational relief from HR any longer. This, they argue, has also resulted to cases in a specific CDA where HR Specialists are not welcome at specific management meetings any longer.

> There have been so many incredibly tiresome discussions about what is strategic and what is operational. And actually we've even started to joke about it, when you hear about someone who does not deliver anything: Yeah, he/she probably works strategically and not operational. [Trade union representative]

On the other hand, in the only non-CDA department studied they seem to have found a good balance in the coaching approach, where both line managers, HR-specialist and HR manager give positive comments of HRs impact on the development of line managers and the business. For instance, the employee sick leave ratio in one business area has decreased from about 13-14 % to 2,5 % cent, which is mentioned to perhaps be a result of a successful "strategic coaching". Thus, which also could be regarded as an indicator of value adding HR work. Though, a considerable reason for this is perceived as because of the significant smaller number of employees and managers in that Department compared to the CDA:s.

Moreover, almost every local respondent were rather sceptical about the idea that a centralized HR service centre and call support would facilitate the possibility to work more strategically by taking over much of the day to day operational issues. Rather, they emphasize the value in receiving line managers' daily operational questions in order to gain understanding of the business and what currently is going on. This business knowledge is of many perceived as essential for being able to contribute to the strategic questions in management meetings, that it builds their trust and legitimacy in order to work strategically.

> We still have quite a lot of operational work, thus assisting managers in their daily issues. But it is also a prerequisite for us to take the strategic perspective […] that we understand the managers' reality. Thus

our legitimacy is all about our business knowledge, which we gain in the daily meeting. [HR Manager, CDA1]

7. Discussion

This analytical section will start with a brief empirical summarization, followed by an empirical discussion in relation to Ulrich's (1997) four-role model. The last sub-section is a theoretical analysis where the result is discussed in relation to the three different general strategy approaches presented in the theoretical framework.

7.1 Empirical summarization

In the light of the empirical findings, the general perception regarding the local HR Specialist is that they are more strategic and work more strategic today in one or another way after the reformation of the HR function, though the motives for that are diverse. The reason for the diverse picture should partly be explained by the size and complexity of a municipality as Göteborgs Stad, since the local organizations differ significantly in terms of business, as well as in the amount of employees and line managers that the HR function support. Hence, the preconditions for the different HR functions are very unequal, which were evident e.g. in the studied Department compared to the CDA:s. Another explanation to the diverse ideas could also be that the organization has not continuously communicated a clear picture of what HR strategic work implies, or defined different perspectives on being strategic in different levels. The most significant changes of the HR reformation are clearly the implementation of the joint strategic processes and the role as local process leaders, together with the new strategic partner role and the accessed position as member to the management tables. A reason to the perceived "more strategic" role among local HR practitioners could also be a result of the emphasis on becoming more strategic primarily from the HR-SD, which have been communicated through e.g. power point presentations, HR conferences (as meeting 1) etc., during the years of transformation. This might have pushed on the expectations and willingness among the local HR practitioners to be more strategic, who thus also more easily tend to perceive their new activities and roles as strategic in a "The Emperor's New Clothes" kind of way, without really clear out why and how. Similarly, the ideas of the "value adding" concept are not coherent, and it seems not to be really concretized.

7.2 The four-role model in Göteborgs Stad

In order to structure the diverse and complex picture of how HR BPs within Göteborgs Stad are working strategically, Ulrich's four-role model (1997) could be considered interesting as an analytical lens, since it has had such a strong global influence on organizations transforming their HR function. Such is also the case in Göteborgs Stad where the model has been used during the years of transformation as a guiding example of the future HR specialist role. Regarding the role as HR Specialist, the presentation of the empirical data shows that the work of the "overall" HR specialist within Göteborgs Stad concerns activities in line with all four roles of the model. They clearly work with the development and implementation of joint HR *processes,* possessing the role as local process leaders and experts within specific operational and administrative HR areas. They also work as traditional generalists as support to the line managers focusing at the *people* within the local business. The work in these two roles have furthermore both a *day-to-day/operational focus* as well as a *future/strategic focus.* Interesting though, is the fact that the different ideas and mentioned examples of strategic HR work among the respondents also somehow fit in every box of the model, not only as supposed in the upper left box as "strategic partner".

Future/Strategic focus

	Strategic Partner	**Change Agent**	
Processes	Take part in all business discussions and future plans, giving input from an HR perspective. Organizational analysis, environmental scanning.	Identify and drive local long-term focused improvement projects. Drive systematic change work in e.g. OSH and talent management.	**People**
	Administrative Expert	**Employee Champion**	
	Affecting organizational comprehensive strategic processes and plans. Implement HR Strategy to best fit local practice	Working strategically focused, coach and support managers in the day-to-day operational work. Build business knowledge and trust.	

Day-to-day/Operational focus

Figure 5. Ideas of strategic work in Göteborgs Stad, applied to Ulrich's (1997:24) four-role model of HR work.

The role as *strategic partner* and member of the local management team meetings is though undeniably seen as a key part of the strategic work, exemplified as; being part of all business discussions, future forecasts and plans and give input and advices from an HR perspective. Such examples of aligning HR and business issues could also be seen as in line with Ulrich's (1997)

idea of HR's strategic role, as well as with the rhetoric of strategic HR within SHRM theory (e.g. Salaman et al. 2005, Shuler & Jackson 2007, Boxall & Purcell 2011, Casio & Bordreau, 2012), but in the cases of HR Specialists on a local business area level within the specific CDA:s and Departments. Moreover, in terms of the HR Managers, they should be regarded as the most professed strategic partners in this sense, since they are partnering on the local director level and take part in business planning with a longer-term perspective, also up to two to three years. They also legitimize the strategic HR processes and plans in the board at the CDA:s and Departments by for example; "selling" HR ideas to the management board, or by writing proposals to the steering politicians in terms of future HR focus and plans. Regarding the strategic partner role, Ulrich (ibid) also argue of the ability to conduct organizational diagnosis and to identify strengths and weaknesses, which could be referred to the discussed activities of environmental scanning that was exemplified on every HR level, e.g. analysing internal employee and management surveys, sick leave ratios etc. Also examples of external environmental scanning, such as analysing trends on the labour market, political changes etc., are very much in line with ideas of strategic practice within SHRM (e.g. Casiou & Bordreau, 2012).

Also the result shows several examples of perceived strategic work among HR specialists connected to different local change projects with future value adding focus, which I perceive could fit the upper right box as *change agent*. This was exemplified both as locally identified projects aiming to improve line managers' work situation in different ways and accordingly add value to the business, or also as projects being part of the local implementation of the joint strategic processes, e.g. implement a talent management program or new OSH work processes. The latter examples were also parts of systematic change processes with a several year time perspective, hence change work with future focus and long-term plans. Accordingly, the HR Managers also have a key role as change agent in supporting the HR Specialists in the planning and implementation episodes, as well as build trust and legitimize the plans in the local top management board. As the interviewed CDA Director describe; "change and strategy work can't be performed separately, but in dialogue and with transparency".

Moreover some considered their expert role as process leader as the more strategic part of their work, which is a role that could be regarded as in line with the lower left box as *administrative expert*. The strategic aspects of this role is partly seen as; having the possibility to affect a

strategic process or a supporting IT-tool that affect the comprehensive organization on a long term, by bringing local day-to-day issues or personal ideas of improvement to the central process group meetings. Another perceived strategic aspect of this role was also to be responsible of adapting and implementing the strategic process together with new IT-tools locally, thus translating the process as a "best practice" to fit the local practice. Hence, this aspect could also be interpreted as in line with the theoretical discussion about best fit versus best practice within SHRM theory (e.g. Boxall & Purcell 2011), where in this case the local HR function translate the central recommendations of best HR practice into own HR plans and processes that best fit the local business.

Lastly, the role as *employee champion*, aiming at increasing employees' commitment and capability (Ulrich, 1997), could be connected to the respondents' perceptions of working "strategically operational". Thus, by having a long-term strategic focus in the day-to-day operational work, primarily by continuously support and coach line managers in a manner so that they can lead and motivate their employees in the best possible way today and in the future. As the result implies, a strategic aspect could somehow be to find a balance in to what extent HR Specialists should support by actually offload the personnel related operational work for the line managers or only monitor the quality and "coach" them to manage the processes themselves, which is depending on how competent and self-propelled the line mangers are. As I interpret, such operational work could imply "traditional" HR support in cases of e.g. employee rehabilitation, the recruitment process, wage setting, OSH routines, trade union dialogues etc. Another emphasized aspect by working operationally close to the field is to gain knowledge about the daily issues of the business and its employees, which also increases the chances to identify aspects of strategic value as well as increase the trust as business partner to affect the strategic decisions in the management team.

7.3 Analytical discussion

Accepting the idea that strategic HR work could be performed differently in all four roles of Ulrich's acknowledged model of the HR function, not only in the role as "strategic partner", that is accordingly not in line with the idea of strategic HR work by Ulrich (1997) who later (2009) advocates that transformative and transactional work must be separated in order to be effective.

So how could that be explained from different theoretical perspectives on strategy and strategic work?

7.3.1 Classical approach on HR strategic work

Adopting a classical approach on strategy, thus viewing strategic HR work in terms of conducting the long-term strategic HR plans and policies as the leading framework for Göteborgs Stad, that is accordingly an activity that mainly should be connected to the HR-SD. They are the key actors considering planning, developing and final decision-making in regard to the organizations' comprehensive HR plans, policies and strategic goals. These plans are ultimately expressed through the joint strategic HR processes, which are supposed to guide the HR related long-term as well as short-term work for both HR practitioners and line managers in all local businesses. Such perspective on strategy work is as I perceive also most in line with the ideas and definitions about strategic HR discussed in SHRM literature (e.g. Salaman et al. 2005, Shuler & Jackson 2007, Boxall & Purcell 2011, Casio & Bordreau, 2012), as well as the suggested criteria of strategic work by Brockbank (1999) such as; organizational comprehensive work, documented plans, long term based work, work integrating multifaceted HR aspects, etc. Also the hierarchical position is emphasized by the classical approach, advocating that strategic work are performed at top central level of the firm by people as e.g. top executives with influence and mandate in final decision-making (Chandler, 1962). Hence, from a classical perspective on strategic work, separating the formulation of planned policies and procedures and their implementation, the departmental HR activities would be regarded as "tactical" or operational, even though they make some long-term decisions, since they work within a leading framework set by the central HR office (ibid). However, in the case of Göteborgs Stad, such simplified separation between the central HR-SD:s "strategic work" and the local HR functions' "tactical work" is not really adequate, since the HR-SD in practice only could provide strategic recommendations and the local offices have the final mandate in decisions regarding the implementation of the HR processes into their business. As exemplified with the "soft" HR processes of talent management and OSH, the central HR processes could be viewed as plans of best practices which the local HR functions could decide to "re-plan" to fit their local business. Thus, one could argue that such local re-planning activities could be regarded as somehow strategic also from a classical strategy perspective, and that the local HR Manager's have a strategic position that together with their local director have mandate in taking decisions connected to HR planning. Regarding the HR

Specialists it is, despite their new positions as local strategic partners and process leaders, improbable to motivate their work as strategic from a classical strategy perspective, since they have a low hierarchal position and no mandate in strategic decision-making on local top management level.

7.3.2 Practice and process approach on HR strategic work

By adopting a practice approach (SAP) on strategy and strategic work, together with arguments from the Processual strategy approach, one could also consider divisional strategic HR practices on a micro level, not being limited to analyze the central organizational HR plans and positions, as in the case of a classical approach on strategy. Regarding the theoretical concept of emerging strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), Mintzberg's (1990) stress that the actual strategy implementation could be as important as the planning and formulation, since insights that emerge during the implementation might form the ground for tomorrow's strategy. In this regard, the HR Specialists, in their role as local process leaders and business partners to the local management, do have a key role in the HR strategy implementation when adopting the strategic HR processes (plans) within the local management. Since they also continuously are evaluating the quality and outcome of the implemented "deliberate" strategy plan they can bring "unrealized" insights of improvement that emerge during the implementation process to the central processes meetings, thus affect the central "deliberate" HR plan and ultimately, seen from a retrospect, the strategic outcome. By viewing strategic practices as the activities that practitioners "do" within the strategy process (Johnson et al, 2003), bringing such insights of strategy improvement could be an example regarded as a "strategizing" event, thus strategic HR work in the role comparable to Ulrich's (1997) "administrative expert".

In terms of the HR Specialists' role and what they actually do, at least the majority primarily do a lot of the work connected to the "traditional" operational HR role after the transformation, as e.g. operational support in rehabilitation, recruitment, labour law and policy advisements etc. Thus, in regard to the work suggested in Ulrich's (1997) "strategic partner" mainly based on a classical approach to strategic work, a shift towards becoming "more strategic" would be downplayed, even though the work includes elements of long-term planning and organizational analysis. However, defining strategy as a social practice (strategizing), and focus on the detailed processes and practices in the daily organizational life that could be consequential for the strategic

outcomes, directions, survival and competitive advantage of the firm (Johnson et al, 2003), one might also put the light on other aspects of the more day-to-day prevalent strategic HR work, rather than a matter of conducting formal plans and policies. As in the case of Göteborg Stad, where about 70% of the overall cost is connected to personnel, a variety of choices and actions by HR practitioners might have more or less impact on the strategic outcome for the organization, at least on a local level. Thus, in the light of a practice oriented approach on strategy examples from the empirical material, rather connected to the "employee champion" could be regarded as micro events of "strategizing" that might generate positive long-term impact for the business and its strategic goals. As for instance arguments as: "Continuously coaching managers to consider personnel issues in their everyday issues, which will help them to be better managers of their business and employees, who ultimately will provide better service and add value to the citizens". "Challenge managers to think in other ways about the organization when recruiting and identifying requirement profiles". Furthermore, "proactive" examples as: "giving input, e.g. in regard to labor law aspects, early in business discussions, in order to prevent sudden strategic decisions that could cause excessive costs for the business on a long term", could also be regarded as a strategizing event that adds value to the organization. Moreover, work that could be connected to the role as local "change agent", such as the observed examples of local projects planned and implemented by HR practitioners, could be seen as series of strategizing events that might generate strategic outcome for the business, seen from a retrospective. Such as identify and drive different training events for line managers with a long-term aim to e.g.; promote future employee health, or secure important competence in the business for the future. Also, to legitimize such work on a higher level, the example of an HR Manager practice; "writing propositions that will be the basis for annual political targets connected to personnel issues", could be regarded as an important HR strategizing activity.

To put a different perspective on the local HR strategic partner as strategists, Mintzberg's (1987) metaphor could be seen as interesting, viewing the strategist as a "craftsman" who; master the details, picks up things other people miss, has a peripheral vision in order to be able to detect and take advantage of strategic opportunities as they unfold. Such perspective of strategy making could, as I see it, be seen as pertinent for the HR Specialist as strategic partner, who adds an HR perspective into the business discussion and could pick up important details that the managers

doesn't see. As the HR Director exemplified the role of being a strategic partner: "raising issues that a manager may not always be able to, think about, or somehow do not see the consequences of". Thus, in regard to the theoretical concepts within SAP theory by Hendry et al. (2010), the *interactive strategizing* type, based on face-to-face interactions, formal and informal communication, negotiation etc., should be emphasized as the most matching approach for the local HR BP as strategist. Since the primary activity, discussed among the respondents connected to the strategic partner, is to challenge strategic decisions and consult with advices from an HR perspective in dialogue with the managers, both on a day-to-day basis as well as in management team meetings. If referring to the arguments by Carter et al. (2008), that the position as strategist is a matter of mastering a certain language, tools and bearing, the HR Specialist in Göteborgs Stad "still" seem to primarily rely on the traditional expertise of labour law and policies, in terms of the most evident tools and arguments observed when they "interactively strategize" in management team meetings. Though, some examples from the interviews also highlight economic argumentation as well as arguments such as: promote employee health, increase customer service satisfaction, secure future competence and talent for the organization etc., especially as HR Manager when "selling in" and legitimize HR ideas at the local director board level. The empirical result also imply that in order to be more strategic it is much up to the HR practitioner as individual to *take* the role as strategist and actively interact in business meetings, show engagement, challenge ideas and prove your knowledge and skills. Thus, just having a passive position as management team member should not be regarded as being strategic. Also the business knowledge among local HR BPs gained in the operational work is strongly emphasized in order to take the strategic perspective. That is very much in line with Mintzberg's (1987) perspective of an effective strategist, stressing the business knowledge and intimate understanding of the operations, referred to as "wisdom", rather than the intellectual knowledge in regard to formal planning and the analysis of reports, abstract facts and figures, etc.

8. Conclusion and implications

This paper has discussed how HR business partners work strategically in Göteborgs Stad, and how a reformation in line with the HR transformation concept has implicated on local HR practitioners' strategic role. Since the arguments of strategic HR work within Göteborgs Stad are diverse, Ulrich's (1997) influential role typology has been adopted for the empirical analysis, in

order to understand these different arguments of strategic work in relation to the prevalent idea of strategic HR work discussed by Ulrich as well as in influential SHRM literature. The empirical analysis of strategic HR work has then been understood in relation to different theoretical strategy schools, where Strategy-as-Practice together with the Processual strategy approach have figured as challenging perspectives to the classical strategy approach, which I regard as dominant within the SHRM discourse.

Considering the adaption of the HR transformation in Göteborgs Stad, the most significant changes for the overall HR Specialist could be regarded as the accessed position as strategic partner and member to the divisional management table, and the new role as local process leader. Though, most of the HR Specialists still do much of the traditional operational support to managers, as e.g. administrative support in rehabilitation and recruitment, labour law and policy advisements etc., at least they have started to do it again after shown dissatisfaction among line managers that requested more operational relief. Thus, in terms of what they do it is, as I perceive, a more operational oriented HR BP role, compared to the ideas of strategic work in the HR transformation concept, as well as with the prevalent view of strategic HR within HRM scholarship (e.g. Brockbank 1999, Salaman et al. 2005, Shuler & Jackson 2007, Boxall & Purcell 2011, Casio & Bordreau 2012), which primarily emphasize organizational diagnosis and development of formal strategies. A reason to this rather operationally characterized HR BP role, could be explained by the fact that Göteborgs Stad so far not have proceeded all the way with a complete HR service centre in line with the SSM model, which are supposed to handle the more administrative and routinized personnel work and buy time for the local HR BPs to focus at the "strategic work" (Ulrich, 2009). However, the result implies that a centralization of HR administration and day-to-day management support would not automatically mean that the local HR BPs would be able to become more strategic. The operational activities are rather strongly emphasized within Göteborgs Stad as a prerequisite for taking the strategic perspective and thus also act more strategically. That it is in the day-to-day meetings and operational support to line managers that HR practitioners gain their business knowledge, as well as trust and legitimacy to contribute in the strategic issues at the management table. Such arguments also support previous research on HR Transformation in public sector suggesting that; HR needs to build its strategic value from its core operational activities (Teo & Rodwell, 2007), and that the change of the HR role towards pursuing a strategic business partnership, at the cost of a decreased operational

knowledge, tend to undercut HR's ability to understand the employees' perspective thus weakening the strategic influence (Harris, 2007). It is also in line with Prichard's (2010) research of HR transformation within private organizations, suggesting that HR practitioners need to be involved in transactional activities to be able to operate strategically, to know the "little things" in order to gain trust and a relationship with the business leaders. Hence, the idea that transactional and transformational work must be separated in order to be effective (Ulrich et al., 2009), is as implied in these research not either supported by the results of this study, at least not in the role as local HR BP. As discussed from a theoretical perspective, such rhetoric are very much in line with classical strategy arguments, such as; it is when top executives (strategists) remove their routine based operational duties (transactional work), and focus time and commitment on analysis and long-term planning (transformational work), as the firm reach strategic success (Chandler, 1962:309).

However, by adopting a SAP perspective on strategy, together with a Processual strategy approach that values the "unrealized" strategies emerging during the implementation, the strategic work of local HR practitioners could be put in another light. As the empirical analysis suggest in this study strategic HR work could be conducted in various ways, not simply in the role as Ulrich's (1997) suggested strategic partner but within all four roles of the model. Such results could also be seen as is in line with research by Welch & Welch (2012) where HR Managers were strategic in the performance of what Ulrich's role model would classify as operational, and could also support research by Caldwell (2003) highlighting emergent role conflicts among HR Managers adopting Ulrich's (1997) prescriptive role typology. Thus, in regard to these arguments one should view the division of strategic HR work in Ulrich's influential model as a too simplified, with a simplistic adoption of the strategy concept. Rather, I would argue to downplay the advocated HR role as "strategic partner", emphasizing the activities connected to formal strategy development and organizational diagnosis. Or seen from the opposite angle, preferably highlight the strategic opportunities that could emerge in the day-to-day operational HR work connected to the roles as "administrative expert" or "employee champion". In terms of how HR BPs "strategize" in Göteborgs Stad, seen from a SAP perspective (Hendry et al. 2010), the strategizing characteristics observed in this study should primarily be regarded as dialogue based *interactive strategizing*, mostly relying on the expertise of labour law and polices.

In conclusion, this study is not an attempt to explain or define HR strategic work, my contribution is rather an attempt to highlight the need of a multi-paradigmatic view of strategy within HRM. Hence, by adding a practice and process perspective on strategic HR work, as a complement to the classical strategy approach, which I regard as prevalent within the SHRM discourse. Since the idea of strategic HR today apparently also is applied on divisional HR practitioners (HR BPs), which largely is a result of the global HR transformation trend as model of best HR practice, I argue that it is necessary to balance the classical "for granted assumptions" of strategy within HRM with the "bottom up" approach to strategy provided by SAP and the Processual strategy school. Thus, such a multi-paradigmatic approach to strategy is also in line with what Boglind et al. (2013:151) imply, suggesting to understand strategy in terms of; strategic *plans,* strategic *positions*, and having a strategic approach in *practice.* Based on the result of how HR BPs work strategically in Göteborg Stad, I would suggest to understand the HR BP role as "strategist" more from Mintzberg's (1987) perspective. Thus, put emphasis on having a strategic approach and behaviour in the day-to-day support to managers, focusing at picking up emerging opportunities in the operational practice that could have strategic impact for the organization on a long term perspective. As the result imply, such "strategically operational" approach tend to be more value adding, than focusing on planning activities and organizational diagnosis, based on classical strategy arguments.

However, as a source of critique to this study, I also see a risk in adopting a practice perspective when defining HR strategic work, in terms of the broad definition of strategy within SAP theory (Johnson et al, 2003), since there is a tendency to motivate almost all activities as strategic (Carter et al., 2008). This could also generate more confusion of what HR strategy work is and somehow excavate the meaning of strategy, which tend to become a worn buzzword within HRM theory and practice. Hence, my practical suggestion to organizations that adopts the trend of HR transformation would be to carefully define what strategic work/roles/behaviour implies for different HR practitioners on different levels, before making a "strategic transition", if such a transition is even necessary. Thus, in terms of HR BPs, why not approach their perceived "strategic work" rather with a rhetoric as for instance; "strategically operational", "long-term focused", "proactive", "strategy implementing" or "tactical" work.

7.1 Research limitations and future research recommendations

The fact that only four local HR departments where studied and no municipality owned companies ware considered in this study, the result should not be regarded as the "true" description of the strategic HR work in Göteborgs Stad. However, the paper might contribute with some new perspectives to the complexity of SHRM scholarship, as well as some new thoughts to research on HR Transformation. Due to the limited amount of time in this study to observe "real" HR practice that could generate strategic long-term outcome, I suggest for the future more longitudinal observation-based research of the topic with a SAP approach. Moreover, this study has not focused on possible differences in strategic HR work between public sector and private sector organization. Hence, that is a relevant aspect that needs deeper investigation in future research on HR transformation and strategic HR work.

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9. Appendix

Appendix I: Interview guide (template) - HR Managers and HR Specialists

<u>Main themes and possible supplementary questions</u>

- **Background (brief)**
  - Education?
  - Previous roles? (Especially within HR)
  - Time worked in Göteborgs Stad?

- **Role and responsibilities**
  - Role and areas of responsibility today?
  - What are your daily contact areas? (Which managers, HR staff, employees etc.?)
  - (For HR Managers) What are the biggest differences in your role and the HR Specialist's role?
  - How does a typical working week look like? Give practical examples. (what kind of meetings, daily issues etc?)

- **From Personnel Specialist to HR BP – changes in the role**
  - How would you describe the change that has occurred within HR in recent years in the organization, how has your role changed?
  - The "strategic partner" role, what does that mean to you? What is the aim?
  - What new expectations, new work approaches? Give examples.
  - What has been positive / difficult? Give examples.

- **Role and influence in management team**
  - How do you perceive your influence in management team and management team meetings? (Do you have a regular place at the management table, or occasionally?)
  - Describe your role in the management team meetings: In what type of questions and decisions do you contribute (both HR related and business related)? What is the most common input from you? Give an example?
  - How do you perceive your opportunity to initiate long-term ideas and projects and gain support for these?
  - Do you use any particular rhetoric or tactic to gain support for your ideas by managers?
  - Do you feel that you have the knowledge and skills that are expected and needed in your role as management team member?

- **Strategic work / Operational work**
  - How would you describe the difference between operational work versus strategic work?
  - Can you give some practical examples of activities in your daily work when you work strategically?
  - How big part of your working time do you estimate that you spend on strategic work respectively operational work?

- Do you feel that you have the opportunity and time to work as strategic as it is desired in the new role? More or less than before the change?
- How long time perspectives do you work with in terms of planning? (In management team meetings, HR-projects etc.) Exemplify such work.
- Do you have any examples where you (or a colleague) have pursued issues that have had long-term influence, or influenced the whole organization of Göteborg Stad?
- How much of the so-called "strategic work" is centrally directed plans or processes that you shall manage (implement locally) in your HR department? How do you experience this work?
- What is the most "strategic" you are / have been doing in your work?

- **Value adding work**
  - How do you perceive that you / HR adds value in your work? (Value for whom?)
  - What is the most value adding work for the organization that you and HR do? Give examples

- **Service Centre and future challenges for HR**
  - How do you perceive that a centralized HR service centre may affect your work locally?
  - If it will take over/offload much of the administrative and operational HR work, how would that affect the possibilities for you to do more strategic work?
  - What do you see as your and HR's biggest challenges / opportunities in the future?

Appendix II: Interview guide (template) - Participants at the HR Strategic Department

Main themes and possible supplementary questions

- **Describe your background (briefly).**

- **Describe your role and responsibilities.**
  - How much influence do you have on the local HR functions?

- **How would you describe the HR Strategic Department's main function?**
  - How has the reformation of HR affected this central department?
  - What is strategic in your work here at HR SD?

- **How would you describe the reformation within HR in Göteborgs Stad? What has been most important?**
  - What were the main arguments?
  - How would you describe the general view of the HR function within the organization after the change? (Among managers? Among HR practitioners?) Higher Status?
  - Any new requirements on the HR practitioners becoming business partners, e.g. in terms of new competence needs?

- **Overall strategy and goals**
  - How would you define strategy for Göteborgs Stad?
  - How would you define strategy for HR within Göteborgs Stad? (How do HR contribute to strategy)

- **To work strategically in the HR role locally, can you give practical examples of this?**
  - Are there any practical examples where local HR practitioners have driven issues that had long-term consequences for the whole organization of Göteborgs Stad?
  - Can also short-term work be strategic? give examples
  - Do you see that their are any specific prerequisites for local HR practitioners to be strategic partners? (e.g. business knowledge, trust, legitimacy?)

- **The Future**
  - How will the new service centre be organized and what HR issues will they own?
  - How do you think the new service centre will affect the local HR function's ability to work strategically, unlike today?
  - What are the biggest challenges / opportunities for HR in the future?

Appendix III: Interview guide (template) – Line Managers, CDA Director

- **Background**
  - Can you briefly describe this business main mission, purpose and goals?
  - Describe your role and responsibilities. (Briefly)

- **HR's change and impact**
  - How would you describe the change that has occurred in the HR function in recent years within the organization?
  - How do you perceive the new HR processes and IT systems?
  - How has that affected your role and work?

- **HR business partnership**
  - How would you describe HRs role and purpose?
  - How does the HR support look like for you today?
  - What influence do you perceive that your HR partner have in management team meetings? How do they contribute and in what kind of issues?
  - How do you perceive your HR partner's understanding of the business and employees?
  - Do you perceive HR as more strategic today and engaging in more long-term issues? Give some practical examples?
  - Would you describe your HR partner as a "strategic partner"? explain?
  - How do you see that HR creates value to the business in the best way?

- **Future**
  - What do you which for/except of the future cooperation with HR?

Appendix IV: Interview guide (template) – Trade Union representatives

- What is your main role and task?
- What are your most important questions that you engage in and drive?
- How is the contact and communication between you and HR? Which joint meetings? Give examples
- What do you regard as HR's main mission? (Most value adding?)
- Describe how do you think HR's role and work has changed in the city over the past decade? What is the biggest difference in practice today? (positive / negative)
- Do you perceive a difference in HR's support to line managers? Explain
- Is HR "visible" and involved in a different way in long-term issues in your opinion? In such case, how?
- What's your interpretation of local HR practitioners as "strategic partners"? (operational versus strategic work?)